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Music is political

Special issue:
Sounds in times of war

Popular music, (contentious) politics, and social change since Russia's war on Ukraine

Illustration: Karin Zaric Sunvisson

also in this issue

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editorial

The power of music ...

This Special issue focuses on sounds, music, and the role and power of it in times of war.

The articles on the Russian music scene show how popular music is a tool in legitimizing the installed power; the underlying message in popular music videos and lyrics is, to this end, celebrating tradional values, glorifying patriotism and the nation.

OTHER ARTICLES on the contrary look into the potential of music for resistance (in Belarus), the power of political mobilization and messages, coded or hidden, calling for action, in either rap or rock music.

Official Belarusian music, supported by Lukashenka, however is described as filled with the echoes of the lost past, promoting nostalgia and giving promises of a safer future rooted in the past. Music has a unique ability to transport the listener back in time. An essay helps us understand how sound and old radio recordings can give a feeling of safety by reminding listeners in Ukraine of a shared independent past. Remembering the dreams of yesterday by listening to sounds once forgotten is described as a way to keep hope for the future in war-torn Ukraine – or at least to bear the burden of today.

LOSS AND TRAUMA is also discussed in relation to funerals and rituals in Ukraine when sons, heroes, soldiers and victims of the war are laid to their final rest. Songs and folkloristic melodies carry a comfort with them in these contexts; the symbolism in performing them – as so many have done before – links to cultural traditions and creates a sense of meaning, and thus resilience.

In Ukraine the war, the traumas, emotions and stress can find an outlet in rave, it is proposed. Communities temporarily united in music and dance, young people expressing themselves together as one whole: These are presented as one solution for restoring humanity and rebuilding society in Ukraine.

This issue is presented more thoroughly by the three guest editors in the following pages.

Ninna Mörner

in this issue

PHOTO: REPAIR TOGETHER 2023

Rave *Tolokas*

"The mediating roles of music and dance in fostering collective resistance and mobilizing communities during times of war. **Page 61**

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Wartime ritual practices

"Elements of Ukrainian folk music are being revived and reinterpreted within newly emerging military funeral traditions. **Page 71**

Listed in Scopus

Baltic Worlds' statement of purpose

BALTIC WORLDS is a scholarly journal published by the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies at Södertörn University, since 2008. It publishes articles in social sciences and humanities as well as environmental studies, practicing a double-blind peer-review process, by at least two independent specialists. *Baltic Worlds* is listed in Scopus, and in the Norwegian bibliometric register (DHB), included in EBSCO databases, DOAJ, and Sherpa/RoMEO.

Baltic Worlds is distributed to readers in 60 countries, and reaches readers from various disciplines, as well as outside academia. In order to present multi- and interdisciplinary ongoing research to a wider audience, *Baltic Worlds* also publishes essays, commentaries, interviews, features and conference reports.

All content relates to the Baltic Sea region and the wider Central and Eastern European area, including the Caucasus and the Balkans.

Baltic Worlds regularly publishes thematic sections with guest editors, enabling deeper explorations into specific fields and research questions. International scholarly collaborations are encouraged. *Baltic Worlds* wishes to advance critical engagement in area studies and to apply novel theoretical and methodological approaches to this multifaceted field.

The journal's Scholarly Advisory Council consists of international scholars, representing different disciplines and with specific knowledge on the area.

The Scholarly Advisory Council

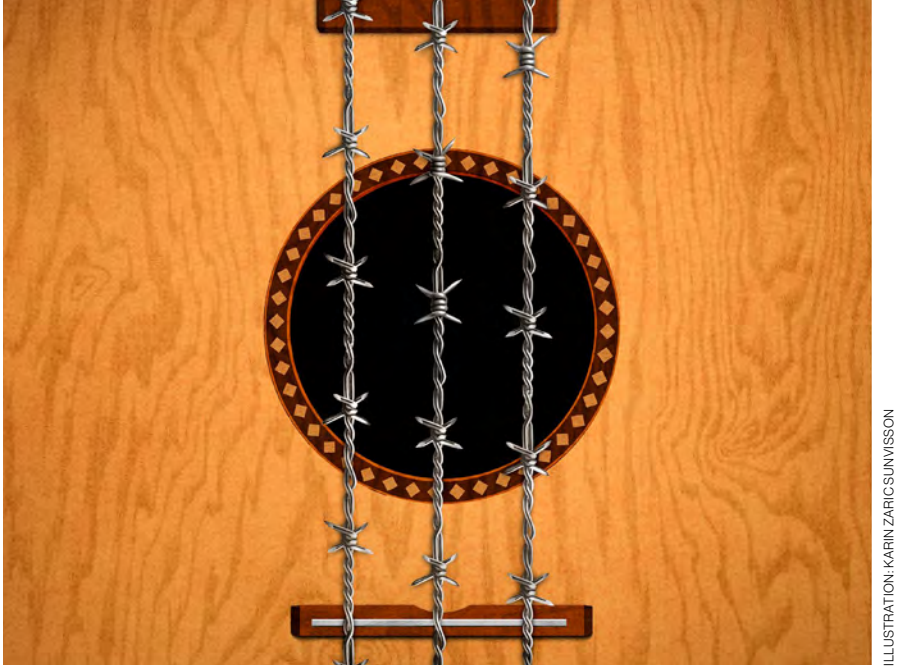

ILLUSTRATION: KARIN ZARIC SUNVISSON

special issue

Sounds in times of war. Popular music, (contentious) politics and social change since Russia's war on Ukraine

Guest Editors: Anna Schwenck, Aleksej Tikhonov & David-Emil Wickström

introduction

peer-reviewed articles

essay

NEXT ISSUE of *Baltic Worlds*, 2025:4, will appear in December. The coming issue includes a theme section guest edited by Lelde Luika "Still 'catching up'? Unevenness, postcoloniality and the ideas of 'Europeanness' in East and Central Europe". The coming issue will also have articles on other topics, and of different genres.

colophon

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BALTIC WORLDS
Special issue: Sounds in times of war

by **Anna Schwenck, Aleksej Tikhonov & David-Emil Wickström**

Introduction.

Sounds in times of war

Popular music, (contentious) politics, and social change since Russia's war on Ukraine

That music may connect well with violence contradicts common understandings of music being a force of good which brings people together. While acknowledging that music can harmonize social relations, this special issue highlights the idea that music can equally justify war and ignite conflicts. Exploring music from such a matter-of-fact viewpoint shifts scholarly attention to the relationship between music, politics, and societal dynamics. This special issue does so in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine. It examines music's multifaceted roles in responding to, reflecting on, as well as also shaping politics and popular sentiments during times of war and protest among actors in and from the former Soviet Union. Though starting with the interrelationship between musicians and rulers in Soviet and independent Belarus, this issue mainly focuses on the period from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 until today.

IN UKRAINE TODAY, both the broader population and musicians find themselves in the midst of war. Music plays a ubiquitous role in social life and is widely regarded as a means of empowerment. "In the current situation, every concert in Ukraine is more than just a concert. No matter where it takes place – in a bomb shelter, a hospital, a school, a volunteer center – it is always a kind of empowerment" explained Iuliia Nikolaievs'ka (Julia Nikolaevskaya), the program director of the Kharkiv Music Festival.[1] Besides highlighting music's general empowering quality in a situation when musicking[2] as a pastime clashes with the realities of war, contributions to this issue point to music as a factor in efforts of rebuilding infrastructure destroyed by bombs or at war funerals. Music is also an important means to publicize atrocities. It is further used to rally for support against the Russian aggression, also internationally. For instance, Andriy Khlyvnyuk, frontperson of the band BoomBox, recorded an a cappella version of the Ukrainian song *Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow* (*Oi, u luzi chervona kalyna*) in Kyiv in the days following the full-scale invasion, wearing his military uniform, and posted it to Instagram. South African musician The Kiffness remixed Khlyvnyuk's rendition to support Ukrainian resistance against the invasion. Led by David Gilmour, the band Pink Floyd subsequently wrote and recorded the single *Hey, Hey, Rise Up!*, incorporating Khlyvnyuk's vocals, and released it in April 2022 as an expression of solidarity with Ukrainians' fight against the occupiers. With roots in a Cossack song *Oi, u luzi chervona kalyna* is but one example of how traditional music and music sounding like traditional music

Slava Ukraini!, with the singer Artur Rehi. The war song video was made in cooperation with the Estonian Defence Forces. PHOTO: YOUTUBE

have been revived. It also evidences that social media has become a central tool not only in distributing music, but also in mobilizing support for Ukraine.[3]

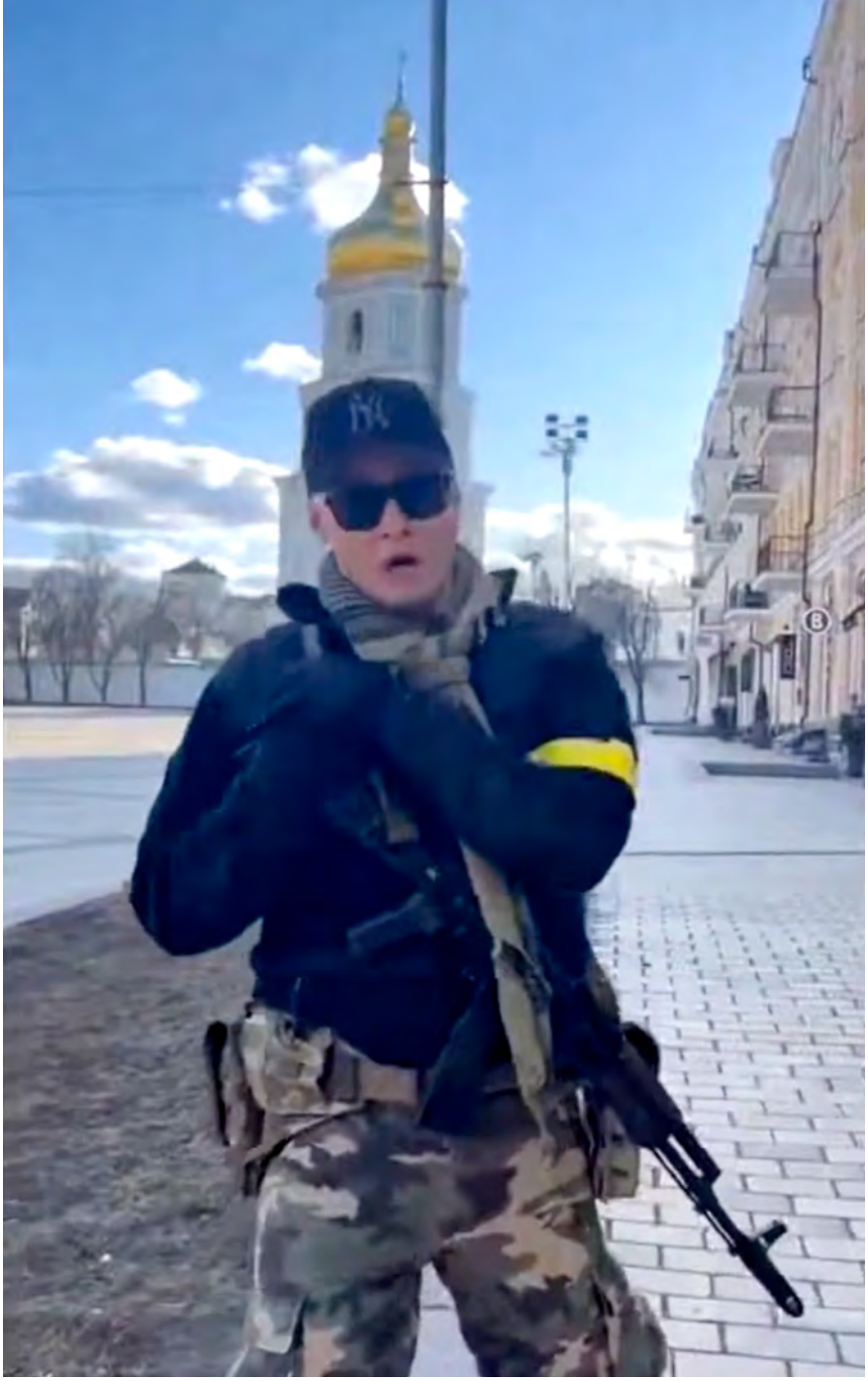
This focus on musical practices in and from Ukraine may well destabilize popular notions of wartime situations. Employing a broader arts angle shifts the attention to societal processes that might go unnoticed in research largely focusing on written texts.

ANALYTICALLY, music is more than a tapestry of organized sound accompanying popular protests, social upheavals, combat operations, funerals, or repair campaigns. Music co-creates situations, for instance, through affording particular body movements and rhythms[4] or when music and songs function as auditive symbols.[5] Music with and without lyrics can be further analyzed as archives of interpretations or as material giving rise to meanings in specific situations. Studying music thus alludes to symbolic webs of meaning. These webs of meaning do not stand firm vis-à-vis political affairs. Rather, how actors define the boundaries of politics, what they regard as taken-for-granted, what they perceive as cultural

"STUDYING MUSIC THUS ALLUDES TO SYMBOLIC WEBS OF MEANING."

or pre-political – and thus not as pertaining to politics proper – is shaped by such webs of meaning. Of course, when politics ceases to be politics in the public imagination but appears as a given, then domination becomes naturalized in the most effective way.

At the same time, what could be called the structure of the musical field – or the organization of musical art worlds[6] – is an important area of social life that may shape politics. This pertains to music scenes as producers of counterculture and as social networks where certain cultural understandings may gain momentum *before* they diffuse more widely. Certainly, music scenes are never fully autonomous from the pressures of convention and material survival that structure both individual and social life. In the same way that music is not necessarily a force that unites, music scenes are not by definition hubs of democratic resistance. That said, musicians are often among the most vocal celebrities speaking out for or against revolutions, for or against war. In turn, their music can acquire the status of an auditive symbol, communicating a political position.



Andriy Khlyvnyuk, frontperson of the band BoomBox, sings in front of Kyiv's Sofiis'kyi sobor's ("St. Sophia Cathedral") bell tower in military uniform. PHOTO: YOUTUBE

The post-Soviet space and the theme of empire

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, revolutions like the Singing Revolution in the Baltics, Georgia's Rose and Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolutions, and most prominently several large-scale, influential protests on Kyiv's Maidan Square – better known as the 1990 Granite, the 2004/05 Orange and the 2013/14 Euromaidan Revolutions – evidence that the notion of a post-Soviet space is inextricably intertwined with Moscow's aspiration to retain a hegemonic status in the space of the former Soviet Union. This aspiration shows itself in politics aiming at keeping frozen conflicts festering, such as those in Moldova or the South Caucasus, some of which transformed into full-scale war such as the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and preventing secession movements through domestic military operations – most notably those in Chechnya and Dagestan.

Following the aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration, the Russian Federation has repeatedly shown its vested interest in retaining the Soviet differentiation between a so-called "near abroad" – consisting of apparently befriended countries that serve the neoimperial state as a cordon sanitaire, resource hub, and export market – and an actual abroad, consisting of foreign countries. Under Putin this differentiation was radicalized, for instance through the nationalistic personification

"MUSIC CAN ACQUIRE THE STATUS OF AN AUDITIVE SYMBOL, COMMUNICATING A POLITICAL POSITION."

of countries, including the presentation of pluralist politics as a severe weakening of the nation, and the idea of sovereignty as a combination of considerable cultural, economic, and military might. In the Putinist mindset, only world powers are sovereigns. Competition between world powers would give rise to all other conflicts, meaning that all striving for independence in Moscow's so-called near abroad, i.e. the post-Soviet space, would be ultimately nothing more than an epiphenomenon of US-American meddling in affairs *framed as* internal.

RUSSIA'S 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine substantiated repeated warnings, especially uttered by Central and East European observers, that the Russian state's and government's neoimperial ambitions had been radicalizing since the early 2000s. These warnings underlined that authoritarian aggression was no longer a means reserved for domestic politics. In 2022, West European governments and economic elites' belief that it was possible to neatly delineate between a Russian politics of interest, founded on international trade, on the one hand and a

Russian-Putinist chauvinistic ideology on the other, was unmasked as having been a dangerous delusion.[7]

WE CHOSE THE FORMER Soviet Union as a geographical frame, because we believe that the Russian state's aggression against Ukraine is part of larger neoimperial politics that radicalized especially when former union republics sought greater independence from the former imperial center. People living in the space of the former Soviet Union, or those who have ties to it, are heirs to a past that has been shaped by Moscow's rule over far-flung regions. Because the Soviet Union was an empire, though a special one,[8] any continuation of imperial aggression – independent of whether justified by way of socialist or capitalist, internationalist or nationalist concerns – elicits responses that relate to a long history of domination in a Russian imperial key of which the Soviet period was the most peculiar and contradictory.

THAT WE RETAIN the former Soviet Union as a geographical frame thus lays bare the imperial counterpoint that accompanies the polyphony of ways of life that is *actually* observable in those parts of the world that until recently were widely captured by use of the umbrella concept "former Soviet" or "post-Soviet" space. The open call for papers leading up to the present issue deliberately invited contributions from areas seldom covered by research and public discourse. Unlike Western Russia, many of these areas, as well as their inhabitants' way of (musical) life, are understudied. Featuring two case studies of Belarus and several of Ukraine, the present issue shows the attempt to break with a history of uneven coverage between former center and former peripheries. Still, the range of articles certainly testifies to a distribution of both actual research and its promotion quite common in the field of Eurasian or East European studies for a long time. It goes beyond the ramifications of this issue to debate the reasons for this state of affairs. Suffice it to say that a profound effort is needed to change this imbalance, including both the fostering of small area studies subjects and a greater openness towards employing cases for social scientific theory building that often tend to be overlooked.

The Kalush Orchestra, representing Ukraine, was the winner of Eurovision Song Contest 2022 in Turin, Italy.

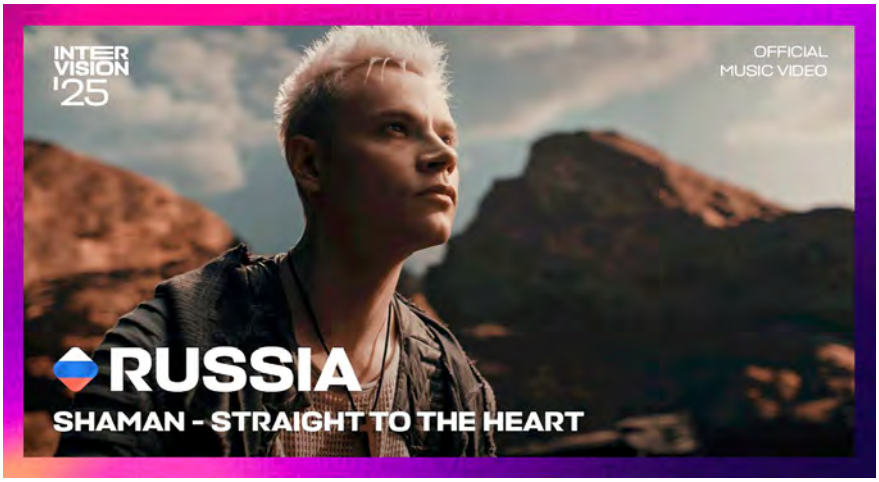
PHOTO: DANIELE VENTURELLI / WIREIMAGE/ GETTY IMAGES

No new Cold War: The Eurovision and Intervision song contests

The container concept "former Soviet Union" is sometimes rejected, because its use may subtly justify a view of the world in which politics proper take place only between superpowers. We believe that it is possible to keep with a post-Soviet geographical frame without normalizing the idea of a new Cold War between Russia and the West. This idea promoted by Putin governments since at least 2014, has been pivotal for justifying both the military aggression in countries bordering Russia and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

AS WITH SPORTS events and world cups, international music festivals and song contests have been discussed as spaces of cultural diplomacy where processes of détente may take place when other channels of communication are closed.[9] Yet, they can also serve as cultural sites of political contention, the outcomes of which can be varying. Regarding the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), it is notable that it served as a platform for Ukrainian musicians to draw attention to Russia's meddling in Ukrainian domestic politics since the early 2000s and subsequently the war in Eastern Ukraine – long before such attention was granted by a majority of governments in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion.[10] In 2014, Ukraine withdrew from participation to protest the occupation of Crimea. In 2016, the musician Jamala won the contest with a bilingual song, sung in Crimean Tatar and English, referencing the historical trauma experienced by Crimean Tatars. In 2022, Kalush Orchestra won with *Stefania*, a song whose accompanying music video stages women's roles in war and portrays the devastation and destruction in Ukraine.

FOLLOWING THE 2020 protests against alleged electoral fraud in Belarus and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belarusian and Russian artists were no longer accepted at the ESC. That Russia revived, albeit in a very different register, the so-called Intervision Song Contest in 2025 should not only be interpreted as a tit-for-tat response. Staging the Intervision Song Contest provides the Putinist government with material to undergird



Shaman was the Russian contestant in the 2025 Intervision Song Contest.

its claim of a new Cold War between Russia, apparently Western-dominated countries, and Europe, or, simplified: Russia and the West – depending on the Trump administration's twists and turns. For Putin the contest is part of a culture war in which, to echo the Putinist framing of world affairs, a decadent and uprooted Europe, aka West, is pitted against a Russia that protects traditional values. Tellingly, the Soviet original Intervision Song Contest was intended to promote cooperation between the opposing blocs at the time, not conflict.[11] The 2025 Putinist re-appropriation of Intervision in a Russian chauvinist manner advertises with the theme of "unity through music"; yet the fact that the Russian contestant was Shaman, who more than any other Russian pop musician embodies the Russian state's neoimperial nationalism in the world of music, indicates the staging of alleged superpower conflict being a central element of Intervision's revival.

WHAT THIS EXAMPLE shows is that differentiation between Soviet Russianizing and post-Soviet Russian domination is crucial to trace how the notion of a Cold War is recycled by Russia to gather international support today. It lays bare a construction of Russia that is basically Soviet and that merges things Russian and Ukrainian into one category of Slavicness performed in a neotraditional rendering of Soviet life. A clear delineation between the Soviet period and its aftermath, sometimes dismissed as apologetic, can help to uncover such ideological twists that supports normalizing the ideological tenet of a new Cold War that is so fundamental to Russian-Putinist legitimation strategies of the state's various neoimperial authoritarian aggressions and war.

Contributions to this special issue

The discussion begins in the Soviet period in Belarus, with what is perhaps the most ambivalent topic among the contributions: Once a central feature of Soviet popular culture, the repertoire of Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambli (VIAs) has endured as a shared cultural heritage across the post-Soviet space and continues to carry political significance in Belarus. Drawing on virtual ethnography and multimodal critical discourse analysis, David-Emil Wickström demonstrates how the state leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka mobilizes Soviet-era VIAs, such as Pesniary, Siabry, Verasy, and Charaunitsy, to advance his populist autocratic ideology, reinforce Soviet nostalgia, and sustain a state-sponsored national identity. From this foundation, the thematic and chronological trajectory shifts to Belarusian rock musicians active from the 1980s through the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 who are critical of the state. Yauheni Kryzhanouski's contribution highlights the modes of protest engagement pursued by artists such as Lavon Volski and Lyapis Trubetskoy.

THE INTERCONNECTION between war and music then emerges as a central theme of the present issue. Kirill Polkov explores the entanglement of war, gender roles, and nationalism in the performances and public self-presentation of Russian pro-war musicians such as Shaman and Tatiana Kurtukova. He focuses on how these musicians perform Russianness on Instagram and Tiktok and thereby help to naturalize conservative ideas about gender and sexuality. Also examining the Russian case, Anna Schwenck and Anastasia Bondarenko broaden the perspective by including popular music produced by inhabitants of occupied Ukrainian territories in support of Russia's war, as well as songs written by Russian oppositional artists now living in exile in addition to music by Russian citizens based in Russia. Their analysis of music videos by Sobor, Shaman, and

"FOR PUTIN THE CONTEST IS PART OF A CULTURE WAR."

Zemfira illuminates how music may legitimate and delegitimate the war through soundings of homeland and depictions of foods commonly symbolizing the nation. Aleksej Tikhonov then turns the readers' attention to the Ukrainian diaspora in Russia and Germany, comparing diaspora rappers with their counterparts in Ukraine concerning their language use before and after the full-scale invasion.

OUR ISSUE THEN moves to several studies focusing on Ukraine. Our decision to conclude the issue with research on Ukraine is informed by the insight from rhetorics that what is presented last is the more significant, and more likely to be remembered. Emma Schrott examines the interaction of rave culture with the direct consequences of war: the destruction wrought by Russia and the rebuilding efforts undertaken through techno-inspired

collective resistance. Inna Shvorak follows with tracing the revival of traditional lullabies, Cossack songs as well as the use of traditional instruments in war time rituals. In doing this she shows how the music is adopted to an urban ritual context and takes on new meaning in times of war. The volume concludes with an essay by Ieva Gudaitytė, who shifts the focus from music to modes of broadcasting and consumption. By situating independent music radio in Ukraine historically as well as within the context of war, she offers a reflection on the production and meaning of alternative historiography.

Methodological and research ethical challenges

The researchers contributing to this special issue were confronted with numerous challenges, some of a methodological, others of a research ethical nature. Due to war, destruction, and the persecution of dissenters, fieldwork in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia is difficult, though for different reasons and with varying political implications. While it would exceed the scope of this introduction to detail these differences, it is safe to say that due to these reasons most articles rely on virtual sources. Online ethnography and patchwork ethnography, the latter working with "gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge production"[12], thus constitute standard methodological tools of empirical research in this issue's contributions. Researching places where military combat takes place implies that the death of colleagues and research participants is to be expected and constitutes an additional emotional toll on the scholar. Working in places where authoritarian aggression against dissenters is radicalized – e.g. via violent crackdowns on signs of opposition, arbitrary law enforcement, and imprisonments – calls for novel forms of solidarity among researchers.

THE INCREASING violence against and dangers for both researchers and research participants demands us also to engage in debates about how we can keep transparent the choice of methods, the varying toll of conducting research under such conditions, as well as the selection of research participants. Of course, these include careful and continuous reflection on the differing ways in which the war and authoritarian aggression affect individual researchers. Are our close ones suffering from the war? If not, how does that influence our reasoning? If they are, how does that influence our reasoning? It also demands creative answers concerning the question of how to deal with a humanities and social science publishing landscape that privileges Euro-American experiences in as much as the latter seem self-explanatory in contrast with understudied areas still treated as if they were by definition peripheral. This situation extends to styles of writing and argumentation. Debates regarding whether researchers should keep with a disinterested position or take on an activist stance concerned us as editors throughout the different production stages of this issue. Though we cannot go into detail here, we find it pivotal to raise these issues here, because hegemonic notions of democratic and peaceful conditions are often implicitly assumed as a standard in methodological debates within sociology and political science. In times when these apparent standard conditions fade on a global scale, laying bare such assumptions' provinciality and ignorance, students of music, politics, and culture may be well advised to build a more humanistically oriented research culture. We hope that this special issue provides a starting point for such endeavours.

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Aleksej Tikhonov is a Post-doctoral researcher in Slavic Linguistics at the University of Zurich.

David-Emil Wickström is a Professor at the Popakademie Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

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Slushai Bat'ku!

Popular music, politics, and the legacy of Belarusian *Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambls* (VIAs)

by **David-Emil Wickström**

abstract

Being once a central component of Soviet popular culture, the *Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambls* [Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble] (VIA) repertoire has become a shared heritage across today's former Soviet republics. While portrayed in the media as a depoliticized historical phenomenon, some music groups still active today like the Soviet Belarusian VIAs Pesniary, Siabry, Verasy and Charaunitsy have in part also become entwined with domestic politics.

Focusing on Belarus, this article explores through virtual ethnography and a multimodal critical discourse analysis the intersection between popular music and politics. It especially focuses on how Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka, drawing on populist strategies, champions artists like the mentioned VIAs that support his ideology. Over his 30-year rule Lukashenka has promoted a national identity based in part on Soviet nostalgia. The mentioned VIAs are not only important drivers of contemporary Belarusian national identity, but they also provide a bridge to the Soviet past. Not only are they (in) directly supported by Lukashenka and the Belarusian state, they in different ways also support Lukashenka and were thus notably absent in the protests following the contested presidential elections in 2020.

KEYWORDS: *Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambl* (VIA), Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, Pesniary, Siabry, populism, nostalgia.

Musicians in the Soviet Union were not instruments of the state. Yet, musicians of VIAs (*Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambl* – Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble) as well as *estrada* (the official Soviet popular music) were linked to state structures with some of their songs also promoting Soviet ideology.[1] Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this legacy lives on and both Russia and Ukraine have instrumentalized popular music to mobilize people, strengthen patriotic sentiment and to raise funds.[2]

The use of music also includes oppositional forces: The protests in Belarus accompanying the contested presidential elections on August 9, 2020, drew on music creatively with songs like *Try carapachi* [Three turtles], *Kupalinka*, *Steny/Mury* [Walls] and *Khochu Peremen* [I want change, often called "Peremen"] becoming protest anthems. Of these songs *Khochu Peremen*[3] together with two songs released after the contested elections, *Vskormlennye odnoi sis'koi*[4] [Fed from one breast] and *Rodina*[5] [Motherland] referenced Soviet rock bands from the 1980s.

Musicians also marched in the protests and were arrested – like the band Dai Darogu!'s front person Iuryi Styl'ski.[6] While rooted in punk rock and released before the election, Dai Darogu!'s song *Kartokha*[7] [Potato] draws on a different form of Soviet popular music: the opening vocal line from the Soviet VIA Pesniary's [The Singers] song *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu*[8] [Ias mowed the clover]. Former Pesniary members and other VIA groups still active have, however, been notably absent from the protests.

Instead, these VIAs can be seen performing at state sponsored events like *Slavianskii Bazar* [Slavonic Bazar] in Vitebsk

The Belarusian state ensemble Pesniary performing at the concert RE:Pesniary, September 12, 2014, Club "Re:Public", Minsk. PHOTO: AUTHOR

or the *Natsyianal'ny festyval belaruskai pesni i paezii* [National Festival of Belarusian songs and poetry] in Maladzechna. Anatol' Iarmolenka, VIA Siabry's [Friends] vocalist, is even seen singing the first verse of the song *Liubumuiu ne otdaiut*[9] [You don't give away your favorite]. Uploaded to the Belarusian music production company Aura's YouTube channel and released on September 17, 2020, this music video supports president Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Written by Aura's Iuliia Bykova and Evgenii Oleinik, the song features several well-known Russian and Belarusian musicians. The title and the refrain's closing line are taken from the conclusion of a speech Lukashenka gave on August 4, 2020, to the Belarusian parliament, decrying foreign meddling in domestic politics before the contested elections: "But she [Belarus] is ours, she is our favorite, and your favorite you don't give away":[10]

> **Here is my sky, my home, my heart**
> **Here everything is dear and close to me since childhood**
> **I love from my soul my country**
> **Here we live, our children will live**
> **In peace, love and harmony – together**
> **Just know – your favorite you don't give away**[11]

As Lozka and Makarychev point out the song has been featured "at various regime-sponsored concerts and broadcast on ANT (All-General TV) and radio".[12]

Focusing on Belarus this article examines such intersections between popular music and politics in Belarus, especially how Lukashenka, drawing on populist strategies, champions artists that support his ideology and positions himself as a leader and "father figure". As Dunkel and Schiller write, "[a]lthough the term populism remains contested, most researchers agree that populism is based on a binary conception of society: a 'people' on the one hand, an 'elite' on the other".[13] Moffitt outlines three overarching concepts of populism.[14] The first, populism as an ideology, is where society is seen as divided into two camps ("pure" people vs "corrupt" elite) and where politics should be the expression of the people's will. Since this "thin-centered ideology" lacks further content, it is mostly linked to other ideologies (e.g. nationalism). The second is populism as a form of political strategy, in other words how politicians strategically pursue and maintain their power through populist practices. The third concept, which is also this chapter's focus, is populism as a discourse or political performance mode and looks at how the discourse people vs. elite is created and maintained through language and performative aspects. Dunkel and Schiller argue that the performative aspect goes beyond language and should take a "culture-oriented approach to populism [looking at] *cultures of populism* [which is] the ways in which systems of meaning and cultural practices function to constitute, communicate, and reinforce populist attitudes on a discursive, interpretative, and performative level."[15]

AFTER GIVING a concise history of VIAs using existing literature, the article's second part focusing on musicians coming from the VIA tradition outlines how Lukashenka through music reinforces

populist attitudes. As Günther points out, VIAs today are elements of a broader nostalgia for the Soviet Union and are often portrayed in official media in a depoliticized way.[16] This fits well with Lukashenka, who, once he was elected, turned towards Soviet symbols and policies to portray his rule as common-sensical and non-politicized. Here Lukashenka draws on what Boym labels a "restorative nostalgia", creating a national memory based on *one* singular idea of national identity in which VIAs provide a bridge to the Soviet past.[17]

The research informing this article is primarily based on a virtual ethnography since travel to Belarus following the 2020 protests became too dangerous. The ethnography is supported by findings from two visits to Belarus in 2014 and 2017, conversations with musicians and cultural workers as well as media accessible outside Belarus. Some of the sources (e.g. tut.by) are no longer accessible or have been taken offline due to Lukashenka's crackdown after the 2020 protests. This is combined with a multimodal critical discourse analysis broadening the analyzed text to include not only the words, but also images, sounds and (live) performances where necessary.[18]

VIAs

In the Soviet Union *estrada* was the dominant official popular music until the 1960s. Following Stalin's death and Khruschev's thaw, not only a jazz, but also an amateur music scene developed (in part also inspired by Western popular music). As a reaction, the Soviet cultural authorities introduced the VIA system to offer a path for amateurs to become professional popular musicians and to control the amateur music scene.[19] VIAs were linked to certain official structures like state philharmonics. Political interests could regulate where a VIA might emerge or what repertoire they were allowed to play. Spanning almost three decades until the end of the Soviet Union Schäfer divides the VIA-era into the following 3 distinct stages:[20]

Stage one is the beginning of the VIAs starting from about 1966 until the end of that decade. The first generation are in part inspired by Western beat music like the Beatles and in part by *estrada* or jazz. Founded as Liavony [Lions] in 1968, Pesniary started as a Beatles inspired band. Centered around its musical director Vladimir Muliavin, Pesniary reached the peak of its popularity in the 1970s and was central to establishing Belarusian as a sung language in Soviet popular music.[21]

In the 1970s (stage two of the VIA-era) we also see a second generation of Belarusian VIAs emerging, notably Verasy [Heather flowers][22], Siabry[23] and the first Belarusian female VIA Charaunitsy [Enchantresses][24]. Schäfer argues that in stage two the VIAs develop distinct musical styles, often drawing on folkloric elements and ethnic as well as national traditions.

Within Belarus a Belarusian ethnic identity can in part be traced to Piotr Masherau's politics of the 1970s.[25] As Chernyshova argues, his policies constructed a civic-national identity that refer to an allegedly common past revolving around WWII memory, Belarusian partisan myths, pre-Soviet Belarusian folk art and customs as well as the Belarusian transition from a peasant society to an industrial Soviet one.[26] In terms of music the Masherau-politics supported bands drawing on Belarusian folklore such as Pesniary and Siabry. As Chernyshova points out "all these different state mobilization efforts produced combined symbolic ethnic attributes with modern and civic elements."[27]

WHILE VIAS PROVIDED a home for more ambitious amateur popular musicians, the amateur scene remained and continued to grow during the 1970s. To control them, rock clubs were founded in the 1980s. This influenced the VIAs which also incorporated more rock influences. The 1980s is also the final (third) VIA stage. Here we see an important musical shift: the VIA-repertoire continued the *estrada*-tradition where the songwriters and lyricists often were not part of the VIAs themselves (which made changes to the line up while retaining the band identity easier). The rock bands, on the other hand, linked songwriting and performance. Despite musical differences this resembles the ideological split seen in Anglo-US-American popular music starting in the 1960s with rock mostly associated with songs written and performed by the band itself and pop identified with a band or artist performing music written for them by a songwriter.[28] This latter approach is something we know from producer centered groups e.g. Ronettes (Phil Spector), Boney M. (Frank Farian) and Dschinghis Kahn (Ralph Siegel) and similarly within a post-Soviet context from formations like VIA Gra (Kostiantyn Meladze, Dmytro Kostiuk) and Serebro (Maksim Fadeev). This also means that it is easier to replace members in a pop band or, going back to the Soviet Union, a VIA line up since they "only" have to perform – creating musical shells around a band name. As I will discuss later this also means that there can be (as in the case of Pesniary) several bands with the same or similar name.

"THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION IS ACCOMPANIED BY THE DEMISE OF THE SOVIET VIA SYSTEM, BUT NOT OF THE ENSEMBLES THEMSELVES."

The collapse of the Soviet Union is accompanied by the demise of the Soviet VIA system, but not of the ensembles themselves. Several VIAs survive. Adjusting to the conditions of a capitalist market economy, they operate differently which also affects their lineups.

Belarus, national identity, and populism ...

