

# No war! No Putin! An overview of Russian protest music

Friday 25 March 2022, by [LOGINOV Ivan](#) (Date first published: 23 March 2022).

**Russian-language protest music includes some classics from the Soviet period, as well as songs from all the genres that have found a local audience in the last 30 years. Today's war in Ukraine and crackdown on peace demonstrators is already adding new music and lyrics to Russian musical and political culture.**

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin has been President of the Russian Federation for 22 years. It would be strange to think that opposition to him has only emerged in recent years, or even that everyone in Russia supports him.

After Putin came to power, macro-economic and institutional conditions stabilized, compared to the 1990s, but gradually giving way to stagnation. This, together with the Second Chechen War, led to many protests in the first years of the new century, which is reflected in the music of the time.

2012 was a true turning point. Putin was elected for a third term, dispelling all hopes of change that anyone might have had during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. Another wave of unrest followed Putin's election for a fourth term in 2018.

The development of protest music reflects this calendar - the years 2012 and 2018 brought key breakthroughs in music production. The most important topics of protest songs were criticism of the economic situation, corruption, nationalism, militarism, censorship and political repression.

Anti-poetry and anti-war music can be found across various genres. They differ in music and also in ideology. The work of some of these artists has long been openly political, others have responded to specific events. Some songs are straightforward in their protest content, others rely on allegories. Some express frustration "only" with Putin and injustices associated with his leadership, others criticize more general power structures that we also find outside Russia. This is especially the case with left-wing bands, such as the hardcore / hip-hop group Moscow Death Brigade, also popular in the Czech Republic. Their output fits into the genre of western protest left-wing protest music. In contrast, the punks of Posljednije tanki in Paris (Last Tanks in Paris) or Mongol Shuudan (Mongolian Post) usually do not comment on current events. However one Posljednije tanki in Paris (Last Tanks in Paris) song *Pulju burzhuju* (Bullet for the Bourgeois) has been added to the repertoire of the band Pornofilmy, whose work we discuss below.

## Changes and traditions

The most popular song to date, accompanying demonstrations in Russia and in Belarus is *Peremen* (Changes). The song became famous thanks to Sergei Solovyov's 1987 film *Assa*, and is inextricably linked with the period of perestroika ('reconstruction'). The call for change, combined with an energetic post-punk underpinning, continues to inspire protesters in Russia and other post-Soviet states. Artists continue to make cover versions, which can be heard also outside the protest milieu. During the Ukrainian protests in 2013-2014, the Ukrainian pop-rock band SKAI also recorded a

Ukrainian version. The Czech relationship to Marta Kubišová 's 1968 hit *Prayer for Marta* from 1968 is somewhat similar.

Another great inspiration for the contemporary Russian musical environment is the work of Yegor Letov, whose multi-layered and ironic lyrics, combined with his charismatic and mystical personality, still enchant audiences. In the context of protests, we should mention his most famous hits *Vsjo idot po planu* (Everything goes according to plan) from 1988 and *Moja oborona* (My Defense) from the following year.

We shouldn't forget to mention the poet and literary critic Osip Mandelstam, persecuted during the Stalinist repression in the 1930s. His work is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Russian art. His poems are set to music, individual verses are borrowed, and references to his non-poetic work also appear in songs.

### **Straight to the point! Punk for freedom**

An essential part of the Russian punk scene is the band Pornofilm. It was the most visible politically oriented rock band in the second half of the last decade. It is part of a wave of Russian political music that emerged after 2012, when large anti-government protests shook Russia after Putin's re-election to a third term. Their 2017 hit *Rossija dlja grustnych* (Russia is for the sad) perfectly captures the atmosphere prevailing in the country and underlines in the chorus the absence of options and no prospect for change. The song *V diapozonje* (On the Slide from the same album) portrays the effects of the war. Its lyrics "Mothers do not believe in death. They are waiting for their sons to return alive from the railway station" sound even more impressive in today's context. The older song *Vykljuchitje Gimn* (Turn off the anthem) from 2014 calls for the rejection of state symbols tainted by the actions of those who represent the state - "turn off the anthem, crumple the flag - burn the fucking Kremlin to dust". The 2016 song *Pjesjenka-antiutopija o fascizmje* (Song-antiutopia of fascism) outlines the return of totalitarianism. It quotes Mandelstam "we live without feeling the earth beneath us", and warns of the state where fascism has triumphed ("above all but us"). In the 2020 song *Djadja Volodja* (Uncle Volodja), they ironically call for their neighbor Volodja to tighten the screws on their bike. In another song from the same album, *Eto projdjet* (It will pass), they sing about hope and that everything necessarily ends sometimes, including the prison in which all Russians are currently living - "Yesterday's dictator is alone in the morgue, today he is just a dead old man."