Belarus was "late to the nineteenth-century nation-building stage" as Krawatzek and Weller point out.[29] Unlike other former Soviet states like Ukraine, the first Belarusian language newspapers, history and grammar were published in the early 20th century. Due to this development there are two dominant approaches to Belarusian history.[30] The first focuses on how Belarus flourished during the Soviet Union. It celebrates the Soviet

Union's achievements and centers on how the Soviet Union repelled the Nazis from the occupied Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union Belarus pursued a path of radical Othering of Sovietness, often referred to as *adradzennie* [rebirth].[31] This second approach to Belarus' history is ethno-cultural. It promotes Belarusian as the official state language and national history from a non-Soviet perspective. *Adradzennie* emphasizes Belarus' historical link to Europe and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as well as the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (BNR). The Soviet period is presented as one of repressions and suffering. Especially Belarusian rock music, which emerged in the 1980s, blossomed during *adradzennie* with Liavon Vol'ski among the most prominent and outspoken artists to emerge.[32]

PROVIDING AN ALTERNATIVE to the ethno-cultural approach, Lukashenka's presidential campaign in 1994 focused on corruption and chasing state officials and intellectuals, nostalgia for Soviet stability (including closer ties to Russia) and restraint regarding market reforms and privatization.[33] Drawing on the people's dissatisfaction with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Lukashenka positioned himself as a leader-figure speaking for the people fighting an elite. Lukashenka embedded his campaign within a form of Soviet ideology (language, economic, social).

Since post-Soviet Belarus was ethnically quite homogenous and Russian as a language dominated this approach can be read as a form of "civic" nationalism based on shared ideas of the Soviet Union. As March argues, Lukashenka continued his populist approach after his election.[34] In Lukashenka's legitimation the people gave him their mandates through a direct form of democracy of which e.g. the referendums in 1995 and 1996 were a part of:

> **These referendums enable the strengthening of presidential power by providing a plebiscite dealing with his political conceptions, and maintaining the illusion of the decisive role of the people in political and social choices.**[35]

The post-Soviet ethno-cultural approach and *adradzennie* was thus replaced with his initial election in 1994.[36] As Ioffe points out, this was in part also due to the majority of the population following the collapse of the Soviet Union being against Belarus becoming an independent country as well as the failure of the Belarusization campaign following independence. Furthermore, Lukashenka is a proponent of civic nationalism which he sees more fitting for Belarus as a country.[37] Russian was elevated to a state language on equal footing with Belarusian, an effort to reintegrate Belarus with Russia was launched, privatization was halted, the "selective and strategic memory commemorating the sacrifices made by Soviet citizens during World War II"[38] was highlighted and state symbols were changed stressing the Soviet heritage in line with Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia.[39]

With the designation of a national ideology in 2003 Lukashenka further moved away from an ethnic towards a Soviet collectivist idea of national identity based on shared values, which Leshchenko calls "egalitarian nationalism" based around Soviet collectivist principles applied to post-Soviet Belarus.[40]

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka attended the wood chopping challenge among journalistst in November, 2022.

SOURCE: HTTPS://ENG.BELTA.BY/VIDEO/GETRECORD/1791/

LUKASHENKA RECAPTURED and continued Soviet ideals and state structures – which is also parodied in popular culture like when the TV sketch *Belorusy poiut o situatsii v Ukraine* [Belarussians sing about the Ukrainian situation] on the Ukrainian Dizel Show points out that Belarus still is the Soviet Union, just small and not aggressive.[41] Lukashenka's election, however, also marks the beginning of oppression and censorship for many (rock) musicians.[42]

Lukashenka, the former head of a Soviet state farm in Belarus, draws on populism as a discursive-performative tool in which, following Ostiguy, "flaunting of the low is the core feature of populism":[43] Lukashenka portrays himself as an anti-elitist with rural roots, often using *trasyanka*:

> **[...] the lexical, grammatical, and syntactic mixture of different languages (Russian and Belarusian, Russian, and Polish, Russian and Ukrainian) [...] employed mainly in rural regions [...] especially when he [Lukashenka] wants to emphasize his concern for the day-to-day problems of the public.**[44]

He can also be seen doing hands on work like portrayed in two official videos from 2022: In one Lukashenka is chopping wood on his compound and in the other he is instructing citizens and reporters on how to correctly chop wood. Here he also has no qualms to dress in working clothes and wear a wool hat.[45]

... and music

As Lozka and Makarychev point out, "[b]y depoliticizing dissent and framing it as deviant behavior, the regime seeks to strip oppositional movements of their political agency and deny them legitimacy".[46] This strategy includes music – Lozka and Makary-

Vladiir Muliavin was the leader of the best-known Belarusian VIA Pesniary. PHOTO: AUTHOR

chev briefly mention the song *Liubumuiu ne otdaiut* (discussed in the beginning of this article) as one example of Lukashenka's depoliticization strategy in which dissenters are framed as deviant because they are against Lukashenka (and Belarus) and thus want to give the loved one (Belarus) away to foreign powers. This fits with a general meddling with music policy: Since he came to power in 1994, Lukashenka has repeatedly cracked down on the music scene. A primary target is the Belarusian language rock scene whose musicians tend to oppose Lukashenka.[47]

At the same time, Lukashenka has in numerous interviews and state appearances hinted at his musical taste and practice, which has an anti-elitist or populist stance: An amateur baian-player who would have also liked to play guitar, he portrays himself as an avid music listener – especially when driving. While also able to listen to *klassika* [Western Art music], he has a preference for *narodnaia muzyka* [folk music] and songs.[48]

WITHIN THE REALM of popular music, Lukashenka seems to have a soft spot for Belarussian VIAs. Along with *estrada*, the VIA repertoire was a central component of state-sanctioned Soviet popular culture. The VIA-ensembles have become a shared heritage across today's former Soviet republics and contemporary post-Soviet popular music still contains their traces. This includes contemporary covers of Soviet (VIA) songs like those on VIA Volga-Volga's album *Pesnya.Ry*[49] – the title a pun in itself by referencing the VIA Pesniary – or groups playing on the name as VIA Iabat'kastan'. By drawing on Belarusian VIAs, Lukashenka not only portrays himself as a person whose music taste matches that of the general population, but he also exploits a Soviet legacy which fits with his civic nationalist approach to Belarus.

This is one of the ways of how music is used for populist ends by politicians as practice and deliberate strategy.[50] Through this kind of staging, Lukashenka draws on non-elite images and this "flaunts the low" in his own performance. His discursive approach to populism includes performative aspects such as gestures and how he dresses.[51] Lukashenka's use of populist staging[52] showcases him as a man, or, to use one of his nicknames, *bats'ka* [father – Russian: *bat'ko*] of the people.

VIA references packaged within contemporary popular music and the ironic use of the VIA-label has, however, not only been used as a humoristic element, but also with political undertones. Returning to VIA Iabat'kastan the name can be read as a slight against Lukashenka and his VIA-preference: it contains the hashtag *#Iabatka*, meaning "I am Batka", similar to the slogan "Je suis Charlie" used in the aftermath of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting. The word *Batka* is used here as the mentioned commonly invoked reference to *Bats'ka* Lukashenka [Father Lukashenka]. Discussing Russian meddling in the Belarus protests, an article in the Russian newspaper *Novaia Gazeta* mentioned *#Iabatka* as a Russian attempt at a pro-Lukashenka branding which emerged in Belarus in 2020.[53]

The use of VIA in the Belarusian group deVIAtion is more a critique of the VIA-System itself. The group maintains a critical political stance with their song *Tvoi bats'ka fashyst*[54] [Your father is a fascist] which is a punkiefied cover of Televizor's "Tvoi papa – fashist"[55] originally released 1987. Once more, *bats'ka* is used – here by the band deVIAtion – as a reference to Lukashenka.

Moving away from *bats'ka* VIA Demotivator's music video *Medved-stori* [Bear-story] is also political: On July 4th 2012 members of the Swedish advertising firm "Studio Total" initiated the pro-democracy stunt "Teddybear Airdrop Minsk 2012"[56] where they dropped teddy bears with messages promoting free speech and human rights from an airplane in violation of Belarusian air space.[57] This incident caused a diplomatic scandal between Belarus and Sweden and resulted in the Swedish ambassador Stefan Eriksson, who also maintained contacts with the opposition, having to leave Belarus.[58] *Medved-stori* which music includes the main keyboard line to ABBA's *The Winner Takes It All*[59] comments on the incident and the accompanying video shows footage from the stunt.

Pesniary, Muliavin, and Lukashenka

A more common use of the VIA-label are parodies like the mentioned Dizel Show's *Belorusy poiut o situatsii v Ukraine* which includes a parody of Pesniary's *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu* or Potap and Nastia's *Chumachechaia Vesna*[60] [Freaky Spring] making fun of VIA performance practice. A recurring source of musical and visual inspiration which unites these two examples is arguably the best-known Belarusian VIA Pesniary and its leader Vladimir Muliavin. In *Chumachechaia Vesna* Potap and Nastia also visually stereotype his trait of being half-bald and with a prominent handlebar mustache.

Continuing their activities into post-Soviet Belarus, Pesniary remained popular both in Belarus and Russia. At the opening of the annual Belarusian festival *Slavianskii bazar* in 1994 Muliavin for the band's 25th anniversary sang *Berezovyi sok* [Birch juice] as a duet with Russian *estrada* star Alla Pugacheva and in 2001 Muliavin hosted an anniversary concert in the Moscow venue Rossiia [Russia].[61] At the same time many bands have paid tribute to Pesniary's work including two Belarusian compilations (Pesniarok; RE:Pesniary)[62] and a Russian fictionalized mini-series about Muliavin that was released in 2023.[63]

PENSIARY'S REPERTOIRE thus remains known to many in the former Soviet Union. It serves as a common pop cultural reference beyond Belarus across the former Soviet republics. According to Günther, Pesniary has been part of a core VIA canon since the 1970s.[64] A 2017 Russian survey placed the group at third place of most liked Soviet groups. This provides *one* explanation for the numerous Pesniary parodies.[65]

Despite this, Pesniary had evolved into a musical shell in post-Soviet Belarus, in other words a band, but where the musicians were not necessarily part of the original line ups. This is in part due to infighting among the members of Pesniary which resulted in several ensembles using the name. After a presidential decree in 1998 only one ensemble, the state ensemble Pesniary, was allowed to use the name. Other groups drawing on the name persisted like Belorusskie Pesniary [Belarusian Pesniary] headed by former Pesniary member Vladimir Misevich.[66]

"THE MEMBERS OF THESE FORMER VIAS HAVE STATE SUPPORT EITHER DIRECTLY THROUGH LUKASHENKA'S INTERVENTION OR INDIRECTLY BEING INCLUDED IN EVENTS AND OFFICIAL COMMITTEES AND JURIES."

Muliavin, however, remained the central person: With the mentioned presidential decree, Lukashenka not only got directly involved elevating Pesniary to matter of national interest, but also reinstated Muliavin as the state ensemble's artistic director.[67] Lukashenka also spoke at Muliavin's funeral on January 28, 2003.[68] As he stated in an interview, he had not only supported, but also pressured Muliavin to remain creative with Pesniary.[69] Lukashenka renamed a street after and erected a statue of Muliavin. He also opened a museum dedicated to Muliavin inside the Belarusian State Philharmonic Society.[70] On its page describing culture and music in Belarus the official presidential website explicitly mentions Pesniary (and Siabry).[71] Through these (and other) activities Muliavin and Pesniary have been elevated to national symbols.

VIAs and state support

Lukashenka has also expressed preferences for musicians from the VIA Verasy including Vasil' Rainchyk, Aliaksandr Tsikhanovich and Marta Holubeva. When Tsikhanovich passed away, Lukashenka offered his condolences,[72] and when Rainchyk turned 70 years, Lukashenka congratulated him.[73] The musicians were also given official roles: Rainchyk has been a member of the Belarusian Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) jury as have his Verasy colleagues Iadviha Paplauskaia and Tsikhanovich. As Bratachkin highlights, Lukashenka prioritizes ESC achievements using loyalists to choose contestants for the ESC.[74]

The mentioned VIAs also profit from being included in state-supported events. The mentioned "Slavianskii bazar" and the "Natsyianal'ny festyval belaruskai pesni i paezii" regularly feature some member of Siabry, Verasy, Pesniary and Charaunitsy – also after the elections in 2020. Rainchyk, Tsikhanovich, Paplauskaia as well as Siabry's Iarmolenka have also been on the jury of the "Slavianskii bazar".[75] Within Belarus at least two former VIAs, the state ensemble "Pesniary" as well as the Verasy ensemble within the *Molodezhnyi teatr estrady* [Young estrada theatre] receive state support.

IN OTHER WORDS, the members of these former VIAs have state support either directly through Lukashenka's intervention or indirectly being included in events and official committees and juries. This links the musicians to the state and is probably a reason for the fact that the musicians themselves tend to be low-key about their political leanings – or toe the state line and support Lukashenka. This is in line with Günther's observation that "the commemoration of VIA music is mostly apolitical", the aim being more to create a nostalgia for audiences' youth.[76]

While expressing no political views in interviews, former Pesniary vocalist Anatolii Kasheparov did perform with a Pesniary-ensemble in the Donetsk Peoples Republic (DNR) in 2017.[77] Similarly, Charaunitsy performed twice at the festival "Donetskie Samotsvety" [Donetsk Gems] in DNR in 2015 and 2016.[78] Kasheparov argued that the show was for friends, but these performances in occupied DNR violated Ukraine's territorial integrity and could be read as pro-Russian political acts. Liavon Vol'ski picked up on and parodied these events for his show on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty:

> **Henykh, there are six or five 'Pesnyary' [singers].**
> **Obviously, everyone needs to earn money somewhere!**
> **So, it doesn't matter where they play now -**
> **Crimea or LNR, DNR.**
> **They don't care – the train station or the bazaar,**
> **Who is a criminal here, who is a clown, who is a tsar.**
> **Just pay the fee.**[79]

As the lyrics demonstrate, Vol'ski not only parodies Kasheparov's 2017-concert in DNR but also the numerous Pesniary-offspring opportunistically performing anywhere for money. Using the melody from Pesniary's song *Vologda* accompanied

by a synth playing the bass line on each beat of the bar and the chords on the off beats the song's sound parodies low-status solo performers singing and accompanying themselves on a synthesizer. The clip includes video footage from the DNR and other concerts and was produced for Radio Svoboda [Radio Liberty].

Some musicians also openly demonstrate support for Lukashenka. Verasy's Vasil' Rainchyk, in an interview with the Belarusian news service *Belta*, backed Lukashenka's Belarus after the contested 2020 elections.[80] Siabry's Iarmolenka has in several instances performed songs which can be read as supporting Lukashenka and his policies like this article's opening example *Liubimuiu ne otdaiut*. Another example is *Slushai Bat'ku* [Listen to the Father] which Siabry performed at a televised concert on March 8, 2006.[81] Together with female (background) vocalists Iarmolenka praises the qualities of the father in form of a call and response:

> **Female singers: He'll settle grudges easily,**
> **Female soloist: He's reliable and calm.**
> **Female singers: He just looks, you can see right away,**
> **Iarmolenka: Who's**
> **Iarmolenka & female singers: the master of the house**
> **[...]**
> **Iarmolenka: Listen to the father**
> **Female singers: Morning, night and day**[82]

The person in the refrain saying "*Slushai Bat'ku*" is Iarmolenka with the female singers adding that this should be done all the time. Not only does this dialogue between Iarmolenka and the female singers clearly mark a gendered hierarchy, but the song can be – and was – read as a call to be obedient and to listen to Lukashenka since the title uses the mentioned nickname for *Bats'ka Lukashenka*.[83]

The concert was hosted 11 days before the presidential elections in Belarus – in which Lukashenka was reelected for his third term. While Iarmolenka stressed that there is no reason to link the song to the political situation in Belarus and that *Bat'ko* is also used for the head of the household, both he and the songwriter Oleg Sorokin in separate interviews stated that the song was written with Lukashenka in mind.[84]

Siabry also opened the 2021 "Slavianskii Bazar" where Iarmolenka performed the song *Ty pomnish* [You remember].[85] The lyrics describe how people in the past interacted with each other while today they spend time on their smartphones and send emojis instead of calling each other.

> **Everything was so easy, everything was so important**
> **Where did all that one day disappear to**
> **It's not about old, outdated things**
> **And not about nostalgia for those times**
> **We all changed, suddenly became strangers**
> **Stopped talking to each other**
> **Got stuck in accounts of different networks [social media]**
> **And became examples for our children**[86]

The song culminates in the bridge with a call for change and to refocus on ourselves which is musically stressed by the band shifting to a half-time feel:

> **But maybe it is time to stop all this?**
> **Change ourselves and change the world.**
> **Open for ourselves something that knows no price,**
> **It's not for nothing that God gave us souls.**[87]

The images projected in the background are everyday pictures from the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s. This song can be read as a strange form of reactionary, or to use Boym's term, restorative nostalgia[88] back to a "simpler" time where maintaining personal relationships through letters and phone calls was important – which is probably synonymous with the Soviet Union. This is a good example of how VIAs today are presented in a depoliticized way, as a historical phenomenon of the Soviet Union.[89] Siabry not only embodies this historical past with its own history, but also through the nostalgia which the lyrics and the performance display. This Soviet nostalgia idealizing a past lifestyle and alleged values falls in line with Lukashenka drawing on the Soviet Union and thus being the custodian of Soviet values. Following a year of protest against Lukashenka, these values are symbolically reinforced with the song opening the 2021 "Slavianskii Bazar". As Dunkel and Schiller stress:

"THIS SOVIET NOSTALGIA IDEALIZING A PAST LIFESTYLE AND ALLEGED VALUES FALLS IN LINE WITH LUKASHENKA DRAWING ON THE SOVIET UNION AND THUS BEING THE CUSTODIAN OF SOVIET VALUES."

> **Nostalgic references to an idealised past evoke a longing for – and return to – a supposedly better and simpler time. Memory culture reinforces populist narratives by framing a specific act, artist, party, or politician as the custodian of traditional values and defender against perceived threats to the cultural fabric.**[90]

As the 2020 demonstrations however also showed, VIAs are not only used by Lukashenka and his supporters, but also by the protesters. As Lysenka argues in her article on Pesniary as Soviet and national heritage, the two Pesniary songs *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu* and *Malitva* [Prayer], were actively repurposed by the demonstrators and have thus become part of an unauthorized Belarusian heritage.[91] *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu* also makes another, albeit silent, appearance in Dai Darogu!'s oeuvre. The music video to *Baiu-bai* [Nighty-night][92] presents a dystopian reinterpretation of an episode from *Nu, Pogodi!* [I'm gonna get you!], a well-known Soviet children's cartoon.[93] In the cartoon the

protagonist (a rabbit) is chased through a wheat field by the antagonist (a wolf) in a combine harvester musically accompanied by Pesniary's song *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu*. Referencing this scene, the combine harvesters in *Baiu-bai* are driven by dehumanized Belarusian police whose faces are disfigured and bloodied (looking almost like Zombies), chasing normal citizens trying to flee across the Belarusian border. From the back of the machines riot police jump out. The lyrics are sung from the perspective of a policeman who sees himself as Lukashenka's right finger [*"Batin pravyi perst"*] and who is only afraid of regime change [*"Tol'ko smena vlasti moi edinstvennyi koshmar"*].

Introduced by a march-like snare solo the up-tempo song (around 99 bpm) goes into a half-time feel during the song's bridge (which starts at 2:47). The video shows a riot police officer beating up an elderly woman accompanied by the melody of the official Belarusian national anthem played on the electric guitar.[94] The bridge's lyrics describe how the cop has collected bonuses, filled the paddy wagon and now feels better:

> **Brought the bum in – 10**
> **For the alcoholic – 20**
> **For the granny with the white-red-white flag – 100 rubles**
> **Ripped a picket line with a report – 150 to my salary**
> **And filled the paddy wagon and my soul lightened up**[95]

Both the lyrics and the visual imagery are in stark contrast to the first verse of the anthem's lyrics which focuses on how peaceful and generous Belarus' inhabitants are:

> **We, Belarusians, are peaceful people,**
> **Wholeheartedly devoted to our Motherland.**
> **We are generous friends, tempering our strength**
> **Living in a hardworking and independent family.**[96]

At the same time the cop is also hardworking and devoted to Belarus, just in a different way than some listeners of the anthem might think.

The Baiu-bai-video went online before the elections (July 18, 2020) and eerily predicted the police brutality and Lukashenka's necropolitics[97] that would follow.

As these examples show Pesniary is not only instrumentalized by Lukashenka but has become part of a Belarusian heritage as well as a pop cultural reference. This points to the polysemic nature of music which can take on different meaning for different people und shows that the government cannot dictate how songs or groups are perceived.

Conclusion

The remains of the Soviet VIAs live on. This points to a shared supranational Soviet heritage and nostalgia back to the music of the audiences' youth – seen also in the repurposing of VIA-material by contemporary bands as parodies, covers, quotes and tribute albums. It can also be heard and seen in the revival of VIAs with little (or no personal) connection to the original VIAs. To some extent these developments parallel currently active Soviet rock bands. In the rock bands, however, the front person, who is mostly also the songwriter, has remained active, while in most of the VIAs – including those mentioned in this article – the composer, an artistic director or a key figure from the original ensemble has remained with the performing personnel mostly changing. While some of the original members like Muliavin and Rainchyk composed parts of the repertoire, the VIAs, unlike the Soviet rock bands, heavily relied on songs written by songwriters not part of the groups. In other words, the VIAs function as musical shells. This makes it easier to bring in any figure related to the VIA – like in the case of Charaunitsy or the numerous Pesniary-offspring – and not necessarily an iconic front-figure like in Soviet rock bands.

The VIAs are also featured at state funded events – also after the elections – and officially recognized. They are thus linked to the Belarusian state and follow the state line. This is both an explanation to why VIAs have been notably absent from protest and why they still are musically active. Here another link to the Soviet empire can be seen: Lukashenka has in part adopted the Soviet power structure of tying artists to the state and thus trying to control the music industry. This is also linked to Lukashenka's populism as a discursive-performative tool and strategy of depoliticization.

Vladimir Putin employs similar strategies in Russia. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine the singer Shaman got a boost as a young, (relatively) fresh face singing patriotic songs and promoting Russian nationalism.[98] At the same time, the repercussions following the so called *golaia vecherink*a [naked party] organized by Anastasia Ivleeva in Moscow in December 2023 has shown how conservative body politics and "traditional values" have become more prominent in Russia: Following the naked party, several musicians faced performance bans and in at least once instance (Kirkorov) was removed from prerecorded New Year shows.[99]

The VIAs remain important for a Belarusian national identity: They invoke a musically successful (Soviet) past and highlight a stylized Belarusian folklore and language in addition to the more typical *estrada* fare that they also produced. Returning to the 2020 protests in Belarus, this, however, does not mean that Pesnary's songs only remain part of an officially authorized heritage: Muliavin and Pesnary's songs have also become symbols for the protesters showing that the political instrumentalization of music by the state is not always successful.

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The article is dedicated to the musicians I met in Minsk.

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Pomidor/off during a concert at Re:public club in Minsk. PHOTO: DAVID-EMIL WICKSTRÖM

The ethos of RESISTANCE in Belarusian rock

The 2020 protests and Russia's war on Ukraine

by **Yauheni Kryzhanouski**

abstract

This article, based on the analysis of media, video production and songs, as well as semi-structured interviews, pursues three objectives. First, it analyses Belarusian rock musicians' modes of protest engagement in the context of the 2020 Belarusian post-electoral protests and the 2022 Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Second, it situates their engagement within the Belarusian underground rock artistic tradition that took root in the 1980s, but which was updated in waves as new impulses were given to protest. Finally, it provides an overview of four types of social logics that have historically contributed to the protest politicization of Belarusian rock music.

KEYWORDS: Politicization, protest, rock music, Belarus.

A major series of electoral protests disrupted Belarusian political life in 2020. The protests provided an often improvised stage for many Belarusian rock musicians who supported the demonstrators through concerts, songs or statements in the media and social networks. This wave of popular musicians' public expression was prominently covered in the Western European and North American media, from *The New York Times* to *Euronews*, often featuring heroic titles: "How Music Became a Weapon in the 'Revolution' in Belarus",[1] "Protest Anthem in Belarus: Three Turtles [name of a song] against State Power",[2] "For Aging Belarus Rockers, a Late Shot at Stardom",[3] "Are Musicians in Belarus Being Locked Up Because Songs Are Instrumental for Change?"[4] etc. In 2022, the same Belarusian musicians were quick to express their opposition to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, in which Belarusian authorities provided support to the aggressor.

This intervention in the political struggle by musicians and their specific participation in collective action is nothing completely new. For more than forty years, Belarusian rockers have been expressing their opposition to the dominant players in the political arena: first under Soviet tutelage, and then under the current authoritarian regime. What forms does this political expression take? And what are the reasons for this long-standing involvement of rock musicians in protest activities in Belarus?

"ROCK MUSICIANS WERE AMONG THOSE SYSTEMATICALLY AND VISIBLY ENGAGING IN PROTESTS IN 2020."

It would be tempting to reduce the answer to individual artistic, political or moral choices. However, such explanations remain unsatisfactory because they fail to account for the collective and enduring nature of this opposition to the Soviet and post-Soviet dictatorship. In this article I argue that explanations can also be found in social structures, i.e., the configurations of relationships that weigh on the actors and predispose them to a certain extent to make specific choices and take up specific positions. This historical and sociological analysis is particularly inspired by the French critical sociology of intellectuals based on Bourdieu's field theory.[5]

A PROTEST MYTHOLOGY that encourages criticism of authoritarian power, partly inherited from the underground scenes in the USSR and Central Europe,[6] has been revived in waves in Belarus. The logics behind this politicization[7] are complex, and the waves of its intensification relate to the national political context which encourages or discourages artists' protests. As a result of these recurrent waves, by 2020, opposition against the political regime was integrated into the conventions of the art world of Belarusian rock, i.e. it became an important dimension of this musical movement's ethos, canon and artistic tradition.[8] Social mechanisms of politicization gradually produced structuring effects on several relatively autonomous sub-fields of the artistic field,[9] particularly and notably rock music, influencing artistic hierarchies and defining protest expression as a type of symbolic capital certifying a musician's belonging to the "authentic" rock scene, as opposed to venal and opportunistic mass culture showbusiness. From this point of view, the politicization of rock is accepted, expected and normalized, even though it is a priori a form of transgression – transgression of the boundary between differentiated social spaces, between social worlds, between types of activity separated by the division of labor.

This article, based on the analysis of media, video production, and songs, as well as semi-structured interviews with musicians, music producers, journalists, and political activists (n=59),[10] has three objectives. First, I analyze Belarusian rock musicians' modes of protest engagement in 2020 and 2022 in terms of the protest repertoire that they used. Repertoire, understood here in the sense that Charles Tilly used the term in social movement theory (repertoire of collective action or repertoire of contention), is a set of claim-making tools available and used in the process of collective action: a "whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals".[11] Second, I situate this commitment within the artistic tradition of Eastern and Central European underground rock music that took root in the 1980s and has been updated in waves following major moments of political tension, contention and repression. Finally, I provide an overview of four types of social logics that have contributed to the protest politicization of Belarusian rock music – all of which, taken together, lead to the formation of a protest ethos that was reactivated in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

THE PROTEST ENGAGEMENT of musicians studied in this article are interesting firstly because it points to how political activities under authoritarian regimes operate, going beyond a binary schema that frames authoritarian politics as a confrontation between the dictatorship and the pro-democracy opposition.[12] Further, the authoritarian context helps to identify forms of political participation that are sometimes almost invisible in liberal democracies dominated by conventional politics, with parties, trade unions and other professionalized actors. While the article focuses on protest politicization in an authoritarian context, it also aims to contribute to a more general understanding of so-called "unconventional" forms of political participation.[13]

This article also contributes to the debates on the relationship between art – in particular, popular music – and political protest.[14] Often, this relationship tends to be classified in media and the general view in two opposing representations. On the one hand, there is a tendency to glorify the heroism of disinterested intellectual commitment of protest music. On the other hand, sometimes authors and colleagues denounce the strategic use of a falsely rebellious image for commercial ends by such engaged musicians. The article shows that most situations are part of much more complex and contradictory configurations, which I analyze through the prism of four logics of politicization.

"Fair elections. Tribunal. Freedom to the political prisoners". Protest rally against Lukashenko, August 16, 2020 in Minsk, Belarus.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

2020–2022: Repertoire of protest

A long-lasting and massive wave of protests hit Belarus after the presidential poll of August 9, 2020, when Alexander Lukashenko was proclaimed to have been elected as president for the sixth time. Strikes and demonstrations against widespread electoral fraud, police violence and monopolization of power took place on a scale unprecedented since the first election of Lukashenko in 1994 and the introduction of authoritarian reforms.[15]

Rock musicians were among those systematically and visibly engaging in protests in 2020. To give just a few examples: in August-September 2020, singer-songwriter Lavon Volski, founder and leader of several rock bands since the early 1980s, including the legendary *Mroja* [Dream] and *NRM* [Independent Republic Dream], recorded two songs with suggestive titles and lyrics: *Iržavaja dziaržava* (lat.) [Rusty State] and *Vorahi narodu* [Enemies of the People].[16] The former illustrates the discrepancy between an aged (rusty) state apparatus and the dynamic society which it no longer corresponds to. In the video for "Enemies of the People", close-ups of fragments of "Hell" from Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" alternate with images of police violence in Belarus. Volski also performed at several demonstrations in Minsk and Hrodna – cities particularly affected by the protests. His album *Trybunal* [Tribunal], released in March 2021, is entirely dedicated to the critique of the socio-political situation in Belarus.[17]

Meanwhile, Volski's former *NRM* comrade Pit Paŭlaŭ provocatively performed *Try čarapachi* [Three Turtles], the band's major hit from the 2000s, during a demonstration in front of a cordon of special police. Towards the end of October 2020, Paŭlaŭ declared he had played 71 concerts for demonstrators since August of the same year,[18] including a concert for protesters in Minsk's "Cascade" housing district. This neighborhood, famous because of the persistence with which residents displayed large white-red-white flags (symbols of the opposition and protests against Lukashenko's rule since 1995) which were systematically removed by city services, hosted several acoustic concerts. These included one by Ihar Varaškevič, another "veteran" of the Belarusian rock scene active since the early 1980s, band leader of *Bonda* [Piece] and later *Krama* [Shop].

ANOTHER HIGHLY SYMBOLIC site of the 2020–2021 protests was a collective buildings' courtyard unofficially called Place of Changes during the protests. This courtyard became particularly known because of a graffiti that was created there in mid-August 2020 depicting two DJs arrested several days before, after playing, during an official celebration, *Peremen* [Changes], a song by the famous Soviet band *Kino* [Cinema] used as an anthem by the protesters. The graffiti was covered with paint by the city services and police every night and systematically restored by the residents. Singers Zmicier Vajciuškievič and Aliaksandr Pamidoraŭ (leader of the band *Pomidor/OFF*) each gave an impromptu concert here. Vajciuškievič's concert had to end early due to a police raid. Pamidoraŭ was arrested after another concert for protesters in a

park – his performance was defined by the court as an unauthorized demonstration, and (coincidentally) all the park benches were dismantled the next day. Together with the aforementioned Paŭlaŭ, Pamidoraŭ had performed several songs in front of the main entrance to MAZ, one of Belarus's largest factories, in support of its strikers. All these musicians also supported protests in their public statements on social networks and in the media.

A particularly interesting aspect of rock musicians' expression after 2020 was their partial transition to using Belarusian, by those of them who formerly sang in Russian.[19] Such generally Russian-singing bands as *Petlia Pristrastiia* [Addiction loop] and *Daj Darogu* [Make way] started to actively record songs in Belarusian. This linguistic turn is not politically neutral: due to the long history of Russian and Soviet imperialist-colonial domination as well as Lukashenko's reforms, the Belarusian language has been assigned a symbolically subaltern political status.[20] Consequently, it has become a tool that can be used as a marker of protest against Lukashenko's regime and Russian cultural and political domination, especially during periods of political crises and increased political activity.

These examples show that the rock musicians' repertoire of protest includes three main types of instruments. Not all of them are put into play by every protest musician – who may use them only partly, depending, for example, on genre traditions, the position occupied in the art field or the context of expression. But artists can also use all of these instruments simultaneously.

FIRST, MUSIC AND especially poetry can be used to express opposition: musicians can write protest songs with lyrics that include revolutionary references. An interesting example is *Mury* [Walls], another anthem of the 2020 protests which is a Belarusian translation of a song by Polish folk singer Jacek Kaczmarski that was popular among *Solidarność* activists in the 1980s. The Polish version is itself an adaptation of *L'Estaca* [The Stake], a protest song by Catalan singer Lluís Llach, who is still politically active.

Concerts organized in support of protesters and jailed activists, speeches during shows, as well as the presence and performance of musicians at demonstrations constitute the second instrument of rock protest's repertoire – as in the examples of concerts during the protest rallies mentioned above.

Finally, the third type of instrument lies beyond and outside the strictly artistic activity of musicians. It includes public expression and commentary in media and social networks. Just like other figures known and respected for their non-political activity, artists can intervene in public debate from outside the political field, assuming the role of public intellectuals.

ALL THREE INSTRUMENTS of this repertoire were used by Belarusian rock musicians after the start of the Russian full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The invasion was facilitated by Belarusian authorities who provided infrastructural support and land passage to Russian troops. As might have been expected, Belarusian musicians who had taken a stance against the authoritarian Lukashenko regime also condemned the Russian aggression, making use of the same repertoire.

Belarusian rock singer Siarhei Mikhalok reunited his band *Liapis Trubetskoĭ* in 2022, and they have since performed in various locations in Europe and North America. Poster from his concert in Riga on July 18, 2025.

First, they spoke out on social networks and openly supported Ukraine. For example, the bands *Petlia Pristrastiia* and *Nizkiz* inserted the following message (in Russian and English) in their video clips on their YouTube channels:

> **While you're watching this video, Ukrainian people are dying under Russian attacks.**

Rock singers Lavon Volski and Siarhei Mikhalok (leader of bands Liapis Trubetskoĭ and Brutto, among others) have published appeals to the Belarusian military, calling on them to refuse to take part in a potential direct intervention by Belarusian armed forces in Ukraine.[21] Volski predicted "the near end of the Russian empire", while Mikhalok, who lives in Ukraine, vehemently accused the Belarusian army of providing a rear base for Russian troops and warned – in threatening terms – against Belarusian troops entering Ukraine.

Second, in some rare instances, Belarusian musicians recorded protest songs explicitly addressing the war in Ukraine. For example, Yury Stylski, leader of *Dai Darogu,* published the song *Praz vyzvalenne Ukrainy* [By the liberation of Ukraine] dedicated to the Kastus' Kalinoŭski battalion uniting Belarusian volunteers fighting on the Ukrainian side. The title refers to the idea that Belarus will be freed from dictatorship as a result of ("by") the liberation of Ukraine from Russian occupation.[22] Another track, *Heroiam slava* [Glory to heroes], is sung by Lavon Volski, with contributions from Aleksandr Pamidoraŭ, Yury Stylski, and Polish singer-songwriter Tomasz Organek. The chorus repeats the Ukrainian national salute (Glory to Ukraine – Glory to the heroes), and the song more broadly expresses support for Ukraine.[23] This song is in Ukrainian: another politically charged language shift in Belarusian dissenting music.

Third, Belarusian rockers have performed protest concerts abroad. In March 2022, after a long period of inactivity, Siarhei Mikhalok reunited his super-famous band *Liapis Trubetskoi* (a satirical novel character) for a major European and North Ameri-

can tour titled "Warriors of light" with the proceeds donated to organizations helping Ukrainian refugees.[24] Other Belarusian musicians, including rock singers Zmicier Vajciuškevič, Lavon Volski, Aliaksandr Pamidoraŭ, Yury Stylski, indy-pop-folk *Navi band* or ethno-punk band *Dzieciuki* [Lads], took part in concerts supporting Ukrainian refugees or volunteers. In addition, musicians voluntarily cancelled concerts in Russia. This expresses opposition especially clearly when cancellations were accompanied by an explanation of the reasons linked to opposition to the war – as it was the case for Belarusian bands *Petlia Pristrastiia* and *Nizkiz*.

A long protest history and waves of politicization

Belarusian rock musicians' involvement in protest activities has many precedents. For example, between 2011 and 2016, all concerts by a dozen groups and singers were banned by the authorities or systematically cancelled by the venues. This so-called "second blacklist period", a situation of unofficial censorship, followed the violent dispersal of a post-election demonstration on December 19, 2010: hundreds of people were arrested, leaders sentenced to prison terms, and rock musicians publicly supported the demonstrators and prisoners. Before that, the "first blacklist period" stretched from 2004 to 2007. On April 21, 2004, six bands (*NRM*, *Pomidor/OFF*, *Palac* [Palace], *Zet*, *Neuro Dubel* [Neuro Plug] and *Drum Ecstasy*) and one singer (Zmicier Vajciuškievič) took part in a concert during an opposition rally marking the tenth anniversary of the presidency of Lukashenko and an imminent referendum abolishing presidential term limits. The very next day these artists disappeared from the media and from Belarusian concert halls and clubs, followed by other colleagues. These informal bans were only lifted in 2007, after a meeting between five protest rockers and the head of the Presidential Administration's ideology department, a meeting which caused an outcry from the opposition media accusing the rockers of compromise and even treason.[25]

"THE SEARCH FOR SPACES OF AUTONOMY AND WESTERN-INSPIRED OTHERNESS UNDER A COMMUNIST REGIME HAS A POLITICAL DIMENSION."

BESIDES THIS EPISODE, rockers often took part in concerts in support of the democratic opposition between 1995 and the mid-2000s. Some of these concerts took place during demonstrations or on their own separately, often to raise funds. For example, concerts with an explicit political dimension under the name "Solidarity with Belarus" have been organized by the Polish NGO "Free Belarus" in Poland since 2006.

This tradition of politicized rock concerts dates back to the 1980s. The show by *Mroja* (fronted by Lavon Volski) that first earned them a mention in the press took place during an open-air arts exhibition organized on 22 April 1984 in Minsk by implicitly dissident[26] cultural initiatives. In 1987, *Mroja*, together with a Latvian group, gave a concert in a forest in support of the Latvian-Belarusian environmental expedition against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the banks of the river Dvina.

THIS PERSISTENCE of protest politicization of rock music in Belarus can be described in shape of three major waves, the first of which started during the Soviet period of the country's history. Speaking more generally about the rock movement in the USSR and Eastern Europe, there is still a discussion going on about its political significance. For some, in the 1980s rock played an almost prophetic role and helped "to reinforce the revolutionary tide" by "rocking the state"[27] and "erode totalitarian regimes throughout Eastern Europe;"[28] for these scholars the "triumph of rock and roll in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has been the realization of a democratic process".[29] Nevertheless, this heroic approach to "Perestroika rock" was quickly challenged. Some researchers have argued that Soviet rockers were not really anti-communist and that this artistic movement existed in cooperation with the authorities, adapting to their requests.[30] Others have argued in favor of extricating the rock movement from the "collaboration – dissidence" paradigm, insisting on rock's otherness and "deterritorialized" aspect.[31] However, even if we adhere to this second point of view, we should admit that, regardless of musicians' motives, the search for spaces of autonomy and Western-inspired otherness under a communist regime has a political dimension.

Moreover, in Soviet Belarus politicization of rock was amplified by the proximity between early underground bands – *Mroja*, *Bonda*, *Miascovy čas* [Local Time], *Ulis* [Ulysses] – and the "National Revival" circles. This cultural-political movement first emerged to campaign for the cultural autonomy of Belarus, but by the late 1980s it consolidated claims for political independence. Viktar Ivaškevič, who at the time was a pro-independence political activist tasked with "recruiting" young rock bands, turning them to the Belarusian language and to National Revival ideology, explains the particular significance of such bands for national-democratic activists:

> **Rock is protest, anti-communism and modernity. Belarussian rock is the elevation of Belarusianness from the open-air ethnographic museum to the present, to modernity, to the flag.**[32]

Belarusian artists were also subject to the influence of Polish punk and new-wave music, intensely and rapidly politicized in the early 1980s against the backdrop of the *Solidarność* protests. Belarusian rock therefore is seen as more explicitly politicized than the Russian underground scene of the early 1980s, which at that time kept its distance from the marginalized dissident movement and from direct protest expression (this situation progres-

sively changed after 1986, when Soviet authorities authorized social criticism).

For painter and poet Mikhal Anempadystaŭ, who wrote song lyrics for several bands, Belarusian-language rock was characterized by its aspiration to play an active role in the political, social and cultural transformations of the 1980s-1990s (an attitude which he calls "active social position") – to a much greater extent than Russian counterparts:

> **At the beginning [Russian rockers] were making a kind of 'return to eternal values'. During the Soviet era, they had a lot of romantic texts, revivals of 1960s Romanticism in new semiotic systems. It can be seen as a very timid political criticism, but most probably it wasn't an active civil position for Russian music – it was more the position of someone who stayed on the side-lines and pondered how everything was going wrong. [...] On the contrary, in Belarus all this music from the start had an active civil position [...]. It was a universal perspective of an author who had to interpret this world, including the problem of identity, including political and social problems.**[33]

Tor Band's members were sentenced to 7 to 9 years of prison. Images from their music video *Maci* [Mother].

The brief years between the country's independence and Lukashenko's election (1992–1994) were in fact the only period when Belarusian underground rock did not express opposition to the authorities. Following the authoritarian reforms starting in 1995, the new wave of protest politicization of rock started and lasted until the early 2010s. This process was based on two trends. The first is the re-politicization of bands from the 1980s, notably *Mroja* which reformed as *NRM*, *Krama* and *Ulis* which both grew out of *Bonda*, *Miascovy čas*, *Novaje nieba* [New Sky] or *Žygimont Vaza* [Sigismund III Vaza]. The second trend is the emergence of new bands and artists that absorbed protest conventions: *B.N.* [No Name], *S'ciana* [Wall], *Pomidor/Off*, *Neuro Dubel*, *Liapis Trubetskoi*, folk-rock singer Zmicier Vajciuškevič or underground anarcho-punk formations, such as *DeVIAtion*, *Kal'ian* (Hookah), *Hate to State*, and *Contra la Contra*. This wave of politicization had several phases that closely followed the reforms strengthening authoritarian power (1995–1996, 2004) and the post-election sequences marked by mass demonstrations (2001, 2006, 2010), but are all part of the same trend of the gradual consolidation of protest rock scenes.

FINALLY, THE BEGINNING of 2020s is marked by tragic events that gave a new accelerating impetus to this dynamic, producing the third wave of politicization with a rapid expansion towards new artists. The 2020 post-electoral demonstrations, followed by police violence and repressions against the protesters, political opposition and civil society, ignited expression of discontent by rock musicians. Among them one can find both "veterans" of protest rock and artists who had not previously intervened in the public debate: those closer to folk or pop, such as *Navi band* or *Recha* [Echo], punk and post-punk groups *Daj Darogu* and *Petlia Pristrastiia*, indy rockers *Nizkiz* who composed *Pravily* [Rules] which has become another protest anthem, or *Tor Band* whose members were sentenced to 7.5–9 years in prison for their explicitly political songs (qualified by court as insulting Lukashenko, discrediting the country, inciting social hatred and relating to extremist activity).[34] Journalist and Belarusian music enthusiast Aliaksandar Arsionaŭ has even tried to gather together all the protest musical output from 2020–2021 linked to the events in Belarus – resulting in more than 600 songs.[35] As discussed above, musicians belonging to the three protest generations

spawned by these three waves expressed their opposition to the war in Ukraine after the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Logics of politicization

The tradition of protest rock in Belarus is well established. Drawing on the example of two Belarusian protest rock movements (national rock that emerged in the early 1980s and anti-capitalist anarcho-punk that consolidated in the mid-1990s), my PhD research showed that the logics of this pronounced politicization are social and historical in the sense that these logics go beyond individual artistic, political or moral choices of the artists, and partly determine the course of their action. Consequently, protest politicization can be analyzed and studied from a social perspective, allowing a better understanding of cultural actors' choices of political expression. I have identified four types of such logics.

FIRST, THE POLITICIZATION of cultural production may be encouraged by traditions or **specific conventions** understood in Howard Becker's sense as changing sets of practical agreements and rules that produce constraining effects on artistic expression.[36] In this sense, the politicization of Belarusian artists finds its explanations in rock's international protest mythology and its social and spatio-temporal contextualization. From the outset, but especially since the late 1960s, a non-conformist, heterodox and rebellious image has been a guarantee of rock's "authenticity", its distinctive feature in the rapidly growing body of popular music.[37] The transnational dissemination of this protest mythology has been accompanied by modifications, adaptations and appropriations. When it became part of the conventions of the underground movement in the USSR and Central Europe, it contributed to the emergence of its anti-Soviet, or at least alter-Soviet or "non-Soviet", image. It was under the influence of this mythology that Belarusian-language independent rock emerged in the 1980s. As Siarhej "Skrypa" Skrypničenka, leader of the band *Žygimont Vaza*, remembers:

> **At that time, rock – as music, as a way of life and as a way of behaving – was breaking stereotypes. Absolutely, rock was protest as such. [...] If you take some examples – the [Russian] band *DDT*, for example – their style was always one of slogans: 'I like this, I don't like that'. And for others [...] the protest was expressed not through the lyrics, but through the very existence of these bands.**[38]

Against a backdrop of authoritarian change and the return to some Soviet policies and symbols after 1994 in Belarus, these conventions encouraged the protest repoliticization of the rock scene. Similarly, in the second half of the 1990s, radical anarcho-punk emerged in Belarus as a result of the international spread of the anti-authority and anti-commercial ideology of the DIY movement.[39] The left-libertarian ethics inherent in this movement led its members to denounce the repressive political regime. As a result, Belarusian rock musicians are required to conform to a certain ethic of contextualized rock protest[40] – similar to what Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron called the "conformism of anti-conformism" of certain student circles in 1960s France.[41] This ethic particularly discourages open and explicit forms of cooperation with state bodies and implies a certain ideology of opposition to the political authorities.

Second, **professional considerations** also contributed to the politicization of rock in Belarus. Inclusion in established conventions went hand in hand with distinction from the movements with which these conventions were associated – knowing that the logic of distinction inciting cultural producers to differ from their competitors and predecessors to "leave a mark" constitutes one of the fundamental principles of the artistic field.[42]

FOR THE FIRST WAVE of Belarusian-language independent rock, the central object of the dialectical imitation-distinction effort was the 1970s-80s Russian underground. The "specifically national" aspect (including the use of the Belarusian language) and the role played in the construction of national identity became the distinguishing features of Belarusian independent rock. This distinction strategy is clearly visible in the following statement by Vitaŭt Martynenka, rock journalist in 1980s:

> **I have never felt there was anything national about Russian rock. I don't know what Russian bands think, they're always interested in making a profit. It's different, it's show business. On the other hand, back home [in Belarus], in Ukraine, Poland and Czechoslovakia, there were *independent* [rock] movements, which were interesting.**[43]

"IT WAS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THIS MYTHOLOGY THAT BELARUSIAN-LANGUAGE INDEPENDENT ROCK EMERGED IN THE 1980S."

Even the very symbolic act of singing in Belarusian language was not totally deprived of professional considerations: as Lavon Volski answered my question about the reasons of his linguistic choice for band's singing:

> **We were 16 or 18 when we prepared our first program in Belarusian. And somewhere along the line we realized that technically we weren't very competitive... Everyone played better than us [...]. [We prepared this Belarusian-language program] because no one sang in Belarusian at all."**[44] **These elements predisposed Belarusian bands to politicization both in the 1980s and after 1995, when the authorities' pro-Russian course resulted in oppositional mobilization of the national identity discourse.**

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

PHOTO: FACEBOOK/PITPAULAU

Belarusian artists, from bottom left clockwise: Zmicier Vajciuszkievicz, Lavon Volski, Siarhej "Skrypa" Skrypničenka, leader of the band *Žygimont Vaza*, and Pit Paulau.

DIY ANARCHO-PUNK, for its part, distinguished itself from the national rock scene by radicalizing protest and claiming the status of the authentic amateur underground. As one of the leaders of the anarcho-punk scene explained in the mid-2000s,

> **Until recently, our Belarusian music leaders, such as *NRM*, etc., tried to – I'm going to be rude, but it's my right – they tried to make advances to the authorities. They justified this for a long time by saying that by accepting contact with the authorities, they were trying to popularize Belarusian music and their views, but it does not make sense in our country. [...] Seeking a compromise with the authorities means changing song lyrics – even when it is not required – and many other things.**[45]

The politicization of protest has also encouraged the interest of the Western media, NGOs, foundations and other foreign players who would probably not have taken an interest in Belarusian music without its status as an anti-authoritarian rebel underground. Lavon Volski spoke ironically about the media's tendency to take an interest in Belarusian music solely because of its protest image:

> **All the journalists who came – from France, Belgium, everywhere – *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, I can't remember all those who interviewed me, they all came to talk to me. I mean, they are talking [to the opposition leaders], someone else, and us – these horrible forbidden musicians, these nightmarish 'berserkers'. [...] Recently a well-known German journalist came to ask me a few questions. I confused him a bit with my answers, because he thought I would be like a warlord with a machine gun on my shoulder, telling him about long years of struggle and imprisonment.**[46]

Third, the politicization of Belarusian rock took place as a result of its proximity, cooperation and entanglement with activists' circles. Musicians are captured (or enrolled) in a relational system that links them to agents of the political field, and their politicization happens **by proximity or by ricochet**. For example, Belarusian-language rock was supported, promoted and bolstered by the anti-Soviet National Revival movement of the 1980s which, in conditions where access to the official political field was blocked, engaged in cultural activities pursuing political objectives. The increasingly explicit politicization of the National Revival, the conversion of its leaders into political professionals

and their departure (or ejection) to the extra-institutional opposition after the authoritarian reforms of 1995–1996 consequently "contaminated" national rock, which became durably associated with political protest. As Pit Paŭlaŭ explained,

> **We were all part of the same great Revival process. Each in their own way. […] And then some of these people went into politics, but when they called us on the phone it was natural – it wasn't a politician phoning a musician, it was a friend phoning a friend: 'Will you play at our demonstration?' And we agreed. And at the same time the ideas of this demonstration corresponded precisely to our own ideas. I would have gone there anyway. And I was going on stage with honor, and everything beat to the same rhythm.**[47]

The leaders of Belarusian DIY anarcho-punk scene were themselves notorious leftist activists, challenging both the authoritarian regime and liberal democratic opposition structures. Punk musicians took part in left-wing anarchist movements (*Chyrvony Zhond* [Red Junta], Federation of Anarchists of Belarus, *KDS Razam* [Confederation of action communities "Together"], and *Pramen'* [Ray]) which encouraged alternative modes of participation, such as music and the satirical press, while claiming the heritage of the Situationist International and its refusal to differentiate between political and artistic activities.[48] Pierre Bourdieu notices a similar perspective while speaking about the French 19th century social art movement in literature: these authors "draw no distinction between the political field and the artistic field (this is the very definition of social art), they also import modes of action and forms of thought current in the political field, conceiving literary activity as engagement and collective action".[49]

"THE POLITICIZATION OF BELARUSIAN ROCK TOOK PLACE AS A RESULT OF ITS PROXIMITY, COOPERATION AND ENTANGLEMENT WITH ACTIVISTS' CIRCLES."

Finally, restrictive intervention of state authorities in artistic activity – the various forms of **censorship** in the broadest sense, including bans on concerts or their systematic cancelling, state media disinterest or smear campaigns, discouraging private support and introducing unfavourable cultural policies, as well as police and judicial repression – also contributed to the politicization of protest rock. On the one hand, it engenders a situation of over-politicization, favorable to the politicized interpretation of messages[50] and consolidating the underground status of Belarusian rock. Strategies for circumventing and using censorship also foster the heroic image of rockers as actors who both act in unfavourable conditions (martyrs to the cause) and are sometimes able to skillfully avoid punishment for their commitment.

Many actors in the Belarusian world of rock that I interviewed mentioned the "advertising effect" of censorship. One musician says that the bans "promote us, that is obvious"; another welcomes the fact that his band was granted a protest image due to the 2004–2007 blacklists, because "that helped a lot"; an opposition activist who was involved with promotion of Belarusian rock assumes that "blacklists make stars of musicians", especially in the long term; and a representative of the anarcho-punk underground suggested that the fact that the Belarusian DIY scene operated in particularly unfavourable conditions made it special and set it apart from its Western analogues.[51] As a music journalist, producer and promoter recalled in 2011,

> **There is always a big demand for forbidden things. For example, *NRM* played in Berlin, and all over the city we put up posters saying: 'Banned in Belarus', etc., and people came without knowing this band at all – just because it was banned. Because if we had just put *'NRM'* on the poster, hardly anyone would have come.**[52]

Conclusion

By examining the politicization of a specific cultural phenomenon, this article contributes to the analysis of modes of pro-democratic and anti-war protest in an authoritarian context. It also provides an input into scholarly debate on the politicization of popular music and other art forms, sheds light on the structures of the Belarusian authoritarian political system and shares new insights into mechanisms of resistance and protest.

Rock music is not inherently anti-establishment and associated with social and political protest, but it can become so depending on the constraints and opportunities that encourage its use in this way. The analysis in terms of social logics of politicization underlines this aspect specifically. The respective influence of different logics of politicization varies according to the period, but also according to the social position of the actors who make up artistic movements. These logics may come into play simultaneously or alternately, and they do so in waves, following important political events that restructure the political field, but also other fields related to public expression, including the artistic field. Due to historic reasons presented in this paper (the protest mythology of rock music, especially in the (post-)Soviet authoritarian context, the ability of cultural actors to rely on the protest image to establish and maintain the singularity of their scenes, the proximity to increasingly politicized social movements, and the harassment by political censorship), Belarusian rock music became an area of the artistic field particularly sensitive to such impulses coming from the political field. As a result, the politicization of rock is normalized, in the sense that protest is expected from musicians pretending to authentically embody the genre in an authoritarian context.

THESE CONCLUSIONS should not be seen as underestimating the personal commitment of artists; on the contrary, they explain

it by offering a more complete picture. While human beings are certainly creative individuals relatively free in their choices, they are also social beings who act in a social world shaped by the history of past choices, by configurations of relations and by multiple interests. Social properties and position in this world of relationships also shape an individual's identity. Yet this social component of identity is seldom mentioned when we talk about artists, let alone artists who commit themselves to social and political causes.

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20 After a brief period in 1992–1995, when Belarusian was the country's only official language, Alexander Lukashenko initiated a referendum that gave Russian the status of the second national language. The authorities have since persistently introduced measures that weakened the use and social prestige of the Belarusian language in education, media, culture and administration. On language policies in Belarus, see e.g. Alexandra Goujon, "Language, Nationalism and Populism in Belarus", *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 27 (1999): 661–677; Grigory Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus: Questions of Language", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 55 (2003): 1009–1047; David Marples, "National awakening and national consciousness in Belarus", *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 27 (1999): 565–578.

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Performing homeland and the de-/legitimation of war

A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF MUSIC VIDEOS

by **Anna Schwenck** & **Anastasia Bondarenko**

abstract

How is war legitimated and delegitimated in music videos? We seek to answer this question using the example of depictions of Russia as a homeland in contemporary music videos. Advancing a multimodal, sound-oriented method to analyze music videos, we engage with the interplay of sound, moving images, and lyrics. How is homeland performed in music videos? Analyzing music videos and performances by Sobor (Ukrainian pro-separatist), Shaman (Russian), and Zemfira (in exile), we find that violence remains hidden in pro-war performances, while emphasizing a Russian-Soviet way of life. Depictions of traditional food and binary gender roles play a central role in pro-war, imperial-nationalist renderings of homeland while performances mixing Russian food with hand grenades and questioning traditional femininity subvert such romanticization.

KEYWORDS: Multimodal analysis, music video, violence, Russia, legitimacy.

When political rulers wage war, they use absolute political violence that denotes acts that cannot be surpassed or undone.[1] According to sociologist Heinrich Popitz, modern societies that enshrine rights to self-determination demand that absolute political violence be publicly legitimated.[2] He assumes that liberalism's natural rights form the basis of modernity which allows us to hypothesize, with Orlando Patterson, that the idea of freedom from enslavement will figure prominently in justifications for war.[3] Protecting a population from enslavement while painting its current homeland in romantic colors is a central trope to legitimate war. Arguably, this trope's persuasiveness is heightened by presenting depictions of homeland as detached from the violence allegedly protecting its existence. We examine the role of musical performance in efforts to legitimate and delegitimate absolute political violence. We do so with the example of depictions of Russia as a homeland in contemporary music videos. We expand on literature emphasizing that music and visuals are more than mere reflections of pre-existing understandings of homeland or nationality; they produce novel or reproduce and alter existing meanings in and through performance.[4]

The production of homeland through (musical) performance may however not only legitimate absolute violence, but also delegitimate it. Legitimation efforts are those symbolic politics that ideally result in citizens' toleration or acceptance of a polity's authorities, institutions, and socioeconomic arrangements.[5] Even if authoritarian governments refer to political ideals merely to lower the costs of coercion, not to attain such ideals, their legitimation efforts structure political debate and societal understandings of war.[6] Dictators, such as Vladimir Putin, who has ruled Russia in an authoritarian manner for more than two decades now, seek to present their politics as adequate responses to an outside world they paint as inimical to rally for support at home and transnationally. Indeed, the Putin governments heavily invested in legitimation despite their enormous intensification of intimidation, imprisonment, and censorship since the annexation of Crimea, i.e., since the beginning of the current war in 2014.

POLITICAL SPECTACLES ARE key tools of legitimation efforts. In Russia and other countries that continue idiosyncratic Soviet political rituals, rallies, parades, and outdoor concerts are central to governments' staging of political support.[7] They may endue

Still from Sobor's video *Sisters of Victory – With Russia in the Heart.*

abstract political ideals with affection using music's capacity to engage crowds beyond a merely cognitive level.[8] They foster collective excitement and shared memories among those attending, engendering temporary "communities of emotional attachment" that may persist over time.[9]

IN THE CONTEXT OF Russia's war on Ukraine, several such spectacles are of relevance. There are the annual celebrations of Russia's annexation of Crimea, staged as honoring the "reunification" [*prisoedinenie*] of the Ukrainian peninsula with what is purportedly its Russian motherland. Almost immediately after large parts of Ukraine were, now officially, invaded by Russian troops in February 2022, a patriotic concert series was initiated by Russian state organs that cost 1.4 million USD.[10] Most took place in huge stadiums, such as *Luzhniki* in Moscow, and featured civilizational-nationalist oriented musicians, such as Oleg Gazmanov, who are not so much ethnic nationalists as adherents of an imperial nationalism defining Russia as a state civilization that would encompass a variety of so-called nationalities.[11] A key event was certainly the public concert celebrating the "Ceremony for Signing the Contracts for Accession" that presented the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories as a lawful act. While the ceremony took place on September 30, 2022 in the Kremlin, the concert, equally featuring Vladimir Putin, was staged in a highly popular manner on Red Square on the same day. Banners depicting "We are Together" [*My vmeste*] as a hashtag and collective hand gestures, such as heart signs, were to communicate positive togetherness and create a sense of shared political purpose.

Musical performance lends itself to the study of legitimation because it is consumed by mass audiences.[12] It enhances our understanding of how power is legitimated aesthetically, e.g., through studying the different ways in which symbolic hints and clues in musical productions can be meaningfully connected by audiences.[13] We understand both live political spectacles and recorded versions of a song, e.g., in the form of music videos, as musical performances that contain cultural meanings.[14] By music videos we mean video clips intentionally produced to accompany and advertise songs. Of course, whether such aesthetic legitimation efforts work depends on audiences' interpretation of and reflections about the interplay of sonic, lyrical, and visual cues. While we did not collect data that indicates the likelihood of musical performance to result in the belief that the war is righteous, our analyses provide a starting point for further engagement with music videos' capacity to justify or, at least, normalize absolute political violence.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS guided our analyses: How are notions of homeland produced through the interplay of sound, lyrics, and visuals in music videos? How is the neoimperial Putinist claim to domination over neighboring nation-states, such as Ukraine, legitimated and delegitimated in performances of homeland? How is absolute political violence made invisible or visible, audible or inaudible in these performances, heightening the homeland trope's persuasiveness by painting war as a violence taking place far from the fundamental goodness of home? Our analysis is guided by the thesis that the videos engage with the main tenets of Putinist ideology. While state propaganda has dramatically intensified since February 2022, the ideological contents presented in and through it are not new. They retell neotraditional, neoimperial, and neoliberal stories legitimating the status quo that have been circulating since the mid-2000s. Neotraditionalism means protecting and preserving what is romanticized as a national society's cultural traditions to legitimate

the pursuit of a conservative future.[15] It is fundamental to Putinist rule because it normalizes and nationalizes what is depicted as Russia's Soviet period.[16] It radically intensified with the show trial against members of *Pussy Riot*.[17] Neoimperial designates the romanticization of Soviet imperialism in a Russian civilizational nationalist key, based on quasi-biological notions, such as that of Russia being a state civilization and assuming a multinational Russian constitutive people.[18] Stories russifying the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in 1945,[19] portraying Russia as continuing its legal predecessor's anti-Western anti-fascist efforts,[20] lend neotraditional and neoimperial claims plausibility. They closely connect with government propaganda claiming that a fascist coup d'état would have happened in Ukraine (in 2014 at the latest), a narrative template that draws on Soviet-era propaganda portraying Ukrainian nationalism as fascist and backed by the United States.[21]

FOLLOWING NORBERT ELIAS, we question propaganda and ideology being mere instances of "a calculated camouflage for a highly rational core"[22] that were not connected to economic concerns. We emphasize that Putinist ideology is rooted in a flexible authoritarian style of government, promoting both neoliberal ideals, aiming at responsibilizing "the worker, student, consumer, or indigent person with discerning and undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving,"[23] and authoritarian-neotraditional values such as obedience to authority. Concerning the question of how state ideology affects political subjects' behavior, Russian pro-war artists' strategies are indicative of the politico-economic dyad described before. Their art production is animated by both the material profit of and symbolic reward for, purportedly, doing good for the country.[24] A paradigmatic example for this duality is the career of patriotic Russian singer Shaman. Being hardly known before the full-scale invasion of February 2022, his artist fees for private concerts have risen about twenty times – to 60 000 USD in 2023. The heretofore unknown cover band performer's success owes as much to the government's symbolic interest in a young nationalist star (Putin ordered that Shaman be awarded the title "Honored Artist of the Russian Federation" in 2024),[25] as to the careful orchestration of a patriotic brand around his persona by his former partner and manager.[26] Russian flexible authoritarianism rewards patriotic musical performance symbolically and economically.

Analyzing sound, lyrics, (moving) images, and their interplay in music videos

Our multimodal, systematic approach of analyzing music videos goes beyond mere textual analysis. It scrutinizes how sound, lyrics, and (moving) images interact.[27] While building on novel methodological literature based on so-called audio-visual grounded theory methodology (AVGTM), we divert in some respects from the steps suggested by its proponents.[28] Most notably, we understand music videos, a synthesis of soundtrack and moving images, as structurally dominated by the song.[29] While the song is meaningful without the visuals, the reverse is not necessarily the case.[30] This is because music videos are usually added later to the song, often with the motivation "to sell the song".[31] Correspondingly, we did not start with the analysis of visuals, as suggested by AVGTM, but with song analysis. Before creating segments of the videos, we, the two authors, analyzed the songs using a technique suited for non-musicologists. This technique, called the "musicological group analysis", reveals a music piece's potential meanings to listeners.[32] The idea underlying this technique is that listeners' subjective and varying associations with harmony, rhythm, melody, instrumentation, and voice are not arbitrary, but *afforded* by the piece's sonic structures.[33] Our different backgrounds as sociologists, who were schooled and educated mainly in Russia and Germany respectively, formed the basis for productive debate especially when our associations with sound, lyrics, and video differed.

"YOUTHFUL SUPPORT SYMBOLIZES THAT OCCUPATION AND WAR ARE EMBRACED BY FUTURE GENERATIONS."

After having analyzed the song, we created meaningful segments of the videos. A notable finding is that our reactions of surprise were productive indicators for choices concerning the start of new segments. Following the steps of analysis suggested by AVGTM, we then assigned codes to images, lyric lines, and sound structures within each segment.[34] Asking the question of what each segment, but also the music video as a whole was a case of,[35] kept our focus on the task of analysis – opposed to mere description – and facilitated the eventual transformation of lower-level codes into higher-level categories. Again, diverting from the proposed AVGTM procedure, we finally reflected on our analysis by asking how watching the video changed our previous understanding of the song. We also asked ourselves whether starting with analyzing visuals, not sound, would have resulted in different final categories.

Homeland in pro- and anti-war music videos

Following AVGTM, we understand each music video as a case. We only selected cases that contain the phenomena under investigation, i.e., instances of legitimation and de-legitimation of the war via musical performance, following the basic premises of Grounded Theory.[36] Moreover, we selected songs in which the "politics of the artists" and the "politics of their art"[37] coincide. This meant that we chose songs that are (a) performed by musicians unequivocally positioning themselves for or against the war in public;[38] and (b) contain pro- (or anti-) war messages on the level of sound, lyrics, or visuals. Concerning pro-war music videos, we assume that (relatively) new faces play a more important role than singers long known for their imperial nationalist oeuvre such as Oleg Gazmanov who was already popular during Soviet times. Due to the state's aim to legitimate

the war, especially among younger people,[39] we chose musicians who are not associated with an older generation of patriotic musicians. Youthful support symbolizes that occupation and war are embraced by future generations. Young people's support is crucial for recruiting soldiers, pro-war volunteers, and members of so-called agitation brigades who are to animate pro-Russian civic life in the occupied Ukrainian territories.[40] The already mentioned pro-war positioned musician Shaman, born in 1991, is a Russian citizen who would be commonly identified as ethnic Russian. Given the before-mentioned centrality of neotraditionalism in Putinist ideology, Shaman meets neotraditional expectations towards masculinity, for instance, in terms of body type, style, and dress. This is substantial for crafting his persona of the male patriot. His persona's performance of assertiveness, a deep commitment toward defending one's home(-land), and gestures towards protecting those who do not fight are character traits complementing these appearances.

The pop group "Sobor" from Luhansk preforming on the Red Square.

IN CONTRAST TO SHAMAN, the group Sobor, which performs the other pro-war song that we analyze, is not very popular. Yet, its performances are symbolically highly significant for legitimating the war because its members are all from the annexed "Lugansk People's Republic" located in Ukraine. At the September 2022 concert to celebrate Russia's annexation of more Ukrainian territories, Sobor, which translates as Cathedral, performed the patriotic song *With Russia in Our Heart*. That these young women from Luhansk perform on Red Square on such an occasion symbolizes that the Russian army is a liberating, not an occupying, force. Gender and youth both play into the specific legitimation effort connected with Sobor. Expectations of neotraditional femininity, which the members of Sobor meet in terms of body type, style, dress, and gestures, assume that women are among the most vulnerable segments of society – together with children, the sick, and the elderly. If female singers welcome the army of the occupier, this army can be suspected to be good, characterized by high morals and deep compassion for vulnerable groups.

Concerning de-legitimation, we regard prominence prior to the full-scale invasion to be much more crucial than youthfulness. Given that authoritarian states marginalize, censor, and vilify oppositional artists – for instance, by denouncing them as foreign agents as in the Russian case – the success of spreading anti-war messages depends on already existing fame. The latter facilitates disseminating songs online and playing concerts abroad. We thus chose to discuss a song by Zemfira, a highly popular musician in Russia. Not only was she listed as one of the most successful stars in Russia recently,[41] Russian history textbooks used in public schools mention her as a rock star[42] – notwithstanding her being in a long-term relationship with a woman. Zemfira positioned herself as opposing the war by all means. Shortly after the full-scale invasion, she released the song *Don't Shoot* [Ne streliaite].[43] When she performed her first concert after the full-scale invasion, she gave a short anti-war speech addressing fans in both Ukraine and Russia.[44]

At the September 2022 concert celebrating the annexation, Sobor performed *With Russia in Our Heart* immediately after the Russian representatives in the annexed Ukrainian territories had thanked Putin and the people of Russia for giving them the opportunity "to return home".[45] Sobor continued this narrative of returning home, yet imbued it with emotion. Before their musical performance, one of the five women, wearing a Ribbon of Saint George pinned to her chest (symbolizing a pro-separatist, pro-Russian stance in this setting), and gasping enthusiastically, addressed the audience:

> **We arrived in Moscow from Lugansk literally today! And probably we need to say that all, all of our friends and family participated in the referendum, and, for sure – they voted for unity with Russia! You can't imagine what happiness this is for us [...]**[46]

With Russia in Our Heart lasts only one minute and is simple in form. It is opened by a bass drum beat in four-four time. It is dominated by the women's a cappella polyphonic singing accompanied largely by the drum's beat. Verse and chorus alternate. Each comprises four lines; one line amounts to one bar with four beats.

While the beat reminded us of marching, harmony and melody seemed to adhere to a folk song. Combined, they communicate a cheerful, upbeat spirit inviting dance moves. During our analyses, Anastasia (co-author) found herself immediately reminded of patriotic performances in Russia because of the marching style and the polyphonic singing. We were surprised when we found out that we were dealing with a cover of *The Wellerman Sea Shanty Song* which went viral on TikTok in 2021.[47] As of June 25, 2025, this original had 421 million views on YouTube.[48] A more decisive factor for selecting the tune than any ideological rooting in *genuine* Russian folklore is that the melody

is known and resonates with younger people. On the other hand, Anastasia found the marching beat and polyphonic singing associated the song with other patriotic musical performances in Russia. Hence, affordances through instrumentation and beat facilitating *popular* sonic associations with a nation-state regime might be much more crucial for legitimation than actual folkloristic purity. The latter might be detected by specialists rather than by the general public. The lyrics mirror the tune's upbeat spirit, with terms such as "my dear" [*rodnaia moia*] creating warmth. Taken together, they paint a romantic image of Russia as a country that is home to peace, bravery, and respect for others. For instance, Russia is depicted as a place "where one sees peaceful skies above one's head" [*gde mirnoe nebo nad golovoi*].

"THIS NOTION OF HOMELAND BUILDS ON THE POST-1990 AND PUTINIST DEVELOPMENTAL NOTION OF PATRIOTISM THAT STARTS WITH LOVE AND RESPECT FOR THE FAMILY."

The following verse is particularly relevant to the lyrical creation of homeland:

> **Here I was born / Here I am of use**
> **[*Zdes ia rodilsia, zdes prigozhus*]**
> **If needed / I give my life for the Rus**
> **[*I zhizn esli nuzhno otdam ia za Rus*]**
> **For the white groves [birch trees], my beloved home,**
> **I'd give my life [*Za belye roshchi, liubimyi dom*]**
> **and for all / who live in it… [*I vsekh kto budet v nem*]**

This verse starts with a variation of the popular Russian proverb "*gde rodilsia, tam i prigodilsia*" that literally translates as "the place where you were born is where you'll be of use".[49] The song's persona states that they would give their life for this enormous country which is equated with *Rus*. This reference to the Kievan Rus evokes today's Ukraine as the birthplace of the Russian state civilization. It is a common feature of foundational myths of Russia linking its origin story to the East Slav cultural community and Christian Orthodoxy.[50] Such references to the Kievan Rus are central to the Putinist claim that Ukraine would not exist as a nation and statehood:

> **Controlling Ukraine is […] an important component of its [Russia's] beginning in Kievan Rus and continuing to Tsarist Russia and the USSR, with the CIS Customs Union-Eurasian Union the natural home (not NATO or EU).**[51]

ON THE LEVEL of song lyrics, *Rus* functions as a pars pro toto – a figure of speech indicating that a part of a larger entity represents its entirety. The connotation that the part *is* the whole legitimates conquest. It suggests that the whole would not be imaginable without this part. In the verse's next line, this home of Russia gets inherently tied to home [*dom*] and white groves. This is an allusion to the birch grove, a nationalist Russian symbol as today's Russia is equated to both the Kievan Rus and Russian citizens' personal homes. Because the rhythm emphasizes *Rus*, the statement to be ready to sacrifice one's life for Russia can be easily overheard upon listening the song. Besides this line and hints towards the Great Patriotic War (such as "victorious May" [*pobednyi mai*]), the lyrics do not allude to absolute violence. The peaceful quality radically changes upon watching the video. On a stage that could be located at a school or House of Culture [*Dom Kultury*] in what has been called commonly, until recently, the post-Soviet space, we see Sobor performing the song together with the pro-separatist Sisters of Victory [*Sestry Pobedy*] in front of a huge flag of the Lugansk People's Republic. It is one of the pro-Russian separatist regions that was officially annexed by Russia in September 2022 and home to both combos. The Sisters of Victory wear dresses that feature elements of clothing usually worn by nuns and nurses (black and white, with coifs or cornetts displaying a red cross).[52]

The video starts with the young female dancers painting the letter "Z" into the air as if they held invisible light swords in their hands. They also form hearts with their hands. We argue that this hand gesture can legitimate the full-scale invasion. At the September 2022 rally, for instance, it was readily used to underline the good-heartedness of volunteers fighting or working in the occupied Ukrainian territories. The gesture corresponds to the hashtag "We are together" [*My Vmeste*] that we read as a youthful twist and social media adjustment to the old Putinist ideologeme of unity. The analyzed music video's last scene is most significant for communicating the protagonists' readiness to use absolute political violence. The singers, after we witness them marching and saluting, load imaginary guns to fire at us, the viewers, while the camera zooms in on their smiling faces.