Another currently popular band is Yorsh (The Rider), which became famous in 2018 with the song *God, Tsarja choroni!* (God, protect the Tsar). The title refers to the anthem of the Russian Empire and criticizes the prevailing pro-government narratives, blaming all Russian problems on immigrants, the West, etc. It is also worth mentioning *Svjerchdjerzhava* (Superpower) from 2019 and *Vlost* (Power / Government) from 2021. In both songs we find criticism of political repression, police violence and propaganda. All the band's songs are characterized by the straightforwardness of the lyrics and the simplicity of the riffs. The song *Vlost* was recorded with the rock band Nogu Svjelo (Leg Cramp), which also recorded the song *Mnje ne nuzhna vojna* (I don't want a war) after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this song, they call on other artists not to keep quiet, and they repeat - "we don't want a war, we only have one honor and one conscience."

Yorsh recorded *Svjerchdjerzhava* (Superpower) together with NAIV, a group that was formed in the late 1980s and whose early hit *Tank-Panky* (Tank-Punks) from 1990 accompanied the popular protests against the August coup the following year. In NAIV's more recent work there are a number of songs criticizing the government, nationalism and militarism. Let's mention *Geroji nashego vremjeni* (Heroes of Our Time), a reference to Lermontov. This 2018 song mocks the activities of the [reactionary-editors] Night Wolves organization. Throughout its existence, the group has espoused

broader anarchist ideals, saying that it aspires to be the enemy of all states. In 2006, they published *The Illusion [of Freedom]*, in which they criticized the tightening of conditions and nationalism.

An interesting point in the history of the band is their 1994 English-language album *Dehumanized States of America*, in which they exchanged hilarious punk riffs for more aggressive hardcore and criticized American imperialism, racism and police surveillance.

Another older but still popular band is Tarakany! (Cockroaches!). In 2020, they released the song *...I nichego except truth* (... And nothing but the truth), in which they refuse to succumb to political pressure from the ruling elite, and express their determination to remain a free spirit in every situation. In connection with the protests in Ukraine in 2013-2014 Tarakany! recorded a Ukrainian version of the song *Ulitse svobody* (Freedom Street, which is also a celebration of inner freedom).

The group Pussy Riot has a specific place in Russian punk. It is known particularly for the 2012 song *Punk Prayer*, calling on the Virgin Mary to drive away Putin. At first, Pussy Riot was more of an artistic group and their work had a purely provocative character. Their aggressive, disparate and noisy songs were an integral component of their feminist and anti-Putin performances, not a separate, musical product. Since 2015, Pussy Riot has been recording music professionally - across genres and in collaboration with major performers and producers. They have collaborated with MARINA, Dorian Electra and Tom Morell (Rage Against the Machine, Audioslave). Pussy Riot adheres to the Western anti-authoritarian anti-capitalist tradition of tradition and in its songs. In addition to political unfreedom in Russia, they mainly engage with the issue of police violence, see for example their *1312* \_ The group's most important protest song is *RAGE* (Rage) from early 2021, recorded in support of the people arrested in protests at that time, including a member of the group, Masha Aljochina, as well as the opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

## **We're tightening up**

In 2004, the hardcore band Psyche released the song *Uběj mjenta* (Kill the Cop), which is still banned in Russia. The song reflects on the issue of police violence and asked the audience: "So, how much does your freedom cost?"

The Alt-metal group Louna found a wider audience around the 2012 elections. In *Vremja X* (X Time), the group captured the spirit of the mass protests, criticizing the country's social situation, and calling for dissent. A year later, Louna released the song *1984*, in which, as usual, they compared the current political situation in Russia with the novel of the same name by George Orwell. In addition to their signature critique of propaganda and militarism, the song includes the statement that, a quarter of a century ago, "the collapse of the big dream became the beginning of fascism." They also criticize militarism and nationalism in some of their other songs. Today, when thousands of Russian conscripts are being sent to Ukraine, the words "hard on the training ground, easy in the grave," from the song *Tje, kto v tanke* (Those in the Tank) send a shiver down the spine. Another of their critical songs is *Moja strana* (My Country).

Slot is another hardcore band, which also plays new/alt metal, and has explicit political content.. Their 2018 songs *Skoljko djenjeg* (How much money) or *Kukushka* (Cuckoo) criticize corruption and the overall economic and political situation in Russia. They also have an earlier song criticizing the preparation of the Sochi Olympics.

Another alt-metal band that is an integral part of the Russian protest scene is Lumen. Their political work begins in 2005 with the hit *Gosudarstvo* (Government / State) with a chorus that remains impressive: "there is supposedly democracy, but in fact it's an empire. I love my country so much, but I hate the state". In the same year, they also released the song *02* (the emergency telephone

number to call the police in Russia) criticizing police violence in 2004 during special events in Blagoveshchensk. In 2007, they tightened their position, both musically and lyrically. Almost every song on that year's album *Pravda?* (Truth?) is political. The theme of police violence is taken up in the song *Idi v otmach* (Give them back), which calls for readiness to defend ourselves, and calls police officers "bad children to whom someone has given power." Other songs call for political activism, for example the song *Chvatit!* (Enough!). Of Lumen's later works, it is worth mentioning *Marsh soglasnych* (The March of those who Agree) from 2012 or *Choroshij tsar i znakomaja vonj* (The Good Tsar and the Famous Stink) from 2020.