Shaman: *My Russia* [*Moia Rossiia*]

Shaman (Yaroslav Dronov) is a Russian nationalist singer-songwriter.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Shaman's song, *My Russia*, also prominently engages with the theme of homeland. Accordion and guitar, which are popularly associated with Russia, characterize its instrumentation, lending the sound a national flavor. Arpeggiated chords on acoustic steel-stringed guitar and spoken lyrics mixed with a syllabic singing style are elements that convey a certain kinship to the Soviet bard tradition and

Still from Shaman's video *My Russia*. The clip tells the story of Shaman visiting his family in his hometown of Novomoskovsk.

russkii rock. Though not folkloristic, these elements create an old-fashioned feel in combination with the instrumentation. The song is slow paced; there is only the guitar's accents on the one and the four, setting the rhythm. To Anna (co-author), Shaman's singing was notably currently recorded yet mixed in a manner that produces a retro feel. Shaman's voice bears resemblance to the ways in which other contemporary musicians seek to convey traditional masculinity: low pitch, high intensity, and a strident timbre that is produced through the use of pressure. Shaman's voice affords power and readiness to aggression. This masculinist use of voice reaches its peak when Shaman sings the line "My Russia". The effect is produced through contrast because during the first part of the chorus Shaman sings softly and breathily:

> **There, where the soul sings [*Tam, gde poet dusha*]**
> **There, where it's easy to breathe [*Tam gde legko dyshat*]**
> **And where dear places give light [*I dariat svet mesta rodnye*]**
> **I won't betray my heart [*Serdtse ia ne predam*]**
> **I know I'll give all I've got [*Znaiu ia vse otdam*]**
> **So that my Russia may live [*Chtoby zhila moia Rossiia*]**

When we consulted the lyrics for the next step of analysis, the overall mood of the music did not change. To the contrary, the lyrics helped us, as listeners, to make sense of these different uses of voice. The lightness and joyfulness of the chorus' first three lines are reflected in a soft timbre. An increase in intensity, volume, and a change of timbre to a more strident quality gives expression to the more earnest patriotic feelings in the latter three lines – culminating in the theme of self-sacrifice for Russia.

As in the Sobor example, sacrifice emanates from a deep love for one's homeland and from personal integrity ("I won't betray my heart"). Russia is represented in this song as both the homeland in terms of the country and one's home. This notion of homeland builds on the post-1990 and Putinist developmental notion of patriotism that starts with love and respect for the family, extends to one's little motherland (*malaia rodina*), i.e., one's birthplace and birth region, and expands to veneration for the big motherland.[53] Fostering identification with one's home and region is thought to ultimately strengthen identification with the Russian Federation, seemingly a russified/nationalized adaptation of Lenin's idea to create unity through diversity.[54]

THE THEME OF HOME is particularly developed in the video.[55] The clip romanticizes a Russia that breathes Soviet customs in a neo-traditional spirit. The video has been edited by its makers with a vintage filter and a color screen, emphasizing sepia tones, which increases this romanticization of the past. The clip tells the story of Shaman visiting his family in his hometown of Novomoskovsk. Accompanying images of a bus on a snowy street on a sunny winter's day, Shaman situates his visit, marked by the warmth associated with the bosom of the family, within the enormous space of Russia:

> **Often, the path of life brings us into the most different corners of our enormous country. And how good it is, at least for some time, to return to one's native family house [*rodnoi dom*], where you were born and grew up, where they love you and always wait for you.**

We divided the video into four segments that structure the unfolding story of the visit. Segment one introduces us to Shaman's family's apartment. It is located in a typical district [*raion*] consisting of numerous four-storied Soviet buildings that are common across what was until recently called the post-Soviet space. We witness that the building's staircase as well as the apartment's layout, furniture, and decor (framed certificates, a carpet on the wall) represent typical elements of a run-of-the-mill Soviet home. Shaman's Novomoskovsk is a representation of the ordinary, an iteration of the many similar faces of post-Soviet Russia.

In segment two, we meet Shaman's grandparents and parents. Shaman hands the women flowers, the grandmother has tears in her eyes. The table is set with typical Russian/Slavic food, including pirozhki, meat, mashed potatoes, and sandwiches with fish eggs. The women ladle food on the plates, Shaman's mother ladles some extra food on his, while the grandfather pours vodka for everyone. It is not only this division of labor that affirms the gender binary. The third section shows Shaman's family watching old photographs depicting his grandfather in uniform and his grandmother with a baby. Then, we see his grandmother asking Shaman to try on a shirt. In contrast, father and grandfather are not concerned with household tasks but play accordion and guitar in the following scene. The fourth and last segment presents close-ups of all family members against the backdrop of the carpet on the wall. This Soviet interior design feature became an indicator for bad taste[56] during the 1990s. In the context of the video, the carpet appears not only as a rehabilitated interior design item, but almost like a piece of cultural heritage in need of protection. Akin to a common populist strategy, the taste of the non-elites, ranging from a gendered division of labor over food choices to furniture style, is celebrated as authentic and intrinsically connected with true loving relationships.[57] This reading is supported by a line in the lyrics: *that one's heart would be never deceived.*

WE INTERPRET THE video as romanticizing a Putinist-Russian way of life needing preservation, a task seemingly achieved by young patriots like Shaman. Shaman's own hair and clothing style have however little in common with those of his ancestors. Dressed all in black with a wadded jacket and a hoodie, wearing a stylish beanie, his ankle length pants emphasizing his black plateau sneakers (which we see in a close-up before he enters the apartment), and later exhibiting his bleached and gelled undercut, he could be on his way to a *Berghain* techno party. Shaman bears little resemblance to a soldier except for his clean-shaven face.

Recorded in 2023, the video does not display any symbols of the war. The line, "I know I'll give all I've got, so that my Russia may live", and the photos, which demonstrate men in uniform, are the only hints. They do not change the homely narrative tone. In this respect, the music video sharply contrasts with the one by Sobor.

Shaman's *My Russia* connects the contemporary and youthful face of a neoimperial Russia with a patriotism rooted simultaneously in the family/little homeland and the grand post-Soviet space [*prostranstvo*]. According to the Putinist imagination, the latter is home to the potentially expanding Russian world [*russkii mir*].

PHOTO: MARINA ZAKHAROVA / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In February 2023, the Russian government added Zemfira Talgatovna Ramazanova to its list of "foreign agents".

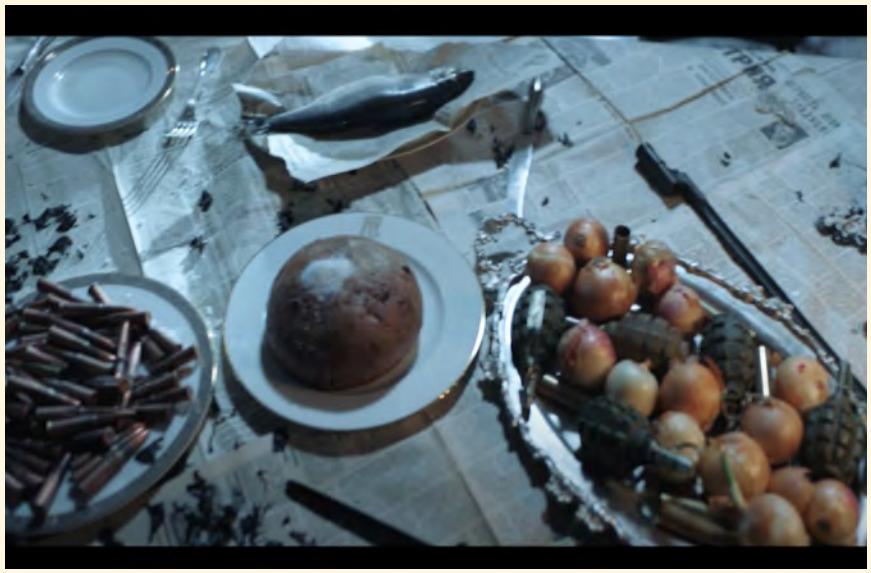
Zemfira: *Homeland/Motherland* [*Rodina*]

Zemfira's song, *Homeland*, can be interpreted as a direct political and aesthetic response to such "*hygge*" (cozy, safe, and familiar) depictions of home. The two official videos that correspond to the same song, one accompanying the original version, the other one the remix version, delegitimate heroism and homeland glory.

Listening to *Homeland* feels like being punched by the drum, bass, synthesizer, and broken guitar riffs. All have a metallic sound. In the remix, sounds resemble radio interference noises. This punching is accentuated by a line in the lyrics that is repeated over and over again: "We teach you, bitch, to love the homeland." Zemfira's intonation is energetic and staccato-like, echoing the instruments' punching sounds. The words connect phonetically and semantically to the sound, since the beat demands emphasizing the letter "u" in the words teach, bitch, and homeland [My na***u***chim tebia s***u***ka rodin***u*** liub***i***t].

These aggressive parts alternate with much slower, smoother, and more lyrical ones. These, which we call b-parts, appear to be floating as Zemfira's voice changes to a soft and breathy timbre. The melody affords melancholy. The second and third b-parts

The video *Homeland/Motherland.* Tetris building blocks feature bodies in underwear. When building blocks do not fit, body parts vanish from the blocks.



In the other *Homeland/Motherland* video, traditional food is inextricably connected to feeding people with violence: bullets, hand grenades, and pistols are served together with vodka and herring.

end with a flute playing passages of the Russian national anthem in the Phrygian key, sonically producing and altering the theme of homeland.[58]

The homeland theme is also prevalent in the lyrics of both versions. For instance, *rodina* is described as "sickened" [zabo-l***ev***shuiu], "thinned" [pored***ev***shuiu], "flown away" [ulet***e-v***shuiu], "confused/lost" [raster***en***nuiu], and "numbed" [one-m***ev***shuiu]. Here, again, the phonetics of the terms that are emphasized by the beat appear to underscore the sound of floating, making the lyrics feel like an organic part of the music. The lyrics of the second b-part suggest that hope is to be found in a personal integrity that may persist despite the pressures of the social and political situation:

There is truth [*pravda*], there is pride [*gordost'*], there is courage [*smelost'*].

The videos of both versions replicate the monolithic style of sound and lyrics; they revolve around one object (a set table and a Tetris game, respectively) and do not feature cuts or changes of scenery. In the music video produced for the song's remix version, we only see a long table.[59] At the outset, we discover a model military aircraft made from metal. Then the camera slowly moves to the right, showing us, piece by piece, items lying on a table covered with old newspapers. The light is cold. Colors of blue and grey prevail. Instead of food, some plates serve revolvers and cartridges. On others, food is mixed with hand grenades. Between plates, we witness lit candles in antique candle stands. When we see a gun at the table's right end, the camera reverses, moving from right to left. The only recognizable objects lying besides, not on, the table are glass shards (or snowflakes?). The table is both an abandoned and heavily guarded object. The food symbolizes Russian working-class feasts. There is herring, sandwiches made of black bread topped with butter; there are pickles and onions. Food is a cultural material key in constructing everyday nationhood. It symbolizes the nation as something that can be attained through consumption.[60] The video's mixing of typical Russian food with weapons communicates that Russianness is as much defined by absolute political violence, by weapons meant to kill people, as it is by traditional food. It suggests that those who tie their identification with Russia and, seemingly innocently, to food, do not only live on herring and sandwiches, but also on revolvers and cartridges. The video, made for the song's original version, features an initial warning highlighting the Russian state's censorship of oppositional musicians and its attempts to marginalize them by declaring them to be foreign agents:

> **This material (information) was created, disseminated and (or) channeled by foreign agent Ramazanova Zemfira Talgatovna or related to activities of the foreign agent Ramazanova Zemfira Talgatovna. 18+.**[61]

The female voice reading the warning sounds robotic. The font depicting the warning is from a 1980s operating system, setting the scene for the commencing Tetris game. Tetris went on sale in 1989. The Tetris building blocks feature male and female bodies in underwear. When building blocks do not fit, i.e., when the in-

"INSTEAD OF FOOD, SOME PLATES SERVE REVOLVERS AND CARTRIDGES. ON OTHERS, FOOD IS MIXED WITH HAND GRENADES."

visible player fails to place them in a fitting position, body parts vanish from the blocks. The video ends with the screen images disappearing as if someone had pulled the plug. We interpret the video as underscoring the violence of a game that is played with human bodies that are shown to be vulnerable. That the bodies do not fit, that they do not make an orderly filled rectangle, communicates that humans are forced into a pattern that is not humane. Both videos changed our first impressions that we had gained through listening to the song and reading the lyrics. Unlike the song, the videos do not accommodate a glimpse into a different reality or future. Both depict total control over a bounded space. Violence is embedded in the situation displayed. The source of violence remains invisible and external to the situation that we can observe in the videos.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals how the neoimperial Putinist claim to domination over neighboring nation-states, such as Ukraine, is legitimated and delegitimated in musical performances that revolve around the theme of homeland. In particular, we have focused on how homeland is produced and manipulated sonically, lyrically, and visually in music videos. Expanding on approaches stressing the performativity of music (videos),[62] we have shown how, for instance, the depiction of traditional Russian food is used in different ways – to produce, yet also to alter meanings of home.

Further, we have identified that instrumentation is key to producing positive associations of homeland – as much as timbre and voice. For instance, Shaman's adoption of techniques widely associated with masculinity is central to patriarchal constructions of patriotism and homeland that presuppose the gender binary. Moreover, accordion and a cappella singing that are widely associated with Russia set the scene for patriotic cues. The tunes of both discussed pro-war songs (*With Russia in Our Heart* and *My Russia*) are markedly sweet and catchy, interspersed with simple slogans of love of one's homeland or one's close relationship to the enormous space [*prostrantstvo*] of Russia.

Absolute violence remains hidden sonically and lyrically in these performances. When we do encounter visual symbols of war, such as in Sobor's *With Russia in Our Heart*, these symbols are included in cheerful, if not playful, ways alluding to transnational popular culture such as light swords and hand signs showing a heart. We find that the stark contrast between the themes of peace, blue skies, mercy as well as good-heartedness and war normalizes absolute violence in Sobor's performance.

Even in visual terms, *My Russia* by Shaman only subtly alludes to the theme of war – the grandfather wearing a uniform in an old photograph is the only cue. The photograph's significance might lie in what Håvard Bakken has described as war merging,[63] a form of myth that situates the ongoing war in the symbolism of the Great Patriotic War. Besides this reference, the clip paints a picture of Russia that is basically Soviet, submerging things Russian and Ukrainian into one category of Slavicness performed in a neotraditional rendering of Soviet everyday life [*byt*]. The carpet on the wall, in a typical populist inflection, ennobles this way of life vis-à-vis pro-Western and pro-European design choices. As common in populism, choices of style appear to be corresponding to political orientations. Soviet *byt*, as the music video suggests, is tantamount to a pro-Putinist and pro-war stance. The same everyday life is questioned in Zemfira's music videos performing homeland/motherland. They suggest – through the interplay of punching drums and metallic broken guitar riffs with images of a Tetris game serving as an allegory of the brute inhumanity inherent in politicians' playing with the lives of people – that renditions of homeland are complicit with the state's violence against all who oppose the war. Zemfira's music videos are subversive in that they play with the mainstays of Russian popular culture, such as the national anthem, but defamiliarize them.

THE USE OF FOOD starkly contrasts in pro-and anti-war music videos. *My Russia* symbolizes the little motherland, i.e., one's home, district, or hometown, and how it ties into the great motherland of Russia by way of a common meal with traditional Slavic food and customs (flowers, vodka, photos, singing). In the music video accompanying the original version of the anti-war song *Homeland*, traditional food is inextricably connected to feeding people with violence; bullets, hand grenades, and pistols are served together with vodka and herring. Zemfira's videos are particularly suited to disarming those patriotic narratives that legitimate the war by romanticizing Russia as a homeland and presenting a Soviet-inspired, Russian way of life as threatened. The specific way in which sound, lyrics, and images interplay in the analyzed music videos might aesthetically subvert depictions of the good home as they are, for example, evoked in Shaman's *My Russia*.

Zemfira's videos also contrast with Sobor's and Shaman's pro-war music videos concerning gendered roles, styles as well as voice and body performance. The female members of Sobor have long hair and wear dresses and make-up which underline their traditional feminine appearance that contrasts with that of patriotic males, such as Shaman, reaffirming the gender binary. In Zemfira's Tetris video, male and female bodies alike are bent and kneeled. At the same time, the rock star's choice to not adhere to the neotraditional template of femininity renders the politicality of typical homeland depictions visible and audible. The widely known fact that Zemfira is in a long-term relationship with a woman, her hair and make-up style, her explicit use of terms such as *bitch* (in a pejorative way), and her varied use of voice testify to a refusal to align with neotraditional expectations of femininity.

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Remixing nationalism

Gender and sexuality in Russian popular music and its reception on TikTok and Instagram

by **Kirill Polkov**

abstract

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has exacerbated Russian nationalism, as reflected in popular music and its reception on digital media. This article explores the role of gender and sexuality in formulating and negotiating ideas about the Russian nation since the start of the full-scale invasion, focusing on the circulation and reception of the songs and music videos by the Russian singers Shaman and Tatiana Kurtukova. Both performers occupy a significant place within a broader landscape of Russian popular music and are popular on social media platforms, where users generate content that features their songs. The analysis focuses on the ways (dis)identifications with Russianness in and through popular music are performed and highlights popular music's symbolic capacity to naturalize normative ideas about gender and sexuality as well as the war in Ukraine.

KEYWORDS: Russian popular music, gender, sexuality, nationalism, Shaman, Tatiana Kurtukova, *ressentiment*.

Shaman, the stage name of Yaroslav Dronov, arrives on stage in a helicopter accompanied by the sound of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. He wears a black robe with a Russian flag on his arm. He takes it off to reveal a sequined hussar dolman jacket, asserting "Do not be afraid of anyone and anything and never give up! Our country is with us, and we are together. *I am Russian*!" The eponymous song starts playing and the crowd cheers in ecstasy. This video from a live performance in Novomoskovsk on July 30, 2023, reflects the ways in which throughout 2022, Shaman has been established as a figure at the intersection of Russian militarized nationalism and Russian popular music. Dronov had been pursuing a moderately successful career since around 2013. His breakthrough came with the release of "*Vstanem*" [We will rise], a tribute to Great Patriotic War heroes, on February 23, 2022. On June 26, the song was broadcast in full on the program *Vesti nedeli* [News of the week] – an unprecedented occurrence for this type of news program. It was only with this state-sponsored media support and the timing of the release – remarkably, just one day before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – that his career truly took off. *Ia russkii* [I am Russian] was released on July 22, 2022.[1] Despite limited popularity within Russia, especially among the youth he supposedly targets,[2] he and his music were subjected to sanctions by several countries for promoting the invasion. In the summer of 2024, Shaman's music was removed from Spotify and YouTube.

SHAMAN WAS NOT the only patriotic singer that had emerged in the Russian music scene since the start of the full-scale invasion. Tatiana Kurtukova gained popularity with her song *Matushka* [Mother]. Her breakthrough came when she was invited to perform on *Pesni ot vsei dushi* [Songs with all my heart], a talk show on the state-owned network *Rossiya 1*, on July 24, 2022. Testifying to her widespread popularity, her second appearance on the same program on June 12, 2024, featured two user-made videos: footage of soldiers, fully equipped in military gear, enthusiastically engaging with *Matushka* from inside a tank, as well as a national dance ensemble from the North Caucasus performing a Lezginka-style dance to a fast-paced remix of the song.[3] The user-made videos that framed Kurtukova's TV appearance further point to how it is not only the two artists that engage with nation-

alist symbolism through their respective songs, but also audiences.

In this article, I trace how ideas about Russianness circulate in popular music, focusing on the songs by Shaman and Tatiana Kurtukova and the reception by their online audiences amidst the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The questions that inform my analysis are: What ideas about Russia are circulated in the music of Shaman and Tatiana Kurtukova and how, if at all, are they contested in user-created short videos on TikTok and Instagram? How are gender, sexuality, and nationalism co-articulated?

Tatiana Kurtukova and Shaman.
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Gender, sexuality, and Russian popular music before and after 2022

Previous research in the field of Russian popular music has detailed the ways in which music has long been a site of national identity formation, fostering nationalistic sentiment, and managing Russia's public image. Performances of *russkii rok* (Russian rock) and Soviet popular songs have been used to shape national identity, expressing nostalgia for Russia's Soviet and pre-Soviet past and serving as a vehicle for communicating national unity.[4] Music has been used to consolidate and promote nationalism,[5] particularly during times of conflict, such as the ongoing war with Ukraine.[6] Research shows that gender and sexuality have also been central to Russian popular music. Performances at events like the Eurovision Song Contest served as nation-branding tools, blending sexualized imagery with national identity.[7] Additionally, queer aesthetics in Russian music, inherent in *estrada*-style camp performances on prime-time TV,[8] have been co-opted by the state. Originally a site for LGBTQ+ self-expression,[9] these aesthetics have been repeatedly reworked for political purposes, serving to distract from domestic issues and engage in virtue-signaling for foreign audiences.[10]

AS VIDEO BLOGGER and musicologist Anna Vilenskaia somewhat reductively suggests, after February 2022, the developments in Russian popular music have proceeded in three distinct directions.[11] Some musicians who went into exile – such as Monetochka, Noize MC, Oxxxymiron, AIGEL, IC3PEAK – create music reflecting current events, catering to both emigrated and domestic oppositional audiences.[12] Meanwhile, mainstream pop artists like Anna Asti and Zivert produce commercially driven, apolitical music that avoids the ongoing military conflict, offering listeners an escape from harsh realities and a sense of normalcy. Lastly, propaganda artists, such as Timati, Shokk, GeeGun, Akim Apachev, and, most notably, Shaman's pop-rock, provide ideological justification for the armed conflict. This three-way categorization oversimplifies a complex musical landscape, where many artists navigate ambiguous positions and engage in subtle forms of resistance and commentary that evade clear ideological labeling.[13] These developments occur amid increasing state control of the music industry that has grown since 2022, monopolizing who and what gains popularity, especially after the departure of Western companies (Sony, Spotify) and banning TikTok (May 2024) and Instagram (banned as of July 2024).[14]

Theoretical starting points, material, and method

This article focuses on both the production and reception of popular music. In addition to studying the circulation of Russianness in the official music videos, examples of TikTok and Instagram user-generated videos allow for an insight into Russians' quotidian performances of gender and sexuality[15] and negotiations of national identity. I understand the TikTok and Instagram videos as elements of both *affective audio networks*,[16] embodiments of particular sentiment that emerge through the remixing, imitation, and circulation of audio on algorithmic platforms and as *nationalist assemblages*, a dynamic network of discourses, affects, materialities, and practices that work together to produce and sustain nationalism. Theoretically inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's work on assemblage through Jasbir Puar, the concept of *nationalist assemblages* offers a way to approach nationalism as "assemblages of sensations, affects, and forces" that engender shifting (dis)identifications, rather than stable identities.[17] Constructivist theories of nationalism[18] highlight its processual nature and the ways in which people reproduce and subvert nationhood in everyday life through routine activities.[19] Such an understanding of nationalism is central to how music, as it travels across contexts and platforms, is co-articulated by artists and users to sustain and shape feelings and expressions of nationalism.

This entanglement of cultural production and (geo)politics can be placed against a background of Russia's self-positioning

globally. Scholars studying Russia's politics and culture have long explicated the ways its position in the global arena is tied to domestic politics. *Ressentiment*, a term coined by Nietzsche and developed by Scheler, offers one way to understand Russia's position.[20] Ressentiment is a psychological state stemming from suppressed envy and hatred (existential envy) that cannot be acted upon or satisfied (e.g., seeking revenge). It arises from two sociological conditions: first, the belief that the subject and the object of envy are fundamentally equal, making them interchangeable; and second, the perception of actual inequality that prevents the realization of this equality, leading to a sense of impotence. These conditions make a situation prone to ressentiment, regardless of individual psychological traits. Its sociological impact lies in its potential to lead to a "transvaluation of values," where previously esteemed values are denigrated and replaced by less significant or negative concepts. This process can transform societal value systems in profound ways.

MORE CONCRETE ANALYSES point to the ways ressentiment permeates Russia's self-understanding and appears in cultural production. Madina Tlostanova calls the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia "the Janus-faced second-class empire."[21] Russia has tried to overcome its complex as a secondary European by formulating a version of a traditional, heteronormative, and binary gender order with a universalist appeal.[22] Especially in connection with the invasion, ressentiment has been used to describe Russia's obsession with Ukraine's independence and closeness to Europe.[23] Cultural studies scholar Mark Lipovetsky speaks of the films *Brat* (1997) and *Brat 2* (2000) [Brother and Brother 2] as expressions of "imperial ressentiment that had been building up for more than 30 years."[24] These films, particularly *Brat 2*, frame Russia as a nation humiliated by the West, yet ultimately morally superior. The protagonist, a former soldier, embodies an idealized Russian masculinity – tough, loyal, and unyielding – who avenges perceived injustices against Russians abroad. Such narratives have gained renewed relevance in the post-2022 climate, reinforcing the Kremlin's messaging about Western betrayal and the necessity of Russian strength in the face of external threats. This article argues that ressentiment may be signaled not only through post-Soviet urban decay and violence toward the Western Other, but also through pop-rock and pop-folk music.

THE SELECTION OF material in May-June 2024 was carried out in several stages.[25] The analyzed material consists of official videos and songs, as well as 58 TikTok videos to Shaman's songs and 25 Instagram user-created videos for each of the songs *Ia russkii* [I am Russian] and *Matushka* [Mother]. Limited by the scope of the article, the videos represent a small, algorithmically influenced sample. My analysis is limited to the uses of music that appear in the corpus. The analysis began with open coding and proceeded to a qualitative textual analysis of the song lyrics and a visual analysis, inspired by the insights of the semiotic approach, of the artist- and user-produced videos.

Ia Russkii and *Matushka*: Two performances of properly gendered Russianness

Matushka [Mother], published on March 24, 2022, is a folk-pop track by Tatiana Kurtukova with influences from electronic dance music. *Ia russkii* [I am Russian], first published on YouTube on July 22, 2022, is a pop-rock song by Shaman, featuring folk-style singing. These two songs have enjoyed comparable popularity during the invasion, each totaling more than 50MM views on YouTube.[26] This section analyzes the entanglements of nationhood, gender and sexuality in the music videos and song lyrics and identifies the ways in which these are in line with state-promoted versions of nationalism, highlighting how the songs and videos combine ressentiment and normative gendered presentations.

In the official music video to *Ia russkii* (now removed from YouTube because of Shaman's channel ban, but reuploaded on other channels)[27] Shaman appears in two settings: alone in a wheat field and later performing in a concert hall with a group of fans waving Russian tricolor flags. Shaman's music video negotiates patriotism by blending traditional and official Russian symbols with a contemporary, youthful image, positioning him as a "new patriot" in a post-February 2022 context. The overall style of parts of the video filmed in a concert hall evokes memories of earlier patriotic propaganda pop/rock singers like Oleg Gazmanov[28] and the Liube band. What sets him apart from these singers is the absence of visual or textual references to the military. Shaman is not represented as a "soldier" and is never depicted in proximity to battlefields (see article by Anna Schwenck and Anastasia Bondarenko in this special issue). In the official video *Ia russkii*, he is stylishly coiffed and costumed, and his movements are carefully choreographed to the camera angles, such as when he clenches his fist and kisses the cross or leans with the microphone stand.

"MUSIC, AS IT TRAVELS ACROSS CONTEXTS AND PLATFORMS, IS COARTICULATED BY ARTISTS AND USERS TO SUSTAIN AND SHAPE FEELINGS AND EXPRESSIONS OF NATIONALISM."

RATHER THAN AN explicit reference to the ongoing invasion or internationalist Soviet patriotism, Shaman's style creates a more ambiguous articulation of Russianness. With the Russian invasion constructed in Kremlin discourse as a "special military operation" rather than a full-scale war, there is a clear divide between civilians – Shaman being a civilian singer – and combatants – soldiers not shown in his videos. Implicit references to the Soviet Union emerge in the choice of setting – the wheat

field. Wheat fields, not uncommon in Russian pop folklore (as seen in *Kon'* [The Horse], a song first performed by the Liube in 1994 with the line "I will come out into the field at night with my horse…"), can also evoke Ukraine's former role as the "breadbasket of the Soviet Union."

Shaman distinguishes himself from the previous generation of patriotic singers by incorporating contemporary visuals. These include his bleach-blond dreadlocks, which provoked controversy as a national hairstyle when the video was first released, and two black-and-white outfits: an oversized white shirt and slim leather pants in the first part of the video (a vague and perhaps overly stylish reference to male peasant garb, lacking any regional identity), and a rocker outfit with skin-tight leather pants in the second part of the music video. His appearances, despite him presenting "Russian," include several "Western" influences, such as the rock-concert style of the music videos and his clothes (see also Anna Schwenck and Anastasia Bondarenko in this special issue).

"GENDERED PERFORMANCES THAT DO NOT CROSS THE BOUNDARIES OF ONE'S OWN SEX AND GENDER ARE EXPECTED FROM BOTH RUSSIAN MEN AND WOMEN."

HIS COMPLEXION gets dangerously close to the absolute idea of "racial" whiteness.[29] Ethnicity and otherness are prominent features of the music video's two epilogues. One of these shows African Americans singing *Ia russkii* as they cruise along a California highway and the other repeats this trope with space aliens. These two endings suggest that Shaman is "Russian" not only out of spite (*nazlo*) toward the whole world, but also the observable universe, which the Soviet Union once aimed to colonize while competing with the US. This can also be read to reflect the imagery and language of decolonization strategically used to rally support within Russia and to present Russia as a defender of a different, non-Western global order. Black people and space aliens are then shown to align themselves with Russia. This also exemplifies the flexibility of the term *russkii*: anyone can be *russkii* as long as they share the appropriate cultural values.[30]

The lyrics of *Ia russkii* proceed as follows:

> **I breathe in this air / The sun in the sky looks at me / A free (*vol'nii*) wind flies above me / It is the same as me // And I just want to love and breathe / And I don't need anything else / Just the way I am, and you can't break me / And all because // *Refrain:* I'm Russian. I keep going to the end / I'm Russian, my blood comes from my father / I'm Russian, and I've been lucky / I'm Russian, to spite the whole world (*vsemu miru nazlo*).**[31]

Embodying ressentiment, Shaman constructs the outside world in these lyrics as an antagonist, positioning Russianness as reactive ("you can't break me") but virtuous ("I've been lucky"), taking pride in the face of felt degradation in opposition to perceived foreign hostility. Placing Shaman in a chain of patriarchal continuity, "my blood comes from my father," the lyrics contain another reference that virtue-signals in line with nationalistic, pro-Russian narratives – the word *vol'nii* (see article by Aleksej Tikhonov in this special issue). *Vol'nii* suggests an elemental unbound sense of liberty, unlike its synonym *svobodnii*, which means free within an existing (imposed) system of rules. "Free wind" (a common phrase in the Russian language), along with the bird flying freely in the video around the same time, are signifiers of personal and national independence that is beyond rules or external constraints. Shaman is free not just within a system, but free in a defiant, primal and untamed sense, one that is beyond rules and laws.[32] This usage reinforces a nationalist self-image of Russians as inherently independent and resistant to imposed authority, particularly from encroaching foreign powers.[33]

References to nature, a source of nation-building in both songs, emerge in both choruses and the refrain of *Matushka*:

> **How many more years should I ask the cuckoo for, / Tell fortunes about my maiden love on a daisy. / Cold spring water, fresh honey in honeycombs, / In an open field on a dark night I will drown in the starry sky. // *Refrain:* Mother Earth, white birch tree, / For me [you are] Holy Rus', for others, a splinter (*zanozon'ka*).**[34]

In *Matushka*, nature imagery and maternal symbols are central to the construction of feminine-coded national identity. The use of "Mother Earth" in the title of Kurtukova's song evokes associations between girlhood ("my maiden love"), collective territory, and identity that appear premodern or "lost to modernity." In the context of the full-scale invasion, *Matushka* can be read to hint at a crucial way women, as a metonymy for the national territory, symbolize the national collectivity: it is supposedly for the sake of protecting women that men go to war.[35] The line "For me [you are] Holy *Rus'*, for others, a splinter (*zanozon'ka*)" further establishes a stark inside/outside binary; "holy" to Russians, as an Orthodox-tinged elusive promise of a world different from, and better than, the postmodern West,[36] *Rus'* is nuisance for outsiders. This contrast articulates the core emotional grammar of ressentiment: what "we" cherish and is threatening to "them." As with *Ia russkii*, the singer's identity emerges from antagonism in resistance to misrecognition.

In ways more explicit than Shaman, Kurtukova negotiates gender-appropriate patriotism through her clothes. The use of folk elements in her costumes increases across the three music videos released in March 2022, January 2023, and April 2024.[37] The first video features Kurtukova in a headscarf tied below the chin in traditional folk clothes difficult to pinpoint to

a certain region of Russia, against a white studio background; the second is a live performance of *Matushka*, with Kurtukova in the same headscarf but in a more elaborate costume with a black vest with embroidered details, instead of a blue shirt, on a stage with black background and simple graphics, accompanied by playback. The third is a decidedly more comprehensive production. It features retro color grading and Kurtukova first as an angelic figure in beige clothes against the sunset and dawn, and then in "Russian, Kumyk, Buryat, and Nenets folk costumes"[38] against a variety of simple graphic backgrounds. This third video also seems to establish a link with *Ia russkii* when Kurtukova first holds a sheaf of wheat, resembling the statue of Russia in VDNKh's[39] "Friendship of Peoples" fountain, and then stands in a blurred yet recognizable wheatfield à la Shaman.

THE USE OF FOLK DRESS by Kurtukova, who herself is likely to be read as an ethnic Russian, stands out compared to Shaman.[40] While Shaman does not cross any ethnic lines, Kurtukova's multiple folk costumes can be interpreted as Russians occupying the top of the hierarchy in the multinational federation; she is the embodiment of multiple ethnicities at once. Throughout the video she moves from embodying an ethnically Russian woman to symbolizing multiple ethnicities, back to a "beige" angelic figure as the universalist Russia with a heap of wheat. The heavenly figure can be also seen as Kurtukova herself embodying Holy *Rus'*. *Rus'* itself is a reference to the term imbued with various meanings. *Rus'*[41] in the historical sense refers to the political entity that emerged in Eastern Europe and does not include Kumyks, Buryats, and Nenets, indigenous groups that the Russian Empire colonized. In the video of Kurtukova wearing folk costumes of these ethnic groups, and in the YouTube comment to the music video, paradoxical "multinational *Rus*'"[42] emerges as an amalgam of the discourse on *Rus'* with Russian multinationalism, the idea of the peaceful interactions between Russians (*russkie*) and indigenous ethnic groups (*korennyye narodi*) across the imperial and Soviet past.[43]

The visual aspects of both performances also reflect the contradictory and ambiguous nature of Russian mainstream nationalism. As feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis points out, rather than a fixed and homogenous body of tradition and custom, the "cultural stuff" of the nation is a rich resource, full of internal contradictions. The depository of cultural signifiers can be used selectively.[44] While the gendered representations in the two videos proceed along the lines outlined by Yuval-Davis, her point about women's particular duty to bear the "burden of representation,"[45] can be deepened with Julia Cassiday's analyses of Russian popular culture and the notion of *cisgender drag*. The concept points to the ways in which appropriate – unambiguous and exaggerated – gendered performances that do not cross the boundaries of one's own sex and gender are expected from both Russian men and women. Her argument that "cisgender *travesti* became a central strategy for performing citizenship under Putin"[46] reflects the sartorial and stylistic choices in the original music videos and points to the tension between authenticity and caricature in portrayals of Russianness. To perform gendered and sexualized Russianness, both Shaman (in the first part of the video) and Kurtukova lean into a depository of vaguely folk clothes. The public reactions to Shaman's attempt to copy Western rocker masculinities with his leather pants in the second part of the official video (and in his other performances) reflect the anxiety caused by his failure to convincingly align Western glam-rock aesthetics with the rigid norms of Russian state-sanctioned *cisgender drag*.[47]

Music as a vehicle of state-promoted nationalism

The uses of *Rus'* and *russkii* and the visual signifiers that draw on a vast repository of official and folk symbols position the songs with Russian state-promoted mainstream versions of nationalism. This reflects the ways in which the terms have been understood "from below" by Russian people themselves: *russkii* is seen to encompass both national/ethnic belonging and citizenship. Such a version of nationalism is characterized by the pervasive influence of Soviet legacies in contemporary conceptualizations of nationalism, patriotism, and multiculturalism, emphasizing stability and unity, and reproducing positive myths about Russia's multi-ethnic past.[48] Since the 2010s, the divide between ethno-centric and civic-centric Russian nationalism has been hard to distinguish, with the ambiguity present at all levels of political discourse.[49] Putin has generally avoided making nationalism a central element of his popular appeal,[50] and has kept the definition of "Russianness" intentionally vague.[51] The clear nationalist and expansionist currents both in Soviet and Pan-Slavic fashion have, however, been identified by scholars of Russian popular music.[52]

WITH RUSSIA WAGING a war in Ukraine, the uses of *russkii* by Shaman and *Rus'* by Kurtukova become part of the nationalist assemblage. The lyrical themes of both songs establish a chain of equivalence between national pride, individual freedom, resilience, and defiance against external opposition, all allegedly attributed to a strong sense of Russian identity, which one pursues *despite* outside pressure. This theme is most salient in the song lyrics, although the proud open poses of Shaman who clenches his fist and Kurtukova who embodies innocent femininity also communicate this visually. This fits neatly into a long-existing discourse of the Russian state about "Russia rising from its knees," which portrays a "Russia" "that had risen (during the Soviet era), fallen (during the 1990s), and is rising again (under Putin)."[53] This narrative, Eliot Borenstein finds, "always reaffirms Russia's role as the hero of history while emphasizing its status as the world's victim or offended party."[54] Lipovetsky identifies "superiority, chosenness, resentment" as key characteristics of Russian racism and Soviet mythologies[55] – which I read as expressions of *ressentiment* in Shaman's *Ia russkii* and Kurtukova's *Matushka*. Thus, while "hot" Russian nationalism proceeds in the trenches or on the margins of the Russian state,[56] a more palpable nationalist-patriotic ressentiment, a sensibility that posits Russianness as a distinct set of values under threat from outsiders and thus worth cherishing and protecting, is articulated in

these songs. At stake, then, is the construction of "[a] recognizable and reliable, but ultimately fantasmatical, identity."[57] Produced as they are amidst a "civilizational" conflict, the two songs shore up pro-war rhetoric and normalize the violent acts of war. The next section analyzes the ways in which ideas about Russianness are performed, upheld, reclaimed, and contested in short user-made videos.

User-generated videos: negotiations of gender, sexuality, and nationalism

This section analyzes TikTok and Instagram user-created videos that remix the songs *Ia russkii* and *Matushka*. *Matushka* is more popular as a source of music for remixes, with 88.8 thousand Instagram reels as of June 2024 (compared to 11.6 thousand featuring *Ia russkii*).[58] Three overarching themes are identified, unequally distributed across the music by Shaman and Kurtukova.

The inauthenticity of Shaman's heterosexuality

In most TikTok videos, posted from his official TikTok account, Shaman appears alone singing songs in the studios or in concert arenas. This carefully curated image constructs him as a professional patriotic performer representing state-sanctioned values, including heteronormativity. TikTok creators subvert this image by satirizing the authenticity of Shaman's heterosexuality. A prominent example involves mocking his purported relationship with Ekaterina Mizulina[59] – a pairing that is interpreted not as a reflection of genuine personal affiliation but as a symbolic performance of idealized heterosexuality in service of nationalist ideology. In one such video, Mizulina, with her robotlike gestures[60] which add to the feeling of artificiality, declares "I listen to Shaman and no one else" accompanied by the caption, "When the school psychologist tries to find out what music you listen to, and your playlist has music that would get you 30 life sentences."[61] This move exaggerates the consequences of *not* liking Shaman's music, suggesting that it is so ideologically loaded it becomes socially risky to not be his fan. By placing this exchange in a school context – where authority figures control behavior – creators frame both Shaman's patriotism and his heterosexual performance as unnatural and imposed. Shaman's virile hypermasculinity is unlike the accepted and even celebrated ambiguous masculinity of Russian pop stars such as Filipp Kirkorov and Nikolai Baskov, who are widely assumed to be homosexual.[62] Whereas Kirkorov and Baskov rely on camp flamboyance,[63] Shaman presents a patriotic heterosexual masculinity that clashes with his queer-coded Western glam-rock style. This mismatch, amplified by forced appearances with Mizulina, makes his heterosexual persona feel forced. In their videos, TikTok users apply self-irony to reveal the performative and artificial nature of state-mandated identities, including Shaman's heterosexual persona.

"*RESSENTIMENT*, AS A KEY SENTIMENT IN THE MUSIC BY SHAMAN AND KURTUKOVA, WHICH COMBINES THE SUPERIORITY AND CHOSENNESS OF THE SINGERS AS 'RUSSIANS' WITH RESENTMENT TOWARD THE OUTSIDE WORLD."

ANOTHER VIDEO INCLUDES a montage of Shaman and his brother side by side, beginning with *Ia russkii* and ending with "*Ia LGBT seks-instruktor iz NATO*," [I am LGBT sex instructor from NATO]. Originally released in March 2021 by the band Neverlove, where Shaman's brother is a frontman, the song ridicules Russian state homophobia.[64] Remixed in the song are the words of a Russian TV pundit, cautioning that "sex LGBT instructors from NATO will sexually educate our children if we don't" with exclamations in German, tightly associating LGBT with Germany, and thus with the West. In the TikTok the following lines from the refrain are heard: "I am LGBT-sex-instructor from NATO / I am teaching the nation how to bang in the ass / You will have to complete an induction by me / The hetero(sexual)s will not hide from us."[65] They appear in quite stark contrast to Shaman's message of national purity and nationalist determination. In April 2024 Neverlove publicly denounced "Western values" and suggested the song is a quip at West, not Russia.[66] The pro-Kremlin pundit's original words, Neverlove song lyrics, as well as their juxtaposition to Shaman all exemplify the ways in which pro-Putin and oppositional figures rely on hypersexualized language to discredit their opponents.[67] The user-created TikTok videos critique heterosexuality and heteronormativity in Shaman's work. They do so without much expressive means, such as dressing up, acting, or lip-syncing, but rather through a recontextualization of the existing material.

Reinforcement of national belonging through body's cisgender drag

The analyzed Instagram reels to the sound of *Ia russkii* mostly reinforce and reinterpret the nationalist message rather than subvert it. They show the colors of the Russian flag prominently displayed in various public events and attached to clothes. Several videos feature male and female gymnasts and dancers. In performing acrobatic and athletic feats to the sound of Shaman's song, these people can be interpreted as aligning themselves with the message of the song; as *russkie*, they are strong "to spite the whole world." The reels of people posing with the flag as individuals and collectives, as well as the use of balloons and colored plaques illustrate the unstable boundaries between individual bodies and the body politic.

This theme can also be identified in videos that use *Matushka*, which feature children and women dressed in traditional Russian clothes. The videos use the music transition at the beginning of the chorus. Performing feminine *cisgender drag*, women without makeup turn fully

made up and sometimes wear a *kokoshnik*, a Russian folk headdress. Popular-folk stylizations of music, of which Kurtukova's song is an example[68] lend themselves easily to using one's body to the rhythm of the song to perform nationalism through dress. Further, given the ubiquity of children's folk ensembles in Russia, the use of such songs reflects a form of benign nationalism that reinforces a collective cultural identity. In line with the biopolitical turn, Instagram reels where people use their bodies to perform nationalism are instances of people's bodies becoming, voluntarily, through techniques of self-management and appropriate presentation, and forcibly, expandable building blocks of nationalism.[69]

Validation vis-à-vis the West through consumption of nationalism

The most popular reel to *Ia russkii*, amassing 728 thousand views, is an image of Kanye West wearing a t-shirt designed by Gosha Rubchinskiy[70] with the word "Russian" in pseudo-Old Church Slavonic typeface. It features the comment "Nash slonyara" [Our elephant]. Calling somebody "elephant" on Russian social media is a way to compliment individuals seen as outspoken, aligning with traditional or pro-Russian political views. This example, alongside the African Americans at the end of Shaman's video, indicates an evolving sense of nationalism that constantly looks to the West (here to the US) for approval. As Tlostanova notes, "[t]he subaltern empire, even when claiming a global spiritual and transcendental superiority, has always been looking for approval/envy and love/hatred from the west, never questioning the main frame of western modernity, only changing the superfluous details."[71]

Some videos are posted by commercial promotional accounts: *Matushka* is used by a balloon decoration company and a video filming company. Company info appears on top of a video of a woman holding the Russian flag made of differently colored balloons against the blue sky. Shaman's song is featured in an unboxing video of a World Cup branded football with referral links to the e-commerce platform *Wildberries* (similar to the online retail platform Amazon). Another video compares excessive and poorly made manicures of American women with the overlaid text, "I really feel sorry for the Americans," transitioning into the "Russian" stylish manicure by the salon that placed the advertisement. This exemplifies how the nationalist assemblage is rooted in the everyday practice of consumption[72] by both women and men and attests to how any platform logic is primarily an economic one, built for revenue and propelled by individual feeling and self-expression.[73] In reflecting the ways Russian nationalist sensibilities function in parallel with neoliberalism, these Instagram users – as individual entrepreneurs – capitalize on the wave of nationalism by promoting their goods and services through the use of these songs.

National (dis)identifications in the second-class empire

This article has argued that Shaman's and Tatiana Kurtukova's music articulates properly gendered and sexualized visions of Russian national identity, which are in line with the ideological visions of Russianness promoted by the state. I have identified *ressentiment*, as a key sentiment in the music by Shaman and Kurtukova, which combines the superiority and chosenness of the singers as "Russians" with resentment toward the outside world. Women and men, femininities and masculinities, all within a neat framework of cisnormative heterosexuality are central to representations of Russia in the ambivalently nationalist music studied in this article, which can be seen in contrast to overtly militarized music and cultural products.

This music is also used by TikTok and Instagram users to assert, negotiate, and negate the geopolitical hegemony of Russia over the "West" amidst the ongoing full-scale invasion. As elements of affective audio networks, the user-remixed videos engage with the music of Shaman and Kurtukova. In doing so, the users build on the expressions of banal nationalism steeped in ressentiment in the original music videos. The user-created content revealed a variety of ways to remix nationalism. These range from explicit alignment that channels its ressentiment through the body, to counter-identifications that shatter the normalized conventions of gender and sexuality, to an ambivalent disidentification by entrepreneurial individuals using the nationalist resources music for their own purposes. Music thus narrates – and contributes to – a normalization of the full-scale invasion, heteronormative gender and sexuality, and "colder," everyday varieties of nationalism.

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38 Quote from the comment, posted by Kurtukova, to the music video.

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42 The original comment posted under Kurtukova's third video reads, "Khit vseia mnogonatsional'noi Rusi *three Russian flag emojis*" (A hit for the entire multinational *Rus*').

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44 Yuval-Davis, "Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations," 17.

45 Yuval-Davis, 18.

46 Cassiday, *Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism*, 59.

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59 Ekaterina Mizulina is Executive Director of the National Center for Children's Assistance (2017–2020), member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, and Director of the "League for Safe Internet" established with the support of the Russian government and parliament.

60 This article points out that some users experience the "uncanny valley effect," the feeling of unease and revulsion, when encountering objects that are almost human-like but not quite, when seeing Mizulina. "Mizulina vnezapno stala internet-zvezdoi. Ei pripisyvaiut roman s SHAMAN i somnevaiutsia v tom, chto ona chelovek [Mizulina Suddenly Becomes an Internet Celebrity. She Is Accused of Having an Affair with SHAMAN, and There Are Doubts About Whether She Is Even a Real Person]," Lenta.ru, December 9, 2023, https://lenta.ru/news/2023/12/09/mizulina/.

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Processing of the Russian war against Ukraine in the lyrics of Ukrainian rappers in Ukraine, Germany, and Russia

by **Aleksej Tikhonov**

abstract

This article is a linguistic exploration of the lyrics and selected social media posts of nine contemporary rappers from Ukraine, Russia, and Germany, all of whom are of Ukrainian descent. The selection of these artists is based not only on their ethnic background but also on their considerable popularity and cultural influence within their respective countries. The primary objective of this study is to examine the pragmatic aspects of their lyrics and linguistic behavior, with particular attention to potential instances of language shift or code-switching, which can be socio-politically motivated. Additionally, the article explores the role these artists play in the socio-political landscape shaped by Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Given that rap has emerged as one of the most dynamic genres in global mainstream music, it is imperative to analyze the messages conveyed in its lyrics, as they now reach a significantly broader audience compared to the genre's early decades (1970s–1990s). Many of these musicians have attained the status of opinion leaders, amplifying their sociopolitical influence. Within the broader context of East Slavic linguistic dynamics, the choice of language – regardless of its pragmatic function – can itself serve as a potent political statement.

KEYWORDS: Ukraine, Russia, Germany, rap lyrics, language.

Since the honorary doctorate for rapper Kanye West in 2015[1] and the Pulitzer Prize for Kendrick Lamar in 2018,[2] rap has not only arrived in the mainstream but is one of the most dynamic music genres today. Rap, a genre that initially emerged in the US in the 1960s/1970s as entertainment, but also as a musical protest against discrimination, poverty, violence, and other sociopolitical grievances,[3] is still ideally suited today for analyzing the processing of war as the culminated form of violence. Its roots in protest make it a powerful tool for engaging with and understanding sociopolitical issues. Rap's cultural origin, political, social, and economic circumstances strongly influence the lyrics, which serve in the present study as a basis for a linguistic analysis in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started in February 2022. Although the beginning of the war dates back to the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the events of February 2022 confronted more Ukrainian musicians as well as musicians of Ukrainian origin with a new reality. The language of their lyrics became a political statement, regardless of whether the musician conceived a political connotation for the song or not.

The following article examines the linguistic behavior of rappers from Ukraine, Russia, and Germany after February 2022. The selection of rappers for this analysis is based on their status as the most popular rap artists in Ukraine for 2022 or, in the cases of Russia and Germany, as the most popular rappers of Ukrainian origin. The question is how the war influences the tension between Ukrainian, Russian, and Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism in the lyrics, and whether any code-mixing or code-shifting

Monatik, T-fest, Capital Bra, Alyona Alyona, GeeGun, Olexesh, Kheltspich, Youra, and Kalash44.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS AND PUBLICITY PHOTOS

phenomena occur.[4] The question is highly relevant for several reasons: (1) Ukraine has been strongly influenced by Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism in recent decades;[5] (2) there has been a trend towards the emancipation of Ukrainian language since the 1990s[6], which was strengthened by the war[7] and; (3) many Ukrainians have emigrated in recent decades, e.g. to Russia and Germany,[8] and in their new realities of life, they may look at the linguistic realities in Ukraine differently and; (4) the Russian government made the language question or the question of the alleged discrimination against Russophone Ukrainians one of the main reasons for attacking the neighboring country.[9] Relevant to the study are musicians born and/or socialized in Ukraine and whose creative work center is Ukraine, Russia, or Germany. In total, lyrics by nine musicians were analyzed – from Ukraine: Monatik, Alyona Alyona, Kheitspich; From Russia: T-Fest, GeeGun, and Youra; and from Germany: Capital Bra, Olexesh, and Kalazh44. The choice of musicians is based on their popularity: they are the most streamed musicians, who identify themselves as Ukrainians in the rap genre in their countries. Aspects such as music video analysis, the performance of sociopolitical content at the concerts, and semiotics of the design of the releases are not part of this analysis, as these and similar factors exceed the linguistic questions posed in the article and are domains of other academic disciplines.

Researching East Slavic rap

The analysis in this article concerns rap produced by professional musicians who identify themselves as Ukrainians, and are working in Ukraine, Russia, or Germany. Accordingly, it also involves research on rap in these three countries, focusing on rappers from Ukraine. Music reviews and journalistic analyses of rap are not considered here, as these formats generally lack or only partially maintain the standards of scientific objectivity.

In terms of Ukraine, as early as 2005 Laada Bilaniuk noted that the choice of language in the lyrics of Ukrainian musicians can be an ideological question,[10] and that, for example, in rap as the "language of the street" *surzhyk* (a colloquial hybrid of Ukrainian and Russian) is also used.[11] At the same time, from a sociological point of view, the rap subculture in Poland and Ukraine is described as a postmodern rebellion against the past (socialism) and the present (conservatism)[12], where language style becomes the central characteristic of identification.[13]

THE FIRST CHRONOLOGICALLY Ukrainian philological publication about rap in Ukrainian addresses the strengthening of national consciousness by using the Ukrainian language in the lyrics in 2017.[14] Also, the publication notes that until the mid-2010s, Ukrainian rap contained many calque borrowings from Russian, which has since changed. Ukrainian-language rap continues to develop, not only in the underground or the sub-cultures, but also among the broader public. With the rapidly declining influence of Russian, the linguistic quality of the lyrics also tends more toward standard Ukrainian.[15] This trend aligns with the broader societal shift in Ukraine, where the use of the Russian language is sharply declining, particularly in the aftermath of 2022.[16] By creating a connection between France and Ukraine

and recognizing rap as part of modern Ukrainian culture, Ukrainian music in the 21st century is positioned as part of European and global pop culture.[17] The process of Europeanisation and globalization is also understood as the renaissance of Ukrainian rap and popular music in general, because the musicians become more aware of Ukrainian as a part of this rebirth after the Soviet time[18]. Most musicians have partially or entirely distanced themselves from the Russian language and Russia since 2014, when Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea[19] – something I will elaborate on in more detail below.

THE FIRST RAPPER researched in Russia is Serëga, a Russophone Belarusian musician and one of the co-founders of commercial rap in Russia.[20] The first academic studies in Russia describe the emergence of subcultures from a social science perspective based on Serëga's fan community[21] or deal with the rhyme structure of his lyrics.[22] Angelina Kucherova notes that Russian rap research still has several fundamental deficits: There is no clear definition of Russian rap, nor has its history been thoroughly examined[23] – the only exception here is the article by Ilya Kukulin from 2020, which attempts to present the history of Russian rap very briefly.[24] In Russia, existing analyses often rely on single examples from lyrics selected according to unclear principles, and in many cases, they are biased publications by students and young researchers.[25] Of the Ukrainian musicians from Russia selected for this article – T-Fest, GeeGun, and Youra – only the most streamed among them (T-Fest) has been covered in Russian research. Even if the successes of GeeGun and Youra (see Table 1) show, that the musicians are by no means unknown in the rap scene in Russia, they have so far been ignored by research. However, T-Fest's tracks, as already mentioned above, are also a topic for young researchers, who deal with T-Fest and the Kazakh Russophone rapper Skryptonite exclusively as Russian artists and discuss them in the context of the "expansion of Russian rap".[26]

THESE OBSERVATIONS indicate that interactions in the context of rap and the languages used vary significantly among the East Slavic countries. English research literature shows an interest among Western academics in Russian rap and also in the context of the war;[27] however, rappers of Ukrainian origin in Russia remain outside the discussions. Nevertheless, T-Fest plays a role in the German research literature, as explained in the article by historian Evgenij Kazakov. Here he is categorized as a Ukrainian rapper, and the sanctions imposed by the Russian state against him are described.[28]

In relation to German-Ukrainian rappers, Cotgrove was the first linguist to examine the lyrics in consideration of East Slavic languages in German Rap.[29] In addition to a detailed description of how multi-ethnolects in Germany developed under the influence of Turkish and Arabic,[30] he considered nine rappers of different origins.[31] One of the nine artists had an East Slavic background – Capital Bra (CB). Slavic languages used by German rappers without a Slavic background are also an ongoing research topic at the moment. My pilot study focuses on German rappers with a Slavic background.[32] I analyzed lyrics by Schwesta Ewa (SE), Capital Bra, Olexesh (OL), and Krime (KR). The study compared Polish influences (SE & KR), Ukrainian-Russian influences (CB & OL), and identity models in German rap. Like Cotgrove, I concluded that hybrid identities are formed amongst other things through language behavior. International politics are frequently mentioned in the lyrics of artists with Ukrainian backgrounds. In contrast, the analysis of all lyrics, as the most extensive data source for linguistic research on rap, revealed that rappers with a Polish background are apolitical and show little connection to Poland as their homeland. The latest finding comes from a stylometric comparative analysis of German rappers, which showed that language registers (i.e., situational language use) in rap are less about the rappers' place of birth or heritage language and more about their region of socialization.[33]

"THE PROCESS OF EUROPEANISATION AND GLOBALIZATION IS ALSO UNDERSTOOD AS THE RENAISSANCE OF UKRAINIAN RAP AND POPULAR MUSIC IN GENERAL [...]."

The rappers

Before the analysis the rappers' language biographies must be discussed and summarized. All rappers were selected based on their views' statistics on YouTube and streaming numbers on Spotify in 2023. The higher a musician's statistics, the more relevant he or she is. This method resulted in the top 3 musicians for each country examined (Table 1):

Songs and languages of war and peace

As outlined in the preceding section, the view and streaming statistics indicate that these artists are not peripheral figures within their national music industries; rather, they rank among the most frequently played musicians in the mainstream. The selection of lyrics for analysis is centered on two critical junctures in Russia's war against Ukraine: the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. All the lyrics and songs examined were either released during these periods or directly in response to these events.

Ukrainian rappers in Ukraine

Monatik, who has been active as a professional rapper since 2013, is the only Ukrainian rapper in the present analysis who could have reacted to the annexation of Crimea, as Alyona Alyona and Kheitspich only became professional musicians in the late 2010s/early 2020s. Monatik, who was and is primarily a Russophone rapper, released the song *Mozhe vzhe dosyt'* [Maybe It's Already Enough] in Ukrainian in January 2014. The

Table 1. **Overview of the examined musicians**

	Artist name	Year & place of birth	Work localization	Highest statistical achievement*	Main languages of the lyrics
	**Monatik**	1986, Luts'k, Northwestern Ukraine.	Kyiv	*Kruzhit* (2017), YouTube, 141 million views.	Russian
	**Alyona Alyona**	1991, Kapitanivka, Central Ukraine.	Kyiv	*Ridni moï* (feat. Jerry Heil) (2022), YouTube, 10 million views.	Ukrainian
	**Kheitspich** (хейтспіч)	Early 2000s, Odesa, Southern Ukraine.	Odesa/Kyiv	*IA vb'iu vsikh bogiv* (2022), Spotify, 1,5 million streams.	Ukrainian
	**T-Fest**	1997, Chernivtsi, Southwestern Ukraine.	Moscow; after 2022: EU	*Uleteli* (2018), YouTube, 123 million views.	Russian
	**GeeGun**	1985, Odesa, Southern Ukraine.	Odesa, Kyiv, Moscow; since 2007: mostly Moscow	*DNK* (feat. Artem Kacher) (2018), YouTube, 64 million views.	Russian
	**Youra**	1983, Alchevs'k, Eastern Ukraine.	Kyiv; since 2022: Russia	*Praktika* (2019), YouTube, 3 million views.	Russian
	**Capital Bra**	1994, Siberia (precise birth place is not available). His family soon moved to Dnipro in Eastern Ukraine and then to Berlin in 2001.	Berlin	*110* (feat. Samra & Lea) (2019), Spotify, 176,8 million streams.	German
	**Olexesh**	1988, Kyiv, moved with his mother to Darmstadt in Germany in 1994.	Frankfurt am Main	*Magisch* (feat. Edin) (2018), YouTube, 108 million views.	German
	**Kalazh44**	Late 1990s/early 2000s, unknown birthplace, his family moved from Ukraine to Berlin, where he grew up.	Berlin	*Royal Rumble* (feat. Capital Bra, Samra, Nimo, Luciano) (2020), Spotify, 56,8 million streams.	German, Turkish

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS AND PUBLICITY PHOTOS

song was a sign of solidarity with the Ukrainian people after, on January 19, the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) initiated the package of contested laws, which introduced criminal liability for defamation, extremist activity, and increased restrictions on holding mass actions, which caused mass protests of the civil society. Back then, the Euromaidan protests took place in Ukraine as an expression against rapprochement with Russia, Russia's anti-EU propaganda in Ukraine, and for a pro-EU government shift. The protests ended in violent conflicts between the protestors and the governmental forces. Russia used Ukraine's internal political instability and began annexing Crimea on February 20, 2014. In 2022, Monatik re-released the song on his YouTube Channel with the anti-war message in English and Russian on the Ukrainian flag as the background: "While you are listening [sic!] this track, ukrainian [sic!] people are dying from russian [sic!] attack STOP IT".[34] He was one of many Ukrainian and some Russian musicians who posted this message on their YouTube channels, including Alyona Alyona, who will be discussed in this article later. In 2022 he released one more song in Ukrainian, in which the message became more obvious compared to his previous solidarity song from 2014:

He doesn't even know who he's fighting,
I defy and smash his armour,
I knock his teeth out and he won't bite anymore,
He doesn't even realise his tanks are just junk

MONATIK – *ART Oborona* (2022)[35]

"ALYONA ALYONA HAS CONTINUED TO RELEASE AT LEAST SIX ANTI-WAR SONGS."

In the lyrics, the Ukrainian rapper most likely means Putin and reveals Putin's ideas of war against Ukraine as illusions. The release of the song was accompanied by a post on Instagram on April 14, 2022, clarifying the message in Russian: "I have always been against the war, but we did not bring it. We did not call the "liberators"! I imagined the defeat of the bloody dictator with all my fibres, while I embodied these thoughts into music."[36]

On June 30, 2022, Monatik, who until then had communicated on Instagram either in Russian, Ukrainian, or English (the order of the relative occurrence frequencies of the languages), wrote a bilingual Instagram post – first in Ukrainian and then the exact same text repeated in Russian. The post referred to his single *ART Oborona* (ART Defence) and did not refer to the languages of communication. After this post, the musician communicated on Instagram almost exclusively in Ukrainian, less often in English. Since then, Russian has only appeared as quotes from his older songs.

ALYONA ALYONA, a professional musician since 2018, has been rapping in Ukrainian from the beginning of her career. Code-switching and code-shifting can, therefore, not be discussed here. On April 1, with the Ukrainian pop singer Jerry Heil, she published a musical prayer *Molytva*[37] [Prayer] in Ukrainian on YouTube. On April 22, 2022, the musicians released the song *Ridni moi*[38] [My Beloved Ones] that was published for the Christian-Orthodox Easter and was also designed in a prayer-like form:

My beloved ones, my beloved ones,
The dog no longer barks,
Even the cat doesn't purr on the porch,
The crying of children shall no longer ring out

Alyona Alyona feat. Jerry Heil – *Ridni moi* (2022)[39]

Alyona Alyona has continued to release at least six anti-war songs. According to her Instagram account, she has always supported charities for the Ukrainian people and army and volunteered herself in civil aid. In the same duo, Alyona Alyona and Jerry Heil represented Ukraine at the Eurovision Song Contest 2024 in Sweden with the song *Teresa & Maria* and placed second in the finals.

THE YOUNGEST RAPPER in this analysis, Kheitspich started his project with the commentary right after the full-scale Russian invasion with the Russian YouTube single *рyzzкий мир* [the ruzzian world] and the following video description: "It's the first song in the new project and the last one in the language of liars, looters, rapists, and murderers. It was written in the first days after the russia's [sic!] attack on my country".[40]

In the song's title and the video description, the pragmatic level of the lyrics is already represented by conceptual graphemics: The name of the attacking country is written in lowercase in the description, thus expressing the absent respect for the country; in addition, the adjective *Russian* is written in the title with a double <zz> instead of an <ss>, with which the rapper refers to the Russian war symbol – the letter <Z>.[41] The rapper also references the Russian language and explains that he will use this language for the last time. In the lyrics, it is clear that he chose the language to address Russians:

Like cowardly rats with no concrete idea,
Did you drop bombs while everyone slept,
Mothers and children wept,
Who could – ran away,
That's damn very manly,
Sitting in a bunker and lying,
I'm half Russian myself,
However, I hate them all.
[...]
You didn't know what was going to happen?
Damn, I will tell you,
Keep praying,
Fear the leader,
Get used to surviving,
Feed the dragon,
Your hands are smeared with blood,
But there is an [orthodox] icon in the corner"

Kheitspich – *ruzzkii mir* (2022)[42]

The selected lyrics excerpt exhibits an exceptionally high concentration of pragmatic content related to the war, with a particular emphasis on the aggressor's behavior in Ukraine and in Russia: the musician accuses the Russian population of ignoring the war; describes Putin as a coward waging war from a bunker; the double standards and the war support of the Russian Orthodox Church are also discussed. The song *ruzzian world* went viral for a short time and reached over 450,000 views on YouTube. To date, the newcomer has produced at least thirteen other antiwar songs exclusively in Ukrainian.

Ukrainian rappers in Russia

T-Fest has been active in the Russian music business since 2013. With more than 120 million views on YouTube, he is one of the most popular rappers in Russia. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, he ended cooperation with the Moscow label *Gazgolder*, left Russia, and toured the EU with Russian and Ukrainian musicians to raise Ukraine funds through the concerts. His working language until 2022 was almost exclusively Russian, with Ukrainian playing a minor role at the lexical level, e.g., through the use of the adverb *avzhezh* [indeed] to emphasize Russian sentences, as for example in *Pravda* (Truth) (2014):

> **Hit the target well,**
> **Missed again, I stepped back again,**
> **'Cause I'm a kid, Ouu! Yeah, I'm a khokhol [Ukrainian],**
> **Check out my flow, this is a flow for my brain,**
> **In your face face ra-ta-ta,**
> **I'm not trap, but we love the 808 [drum machine], indeed,**
> **We love the cash**
>
> T-Fest – *Pravda* (2014)[43]

Notably, this excerpt comes from a song released in January 2014, just before the annexation of Crimea. In it, T-Fest refers to himself using the pejorative Russian term for a Ukrainian: *khokhol*. This choice is likely interpreted by listeners as a critique of the negative attitude prevalent in the Russian state media toward Ukraine during the Euromaidan. Following this critique, T-Fest raps about machine gun fire directed at an imagined enemy to whom he addresses these lines, expressed through the interjection *ra-ta-ta*. The presence of a few anglicisms in the lyrics does not require extensive analysis, as they are common in rap across various linguistic contexts; for instance, terms like *cash* appear frequently in rap music of other countries as well. After February 2022, the language behavior in the musician's lyrics changed. For the first time in his career, he released a song entirely in Ukrainian: *Dai meni zvyknuty* [Let Me Get Used to It] (2022), and for the first time showed Spanish influences in Russian-language lyrics as in *Me gusta* [I like it] (2022).

ODESA-BORN, Moscow-based rapper GeeGun did not change his language use in lyrics after February 2022. He consistently used Russian with barely noticeable lexical influences from English. Ukrainian does not play a role in the musician's lyrics. On the other hand, Youra is a particularly interesting case because of his pro-Russian political statements and the use of languages. Youra released the song *HABAR* [Bribery] for the first time in his career a song entirely in Ukrainian in October 2021. The track criticizes corruption in Ukraine without specifying which parts of Ukrainian society the lyrics focus on. In July 2022, Youra released the song *POZICIYA* [Position], which consists of dominantly Russian lyrics and a few words in English and Ukrainian. Considering all the Ukrainian rappers examined, this is a rare case when Russian-Ukrainian code-switching occurs within one song, although the song remains trilingual Russian-English-Ukrainian. The corresponding passage of the Russian-Ukrainian code-switching states:

> **The first microphone, Donbass [sic!] is speaking!**
> **Here is where the people are full of will/free,**
> **watch out!**
> **We shouldn't have been**
> **forced to speak [Ukrainian]**
>
> Youra – *POZICIYA* (2022)[44]

The lines take a clear pro-Russian political stance in Russia's war against Ukraine, because here the Donbas region is personified and speaks to the listeners about the attempted compulsion to switch from Russian to Ukrainian. The population of Ukraine's Donbas region is defined as a "free population", using the adjective *vol'nyi* instead of *svobodnyi*.[45] The noun *volia* [freedom, will] is central to the derivation of *vol'nyi* [free, full of will, permissive, unrestrained]. The Slavophile and Tsarist Army General Kireev referenced the concept of *volia* in 1889 within the following context:[46] "Our state formula is expressed as follows: One will (that of the Tsar) and many minds (the council of the land [= parliament])". This statement encapsulates the Slavophile perspective, which emphasized the Tsar's absolute will alongside the consultative role of the parliament. This viewpoint was deeply rooted in the principle of *sobornost'*–the spiritual and organic unity of the church, the people, and the state. As it was over 100 years ago, the term remains highly politicized today and is part of a worldview constructed by the Kremlin. The semantic value of *volia* is thus connoted in Russian, especially within the intellectual concepts of Slavophilia, *Sobornost'* and ultimately Russian nationalism in the 21st century, as an "organically emerging term",[47] which is associated with the infinite happiness and the endless expanses of Russia.

THE ENDURING INFLUENCE of this ideology in contemporary Russian political thought is exemplified by a recent blog post[48] authored by Alexander Dugin, director of the Higher Political School at the Russian State University for the Humanities and a prominent Kremlin-affiliated nationalistic philosopher. His post, titled "The World of Civilizations: Sobornost' in a Multipolar World", presents a transcript of his speech outlining the ideological foundations and strategic objectives of Russia's war against Ukraine. *Svoboda* [freedom], on the other hand, is understood today in the same

context of Kremlin's ideological worldview as "an artificially constructed and borrowed term",[49] an import from the West.

It can thus be ruled out that the adjective is a Ukrainism in Russian, such as in *vil'na Ukraïna* [free Ukraine], since the phonetic realization and also the pragmatic-political context contradict this. As in the patriotic Russian connotation, Youra also locates the population of Donbas in a semantic area characterized by a separate notion of the so-called *Russian freedom* or *Russian will*. This localization is then reinforced in the following sentence, in which one of the few examples of direct Ukrainian-Russian code-switching among Ukrainian rappers occurs: *Ne nado bylo zastavliat'*$_{RU}$ *rozmovliaty*$_{UA}$ *nas*$_{RU}$ [We shouldn't have been forced$_{RU}$ to speak (Ukrainian)$_{UA}$]. In contrast to the rest of the syntactic construction, the verb *to speak* is not implemented in Russian but in Ukrainian, which means Youra took up the Kremlin's narrative about the so-called Russian language ban in Ukraine in the song. The acts of war in the Donbas are presented here as a direct result of the forced use of Ukrainian.

Rappers of Ukrainian origin in Germany

Russian-born but raised in Eastern Ukraine and Germany, rapper Capital Bra first took a stand on Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014. The title of his track is an anti-war statement: *Kein Krieg* [No War], but in the lyrics, he raps in German:

> **Please listen to me, that's all I ask,**
> **I'll explain the conflict to you from a different point of view,**
> **We Ukrainians, we never wanted to quarrel with Russia,**
> **But the Americans provoke from an ambush,**
> **Politicians who speak for everyone,**
> **It's about money and power, we're about human lives,**
> **Russian tanks entering my country,**
> **You see dead people in front of the Maidan**
>
> Capital Bra – *Kein Krieg* (2014)[50]

On the one hand, the invasion of Russian troops is criticized here. On the other hand, the reasons for this are sought in the US as a secret warmonger. Further on in the text, it becomes more concrete:

> **Ah, and they don't talk, they send the army,**
> **A battle between good and evil, but who's who?**
> **And you don't see that, we agree,**
> **Fuck the Americans, look how Putin defends our country,**
> **They lie in the media and you fall for it,**
> **Look, how two powers split up our country**
>
> Capital Bra – *Kein Krieg* (2014)[51]

Capital Bra identifies as Ukrainian, not as Russian. He contextualizes Ukraine as "our land" and emphasizes being Ukrainian again and again in his tracks: *Stable Ukrainian, Soon to Be a Big Earner* (song *Brown, Yellow, Purple* (2016)),[52] *I'm Ukrainian, fuck the Americans* (song *Intro* (2017)),[53] *I'm Ukrainian // I don't wear grillz* (song *Makarov Complex* (2020)).[54] He also makes positive references to Vladimir Putin in lyrics, the layout of individual albums, and in interviews.

On March 2, 2022, Capital Bra released the single *Stop Wars* along with rappers Kontra K and Kalazh44. The musicians also started a platform where their fans can donate money to Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Iraq. Capital Bra says in his part of the song:

> **When suddenly everyone shoots,**
> **The same people, only the weapons are different,**
> **Maybe a different flag, but the same language,**
> **Every Ukru, every Russian checks what I say,**
> **But I can't understand,**
> **We've never seen boundaries between us,**
> **But suddenly there are boundaries,**
> **Suddenly bombs are falling on people**
>
> Capital Bra feat. Kontra K & Kalazh44 – *Stop Wars* (2022)[55]

The lyric of the single brings dubious statements to the listener: Because the eight lines serve Putin's narrative, with which the politician justifies the war, among other things. Capital Bra sings about Ukrainians and Russians being *the same people*, speaking the same language, most likely meaning Russian. In addition, there are the personal designations *Ukru* [Ukr(ainian)] and *Russe* [Russian]. While *Russian* is neutral here, *Ukru* could be interpreted as a derivation from Russian *Ukr* or *Ukrop*. Both terms are condescending to Ukrainians and are located in the same semantic spectrum as *Ukrofashisty* [Ukrainian Fascists]. The terms are also a staple of pro-Russian memes about Ukraine on the Russian-speaking internet.[56]

Capital Bra's feature on the single *Stop Wars* is Kalazh44, a rapper with a Ukrainian background. About seven weeks after the joint single, Kalazh44 released the album *District13*, which includes a feature with Capital Bra. The song is called *Keine Politik* [No Politics]. Even though the musicians had made numerous political statements in *Stop Wars* just two months earlier, the main line of the hook at the end of April 2022 is: No politics, don't do politics, Bra, // Don't do politics.[57]

ANOTHER GERMAN RAPPER of Ukrainian origin who plays a role in the topic of the Russian war against Ukraine is Olexesh. Olexesh is the first German rapper with a Slavic background to achieve commercial success. To date, he has released six albums, received the HipHop.de Award for Best Live Act in 2017, and his videos have over 100 million views on YouTube. Like Capital Bra, he self-identifies as Ukrainian, as evidenced by many of his lyrics, music videos shot in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian coat of arms in his album designs. At the same time, unlike Capital Bra, Olexesh does not equate Ukrainians and Russians. In addition to his Ukrainian post-Eastern bloc identity through mentioning "*the*

East", the USSR etc. in several lyrics, Olexesh's role in *being a Slav* is also striking because he not only speaks of himself as a *Slav* but also of a *Slavic empire*. However, it remains unclear whether it is a metaphor for his perception of the ethnic structure of inmates in German prisons, an expression of a hybrid post-Eastern bloc identity (usually not tied to ethnic characteristics), or a reference to pan-Slavism. Olexesh plays with his identity models, referring to himself as *Russki Kanak*[58] in a few songs. Regarding identity, Olexesh is flexible and represents a new hybrid identity model in German pop culture.

"AFTER FEBRUARY 2022 SOME RUSSIAN MUSICIANS, SUCH AS THE BAND LENINGRAD, ALSO SING ABOUT A BROTHERHOOD OR UNITY OF RUSSIA AND UKRAINE, WHICH EXCLUDES UKRAINE'S INDEPENDENCE AS A STATE."

ON FEBRUARY 26, 2022, Olexesh posted a clear pro-Ukrainian sign on his Instagram account with over 800,000 followers: A photo of a child standing in a wheat field with the blue sky above, the child holding the Ukrainian flag. On March 5, 2022, he released *Mama Ukraina, Papa Russia*. The song says:

> **Mama Ukraine, Papa Russia,**
> **The same blood in us, because everyone boils with water,**
> **I don't want gas, I want freedom for the Shtrassa [Street$_{UA}$],**
> **Fuck politics, army, stop the tanks**
> **[...]**
> **Fuck life, stay stable, I fuck politics,**
> **Because in the end we're all fucked by a president,**
> **Man, I miss my homeland, I'll be back soon,**
> **And then every stone will be put back in its place**
>
> Olexesh – *Mama Ukraina, Papa Russia* **(2022)**[59]

The cover of the single with his parents' wedding photo could give the impression that it is actually about Olexesh's mother and father. However, in recent years he has mentioned in various interviews that his father is from Belarus, whilst his mother comes from Ukraine. So it remains to be seen why the father of the lyrical I in the song became Russian. The association of Ukraine with a woman could primarily point directly to Olexesh's mother, but also to the grammatical gender of the country's name in German, Russian, Ukrainian, or finally to Putin's depiction of Ukraine as a *Krasavitsa* [Beauty], which is sexist idea about the personification of Ukraine as a beautiful woman who is inferior to masculine Russia.[60] Shortly after the song's release, Olexesh also published his biography as a book under the same title.[61] From a philological perspective, this metaphor belongs to the concept of "nation as a family" in which certain parts of the nation assume the paternal role, and certain parts of the nation the maternal role[62]. After February 2022 some Russian musicians, such as the band Leningrad, also sing about a brotherhood or unity of Russia and Ukraine, which excludes Ukraine's independence as a state.[63] Russia's political nuances of constructing president's image also play a role here, as since the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin's and Aliaksandr Lukashenka's (for Belarus) PR campaigns have attempted to portray them as a hero, brother, or father of the nation, depending on the situation. This PR effort continued under Putin.[64] In connection with the image of Kyiv as the medieval "mother of Russian cities,"[65] even though the name of the city is grammatically masculine in Ukrainian and Russian, a contextualization of Ukraine from a pro-Kremlin position cannot be ruled out in the song's title. In the end, it remains highly questionable to what extent Olexesh's lyrics go into such pragmatic depth and are subject to extensive philological analysis. What is certain, is that the connotation of Ukraine and its individual cities, such as Odesa as woman and mother,[66] and, on the other hand, Russian cities, such as Rostov, as man and father,[67] is common. However, the fact is that Olexesh's relationship with Ukraine is more nostalgic than that of Capital Bra, which is strengthened by the intro of the song, in which his grandmother says in Russian: "And yet it's good that you left back then," referencing Olexesh's and his mother's migration to Germany. Finally, the various metaphorical classifications of Ukraine and Russia show that Ukraine and its cities are either grammatically feminine or artificially feminized from the Kremlin's perspective (the example with Kyiv). In contrast, Russia is often artificially masculinized by the Kremlin, which contradicts the Russian grammatic categories, where Russia and Moscow are feminine.

Discussion

This article examined how the escalation of the Russian war against Ukraine in February 2022 was processed in the songs of Ukrainian rappers in Ukraine, Russia, and Germany. A particular focus was on the choice of languages, which is a central social and political issue, especially in Ukraine and Russia.

As might be expected, the war is a hugely important topic for rappers in Ukraine. Since February 2022, the war has reached all spheres of life of Ukrainians. All three rappers examined (Monatik, Alyona Alyona, Kheitspich) address the war in their lyrics. The approach to contextualizing the war is different in all three examples. Monatik has (re)released two anti-war songs. Both songs are in Ukrainian, which is untypical for the Russophone musician and has a special meaning. However, Monatik changed his communication language on social media in 2022 and now communicates primarily in Ukrainian. Russian plays almost no role in his communication. Alyona Alyona has always released tracks exclusively in Ukrainian, which she continued after 2022.

More than half of her new songs are about war. An exciting case is Kheitspich, who only started his music project with the full-scale invasion and only released one song in Russian, in which he addresses the Russians directly. In the song, he tries to educate them about the war but simultaneously expresses a wide range of negative emotions towards Russia, Russians, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Putin. Other anti-war songs by Kheitspich are in Ukrainian and are aimed at Ukrainians or dealing with pain and anger.

AMONG UKRAINIAN RAPPERS in Russia, a comparable case is Youra, who did just the reverse of Kheitspich, switching to Ukrainian in a song to convince Ukrainians that they were wrong. He takes a clear pro-Russian position and accuses Ukraine and the collective West of escalating the war. In his new songs, T-Fest indirectly addresses the war on a poetic level, allowing for various interpretations. Nevertheless, it is a fact that he takes a clear pro-Ukrainian position, which is shown by his language switch to Ukrainian and the strict breaking off of cooperation with Russian labels and leaving Russia. The third rapper GeeGun showed no dismay, at least publicly and in his lyrics. He does business as usual and in Russia does rap in Russian.

A differentiated picture emerges among the German rappers of Ukrainian origin. None of the three rappers can be classified as clearly pro-Ukrainian. In the lyrics, there is a negotiation of one's own identity and the rejection of political topics. The fact that the rappers themselves become political in their lyrics is not a contradiction for them. Nevertheless, it can be clearly said that all three rappers are for peace, just in different scenarios. Capital Bra can be understood as a supporter of Putin and can be classified in a similar field as the rapper Youra. Kalazh44 does not deal with the war and cannot be categorized. Olexesh is more cautious with his view of the war and says there must be peace again, rejecting gas and therefore Russia. He feels a stronger emotional-nostalgic connection to Ukraine than Capital Bra and Kalazh44. The rappers' linguistic behavior and statements about languages confirm these observations. While Capital Bra and Kalazh 44 don't use Ukrainian in their songs, and Capital Bra questions whether Ukrainian and Russian are truly separate languages, Olexesh uses individual Ukrainian words (e.g., *Shtrassa* [Street]) in his German lyrics and is not categorically pro-Russian or in favor of peace under the Russian flag, as Capital Bra is.

IN UKRAINE, rappers increasingly switch from Russian to Ukrainian. When they do use Russian, it is mainly to express negative emotions and thoughts towards the Russian government, Putin directly or the people in Russia. In Russia, the reverse seems to apply. Here, rappers use Ukrainian only to make negative statements about Ukraine. Alternatively, the war is ignored in the lyrics entirely, as the example of GeeGun showed. The exception is the example of T-Fest. He immediately accepted the consequences (termination of the contract with his producer in Moscow and the exit from the Russian music market, where he had been mainly active until then) and chose the pro-Ukrainian side. In Germany, the rappers are for peace but unite it remains ambivalent under which flag peace should be achieved and whether the rappers even want to declare their allegiance to Russia or Ukraine. This leads to a situation in which supposed pro-Ukrainian anti-war songs (prominent examples are Capital Bra & Kalazh44) can be interpreted as pro-Russian (war) songs upon closer inspection of the pragmatic level of the lyrics.

Conclusion

In the majority of the analyzed cases the war has had the effect that language use in East Slavic(-German) rap has become marked by clear boundaries between political positioning for Ukraine or for Russia. The consistent use of Russian in the lyrics of rappers who work in Ukraine can no longer be justified. The Russian language seems to be only allowed for Ukrainian rappers in specific contexts; either, 1) they address Russians, or 2) it is one of their old songs. The consistent use of Russian can be seen as a pro-Russian attitude as the example of Youra shows in particular. Ukrainian is used much more consistently in rap in Ukraine than before February 2022 and the genre becomes also linguistically more diverse due to new, e.g., English or Spanish influences. Rap in Russia remains mainly monolingual Russian. With Ukrainian rappers in Germany, however, the situation is less clear. In this case, deficits in linguistic, cultural, or historical competencies could explain why the rappers try to unite numerous contradictions in their songs and then intentionally or unintentionally produce pro-Russian war songs. The distinguishing feature here compared to Ukraine and Russia is that these texts are communicated to an audience that is mainly located in Germany, Austria and Switzerland and therefore, due to the geographical distance from the war, would not necessarily have a specific and categorical attitude towards the war before listening to those songs. The opinions could only be shaped by these lyrics.

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Figure 1. Yahidne rave toloka.
SOURCE: REPAIR TOGETHER 2023

Raving, rebuilding, and resisting

RAVE TOLOKAS AS COMMUNAL ELECTRONIC MUSIC PRACTICES IN WARTIME UKRAINE

by **Emma C. Schrott**

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Figure 2. Ivanivka rave toloka.

SOURCE: REPAIR TOGETHER 2023

abstract

This research examines the uncharted phenomenon of rave *tolokas*, where electronic dance music practice merges with cleaning war-torn villages in Ukraine, fostering community, resistance, and cultural identity amidst the full-scale war in Ukraine. It interprets rave tolokas as embodied, physical-affective experiences that intertwine dance and labor to restore cultural spaces. Through music and sonic material, participants actively confront war, challenging narratives of rave culture as escapism. Contributing to (ethno)musicology and conflict studies, this work highlights music's multifaceted roles in armed conflict. It draws on participatory digital ethnographic methods, including in-depth interviews, addressing the challenges of conducting wartime research.

KEYWORDS: Digital ethnography, Ukraine, rave, reconstruction, resistance.

Approaching wartime musicking

> **This is like a super amazing experience because you feel the connection to the people. […] I like digging and staying in the line and transferring those bricks, it's like feeling super connected to people I'm near to. […] My personal feeling is that before the war it was kind of different. It was really something different. I would say that I did not feel this kind of connection, for example, when I just attended some event in a local club in Kyiv. […] But when you came to rave toloka, this was a completely different feeling, because of the feeling of this togetherness that we are doing something good, and we work hard and then we can dance hard. […] You not only have the feeling that you are doing something good, that you are helping people who are in need, but also you begin to be the part of community with the same values, with the same attitude to people, to war, to your position as a Ukrainian.**[1]

Daria's statement, along with Figure 1 – depicting a young woman dancing to a DJ set with turntables creatively stacked on ammunition boxes amidst a group of people simultaneously

gathering debris in broad daylight – captures the atmosphere of rave tolokas [толока]. This collective musicking merges the act of clearing up war-torn villages in Ukraine with the electronic dance music practice of raving. Taking inspiration from both an old rural Ukrainian tradition and contemporary urban music culture, rave tolokas intertwine dance, labor, and their pertaining physical processes. This article delves into the lived experiences of the hitherto uncharted rave tolokas, showing how this music practice fosters community-building, collective resistance, and cultural identification amid full-scale war.

Rave tolokas, also known as "clean-up raves", are organized happenings that combine the work of restoring war-ravaged villages in Ukraine with the electronic dance music practice of raving. They present a striking example of how people engage with music in war settings, employing dance as a means of aiding reconstruction in devastated areas. Consequently, this study places particular emphasis on the mediating roles of music and dance in fostering collective resistance and mobilizing communities during times of war. Throughout the paper, firsthand perspectives provide profound insights into individual experiences – such as Oleksii T.'s reflection, a sentiment echoed in later sections, highlighting the dual role of rave tolokas in supporting reconstruction and fostering communal joy through music: "You can do some volunteer job and then you can dance, and you will not feel guilty about that you are dancing".[2]

"'RAVE TOLOKAS' SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE OF A MUSIC PRACTICE THAT EMERGED AMIDST THE OUTBREAK OF THE FULL-SCALE WAR IN UKRAINE."

EXPLORING THE MULTIFACETED roles that music can assume in the context of armed conflict, research on the intersections of music, sound, violence, and war has garnered significant attention in recent years. Studies on war-torn and conflict-affected regions have explored various aspects, including music's function as a propaganda tool, a weapon of warfare or a means of resistance. Scholars have also examined the impact of war on musical traditions and cultural identities within diasporic communities, as well as the role of music in postwar reconciliation among traumatized populations.[3] Additionally, Martin Daughtry has described how the reconfiguration of a wartime aural environment necessitates the development of new listening skills,[4] while Carolyn Birdsall has shed light on the significance of auditory perceptions in wartime experiences, enhancing the concept of earwitnessing.[5]

In his 2014 article titled "Ethnomusicology in Times of Trouble", Timothy Rice reflects on these contributions, addressing the need to study the aural environment and sonic practices more broadly, particularly in wartime contexts. This resonates through the sonic lifeworlds of Ukrainian civilians, who have had to adapt to new auditory conditions shaped by explosions, air raid sirens, and rocket strikes. The author also observes that ethnomusicology has been slower to incorporate the study of crises compared to related disciplines like anthropology. He attributes this lag to the scarcity of research providing clear evidence linking music to war atrocities, largely due to cultural perceptions that predominantly associate music with positive connotations such as pleasure and peace. Another contributing factor, according to Rice, lies in paradigmatic beliefs that music can only thrive within stable social environments.[6]

AGAINST THIS BACKDROP, at the core of this article, "rave tolokas" serve as an example of a music practice that emerged amidst the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine. Studying the emergence of such a practice can not only help give insight into how organized violence can trigger the production of musical knowledge but also broaden our understanding of the nature of human music making. This aligns with Svanibor Pettan's research on the roles of music in the Croatian Homeland War, arguing that "wars and other violent conflicts stimulate musical creativity and thus call for the attention of researchers".[7] Adopting a pluralistic perspective on human music making, this study draws on Christopher Small's concept of "musicking"[8] as well as further ethnomusicological concepts applicable to conflict settings, such as Thomas Turino's idea of understanding music as social participation, which underscores the vital role of music in establishing connections with our personal lives, communities, and the surrounding environment.[9] These conceptual frameworks bring into focus how rave tolokas function as embodied acts of participatory practice and meaning-making, where musicking becomes a vehicle for emotional connection and collective resistance in wartime Ukraine.

Ethnomusicological online fieldwork?

In her 2010 study, Margaret Kartomi shares her perspective on war as a cultural process wherein musical life can change, evolve, and take on new directions. She further addresses the neglect of war studies in ethnomusicology, highlighting the challenges of access and security during fieldwork in conflict zones.[10] Since then, the advent of digital technologies has transformed the study of music in conflict situations, offering new avenues for research that make it possible to consider how local musicking realities are digitally mediated. Abigail Wood already recognizes the significance of digital spaces in people's everyday musical lives in 2008 and advocates for online-oriented approaches in ethnomusicology.[11] While Wood, drawing on email correspondence described as a disembodied textual mode of communication, points to limitations in spontaneity during her research, audiovisual capacities of contemporary online platforms can foster spontaneous participation and social interaction. This includes reacting to broader informational posts or more ephemeral shared content, as well as engaging in direct messages that can lead to face-to-face video calls.

This study employs online ethnographic methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with individuals involved in rave tolokas. Since online fieldwork in ethnomusicology is relatively novel, I draw on works such as *Digital Ethnography: principles and practice*.[12] These challenge the notion of the dichotomy between real and virtual, emphasizing the continuity between online and offline practices as deeply embedded in everyday life. They also help to develop an ethical framework for conducting online fieldwork in a war zone. Ilmari Käihkö's recent article on "chatnography", for instance, which explores interaction through social media and messaging apps, is particularly insightful as it addresses ethical implications of digital ethnography in the Russo-Ukrainian war context. Käihkö highlights the tension between easy remote communication and the drawback of an overwhelming flow of information and explores how digital research becomes intertwined with everyday life, raising moral questions about the impact of this constant connection on one's personal sense of disruption.[13]

BY CREATING accounts on Instagram and Telegram – the primary platforms for organizing, documenting, and sharing information on rave tolokas, which are public and open for anyone to join – I was able to identify participants, engage in online conversations, explore musical practices, and expand my network at the outset of my research in autumn 2022. I explained how I came across the profiles I contacted in relation to my research interests and disclosed my role as a researcher both in initial messages and on my platform profiles. While interactions with established contacts were frequent, easy, and spontaneous – due to the casual, low-threshold nature of chatting on these platforms – I encountered dilemmas regarding whether to enable or disable notifications for new messages. For example, navigating the blurred boundaries between public and private spheres, as digitally mediated interactions from the wartime research "field" created an internal expectation of being constantly available to check updates and respond to messages. These notifications also extended to social media activities, including live updates featuring audio-visual content from participants in rave tolokas, demonstrating the dynamic flow of musical practices in interconnected digital and physical spaces.

Between April and May 2023, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews in English, with participants providing informed consent for recording. The oral format influenced participant recruitment, as some individuals were hesitant to share their experiences in spoken English. However, conducting the interviews online also offered certain advantages – for instance, interviewees could easily look up translations during the conversation using their preferred electronic devices. These interviews, lasting an average of one hour, focused on various aspects of their experiences in the clean-up raves, including their motivations for involvement, feelings during participation, the significance of electronic music in this context, and interactions with local communities. Among the participants, four identified as cisgender female and four as cisgender male. Those who preferred not to be referred to by their real names were assigned pseudonyms, marked with an asterisk.[14] While the age range of individual interviewees spans from the 20s to 30s, their level of engagement with Ukraine's electronic dance music culture varies. This ranges from individuals who are less frequent attendees of raves to regular participants in the scene, including DJs actively performing sets. It is furthermore worth noting that, although I had not previously visited Ukraine prior to conducting this research, my personal background included familiarity with diverse electronic dance music cultures through regular participation in various contexts – such as attending events, listening to commonly associated music styles, and engaging with the histories of these cultural scenes. Consequently, this work is written from a personally situated perspective, grounded in observations gathered through digital platforms and the thematic analysis of online ethnographic interviews.

Ukraine's nightlife transforming into daytime reconstruction effort

> **You have a building, it has a couple of sections, and in one section there is a stage with the artist. The artists change like once in an hour, like 40 minutes. And there are usually a bunch of guys who are dancing now, then they go in to do some work and other guys come in their place and it all happens, you know, very naturally and organically. [...] And it can be like you know, in the parts of the section of the building, someone is raving, and someone three or five meters away is doing the work. So, it's like parallel processes and they do not interrupt each other. [...] You can hear the music from the other section while you perform the work, and you can dance in the process.**[15]

The way Veronika sheds light on the nature of the work process at rave tolokas and the impression of a loose yet smooth process of effectively cleaning up the cultural sites is shared by other participants such as Oleksii M.: "I found that it's kind of anarchy, but everyone is well organized, no one just sits in the corner".[16] On a voluntary basis people tackle different work tasks, helping wherever needed and collaborating for efforts requiring more manpower.

INVESTIGATING THE SONIC and musical responses of people under conditions of armed violence can not only expand our knowledge of wartime violence, but also contribute to our understanding of how people "use music and sound phenomena to give meaning to their reality in contexts of war",[17] as Luis Velasco-Pufleau notes. The newly emerged clean-up raves present a particularly interesting response as they are contributing to reviving parts of the sonic lifeworlds that many young Ukrainians enjoyed before the outbreak of the full-scale war in February 2022. Reflecting on his participation in a rave toloka, Oleksii T. shares: "In my head this was like a kind of festival, but with volunteering in the first place, of course".[18]

Amidst a rearranged wartime soundscape, Ukraine's rave culture has managed to persist, albeit in an altered form. The as-

piration to help war-ravaged communities engendered a volunteer movement that was inspired by both contemporary urban music culture and an old rural Ukrainian tradition. "Rave toloka" designates a happening that couples the electronic dance music practice of raving with the labor of cleaning up bombed-out buildings. In international media coverage therefore referred to as "clean-up rave", the phenomenon was initiated by the organization *Repair Together* and named "toloka" to honor the eponymous Ukrainian folkloristic tradition. Interestingly, only a few of my interlocutors were familiar with the toloka custom before starting to attend rave tolokas – Daria shares her understanding of the term:

> **It has been in our local usage for centuries, I think, and toloka means when your neighbors, when people who live around you, were all gathering to do something, like to clean up what is needed to be done. And they were celebrating, sharing dinner together, like building this community.**[19]

The toloka tradition equals a collective labor practice. It evolved since the 15th-century among peasant populations who cultivated a custom of mutual aid for urgent work, such as raising barns, cutting timber or reaping harvests.[20] In the early 19th century, the toloka had become emblematic of a cultural conduct within rural communities, characterized by mutual neighborly help.[21] Typical features of traditional tolokas – such as taking place on Sundays, being carried out regardless of gender, and being rewarded in form of a meal – have been adapted in rave tolokas.

"THE TOLOKA TRADITION EQUALS A COLLECTIVE LABOR PRACTICE. IT EVOLVED SINCE THE 15TH-CENTURY AMONG PEASANT POPULATIONS."

It was at the end of April 2022 that a group of young Ukrainians founded the volunteer organization Repair Together to help restore demolished villages that had been liberated from Russian occupation in the Chernihiv region, a northern area of Ukraine that was heavily affected during the early stages of the full-scale invasion. The initiative started to hold regular tolokas in affected communities every weekend. It soon came up with the idea of organizing rave tolokas, introducing the unprecedented combination of volunteering and raving. Rave tolokas not only served as a substitute for the cancelled festivals that would have otherwise animated the country's thriving electronic music scene but also came to play a pivotal role for drawing attention to Repair Together's mission. Captivating videos depicting hundreds of raving volunteers in villages across northern Ukraine quickly went viral on TikTok and Instagram, attracting international interest and generating a surge in donations and helping hands for the organization's work.

UNLIKE REGULAR TOLOKAS, rave tolokas are characterized by their setting in and around destroyed houses of culture, "Dim Kul'tury" [Дім Культури]. These are cultural institutions that were once central to Soviet public life and remain common in Ukrainian villages and towns. In the summer 2022, Repair Together organized three rave toloka weekends in two villages in the Chernihiv region that had fallen victim to missile strikes, artillery fires and occupation as part of Russia's failed offensive on Kyiv. The first two, held in July, focused on restoring the house of culture in the village of Yahidne, located about 140km northeast of the capital. The third and, according to my interviewees, largest rave toloka took place in early September in the neighboring village Ivanivka.

THE COMMUNAL SPIRIT inherent in the toloka tradition appears to have transferred to rave tolokas, forging connections not only among the young volunteers but also with the local residents. For the most part, rave tolokas have been warmly embraced by the village communities. As with the old custom, the hosts express their gratitude to the volunteers through offerings of coffee, tea, or homemade treats. However, their involvement goes beyond gestures of appreciation, as locals spanning various age groups also participate in the collective labor and dance happening. Through both its regular and rave tolokas, Repair Together has remained committed to initiating reconstruction by clearing debris, and the three rave tolokas achieved remarkable success in restoring the cultural houses of Yahidne and Ivanivka.

Like most interviewees, Marianna participated in both regular and rave tolokas. Reflecting on cleaning up the cultural centers, she remarks: "You don't feel ashamed that you're dancing there because you're happy that this place was liberated".[22] Many cited a sense of guilt as motivation for joining rave tolokas, especially male participants, who felt the need to contribute without taking up arms. Daria speaks openly about the moral dilemmas faced by Ukrainian civilians and how Repair Together helped restore a sense of belonging:

> **When the war started, I mean the full invasion war started in 2022 actually, the society in Ukraine asked themselves a lot of questions like: Are we allowed to live our life happily during the war? During that time when we know that our soldiers are struggling, are defending our country? [...] Besides the feeling of being involved in something big and cool, besides the feeling of doing good for other people, I've made new friends, I've made new connections and I've lost this feeling of loneliness.**[23]

Recognizing the heterogenous entanglements between rave culture and social upheaval, Ukrainian rave tolokas challenge various trends in research on rave culture as they do not present a temporary retreat from political restraints but rather an active way of facing the reality of war through their extraordinary function of restoring war-ravaged cultural institutions.

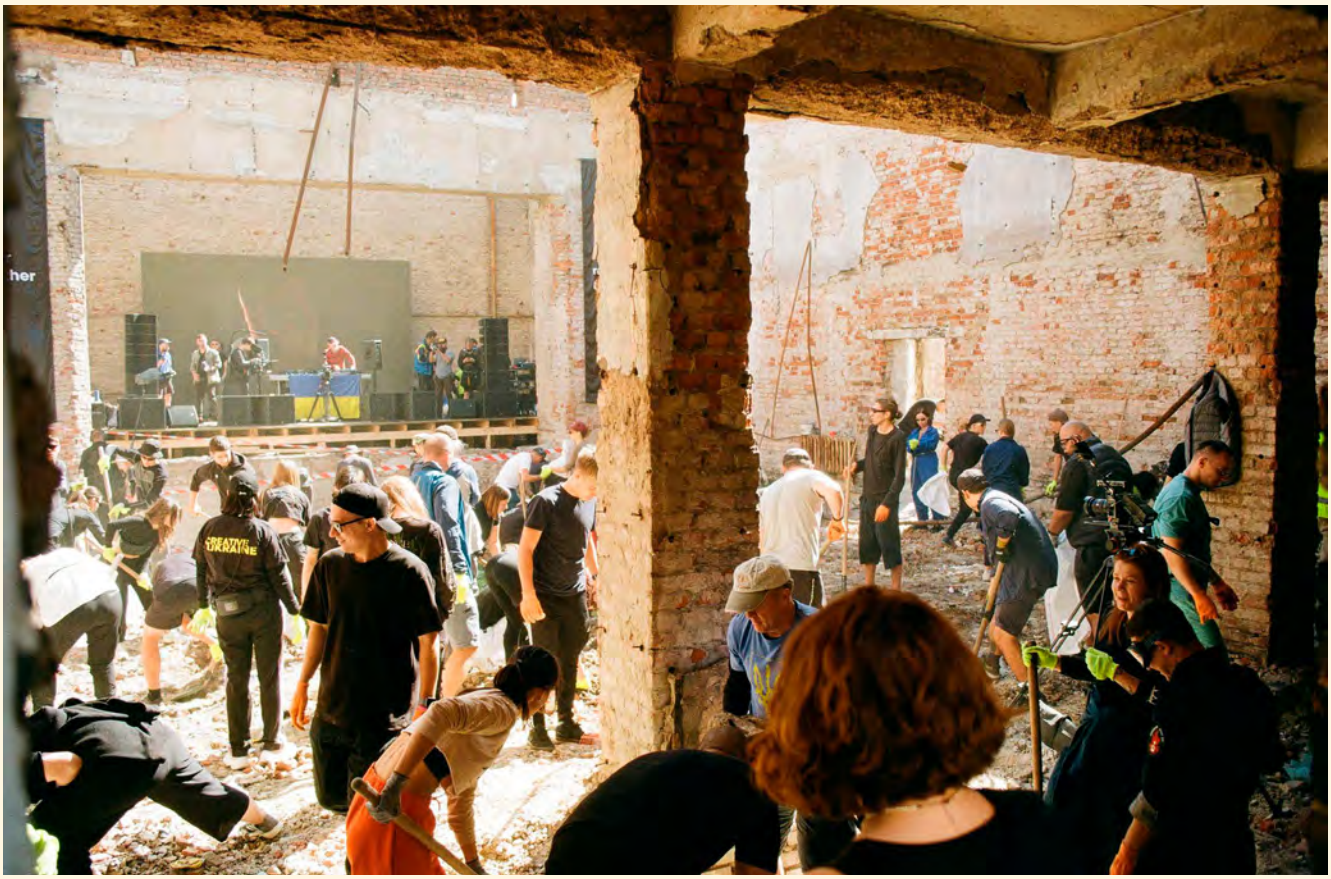

Figure 3. Ivanivka rave toloka.

SOURCE: REPAIR TOGETHER 2023

Rave reimagined: New narratives through cultural rebuilding

While certain Electronic Dance Music Cultures (EDMCs) have undeniably acquired political significance in various socio-cultural contexts, their primary purpose remains the collective production of affect for an escapist, hedonistic experience. In stark contrast, what distinguishes rave tolokas is their extraordinary function of restoring war-ravaged cultural institutions. This observation suggests a noteworthy shift within rave culture, where music practice and sonic material are engaging with significant acts of resistance.

RAVE CULTURE, often associated with techno underground, hedonism, and counterculture, has attracted considerable interest from anthropological, sociological, and musicological scholarship. Themes such as alternative lifestyle, grassroots organization, and anti-establishment youth culture have shaped discussions of EDMCs, with escapism remaining a central concept in most analyses. While dominant narratives in EDMC research revolve around rave culture providing a temporary diversion from daily existence in capitalist society, early studies largely portrayed it as politically neutral escapism. In his 1997 article on rave culture, Simon Reynolds views rave as apolitical due to its emphasis on hedonistic weekend escapes from "real" life, resulting in the absence of a social change agenda.[24] Though Brian Wilson recognizes rave culture's challenge to prevailing value systems linked to consumption and social order in 2006, he similarly concludes that it lacks political intent as it does not embody a social change ideology.[25] In contrast, Riley et al. propose that through the lens of neo-tribal theory, EDMCs can be considered as alternative forms of political participation, where rave culture functions as a politics of survival by establishing spaces of communal hedonism and pleasure.[26]

The historical neglect of dance cultures like disco, house or rave within cultural studies research has been highlighted by cultural anthropologist Graham St. John, who attributes this oversight to an earlier focus on youth-subcultural class resistance.[27] The prolonged perception of rave culture as apolitical may therefore additionally stem from the fact that its audience does not necessarily connect through class struggle narratives. Rave draws its origins from dance music scenes such as 1970s disco, followed by Chicago house, Detroit techno, and British acid house of the 1980s. While these musical genres inherently carry significant socio-political perspectives, the emergence of acid house as intimately tied to rave culture was driven by

a counter-hegemonic movement in response to the politically charged climate of late 1980s Britain under conservative Thatcherite governance.[28] Rave culture has since gone global and taken on many manifestations – from underground warehouse parties and outdoor field raves to festivals and commercial club culture – challenging simplistic counterculture/state dualisms and leading to a transformation that Anderson and Kavanaugh describe as the "rave-club culture continuum".[29]

IN HIS BOOK on contemporary global raving cultures, St John chronicles how non-commercial forms of EDMC in particular offer subversive sites where themes of activism and resistance to mainstream cultural norms persist, ranging from pleasure principles and counter-colonial interventions to politicized elements such as illegally repurposing spaces or consuming banned substances.[30] Beyond specific collectives or festivals that embody the desire for social change, there are various present-day examples of rave culture that present forms of resilience and resistance within specific local political contexts. For instance, Georgia's "Rave-olution" under the slogan "we dance together, we fight together" emerged as a direct response to specific instances of oppression and government actions that threatened personal freedoms, with people rallying and dancing together in the face of oppressive measures imposed by conservative authorities.[31]

"RAVE CULTURE, OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH TECHNO UNDERGROUND, HEDONISM, AND COUNTERCULTURE, HAS ATTRACTED CONSIDERABLE INTEREST FROM ANTHROPOLOGICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, AND MUSICOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP."

The collaborative practices observed in the work process of rave tolokas reveal links between the revival of the communal toloka tradition and the perpetuation of group togetherness as a fundamental aspect of rave culture. Feelings of connectedness emerge as a reoccurring theme in conversations with participants, as Alina* describes: "This is the magic of this project, this togetherness".[32] Reflecting on the atmosphere at the group work, Oleksii M. further expands on shared values such as gender equality, also evident in the absence of gender division in work tasks, and a commitment to LGBTQ+ acceptance, concluding: "It's about solidarity that everyone is appreciated here and the interests and lifestyle of everyone is respected there".[33] As explored further in the next section, the music and its broader sonic environment culminating in a multisensorial experience is crucial to an understanding of this sense of unity and belonging. The profound bond that emerges from the fusion of engaging in physical labor to deep electronic beats, all with the purpose of rebuilding a nation under attack, is central to the feeling of togetherness, as Oleksii M. moreover reflects:

> **When one country wants all Ukraine to have a blackout, without electricity, they want to threaten us. They want us to be shocked, they want us to be, like, frozen. And you show that: okay guys, you do it, but see – we may have fun, we may listen to electronic music, and everything you do means nothing to us. You won't defeat us, you won't break us down.**[34]

Clean-up raves share certain aspects with different rave cultures we know of, yet they push the boundaries of EDMCs in unprecedented ways. With the goal of revitalizing houses of culture in Ukrainian villages, they take place in mainstream bodies of culture and publicly invite people to combat the invasion by collectively restoring communities in broad daylight. Rave tolokas thus not only have an intergenerational effect by involving locals as part of the communal toloka custom but also challenge the notion of rave as an all-night dance affair. This reflects the broader transformation of Ukraine's electronic music scene, where curfew restrictions have led to the adaptation of nighttime gatherings into daytime events, often with proceeds supporting the military or humanitarian efforts. While the endurance of the collective experience over an extended period of time remains a crucial aspect, it is important to note that what enables the endurance in rave tolokas is not the consumption of substances, often associated with rave culture, but rather the elements of collectivity and pulsating beats – Oleksii T. comments on this as follows: "You don't have any drugs because it's just not possible to do some complicated and dangerous task. [...] You need to be aware of everything that's happening around you".[35] In a similar vein, Daria highlights how rave tolokas challenge the prevailing negative perceptions associated with drug use within rave culture: "I think those changes are affecting the perception of underground culture".[36] This underscores the potential of the music practice to reshape public opinion and foster a commitment to voluntarism.

Engaging in the techno workflow

The body is particularly significant in rave tolokas, because not only do participants dance, they also engage in physical labor. In her recent study, Maria-Adriana Deiana interprets rave as an embodied register of war and provides insights into analyzing affective dimensions of dance practices in situations of armed conflict.[37] By exploring musical and sonic affects, ethnomusicological scholarship has extensively studied the links between embodiment and emotion across diverse socio-cultural contexts,[38] contributing to an understanding of affect in electronic dance music spaces in particular as what Luis-Manuel Garcia describes as "a bundle of sensory and embodied feelings that leak into emotional registers".[39] The connectedness ravers feel is deeply

influenced by the multisensorial and embodied sonic experience of collective dancing, where affects navigate "between motility, incorporeal intensity and visceral perception", as Martin Zebracki writes.[40] Oleksii T. provides insight into his bodily experience and perception of collective intimacy at rave tolokas:

> **It's kind of a collective flow. [...] Imagine like 300 people doing this at the same time and communicating, so they're sharing to each other what they feel during the moment. [...] It's about feelings – because listening and feeling the music – it helps you to feel deeply and open yourself wide to everyone and to the job that you're doing.**[41]

Electronic dance music plays a central role in interpreting rave tolokas as collective corporeal activities and physical-affective experiences. While in historical accounts of the toloka tradition the role of music is not mentioned, it can be presumed that the emergence of rave tolokas has been influenced by technological advancements and the DIY ethos of rave culture. Apart from grassroots mobilization and non-hierarchical organization, the DIY ethos of rave culture is manifested and adapted in various ways within rave tolokas: war-stricken cultural centers as venues for music-making, collaborative participation through both dancing and working, and DJs developing unique styles that merge with sounds associated with war destruction. Hillegonda Rietveld suggests that electronic dance music, as a broad category that has evolved over the past four decades, is deeply rooted in a technocultural framework, where the sounds featured in the music contribute to an affective quality inherent in digital music technologies.[42] Clean-up raves can therefore be understood as a technologically mediated activity, where DIY elements are taken to another level, with the war-torn environment not only repurposing ammunition boxes as turntable supports but also influencing the overall sonic experience. According to Oleksii M., the sounds of cleaning up become an integral part of the music experience, creating an "organic mash-up of real sounds and electronic music".[43] The music emanating from the large speakers set up in the damaged cultural sites liberated from occupation merges with the sounds of shoveling war rubble and ravers stepping through bullet remains lying on the ground – Dmytro reflects: "You know, bullets were giving some strange sound, like snow in winter".[44] Reorienting the urban soundscape of Kyiv's and other cities' electronic dance music spaces, Figure 2 depicts participants grooving to this unique aesthetic.

THE SONIC TRAITS found in many musical aesthetics of EDMCs, including repetitive beats, deep bass frequencies and other stimulations, profoundly impact the embodied collective experience of heightened affect. Garcia highlights how electronic dance music generates affective responses in the body's haptic senses: stimulating tactile sensations through vibrations, sonic components like percussion, texture, and timbre play a significant role in fostering feelings of embodied intimacy and social connectedness.[45] Drawing on years of experience as a DJ, Dmytro describes clean-up raves as an "incredible experience of a party because you help people to work"[46] and reflects on his experience as a performer:

> **Rave toloka is about audience too because you should play music to people who are working hard. [...] I started to play, and I was watching how audience react on my music. I was looking for, for the ideal tempo or, you know, ideal music, ideal level of aggression in this music. [...] I felt the moment and after that I was like in meditation, like in strong trance.**[47]

Dmytro's description of trance reflects what Morgan Gerard describes as a liminal quality of rave experiences, where DJs can guide dancers through fluid interactions between mental, musical, and physical states, enabling heightened focus, flow, and physical endurance through music.[48] Similarly, Alina* found great satisfaction in using her music to inspire and motivate the volunteering ravers. With her keyboard, synthesizer, and microphone setup, she aimed to create the perfect atmosphere by blending "Italian disco with a little sip of acid".[49] In addition to the music's affective impact on fostering a sense of togetherness, the beat and bass support the physical labor of restoring the war-damaged sites. When discussing the role of electronic music in the clean-up raves, my interviewees draw parallels to work songs and marching music, emphasizing the integral role of electronic music in facilitating synchronized and efficient work practices. This sentiment is captured in a quote by Oleksii M.: "It kind of leads the workflow of clean-up. [...] If you dig pieces of bricks with a shovel you have a rhythm to dig it",[50] and by Ivan*, who comments on the recurring motif of passing bricks in a line:

> **With like 50 people in a line, from tractor to inside in the building and each person takes one brick or two, gives it to another and it's really smooth. People just take it from right side, take the brick, turning it to the left, giving it to another person. And it really looks like connected to music.**[51]

In the face of adversity during war, participants consistently highlight the energizing and motivating effects of the fast and repetitive nature of electronic dance music during labor-intensive activities. The distinct collective musicking experience found in rave tolokas serves as a pioneering subject for the study of rave culture.

Conclusion: Electronic dance music as a site of war resistance

Beyond the acknowledged role of electronic music in aiding the work process through its embodied sonic qualities, the unifying experience within rave tolokas is further enhanced by electronic dance music having become an integral part of Ukraine's cultural landscape – often interpreted through the recurring narrative of it playing a role in "shaping the image of a modern country".[52] This heightened meaning as a cultural battleground is also re-

flected in slogans like "we will rave on Putin's grave" – as heard, for instance, in the track "Rave On Putin's Grave" by *Paat*. (feat. *Nata Teva*)[53] – and in interviewees' depiction of techno as part of Ukrainian cultural identity, contributing to the formation of a self-defined national identity in opposition to Russian dictate.

THE UKRAINIAN FLAG hanging from the DJ booth in Figure 3 hints at music's frequent function of strengthening cultural identities in societies during times of war. The emergence of Kyiv as a key center of rave culture amid the Maidan Revolution and Russia's initiation of war in Ukraine in 2014 left a profound impact on the cultural sphere of the nation. Examining efforts to preserve musical heritage amidst destruction, Nelli Samikova emphasizes the significance of Ukraine's musical identity in fostering national identification, and illustrates the emergence of "ethno-pop" and "pop-folk" music styles.[54] Similarly, analyzing the 2010s while studying the interplay between globalization and national revival processes, Andriy Bondarenko focuses on electronic music, tracing the evolution of "folk electronics" and highlighting the how artists integrate "sounds of Ukrainian folklore" into electronic music to reinforce national identity.[55] In this context it is interesting to consider how the resurgence of folklore within rave tolokas extends beyond the adaptation of the toloka tradition and can also be observed in the music performed at cleanup raves, where Ukrainian (neo-)folk music elements are incorporated into various electronic music styles, as Daria describes:

> **When the full invasion war started, I feel that we are much more discovering the old Ukrainian music. […] Like even the traditional music, the folk, the everything, and the combination of folk with electronic music […] So, during the rave toloka, there are different types of music played, but I feel that everything that we can hear is connected to our local scene and this is super inspiring that we are not trying to search for some cool music elsewhere, but we are coming back to our roots.**[56]

As efforts to preserve musical heritage as a part of Ukrainian culture amidst destruction becomes a relevant means of distancing oneself from the aggressor, rave tolokas can consequently be interpreted as a form of resistance through the establishment of a self-defined cultural expression. Dmytro, who played at two rave tolokas, elaborates: "I mix some old songs, mix some ethnic elements, like ethnic instruments in my sets."[57] More broadly, he shares his view on Ukraine's wartime EDMC as a form of societal upheaval, a portrayal of participation in rave tolokas as synonymous with experiencing both joyful and determined resistance, which emerges prominently during interviews:

> **Not all the people here in Ukraine expect that you have the right to be happy, even in the middle of the war. […] So, this is not only resistance, this is even a riot and this is like a form of the cult of life. This work helps us, helps Ukrainian people to remember as well who they are. […] We are remembering our language, we are remembering our cultural heritage.**[58]

This article explored the experiences and meanings associated with rave tolokas in war-torn Ukraine, shedding light on the diverse roles music can play in armed conflict. It showcased how rave tolokas question current narratives in rave culture by directly engaging with the realities of war and rejuvenating war-damaged cultural institutions, transforming Ukraine's nightlife into daytime reconstruction efforts. Additionally, it examined the affective togetherness that participants experience through the combined act of dancing and working. The incorporation of the DIY ethos from rave into rave tolokas highlighted their capacity to assimilate the sonic environment of the war-torn landscape, culminating in a distinctive and resistant expression of Ukraine's cultural panorama. Future research avenues could include a focused investigation into the themes of cultural revival and national identity; an analysis of digitally mediated experiences and responses to the rave tolokas, especially those that were live-streamed and accompanied by parallel events in different countries; as well as a detailed reflection on online ethnographic methodology, considering both the impact of digital spaces on wartime musicking and the potential of expanded digital ethnography methods in applied ethnomusicology.

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During the funeral of soldier Andriy Chepil, a well-known musician from the Ukrainian folk-rock band Koralli, as many as 13 trembitas sounded.
PHOTO: YURIY RYLCHUK/UKRINFORM

Folk music (post)revival in (re)invented Ukrainian military funerals

by **Inna Shvorak**

A RESEARCH NOTE ON WARTIME RITUAL PRACTICE

abstract

This research note investigates the revival of Ukrainian folk music in the (re)invented military funeral rituals during the ongoing war on Ukraine. Since the 2022 full-scale invasion, elements of folk music – such as historical Cossack songs, the Carpathian trembita, and lullabies – have re-emerged in urban civic mourning, symbolizing national grief, resistance, and identity. Drawing on concepts of revival, postrevival, and (re)invention (Livingston, Bithell & Hill, Hobsbawm, Prickett), the article examines how these musical forms are recontextualized in response to trauma and loss. Through three specific case studies, the article explores how Ukrainian folk music has been adapted to contemporary urban ritual settings and examines its role in shaping symbolic expressions of memory, resilience, and cultural continuity in wartime Ukraine. The study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of music in ritual transformation in the context of war and conflict.

KEYWORDS: Ukrainian folk music, revival, (re)invention of tradition, military funerals, wartime rituals.

"THE POST-2022 EMERGENCE OF FOLK MUSIC IN MILITARY FUNERALS – AS ILLUSTRATED THROUGH LULLABIES, HISTORICAL SONGS, AND THE CARPATHIAN TREMBITA – HAS RECEIVED LITTLE SCHOLARLY ATTENTION IN INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE."

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian society has experienced profound transformations in its everyday life and cultural expression. A noteworthy development in recent ritual practice is the incorporation of folk music elements – particularly during military funerals – that had not been part of such ceremonies in the earlier phases of the war. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion, military funerals have become a daily reality across Ukraine. This increased visibility of funerals not only reveals the extent of national loss but may also help explain recent changes in how these ceremonies are structured and in the symbolic role of music within them. By *folk music*, I refer to rural musical genres rooted in traditional oral heritage – including lullabies, historical songs, and the use of folk instruments such as the trembita, kobza, horn, and drum.[1] While acknowledging these distinctions, I use the term *folk music* throughout this article to maintain clarity and consistency within the broader ethnomusicological discourse.[2]

This article explores how elements of Ukrainian folk music are being revived and reinterpreted within newly emerging military funeral traditions – civic-ritual ceremonies that first took shape during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity and have since expanded and taken on new forms and meanings following the full-scale invasion in 2022.[3] These musical practices, once rooted in rural settings, now appear in unexpected urban spaces such as city squares and Christian churches. This shift not only relocates folk music into civic space, but also recontextualizes its traditional functions. Lullabies – originally performed in domestic, private settings – now serve as public expressions of a mother's grief in the context of national mourning. The Carpathian trembita, once used to communicate across mountain landscapes, also served as a traditional funeral instrument in ritual contexts. Although this practice still exists sporadically in some Carpathian villages, it has largely disappeared from its original local setting. In contemporary military funeral ceremonies, the trembita reemerges as a symbolic sonic presence, reconnecting forgotten ritual functions with new civic meanings. Historical songs, which were rarely performed at military funerals before 2022, have gained greater prominence in public mourning, linking past national struggles and historical losses to the contemporary experience of war and grief.

TOGETHER, THESE reappearances of folk music in civic mourning settings reflect broader processes of cultural transformation in times of war. They raise critical questions about the role of tradition in shaping contemporary ritual. The central research question guiding this study is: How are traditional Ukrainian folk music genres being revived and (re)contextualized within the emerging military funeral practices during the ongoing war?

More specifically, the article examines:

1. Which folk musical genres and instruments are being revived in funeral rituals?
2. How are these practices reshaped to reflect wartime experience and civic mourning?
3. What new meanings or ritual functions are assigned to these musical elements?

This article offers a conceptual contribution to the study of wartime ritual by drawing on theories of revival, (re)invention, and postrevival. By positioning the Ukrainian case within global discussions of folk revival, it opens space for comparative reflection and theoretical expansion. The post-2022 emergence of folk music in military funerals – as illustrated through lullabies, historical songs, and the Carpathian trembita – has received little scholarly attention in international literature. Moreover, within Ukrainian academic discourse, there has been almost no research that interprets these practices through the lens of revival theory or the concept of (re)invention. While earlier studies have examined the structural and symbolic dimensions in funerary ritual from both folkloristic and ethnographic perspectives,[4] the conceptual framing of these practices as processes of ritual transformation remains largely absent – particularly within ethnomusicological analysis. This article introduces new material to international readers and advances a music-centered interpretive framework in Ukrainian scholarship, laying the groundwork for future empirical and comparative research.

Theoretical framework: (post)revival and (re)invention

Ukraine's experience of a wartime folk music revival is not unique. Across various national contexts, folk traditions have served as tools of resilience, resistance, and identity-making during and after conflicts. In countries such as the United States, Germany, Croatia, and former Yugoslavia, scholars have explored how war influences folk music's form and function.[5] These cases underscore that folk music does not merely preserve tradition – it actively responds to trauma, ideology, and political upheaval.

Music has the power to ignite and resolve conflicts, foster therapeutic responses, or even serve as an instrument of violence.[6] The relationship between music and war has been analyzed in a wide range of scholarly literature, including in the edited volume *Words, Music and Propaganda*, which documents

Chorea Kozacky, a music ensemble under the leadership of the famous Ukrainian singer and kobzar Taras Kompanichenko (center), perform during a farewell ceremony in Kyiv on March 10, 2023. PHOTO: RUSLAN KANYUKA/UKRINFORM

examples of musical responses during conflicts, including the current war in Ukraine.[7] Scholars note how song-making becomes a means of expressing patriotism, mourning, and collective resistance.[8]

IN THIS ARTICLE, I apply the concept of *folk music revival* using a multi-dimensional framework that includes revival as a cultural concept, a process of adaptation, and a vehicle for change. This understanding draws on the foundational work of Tamara Livingston, who analyzed revival movements as ideologically motivated and community-driven phenomena.[9] In her model, revival typically involves a core group of revivalists, revivalist ideologies, original sources, organized events (e.g., festivals), and a surrounding market or institutional infrastructure. Livingston's emphasis on the intentional restoration of tradition in opposition to mainstream culture provides an important point of reference for understanding how wartime musical expressions in Ukraine connect to pre-existing folk practices (e.g., calendar and ritualistic songs, funerary laments (*holosinnia*),[10] or Carpathian horn calls such as the *trembita* rooted in rural ritual and oral tradition).

Scholars such as C. Bithell and J. Hill have pointed out that the evolution of revivalist movements often leads to a *postrevival* stage.[11] This stage involves a shift in function, aesthetic, or context – for example, when musicians reinterpret tradition through cross-cultural influences, new technologies, or in new ritual spaces. In this phase, traditional forms are reimagined to convey meanings that resonate with contemporary emotions and political realities.

Recent studies in the English and Central European contexts propose alternative terms such as *resurgence*[12] or *postrevival*[13] to address phenomena that do not neatly fit Livingston's original criteria. These authors argue that in some cases, there is no need to "rescue" a dying tradition, no unified ideology, and no clear boundary between mainstream and folk culture – necessitating a new vocabulary for describing what is happening. The English case, for example, reflects a revival that is deeply entangled with popular culture and fragmented aesthetics, making it distinct from previous waves of structured revivalism. While postrevival emphasizes transformation after revival, *resurgence* highlights renewed activity where traditional elements remain, but revivalist ideologies no longer apply.

THE UKRAINIAN context opens new dimensions for understanding these processes. While in previous decades, Ukrainian revival movements were shaped both by Soviet-era staged folklore ensembles and post-independence efforts such as ethnographic expeditions, education, and folk festivals, concerts, and the development of ethno-rock or pop-folk genres, the use of folk music in military funerals after 2022 has gained particular prominence, genre diversity, and emotional depth. Although the origins of these practices date back to the Revolution of Dignity ("Euromaidan") – particularly the use of the folk song *Plyve Kacha po Tysyni* [The Duck Swims on the Tysa River] as a requiem during funeral processions honoring fallen activists and later, soldiers who fought in eastern Ukraine – the full-scale war has significantly expanded folk music scope, public visibility, and symbolic weight.

This broader folk revival in Ukraine of the past 20 years, while rooted in preservation, has also served as an expressive vehicle for asserting national sovereignty. Musicologist Maria Sonevytsky identifies a distinct aesthetic in this movement,

which she terms "wild music" – raw, unprocessed sounds that resist institutional standardization and evoke an authentic connection to rural tradition.[14] Such sonic "wildness" became politically charged during the period between Ukraine's two revolutions (2004–2014), reflecting a civil aspiration to break away from Soviet-era narratives and build a sovereign cultural identity. These expressions extended into global platforms: performances like Ruslana's *Wild Dances* (2004) and Jamala's *1944* (2016) at the Eurovision Song Contest channeled elements of folk music.[15] These acts combined folkloric vocal styles and political narratives to signal Ukraine's distinct cultural path. Rather than polished folkloric showcases, these were acts of cultural defiance, communicating political trauma and historical memory through symbolically loaded sound and performance. Thus, the same "wild" energy that animates military funeral music today can be understood not as aesthetic primitivism, but as part of a broader continuity of cultural resistance and identity work.

In this context, folk music serves not only the purpose of heritage preservation or artistic experimentation, but also fulfils a symbolic and ritual role in times of national trauma. These post-2022 practices can be understood as part of a postrevival or even a resurgence moment – a renewed reintegration of traditional genres into civic rituals. They often emerge spontaneously, without institutional support, yet are widely embraced by the public. Their relevance is affirmed not through formal recognition but through collective emotional response – silence, attention, and shared participation in the ritual.

IN THIS ARTICLE, I also build on the idea of *reinvention* as discussed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their theory of invented traditions.[16] While their work focused on how states construct traditions to serve ideological functions, I draw on the expanded perspective offered by Stephen Prickett.[17] Prickett extends Hobsbawm's framework by showing that reinvention can emerge from cultural memory and collective reinterpretation – not just from top-down state agendas. This approach allows for a more fluid understanding of how revived musical elements operate within new ceremonial and symbolic frameworks.

Thus, this study contributes to existing theoretical debates by positioning the Ukrainian wartime case at the intersection of *revival, postrevival* and *(re)invention*. Rather than applying these concepts as rigid categories, I use them as analytical tools to trace how examples of folk music travel across time, space, and meaning. While definitive conclusions require more empirical research, this research note opens a conversation about how folk music functions not only as a carrier of memory but as an active participant in the construction of wartime civic identity.

Alongside folk genres, many contemporary funerals also feature popular Ukrainian songs and patriotic music, reflecting an expanded sonic repertoire of mourning that reinforces narratives of resistance and resilience. Recent research and media projects have analyzed the role of popular sound in the wartime landscape in contemporary Ukraine.[18] While folk music has become an increasingly visible part of modern military funerals, its role remains relatively understudied – an area this research note seeks to explore.

While shaping new revival models

During upheavals such as war, society often focuses on what is most essential for physical and psychological survival. After February 2022, new rituals have become an integral part of life under conditions of permanent uncertainty – the so-called "new normality".[19] In Soviet and early post-Soviet Ukraine, military funerals were largely formal and state-controlled, with minimal or no use of music beyond official marches. Since 2014, during the war in Donbas, more personalized and emotionally expressive musical elements began to appear, such as patriotic and folk songs (for example, *Plyve kacha*). This period also saw the revival of the nearly forgotten tradition of lamentation (*holosinnia*), in which close relatives – often mothers or wives – bid farewell to the deceased through improvised sung weeping. Military funeral rituals have now become a routine part of wartime life in Ukraine and have undergone significant transformations. This applies not only to the structure of the procession but also to its verbal-musical content. As previous research showed,[20] new rituals often emerged in fragmentary form from the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and after the full-scale invasion, both their frequency and diversity increased considerably. In this section, I examine three examples of folk music through the lens of the *folk music revival* and the *(re)invention* of tradition. I also consider the performers' professional backgrounds (whether they are trained musicians or not), the sources and functions of the music, and the degree of collective initiative involved. My focus on urban military funerals helps illuminate how rural traditions are being recontextualized within the urban environment.

"AFTER FEBRUARY 2022, NEW RITUALS HAVE BECOME AN INTEGRAL PART OF LIFE UNDER CONDITIONS OF PERMANENT UNCERTAINTY."

ONE OF THE noticeably new sounds of the modern military ritual is the performance of historical (Cossack) folk songs – part of the oral tradition of Ukraine, originally transmitted without musical notation and performed by traveling singers such as kobzars (see endnote 1). Although many of these songs are anonymous and have collective authorship, some of them were later recorded or arranged by ethnographers and composers during the 19th and 20th centuries. In modern practice, both traditional and adapted versions are performed. After the full-scale invasion, this function during military rituals in Kyiv was taken over by Chorea Kozacky, an early music ensemble under the leadership of the famous Ukrainian singer and kobzar Taras Kompanichenko, who has been serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since February 2022. It is worth noting that even before the full-scale war, the group also performed compositions during the funerals of civil-

ians (famous dissidents and representatives of the political and cultural elite). Using the example of the Chorea Kozacky ensemble from the point of view of music revival during the full-scale war, I would like to discuss the funeral of Dmytro Kotsyubailo, commander of the "Da Vinci Wolves" battalion, Hero of Ukraine (2021), and leader in Right Sector (Pravyi Sektor), a right-wing Ukrainian nationalist organization,[21] specifically the performance of the *Oj na hori vohon' horyt'* [Oh, on the hill a fire is burning].[22] It is important to note that this song is part of the repertoire that the band often performs during military funeral rituals in Kyiv.

This old historical song tells the story of a Cossack who died on the battlefield, where the traditional *kytaika* (a red fabric covering the Cossack's body) is a returned symbol of the fallen warrior's courage and heroism. The ensemble singing lines of poetry alternates with instrumental interludes (kobza, drums, violin, shawm). Singing Cossack historical songs at a military funeral is a restoration of an ancient Cossack tradition. Ukrainian researcher Lyudmyla Ivannikova, who has studied rural and urban funeral traditions for many years, concluded in her report on the musical-verbal component of modern funerals that:

> **Performing Cossack songs in cities does not contradict tradition and is part of it or its modification. […] There is a mutual influence of different elements of urban and rural funerals.**[23]

Thus, the performance of this song is essentially following an ancient funeral tradition and, according to Stephen Prickett's concept, can be interpreted as an example of the reinvention of tradition.[24]

A similar function at this funeral is performed by the folk instrument *trembita*. Trembita is a traditional Ukrainian musical instrument, also called the soul of the Ukrainian Carpathians, its place of origin. The instrument looks like a wooden tube up to 2–3 meters long and has a resonant, low-pitched tone. The trembita is a natural horn with no finger holes or valves; it produces tones based on the natural harmonic series, making it diatonic in character but limited in melodic range. The appearance of the trembita in the military ceremony of the city is, on the one hand, a new phenomenon, but on the other hand, it represents the revival of Hutsul funeral traditions geographically relocated from the Ukrainian Carpathians. *Hutsuls* is a term used to refer to the ethnocultural group of Ukrainians living in the Carpathians. During an interview, Maksym Berezhnyuk, Ukrainian musician and member of Chorea Kozacky, explained the significance of this initiative:

> **This shows that trembita is not just a signaling instrument for some ceremonial events but primarily a ritual instrument.**[25]

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

During the funeral of Dmytro Kotsyubailo, the historical cosack song *Oj na hori vohon' horyt'* was performed.

Today, the sound of a trembita at a funeral may seem somewhat unusual for residents of large cities, as this is a rural tradition. Ukrainians are used to perceiving the trembita as a musical-stage instrument. For example, the trembita brightly sounded in Ruslana Lyzhychko's song *Wild Dances* during Eurovision in 2004 (see endnote 15). The song from Ukraine then won this competition for the first time. In Ruslana's song, the trembita made its international musical debut as a signaling folk instrument, and became a "globally modified 'identification code' of Ukraine".[26] The trembita is also associated as a vivid symbol of "Ukrainianness" (the phenomenon of Ukrainian identity). After such a successful international experience, the trembita returned to Ukraine and, along with other folk instruments, sounded anew in the creativity of various musical groups (for example, "ONUKA", "Koralli"). The trembita, as a traditional (rural) instrument, usually performed two functions – signaling, and funerary-ritual .

SOMETIMES, INSTEAD OF the traditional 3–4 trembitas, a whole orchestra of trembitas accompanies the funeral. For example, during a funeral in Western Ukraine (Ivano-Frankivsk), as many as 13 trembitas sounded. In addition, along with them, 7 smaller local signaling instruments – horns *(rohy)* – appear in the ensemble. The horn also has two functions in Carpathian rural culture: as a signal to scare away wolves from the sheep flocks in the mountains, and as a ritual instrument. The unusual loud sound of such a number of instruments in this context reveals special respect for the fallen warrior Andriy Chepil, a well-known musician and trembita performer in the Ukrainian folk-rock band Koralli.[27] The new ritual sound of the Carpathian trembita today is a rethinking and return of the instrument to its traditional natural sphere.

Although the trembita had already undergone a stylized revival in the early 2000s as a symbolic and stage instrument, its contemporary use in military funerals invites further discussion.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The trembita, as a traditional (rural) instrument, usually performed two functions — signaling, and funerary-ritual.

On the one hand, this may be viewed as a *second revival* or *neo-revival*, since its ritual function – as opposed to its signaling or symbolic role – was not fully revived or explored during the earlier phase. On the other hand, the shift from symbolic representation to active ritual use may be interpreted as a case of *postrevival*, in which a previously revived cultural element undergoes functionalization and ritual recontextualization. This ambiguity reflects broader theoretical challenges in defining revival stages and prompts further reflection on how ritual and symbolic functions evolve during times of crisis.

Militarization as a form of "normalization" in wartime Ukraine has also intensified folk processes that predated the full-scale invasion. Ukrainian scholar Oksana Kuzmenko describes the recent popularity of the song *Oi, u luzi chervona kalyna* [Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow] as a case of repeated folklorization.[28] Originally composed in 1914 by Stepan Charnetskyi and associated with the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (Army of the People's Republic in 1917), the song combines literary roots with Cossack imagery and military themes. Over the past century, it has circulated across different political regimes, often resurfacing during periods of national resistance. Kuzmenko notes that the song, having originated in a military context, has now "returned" to the army – particularly the Armed Forces of Ukraine – in new musical interpretations. After February 2022, the song regained widespread popularity, becoming a unifying symbol of Ukrainian resilience. Its global resonance grew after a widely shared performance by Ukrainian musician Andrii Khlyvniuk, followed by remixes and reinterpretations by international artists such as The Kiffness and Pink Floyd.[29] In this sense, the process of *folklorization* can be understood as part of broader revival and postrevival dynamics, in which traditional or symbolic repertoire gains new relevance within contemporary ritual and acts of cultural resistance.

THESE DYNAMICS are not limited to historical or widely recognized songs. They also manifest in more intimate, authorial compositions that undergo symbolic transformation under the pressure of collective trauma. One such process is also observed today. Here we turn to the third model – the lullaby *Kolysochka klenovaia* [Maple Cradle], which underwent a genre-functional transition. This lullaby, sung by Ivanna Dymyd[30] during the church funeral of her fallen son Artemii Dymyd,[31] has an authorial origin (lyrics by Andriy Panchyshyn, music by Viktor Morozov). It was initially performed by the composer himself in a lyrical, emotionally expressive style to guitar accompaniment.[32] Later, it entered the concert repertoire of the renowned Ukrainian vocal ensemble Pikkardiyska Tertsiya,[33] who presented it in a brighter character, while retaining the minor tonality, shifting its use from intimate domestic space to public performance directed at audience appreciation. This trajectory represents a classic example of folklorization, where an authored piece is reinterpreted for new socio-cultural settings.

Ivanna Dymyd's performance, however, marked a further transformation – one deeply personal yet symbolically national. Her rendition is closer to the original in tone but differs in mode and intonation. The original version performed by Viktor Morozov features a more expressive melodic line and dynamic contour: each first line of the poetic stanza includes the raised 4th and 6th degrees (A♯ and C♯) of E minor – the Ukrainian Dorian mode, also known as the Hutsul mode. In contrast, Ivanna's version is sung in natural A minor and has a more restrained character. In an interview, she reflected on this experience:

> **Singing the lullaby, I communicated with my son's soul, and it dawned on me that this is the 'maple cradle'. Only in the church did I realize the depth of this lullaby. And that moment was entirely mine. It was the 'cry' with which a new child is born. It was a new birth. My application for a new existence. The previous Ivanka is no more.**[34]

The lullaby, as a classic genre of children's folklore, traditionally reflected the intimate "mother-child" relationship. In Ivanna Dymyd's performance, this relationship is rearticulated within a ritual framework: the lullaby is addressed not to a sleeping infant, but to her adult son who died in war. This act signifies a profound inversion of the genre's life-affirming function and evokes the traditional role of lamentation (*holosinnia*). The performance

exemplifies a layered process of postrevival and folklorization, in which an authored song – already integrated into the folk-pop canon – takes on new ritual and symbolic meanings. Through its recontextualization, private maternal grief becomes part of a public mourning ritual, shaped by emotional resilience and national trauma.

PHOTO: UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

Ivanna Dymyd, mother of 27 year old Artemii Dymyd, killed in Mykolaiv Oblast, sings him his last lullaby in the Lviv Garrison Church on June 22, 2022.

WHILE REVIVAL typically refers to the deliberate restoration of traditional forms from the past, folklorization describes the process through which non-folk material – often authored songs – acquire folk-like characteristics and social functions through popular and ritual use. These two processes often intersect, reflecting both the preservation and transformation of cultural memory. In this sense, Ivanna Dymyd's lullaby functions not merely as personal expression, but as a cultural response to war, transforming grief into a shared symbolic act. While the lullaby has received particular analytical attention here due to its symbolic transformation and relevance to current revival processes, the performance aspects of the trembita and kobza – such as rhythm, modality, and technique – require separate, in-depth study beyond the scope of this article.

Concluding remarks

New folk music interventions in contemporary Ukrainian military funerals reflect a few revival models that illustrate society's adaptation to the ongoing conditions of war. The current funerary soundscape demonstrates a significantly broader diversity and intensity of musical and ritual innovation. The first two examples discussed in this article – the Cossack historical song and the trembita – can be described as cases of postrevival. These elements, which were already present in Ukrainian folk and popular culture, underwent revival in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Their presence in military funerals marks a transition from concert or media contexts into urban ritual settings, where they assume new roles in public commemoration and national mourning ceremonies. For instance, the trembita, once stylized for Eurovision performances and contemporary music projects, has re-emerged in its ritual function, bridging village and city, past and present. At the same time, the trembita raises further questions: does this represent a second wave of revival – a deepening of earlier efforts – or a new phase of post-revival refunctionalization? This ambiguity highlights the complexity of revival models during wartime, when symbolic, ritual, and emotional functions often intersect and evolve in unexpected ways.

This tension invites an interpretive framework based on (re)invention, as formulated by Stephen Prickett. While Eric Hobsbawm emphasized top-down constructions of tradition, Prickett points to more flexible and collective acts of cultural reimagining, rooted in memory and new ritual needs. Thus, the modern use of the trembita can be viewed not only as a continuation of revival or postrevival efforts but also as an example of ritual reinvention – where the very structure and social function of ritual are transformed in response to national trauma.

"THE CURRENT FUNERARY SOUNDSCAPE DEMONSTRATES A SIGNIFICANTLY BROADER DIVERSITY AND INTENSITY OF MUSICAL AND RITUAL INNOVATION."

THE EXAMPLE of the lullaby presents a more intimate yet no less complex model. Here, a genre traditionally associated with motherhood and domestic care is transformed into a requiem for a fallen son. This illustrates how personal grief can become a catalyst for broader ritual transformation. In Ivanna Dymyd's performance, the lullaby emerges as a symbolic and ritualized act of farewell – a form of maternal lament (*holosinnia*). Its recontextualization within the domain of civic mourning ritual exemplifies both postrevival and folklorization: an authored piece that previously circulated within folk-pop environments assumes new emotional and social functions through public ritual use. The symbolic transformation of the lullaby – from a private gesture of love into a shared expression of loss – is a vivid example of how non-folkloric material can be integrated into a living tradition during wartime.

More broadly, revival typically refers to the conscious re-creation of past traditional forms, while folklorization describes the process by which non-folk material – often authored songs – acquires folk characteristics and social functions through popular or ritual use. These processes often intersect, reflecting both the preservation and transformation of cultural memory. In this sense, Ivanna Dymyd's lullaby operates not only as a personal expression of emotion but as a cultural response to war – a collective symbolic act that channels grief into a form of ritual resistance.

In all three cases, music performs a therapeutic function. Some musicians engage with heritage as part of a deliberate revival project, while others turn to music as a spontaneous means of processing trauma and loss. These ritual musical acts function not merely as aesthetic or symbolic gestures but as coping mechanisms – manifestations of love, resilience, and cultural continuity. As the saying goes, "music reflects its time." In Ukraine, it reflects not only personal loss but a broader cultural transformation – a rethinking of grief, motherhood, and national identity into symbolic and ritualized forms of resistance.

AS THE WAR CONTINUES, the future trajectories of these musical models remain uncertain. Nevertheless, this study offers a snapshot of the current revival dynamics shaping Ukrainian ritual culture. By framing these practices through the lens of (re)invention, the article underscores how societies in crisis revisit and rework cultural memory – not to replicate the past, but to survive, resist, and remember in the present.

In this context, it is worth recalling Owe Ronström's observation: "Revival is a process of traditionalization that takes place in the present, to create symbolic links to the past for the sake of the future".[35] These words prompt us to reflect on what kind of tradition Ukrainian society is currently constructing – not merely as a response to loss, but as a cultural investment in a peaceful future. At the same time, these ritual and musical interventions can be viewed as part of a broader process of national identity formation. As Hobsbawm argued, invented traditions are key instruments in nation-building, particularly during periods of crisis or transformation. In the Ukrainian case, this process resonates with longer historical trajectories of nation-making – from the Cossack era's early struggles for autonomy and the 1917 Ukrainian People's Republic to the 1991 independence and the cultural revivals of the 21th century. Thus, these revived and reimagined musical practices are not only responses to war but acts of symbolic sovereignty – a form of cultural resistance that helps define what it means to be Ukrainian today and in the future.

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Listening to alternative histories through independent sound media in Ukraine

by **Ieva Gudaitytė**

abstract

This essay, based on broader research on independent radio stations from Kyiv, Gasoline Radio and 20ft Radio, and an independent label, Shukai, looks at how these sound media can engage with cultural history and offer different ways to think about archiving. Through applying Diana Taylor's use of repertoire to three specific sound examples (a radio show, an installation, and a record), I argue that these alternative sound media formats allow an open and dynamic reading of cultural works of the past. The role practitioners seem to take up is to look for and fill gaps they see in mainstream public discourse in relation to Ukrainian music, culture, and sound media history. Listening for the missing knowledge from the past allows the audience to attune it with imaginations of the future.

KEYWORDS: Sound media, archive, independent radio, cultural memory.

History, and who gets to tell it, plays an important role in Russia's war and full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In times when historical truths seem to be easily manipulated and weaponized, any attempt to look for "alternative" histories should be taken with serious caution. To clarify, here, I mean two things: first, the history of Ukrainian alternative culture, and second, a hope of finding answers for how things can be different in the future by looking at less-explored pasts.

The history of radio in Ukraine and elsewhere is embedded with notions of nostalgia and authenticity, together with radio technology's colonial and emancipatory potential.[1] From early radiotelegraphy during the Ukrainian People's Republic, the first broadcasts from Kharkiv, and the rapid increase of Soviet state control and violence that followed (including strict monitoring and destruction of documents from Ukrainian radio archives), public radio in the 20th century has been a site of both control and resistance.[2] The latter includes various community practices attempting to overcome official state policies, such as amateur short-wave radio clubs, illegal gatherings to listen to jammed radio broadcasts from the West, or initiatives by public radio workers to save local recordings.[3] The early years of Ukrainian independence brought new negotiations around what is independent in radio media: liberalization of the market and the first commercial radio stations, mass entertainment culture, and the role of the music journalist as taste curator.[4] Not long after, media freedom was threatened during the Kremlin-backed terms of the Kuchma government (1994–2004), whose media monopolization, disinformation campaigns, and the assassination of journalist Georgiy Gongadze contributed to triggering the Orange Revolution in 2004; and, similarly, during the Yanukovych administration (2010–2013) that was overthrown by the "Revolution of Dignity", also known as the Maidan Revolution, in 2013.[5] Due to the lack of coverage from the mainstream media during the Maidan events, various online media and grassroots initiatives like *Hromadske.tv* and *Hromadske Radio* (*Hromadske* meaning public in Ukrainian) became key public channels for independent journalism and news coverage.[6] The declaration of martial law since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, allowed for increased government control over the public media in Ukraine.[7] While social media remains the most trusted information provider since before the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian-language radio broadcasting has increased in popularity.[8] Other audio media, such as narrative podcasts, have also emerged as formats to communicate new wartime realities and frontline experiences.[9]

This essay looks at three examples of "other" audio formats

20ft Radio's name refers to their studio space, established in 2016 in a twenty-foot-long cargo container. PHOTO: 20FT RADIO/FACEBOOK

that engage with Ukrainian media and cultural history. They differ in their form and content: an online radio show on Ukrainian poetry, a radio show and an installation made from old Ukrainian National Radio recordings, and a record of re-released archival music from Odesa Film Studios. Contextualizing them with interview materials from their authors and peers offers an insight into broader conversations around cultural memory in the contemporary Kyivan alternative culture scene. Through this kaleidoscopic approach, I ask why it is important for independent sound media practitioners to engage with cultural works of the past and which ones, and how it can act as a kind of ad-hoc archive in times of war. Independent sound media, as discussed here, pose a playful provocation: to what both sound media and archive can be.

Research context

All interview materials used in this work are from ongoing research on the independent sound media in Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Here, I focus on parts of conversations that relate to Ukrainian cultural history, collective memory or the idea of an archive. These include direct quotes from interviews with hosts and core team members of two Kyiv-based online radio stations, Gasoline Radio and 20ft Radio, and a co-founder of an independent record label, Shukai, Ukrainian for the imperative form for "[you go and] search". Four of these were conducted remotely online with people residing in Kyiv: from Gasoline, co-founder and curator Oleksii Makarenko and Sasha Ushenko, a studio manager, event organizer, and host of the poetry radio show example, core team members from 20ft Radio, from Shukai, co-founder Sasha Tsapenko (who was also an occasional show host on Gasoline Radio). Another four were carried out in-person in Vilnius and Berlin: from Gasoline Radio, Olha Udda, a DJ and a cultural manager, who supported radio activities remotely, Mykola, a musician and host of a radio show before moving to Berlin, and Andrii Bezliydnyi (aka Andrew Bez), a former host of the show "Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine"; from 20ft Radio, Vitalii, now based in the Netherlands and working more as an international representative of 20ft's activities. All the interviews were semi-structured, with a soft focus on the role of independent media and alternative sound culture communities since the full-scale invasion. Each took one and a half to two hours. Apart from one, all were recorded. Interviews were held initially in English and gradually more in mixed English and Ukrainian (questions in English, responses in Ukrainian). While not included through direct quotations, broader research included follow-up interviews and informal written and verbal communication with interviewees.

"WHILE SOCIAL MEDIA REMAINS THE MOST TRUSTED INFORMATION PROVIDER SINCE BEFORE THE FULL-SCALE INVASION, UKRAINIAN-LANGUAGE RADIO BROADCASTING HAS INCREASED IN POPULARITY."

Due to limitations imposed on this research by the ongoing war, this work used a so-called patchwork ethnography approach. This research method combines various fragmentary data over a long period to understand the context and subject matter beyond the division between the researcher's point of entry, i.e. "home", and the site of research, i.e. "field". Instead, it embraces working with "gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge

The radio festival "Signals2Noise" in Berlin. PHOTO: GASOLINE RECORDS

production".[10] War is one of those situations where constraints become tangible due to martial law, mobilization, and other factors. Hence, patchwork offers a framework to access the field – Ukrainian independent sound media online and studio sites – remotely through online interviews and accompanying contextual documentation.

For this essay, this includes the sound works mentioned earlier (the radio show, the record, the installation) and accompanying materials available from their producers' websites, such as videos, written descriptions, and stations and hosts' public social media posts. I also refer to online radio archives as a site to store and communicate audio content and as a source for contextualizing individual shows within broader programming. Finally, through my curatorial work supporting the radio festival "Signals2Noise" in Berlin in October 2024, I had an opportunity to observe Gasoline Radio representatives remaking the radio show with Ukrainian National Radio excerpts into an audio-visual installation.[11] All of this allows the researcher to examine how cultural history and memory are explored at the intersections between the sound work, its medium, and its verbal contextualization.

While this text does not include much discussion about how independent sound media functions on the ground in Kyiv, I would like to briefly introduce the *Gasoline* and *20ft radio* studio locations over the years. This is done for two purposes. First, to prevent reducing their work to online activity, instead seeing it as interconnected with their offline presence. Second, to show that the radio studio is in close physical and social proximity to other important nightlife cultural venues and serves as a meeting space for local audiences and creators. Having that in mind allows us to see interviews, sound works, and online audiovisual materials as fragments of larger discussions about memory and alternative history within a closely connected local alternative music community.

Gasoline Radio, a Kyiv-based online radio, officially launched on February 22, 2022, two days before the full-scale invasion, but practically started operating on May 18 of the same year. Until August 2023, Gasoline rented a studio on Brats'ka Street in the Podil district of Kyiv, where radio hosts could stream live or prerecorded shows. Due to financial and human resources constraints – as a part of the core team joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces – in autumn 2023 the radio shifted away from live-streamed radio shows, moving instead towards streaming prerecorded shows sent by hosts through their platforms online, organizing occasional events (like DJ sets) in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and other cities in Ukraine, and participating in collaborations with other radios or cultural institutions.

20ft Radio's name refers to their studio space, established in 2016 in a twenty-foot-long cargo container. Until autumn 2021, 20ft Radio broadcasted next to one of Kyiv's most popular Kyivan underground clubs, Closer, in what was, until the early 2010s, a weaving factory.[12] After a period of online and event-hosting activity, including the first year of the full-scale invasion, the radio opened its container to live audiences again in the summer of 2023 at another location in the Podil district: this time in the yard of a former beer factory in Kyrylivska Street. Next door, in the building that the 20ft Radio yard is a part of, is the nightclub, cultural venue and community café K41 (which stands for the address, Kyrylivska 41; alternative name ∄) that is in close collaboration and shared social circles with 20ft Radio.

The record label Shukai does not have a studio location. It also differs from the radio stations in being sound media, which I use here to refer more to the vinyl and online records that the label distributes. The reason to include it is, firstly, thematic – its focus on releasing recordings of Ukrainian avant-garde music from the 1960s and 1990s and its production process that includes broader archival and restoration work. Secondly, Shukai shares other commonalities with Kyivan independent radio stations: social circles, performances in similar venues and events, interest in discovering and sharing alternative Ukrainian music, and exploring experimental sounds and sonic formats.

Independent sound media

I call this sound media "independent", although it is often interchangeable with "community" or "alternative". This choice aims to highlight differences from mainstream commercial media or public culture and media institutions. Both radio stations and the label see themselves as places for sounds that could not fit elsewhere: the eclectic, playful, niche, and experimental. According to Gasoline Radio hosts, their goal was to diversify the local music scene by offering a space for new or less established musicians and radio DJs. Similarly, 20ft Radio co-founders speak of a place where musicians without label contracts or other sources of stable income "could play what they want" without commercial interruptions or public media regulations.[13]

Financially, it means the stations and the label are independent of commercial donors or institutional commitments to the state. Funding is thus diversified between listener donations, events revenue, and various short-time projects with European funding structures. Both stations operate on a volunteer-based

and amateur, or semi-professional, level where no prior experience is required. Instead, a radio station is seen as a training facility and a platform for international collaborations. Similarly to other self-organized entities, working roles within radio stations are flexible, and relationships are often personal and intertwined. While audience reception is not analyzed in detail here, one of the self-identifiers of stations like Gasoline and 20ft is the social proximity to its listenership.

Changing the roles of creators and audiences is characteristic of alternative media.[14] Their focus on entertainment and artistic pluralism echoes pirate radio practices, while their commitment to remain outside of financial or other dependence on the state can find comparison within the free radio movement.[15] Self-identifying as independent can apply to aesthetics through ideas of authenticity and taste value judgements, but it also maintains an ambition for social transformation that Michael Warner has described as counter-public discourse.[16] This places Gasoline and 20ft radios (and to some extent Shukai) alongside other DIY community radio situations that engage with sound technology as a way for civic empowerment, as, for instance, Christina Dunbar-Hester observes in low-frequency radio activism in the U.S.[17]

"CHANGING THE ROLES OF CREATORS AND AUDIENCES IS CHARACTERISTIC OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA."

War creates urgency. It makes abstract notions of cultural independence align with more concrete political objectives. In her article reflecting on how Russian political and military aggression has affected ethnographers and ethnographic work in Ukraine since the beginning of the war in 2014, Jennifer J. Carroll remembers a conference in Kharkiv in 2016, observing other participants:

> **[...] undertak[ing] projects of social prognostication, projecting a more desirable, more democratic, more optimistic vision onto an imagined Ukraine that exists beyond the present, the revolution, and the war.**[18]

What J. Caroll describes is yet another side of being independent – from the past and present political contexts that affect the work of ethnographers she observed. Independent sound media reveal a similar paradox: an urge to focus on imagining alternative Ukrainian culture after the war yet returning to exploring its tragic history.

Alternative archive

War and the full-scale invasion also added urgency to cultural preservation efforts, including the sonic.[19] It also made documentation a significant tool for making sense out of war experience and seeking justice: from war crimes evidence to diaries of civilian experiences.[20] As it picked up its activities few months after the full-scale invasion, the independent radio stream has also become a collage of moods, reactions, and reflections of the Kyivan cultural community. Coming from a tightly knit circle of friends and colleagues, permeated by the feeling of isolation imposed by restricted mobility under martial law, especially for men, broadcasting became an outlet and a tool to distribute sounds across space but also time. Olha Udda, a Gasoline radio host, underlines the almost existential function of broadcasting in a situation when all can be lost at any moment:

> **People [in the alternative music community] are aware that we were experiencing a unique time of having a chance to continue our creative work during the first two years of full-scale war, but there is an awareness that every opportunity to create is fragile.**[21]

Referring to constant shelling, internal and international displacement, mobilization, electricity outages, and financial difficulties that the invasion has caused, Olha speaks of the desire "not to be forgotten": as civilians who continue their creative practice by producing radio shows while also witnessing and being targeted by the military aggression. One of the ways to resist the sense of fragility was to share and store their work in radio archives. All radio shows and music playlists are available on their websites via embedded links to platforms such as SoundCloud (Gasoline Radio) and MixCloud (20ft Radio) that are free for listeners and producers.[22] Shukai uses the online record store Bandcamp, which provides an alternative to mainstream streaming sites with a supposed fairer treatment of artists.[23] It also allows a limited number of free listen for its audiences. As one of the co-founders of 20ft Radio explained, providing access to all shows was a crucial part of the initial radio vision, because the archive allowed them to spread alternative Ukrainian music that according to him, was otherwise hard to find.[24]

To understand how radio works as a collection of cultural works, I propose to look at it through what Diana Taylor calls a repertoire. Based on her study of performance art in the Americas, Taylor calls for an alternative to an object-centric archive by looking at cultural actions that "enact an embodied memory" both due to their personal significance to an individual, and by targeting socially constructed collective reception.[25] The author outlines various ways archive and repertoire work together and argues against the myth of stable and unmanipulated knowledge of an archive. Repertoire acts, through this perspective, require participation for knowledge to be transferred, and embrace their change over time. To listen to independent sound media as an archive but also as a repertoire means to allow it continually "generate, record, and transmit" knowledge about alternative Ukrainian culture in the past and present.[26] Sound works in the independent media repertoire become a way of reinterpreting historical aural traditions and contemporary sound documents that might hold something to explain the ongoing terror, and sonic reminders to prevent it from happening again. They allow for what Olesya Khromeychuk has called "placing Ukraine on our mental maps" – a way to fill the gap of knowledge and add

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Olena Teliha (1906–1942), controversial for her involvement with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).

complexity to the understanding of how communities across Ukrainian society are responding to Russia's full-scale invasion, or what led to it.[27] A repertoire approach also allows us to see radio hosts engagement with the past by pointing out the gap where they think history of alternative Ukrainian music culture should be.

Vyriy [Whirlwind]

The first sound work example I introduce works more as an archive than a repertoire. It is one of the first Gasoline shows, *Vyriy* [Whirlwind], which engages with more common traditional notions of "historical heritage" of Ukrainian literature and poetry. "A musical and poetic podcast by Borys Tkachuk [...] and Sasha Ushenko", *Vyriy* mixed local ambient tracks with readings of classic and contemporary Ukrainian poets: Vasyl Stus (1938 – 1985), Lina Kostenko (b. 1930), Vasyl Symonenko (1935 – 1963), Maria Stepaniuk (contemporary), Nadiia Savytska (contemporary), and Olena Teliha (1906 – 1942), controversial for her involvement with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).[28] Among them, Stus, Kostenko and Symonenko are members of *shestidesiatniki*, [The Sixtiers] – a post-Stalin Thaw period cultural movement across the Soviet Union. In Ukraine, they promoted national ideas, language, citizenship, and creative freedom.[29] Maria Stepanyuk and Nadiia Savytska are contemporary poets while Olena Teliha, born in 1906, is an earlier representative of the Ukrainian national movement against the Russian Empire before the Second World War.

First in the series, Teliha is a deeply contentious figure in contemporary Ukrainian memory politics. While admired as a national hero, some scholars condemn her literary affiliations to "the authoritarian brand of nationalism" and treat her as a part of the group within the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists most associated with integral nationalism.[30] After rejecting the "writing that glorified Hitler", she was denounced by the Gestapo and, together with her husband, executed in 1942.[31] While I cannot be certain, I doubt these discussions were analyzed in depth by the makers of the radio show. For them, Teliha is a lesser-known Ukrainian female poet that deserves more space for her work and perhaps more attention to her biography. It suggests an alternative music community discovering, or wanting to discover, Ukrainian literary history on their own.

In the show, Teliha is portrayed as an activist for Ukrainian independence. Her execution by the Gestapo and her commitment to writing in Ukrainian fit the overarching theme to represent the history of Ukrainian literature under constant repression. Stus, perhaps one the most popular Ukrainian dissident poets today, died after experiencing various forms of violence and declaring a hunger strike in the Soviet forced labor camp in Perm. Symonenko died shortly after being beaten up by Soviet police at Smila railway station.[32] The episodes are all in Ukrainian and are accompanied by English and Ukrainian descriptions on the Gasoline website. These short texts give basic biographical data for each author and include selected quotes from poets, such as "Victory is given only to those who were able to laugh even in pain" by Olena Teliha or "We want to show that Ukrainian poetry is an important component of our culture, permeated with pain and oppression" by Vasyl Stus.[33] This suggests a wish to "reinstate" them to an archive as a place of stable value and recognition. Yet the focus on their tragic biographical data hints more towards an attempt to evoke the collective trauma of cultural oppression. In their interview descriptions of the show, the Gasoline hosts also bring up the story of "Budynok Slovo" [Building Word; also known as The Writers' Building], a residential building in Kharkiv that housed many prominent Ukrainian writers in the early 1930s, most of whom were executed by the Soviet authorities and thus are considered part of the "Executed

Renaissance."[34] Bringing them together aims to add repertoire to the archive: evoking anger and a sense of injustice inflicted on Ukrainian authors. It also is a way for the radio practitioners to answer the question of why Ukrainian literary works are not widely known.

The radio makers also seemed to be interested in the complexity of human choices in the face of "pain and oppression", and a way to relate to previous Ukrainian artistic traditions. The podcast *Vyriy* can be seen as a search for historical consolation, similar to what Marianne Hirsch calls a generation of post-memory: a way to deal with second-hand or transgenerational trauma: In this case, of facing the existential cultural threat imposed previously by Soviet repression and now by Russian military aggression.[35] In the words of the show's host Sasha:

> **It's hard to say why it feels this way because we Ukrainians have been under pressure and there is so much pain – it is reflected in the songs and what Ukrainians are experiencing these days.**[36]

This quote calls for advice from the poets of the past. Poems became carriers of knowledge from previous to contemporary creative communities. *Vyriy* also reveals a moment of realization: since the full-scale invasion, the topics of Ukrainian cultural works can be understood through the lens of survival in a way that might not have been possible before.

In another interview, a host from 20ft Radio referred to a similar moment of need for more attention to Ukrainian cultural history. Referring to one of the canonical figures in Ukrainian national and literary tradition, Taras Shevchenko, he shared that while it all seemed outdated at the time, "now it makes sense to me why we had to read Shevchenko in school, because my classmates on the front lines, they now know what they are fighting for", meaning that reading Schevchenko allows people to see the war as a part of a longer history of Russian imperial ambitions in Ukraine. Moments like this and *Vyriy* suggest changing attitudes towards cultural history and its place in an archival institution amongst radio communities. What was once dismissed as belonging to the past and no longer relevant gains contemporary political significance. Bringing that out through radio formats is seen as bringing it back to life, back to the actively performed repertoire.

"OLD RECORDINGS OF UKRAINIAN NATIONAL RADIO BROADCASTS FROM THE 1990S ARE JUXTAPOSED WITH VARIOUS CONTEMPORARY TRACKS."

Similar sentiments echo across other testimonies, referring to the need to learn about the history of Ukraine, the Romanov empire and the Soviet Union, including the injustices of serfdom and language bans during Tsarist rule, Stalin's policy-induced famine, the Holodomor, or mass civilian deportations to Siberia.[37] The motivation is to use independent sound media to build resilience against the Kremlin's weaponized readings of history. In other words, the full-scale invasion was a call to revise the perception of history and its importance, making it less about alternative history and more about an alternative reading of that history. It is a way to reconstitute cultural history in a way it is easily transmitted to the new generation of cultural workers in Ukraine.

Vsesvitniia Sluzhba Radio Ukraiini [The Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine]

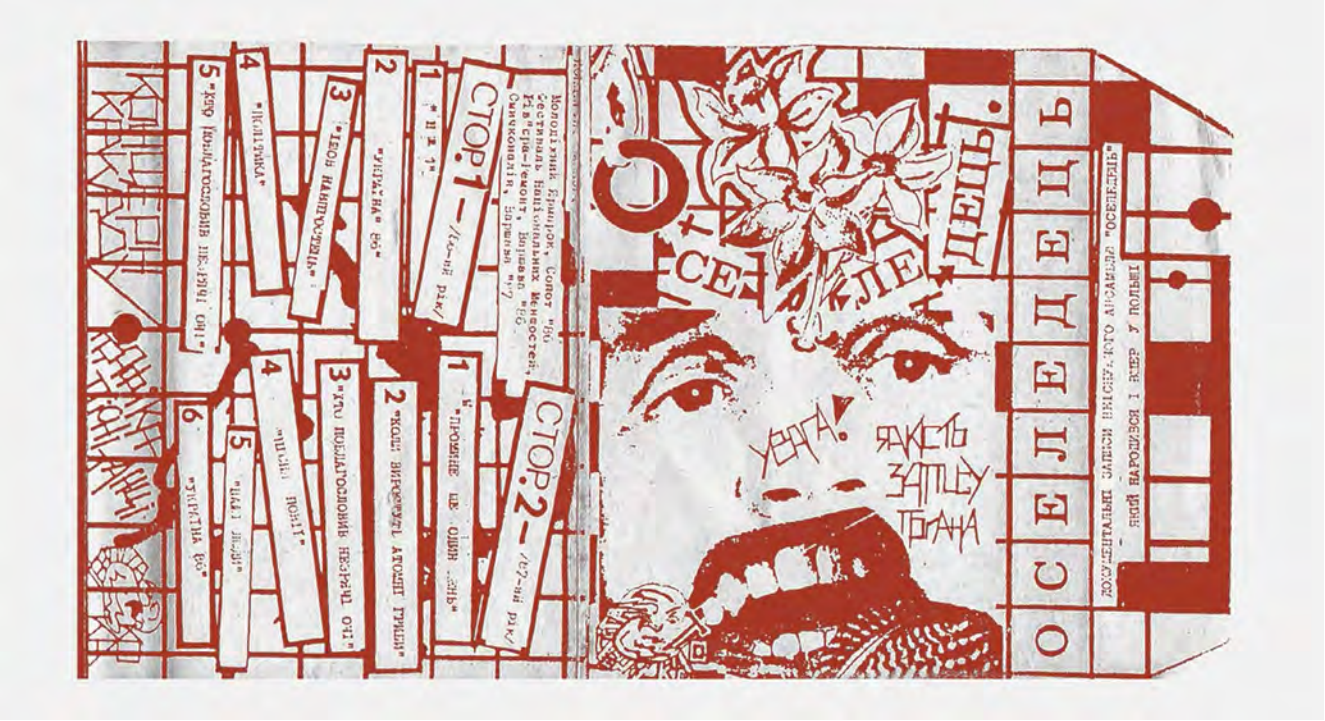
The show *Vsesvitniia Sluzhba Radio Ukraini* [The Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine] by Gasoline Radio is another example. Here, the archive works with the repertoire to connect the history of radio to the present. Each episode lasts about one hour, where old recordings of Ukrainian national radio broadcasts from the 1990s are juxtaposed with various contemporary tracks to create an illusion that the service is active today. The show aims "to reimagine this Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine as if it was still going". As the program description reads:

> **[...] this is not only created to entertain you with cool tunes. But first of all – to create an imaginary space and time in which the old Ukrainian radio continues to be old and at the same time relevant for all categories of citizens.**[38]

To be old and relevant, firstly, refers to aesthetics and music taste. The radio show combines sonic markers of an "old radio" – historic jingles, background crackles and excerpts from news segments – with music that listeners today are assumed to enjoy. Secondly, the show's relevance to all citizens questions a somewhat outdated function of radio: to provide all information and entertainment. The show intends to turn fragments of Ukrainian media history into something that contemporary independent sound media listeners can relate to and thus reanimate archival materials in a contemporary context.

During the radio festival "Signals-2Noise" in Berlin in October 2024, the show's host Andrii turned the series into an installation titled *Brekhunets: From Propaganda to Nostalgia*.[39] *Brekhunets* – chatterbox, stemming from the word 'brekhun', meaning 'liar' – is the Ukrainian version of radio technology also known as radio *tochka* [Russian for point], a small wired radio receiver compulsory in various institutions and people's homes across the Soviet Union that was used as a mass propaganda tool during the Stalin era.[40] For the festival, three such radio receivers were reconstructed to play custom-made episodes of the Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine. Extra meaning was added by using one of the devices manufactured in the now semi-occupied region of Donbas, thus emphasizing that it belongs to Ukraine (see images).

The installation referred to radio history on several levels. First, by alluding to "propaganda", it referred to radio's impe-



Koka Records released niche Ukrainian recordings in Poland just around the fall of the Soviet Union. PHOTO: KOKA RECORDS

rial past. Evoking how radio technology was used to impose an overarching Soviet identity on its citizens bears comparison to the history of the British Colonial office or French national broadcasting attempts to exert symbolic power over their colonies.[41] Second, the nostalgia dimension supports the repertoire approach to thinking about memory and its transfer depends on individual and personal reception. It can imply the listener will be nostalgic for independent Ukrainian broadcasting services. It also taps into the complicated politics of how nostalgia for Soviet times is both ironized and weaponized in the public discourse.[42] Combining these discrepancies – Soviet technology from Donbas broadcasting independent Ukrainian radio archive materials and contemporary music in a festival in Berlin during the ongoing war in Ukraine – allows space for playful and open-ended readings of media archive and history.

Contextual information around the installation focuses on personal memories forcibly turned political. As Andrii, the show's host, describes, Ukrainian national radio was present in every home, most commonly in the kitchen, and and was full of naïve content:

> **[…] congratulatory broadcasts, meetings with new pop artists, talk shows on any topic, from discussion of the primary school curriculum to the modern policy of reforms and rethinking of the historical past. All these programs accompanied the everyday life of people in cities and villages and the carefree childhood of today's youth, who today are faced with the challenges of survival.**[43]

Memories of the kitchen, childhood, and other elements of the peaceful domestic past highlight the contrast with the uncertain and traumatizing reality of war. To call it nostalgia would be to undervalue it. Instead, it can be seen as another example of evoking embodied memory to think about the trauma of forced displacement, and an attempt to add complexity to historical events for international audiences.

"THEY WERE SINGING ABOUT BURNING CHURCHES AND THE CHURCHES ARE BURNING NOW."

By introducing what is deemed rather specific for Ukrainian cultural history, *brekhunets* bridged it with widely accessible sentiments. Placing an old Ukrainian radio in the world also tapped into global politics, as listeners were invited to use real-time translation for the spoken segments of the Ukrainian Radio recordings. The exhibition text suggested noting "the symbolism in historical facts from the news" as a reminder of narratives about nuclear armament, international commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity etc. that gained new valence since the full-scale invasion. The installation turned historical radio broadcasts into a sonic space that is politically haunting in its content yet comforting in its domestic aesthetics. In this space, Ukrainian radio history is enacted as a repertoire

Victoria Amelina, Ukrainian novelist and war crimes researcher, killed by a Russian attack on civilian infrastructure in June 2023. PHOTO: RAFAŁ KOMOROWSKI/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

to help understand political events of today and vice versa – by appealing to contemporary audiences, archival sound objects regain relevance.

Shukai and the 1990s

The final example is of independent sound media engaging with the history of alternative culture in the late Soviet and early independence periods. The economic hardships, a surge of enthusiasm around the newly independent state, and the emergence of music previously censored by the Soviets contributed to a unique moment for the alternative music scene to look for new ways to define its Ukrainian-ness.[44] Rediscovering the new wave, avant-garde, and post-punk artists continues to this day. For example, one of my interviewees invokes the importance of Koka Records (the title being a humorous acronym for *Kontsern Kakadu* [Concern Cockatoo]), which released niche Ukrainian recordings in Poland just around the fall of the Soviet Union.[45] He specifically refers to a song from 1985 by *Oseledets* [herring] released by Koka, called *Tserkvy Horiat*, [Churches are Burning].[46] In his words, the darkness of that sound echoes particularly well today: "they were singing about burning churches and the churches are burning now".[47] Perhaps unknowingly, this echoes an essay by a Ukrainian novelist and war crimes researcher Victoria Amelina, killed by a Russian attack on civilian infrastructure in June 2023:

> **Cancel culture vs. execute culture: Why Russian manuscripts don't burn, but Ukrainian manuscripts burn all too well.**[48]

At the same time, some of the interest in the 1990s is seen as too mainstream for other members of the Kyivan alternative music scene. As Gasoline radio host and musician Mykola describes, the increased interest is far from discovering all the depths of the period, and overlooks later years of the scene:

> **Another thing about the Ukrainian music scene is that we have a big gap between the 1990s and nowadays. In the 90s, as everywhere in the post-Soviet shit, there was a big boom in any kind of music, especially experimental forms. And Kyivan and the Ukrainian experimental scenes were actually very huge as is starting to be emerge. There is a lot more than people may know. […]. Most people, not even mainstream people, but musicians, they know Svetlana Nianio. She's the most prominent of that era, but there is much more. […] And it's a very interesting point about archive-making and history. For me, it was a big surprise to listen to music from the 90s from Ukraine. […] Now, it's more like cultural resurrection or something like that.**[49]

In highlighting "the boom" that the newly open global public and commercial space caused in the 1990s, Mykola stresses the scope of a gap in alternative cultural memory. Then comes the surprise that more music survived from the years of supposed "underground" or cultural practices hidden from the state than expected. This reveals oversights of institutional archives, e.g. private collections that the contemporary independent scene hopes to fill. All this is underscored by a strong desire to discover

something deemed new, authentic, and unheard, and an urgency to save the "dying resource".

This issue is addressed by another alternative music initiative: a label focusing on Ukrainian music from the 1960s to 1990s, Shukai, part of the independent label Muscut.[50] As one of its founders, Sasha Tsapenko, has described, it all started with a visit to the Soviet Ukrainian film studio in Odesa, where he discovered sci-fi and horror TV film scores by Victor Vlasov. Comparing the former film institution to the BBC Radiophonic studio, and the discovered tapes to Delia Derbyshire's "Doctor Who" main theme, he describes the state of the archive as appalling, and the process of restoration as borderline absurd:

> **It was hard to take [the recordings] out of the studio, because the tape machines in the studio were in very bad shape. They were cutting the tapes, and I thought that we needed to bring these tapes to Kyiv, digitize and restore them. There is a cool story: the studio didn't want to give them to us, so we made an agreement with them. They gave us an insurance that said if we lose these tapes, then we have to pay them 5 million hryvnias. And I asked for these tapes to be sent to Kyiv with DHL. But when DHL saw the sum of 5 million, they refused to take them to Kyiv, so I had to drive them – 5 million, we laughed that if the tapes cost 5 million, then I took 5 million and just went to Kyiv. When we brought them to Kyiv, we restored them a little, because they were torn. We glued them. And when we listened, I was very impressed. This is our first release, from the film 'The Air Seller'. And there were a lot of tracks that didn't fit into the movie at all because they were so free that the Soviet government said, we can't put them in the movie.**[51]

The response to the state institutions' failure to preserve archival material resembles working practices of the former Soviet cultural infrastructure.[52] As then, music enthusiasts use humor and unconventional methods to get around the difficulties that prevent them from accessing a desired cultural object. This supports the claim that an unchanging archive, in this case of analogue sound media, is a myth. It also adds specific cultural context to who gets to access it and under what circumstances.

These tapes became the first record from Shukai, *Air-Seller, 1967*. Vlasov's music, written for the television film of the same name, was targeted for all-Soviet audience, hence all its song lyrics are in Russian. This caused some initial backlash for the label upon its release in 2019, as its audience pointed out the discrepancy between this and its commitment to lesser-known Ukrainian sounds. This reaction can be seen as symptomatic of wider debates on how to situate Soviet Ukrainian cultural heritage today.[53] As seen in the quote, the redeeming quality became the soundtrack's initial rejection by the Soviet government and, I would add, similarity to the Western experimental music tradition of that time.

An abandoned archive is an inaccessible site that is not transmitting any knowledge or cultural history. It raises the question of what has happened to other cultural memories that have not been saved for political or other reasons. While these examples speak of disappointment with the archival institution and with the lack of genuine curiosity from the general audience, they also describe the desire, if not ambition, that motivates the work for an alternative collective view of the Ukrainian (alternative) sound history, and, by extension, cultural policy. Cultural works from the period between the 1960s and the 2000s constitute an important part of the independent sound media repertoire: they are seen as predecessors and examples of a nearly forgotten alternative music history that can serve as an inspiration.

Conclusions

Alternative sound media reveal an array of dynamic and playful formats to engage with cultural works of the past. The selected examples do not give an exhaustive overview of cultural memory projects from Gasoline Radio, 20ft Radio, and Shukai. A few other instances where archive and repertoire work together to bring alternative ways to look at the history of Ukrainian culture include Gasoline's documentary film on Carpathian folk music and instrument making traditions, "Spadok" [heritage], and a project between 20ft Radio and the British Council on the 1990s avant-garde scene, "Memory Leaks".[54] They add to the eclectic selection of radiophonic and sound works of poetry, recontextualized archival radio recordings, or restored analogue tapes discussed in this essay. As forms of sound media, both radio stations and the label come across as accessible and agile practices, which allow them to quickly respond to the urgency to preserve memory amidst the new realities of the full-scale invasion.

The sound works and their makers discussed in this essay search for and aim to fill the gaps in alternative Ukrainian cultural memory. They look to the past to find ways to show how cultural knowledge could be useful today. The objects they engage with are not always outside the traditional canon, yet what makes them alternative is their rediscovered and recontextualized value and political significance in the face of military violence. 'Alternative' is also an alternative reading of cultural politics: exported to less informed audiences, it enables them to fill knowledge gaps, adding complexity to Ukrainian experience.

In their attempts at preserving what they deem to be lesser-known cultural work, independent radio and sound practices move away from an object-centric archive to a more action-focused repertoire method of transferring memory. However, the urge to go and search, to share what is discovered, and to foster space for diverse conversations around the shared cultural past are less systematic and more exploratory. Alternative radio communities participate in memory collection not only because they deliberately want to get involved in how history is being told, but also because memory leaks, as an emotion, as if from wounds. The hope is that listening to them can also help make it possible to imagine a future.

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Alesia Rudnik:

”Digital spaces are often the only venues where dissent and mobilization can take place”

by **Joakim Ekman**

Alesia Rudnik is a political scientist based in Sweden, originally from Belarus. Her research has been published in journals such as *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *Media, War & Conflict* and *Internet Policy Review*. She is also a regular contributor to *Baltic Worlds* (see for example the co-authored article with Malin Rönnblom in *BW*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2024). She currently serves as the Director of the Center for New Ideas, an independent Belarusian think tank operating in exile. She previously led a Belarusian diaspora organization in Sweden and was awarded “European of the Year 2022” in Sweden for her civic engagement.

Rudnik’s academic work focuses on the relationship between people and technology in the context of political protests under authoritarian regimes. On September 12, 2025, she defended her doctoral dissertation in political science at Karlstad University, titled *Machinery of Dissent: People and Technology in Political Protests in Autocracies*. In conversation with Baltic Worlds, Dr. Rudnik reflects on research in Sweden concerning Belarus, the 2020 Belarusian protests, and the role of digital platforms in mobilizing protest movements within authoritarian contexts.

Alesia Rudnik.

JOAKIM EKMAN (JE): **How does it feel to have completed your PhD – what was the first thing you did after the defense?**

ALESIA RUDNIK (AR): It feels like a chapter of my life has come to a close. Earning a PhD in political science was a goal I set for myself back in my teenage years, so reaching this milestone feels like both a personal accomplishment and a fulfilment of a long-standing promise to my younger self. After the defense, I celebrated with colleagues during a warm and memorable evening that included a quiz based on my dissertation, a musical performance by one of my peers, and heartfelt speeches. It was a cozy, joy-filled night. To top it off, I took a one-week trip to Italy – a perfect way to mark the end of this journey.

JE: **Could you briefly summarize what your dissertation is about?**

AR: The dissertation is an analysis of how digital technology is incorporated into contemporary political protests in autocracies. As empirical groundwork, I briefly analysed how TikTok emerged as a mobilization platform in Russia in 2021. However, the main empirical focus of the dissertation is the exploration of the relationship between technology and people during the Belarusian protests of 2020.

The theoretical argument of the dissertation is that the technological and physical lives of modern individuals are so deeply intertwined that separating the two dimensions no longer reflects the reality we live in. For citizens of non-democratic states, where alternative opinions are censored, digital spaces are often the only venues where dissent and mobilization can take place. The inseparability of the technological and physical in these contexts, particularly during political crises, creates conditions for rapid mobilization and online unrest. I metaphorically refer to this alliance of people and technology as a "machinery of dissent".

Scholarly knowledge on the role of technology in social movements has largely grown from studies of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In practice, however, many recent protests have been mobilized via TikTok, Telegram, or – as seen very recently – the gaming platform Discord. It is therefore important for academia not only to keep pace with the use of new platforms in protest mobilization, but also to build a strong theoretical foundation that expands upon earlier scholarship rooted in platforms that are now relatively marginal in this context.

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Practice shows that movements learn from one another – something illustrated by Discord becoming a mobilization platform in Morocco just weeks after it was used during the protests in Nepal (in the fall of 2025). Thus, my dissertation goes beyond the Belarusian and Russian cases; it is about the broader strategies social movements use around the world.

JE: **Your perspective is innovative. What inspired your approach?**

AR: I was inspired by approaches in science and technology studies (STS), where similar arguments form the basis of many research inquiries. In a sense, modern digitalized social movements are chaotic and networked; an inherently fitting framing through the lens of STS. Thus, the readings, specific scholars, and, not least, my observations of the unfolding Belarusian protests (which began on the same day as my PhD) all inspired my approach.

JE: **What sources and materials did you work with, and how did you access them?**

AR: Two main sources were used in the dissertation. Firstly, I analysed protest videos in Russia on TikTok, using the most popular hashtags related to the protests against the detention of Aleksei Navalny in 2021. Similarly, I examined publications in the largest Telegram channel, Nexta, in Belarus, which played a key role in mobilizing the protests. Both sources were easily accessible, as I monitored them almost in real time. However, many of the analysed TikTok videos were later removed by the platform, following requests from the Russian government.

Secondly, I conducted interviews with protest leaders, participants, and digital activists from Belarus. At the time of the interviews, all of them had left the country. To meet them, I travelled to Vilnius, Warsaw, and Berlin. In the methods section of the dissertation, I note that being Belarusian, having a public profile, and possessing prior activism experience helped me secure interviews with individuals who might otherwise be reluctant to speak with strangers or outsiders. Studying social movements is more effective when respondents trust the researcher; something for which I am deeply grateful.

JE: **Did you encounter any specific ethical or practical challenges in your work?**

AR: Some of the interviews were challenging. Sometimes the respondents had to change locations at the last minute for security reasons. But the biggest challenge was probably the psychological weight of these interviews: many traumas and difficult experiences were shared by the respondents. At times, I felt I simply had to be present as a form of support, even though I knew this might not yield material for the analysis. In turn, many of the observations made in those moments turned out to be the most valuable.

JE: **How did the political situation in Belarus affect your ability to conduct research?**

AR: First, it limited my focus to respondents currently residing outside of the country. Second, the closed nature of the Belarusian regime did not allow for an equally in-depth study of the regime's role in suppressing the protests compared to the study of protest participants.

JE: **The opponent at your doctoral defence was from outside of Sweden (Mariëlle Wijermar, Assistant Professor in Internet Governance, Maastricht University). How would you describe the academic interest in Belarus in Sweden?**

AR: I would describe it in two words: marginal and Russia-embedded.

JE: **Has the ongoing war in Ukraine changed anything in this regard?**

AR: On the one hand, following the surge of interest in Belarus in 2020--2021, the war in Ukraine has continued to in-

fluence the de-Russification (or, as some would frame it, decolonization) of Eastern European studies. On the other hand, the expanding field of Ukraine studies has naturally led to a decline in attention to the Belarus agenda, after 2022. In this regard, academia has mirrored the trajectories of politics and media.

JE: **In what ways could Swedish research strengthen its focus on authoritarian regimes and post-Soviet countries?**

AR: There are great initiatives addressing this in Sweden at the moment. However, I would encourage more collaborations to strengthen the practice of learning from scholars of authoritarianism to study potential crises within democratic systems – including the roles of Big Tech and welfare in democratic countries. I believe that many research strands within authoritarianism studies have now become a valuable source for anticipating democratic backsliding. Some developments that appear novel in struggling democracies are already well-established practices in autocracies. Building collaborations along these lines would help both to understand the challenges to democracy from a theoretical perspective and to address them at the political level.

JE: **You are not just a researcher; you have also been involved in political activism. Are there any activist-oriented projects or initiatives you're interested in pursuing?**

AR: I formally left political activism in 2021, when I concluded my chairwomanship at *Sveriges Belarusier*. For now on, while applying for post-doctoral positions, I will still keep working with the independent Belarusian think tank in exile (*Center for New Ideas*), which I led as a Director since September 2023. In a broad sense, sure; this can be seen as activism, as we are working towards educating young Belarusians in exile, publishing research on topics not welcomed by the ruling elites, and providing recommendations to Western stakeholders working with Belarus.
I don't believe that engaging in political research should necessarily preclude participation in political activism. Even if research adheres to rigorous academic standards, the very act of framing research findings involves a degree of political agency. That, however, is a separate issue worthy of its own reflection.

JE: **Do you plan to stay in academia, or are you considering applying your expertise in other fields?**

AR: I believe that research should have real-world impact. Throughout my thesis work and beyond, my guiding principle has been to consider its applicability: Can it benefit the communities being studied? Can it inform policymakers or engaged citizens? With this in mind, I see myself contributing to research both within and beyond academia; something I have consistently done throughout my time as a PhD student. I hope to carry this approach forward in my career: striving for high-quality research while also offering insights and expertise to relevant stakeholders outside of academia.

JE: **Thank you for the conversation.**

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THE INTERVIEW by Professor Joakim Ekman is published online and the first in a row of what is to be a new series covering newly defended doctoral thesis on topics of concern for the region and the area *Baltic Worlds* is covering.
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