### **Russian rap between trends and poetry**

The Russian rapper Noize MC has been criticizing the ruling United Russia party and the police almost since the beginning of his career. In 2008 he recorded *Nashe dvizhenije* (Our Movement), a critique of the ruling party's youth organisation Nashi (Ours). He has consistently performed anti-war songs, such as *Jordan* from 2015 which addresses conflicts in the Middle East, *Ljudi s avtomatami* (People with Rifles) from 2018 or *Stoljetnjaja vojna* (100 year War) from 2021. After the current invasion began, Noize MC recorded a video for last year's Ukrainian anti-war song *Vudu* (Voodoo). In the clip, we see, among other things, blooming sunflowers, referring to a viral video in which an older Ukrainian woman offers Russian soldiers sunflower seeds, explaining that these will grow after the soldier's death.

Oxxxymiron is probably Russia's most famous rapper. He hardly mentioned politics formost of his career, but in recent years he has become a regular participant in anti-government protests. Worth mentioning is *Vjetrzh pjeremjen* (Wind of Changes) is a track he recorded for an online rap battle in collaboration with Samaraddin Rajabav, who was prosecuted at the time for participating in a demonstration, allegedly attacking a police officer, who he threw a plastic cup at. In addition to the obvious condemnation of injustice and police violence, we find here a particular emphasis on inner personal freedom. The anti-utopian concept album *Gorgorod* from 2015 can also be considered an allegory of contemporary Russia .

Many popular rappers have recently embarked on politically engaged work. The most prominent example is the rapper FACE. He became famous for his entertaining hits about with who he spent the night and how. But in 2018 he released the album *Puti Njeispovimy* (Indescribable Paths). Each track here provides a political commentary. For example, *Chjetvjortyj vsadnik* (Fourth Rider) points to the lack of freedom in Russia - "my country is one big prison; wherever I go, I feel at home." Interestingly, in the opening composition, *Vorovannyj vozduch* (Stolen Air) he refers to Mandelstam's celebration of poetry that emerges freely and without permission, which he called stolen air. A year later, FACE recorded a song for Mikhail Idov's film *The Humorist* about humor and power in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. In the song of the same name, the rapper refers more to the current situation in Russia. Some verses have matured well - "Russian grandfather frost [Santa Claus - editors] will bring us war".

In 2019 the rapper Lugalajz released the song [Zastoj 2.0](#), comparing the current state of Russia with the USSR of Brezhnev's time, and warns that the more violence the Russian regime commits abroad, the more it will eventually isolate itself. The following year, the rapper ATL released [Brasljety](#) ([Bracelets](#)). This dance track has the catchy chorus "They Arrested You, They Arrested Me," criticizing the arrests of people involved in anti-government protests. Another interesting dance hit is the 2021 song [Akvadiskoteka \(Aqua Disco\)](#) by the musician TMNV. The song refers to Putin's luxury residence, which was exposed that year by the Navalny Anti-Corruption Fund.

On 13<sup>th</sup> March this year, one of Russia's most famous rappers, MORGENSHTERN surprised everyone with his new release song [12](#), which includes a sample recorded by Ukrainian journalist

Dmitry Gordon, urging Russian soldiers to “fuck off.” At the end of the song, there is also a recording of a phone call between MORGENSHTERN’s Ukrainian producer Palagin and his mother living in Ukraine, who describes to him her own experience of the bombing.

### **Songwriters as a Russian conscience**

Singers from the ranks of Soviet rock bands still enjoy considerable popularity. Among the most famous are Andrei Makarevich, the leader of the band Mashina vremjani (Time Machine), and Boris Grebenshikov, known as BG, from the group Aquarium. Both have cult status as some kind of founding fathers of Russian rock, and both have recorded dozens of songs over the last ten years, commenting on social events. It is worth mentioning, for example, BG’s 2019 song [Vecherniy M \(Evening M\)](#), in which the author mocks the propagandistic moderators of Russian state television. In the same year, BG and Aquarium recorded the anti-government reggae song [Poshol Von Vavilon \(Go Away, Babylon!\)](#), applying the classic Rastafarian theme of Babylon to Russia.

The poet and musician behind the pseudonym Vasya Oblomov pursued politics in his student rock band Cheboza, for example in the 2004 song [Nje Kolotise \(Don’t Make a Fuss\)](#), in which he mocks Vladimir Putin’s media image and criticizes his politics and track record. As part of his solo work, he recites socially oriented satirical poetry with a folk-rock accompaniment. In 2012, he recorded a joint song [Poka, medvjed! \(Hi, honey!\)](#), with the critical journalist and political commentator Leonid Parfonov and the journalist and politician Xenii Sobchak, mocking the incumbent President Dmitry Medvedev, just before the re-election of Putin that year. Other works include the 2015 song [S chego nachenajetsja rodina](#) (Where the Homeland Begins), which reflects on Russia’s socio-economic problems and criticizes corruption and political repression, as well as *Nesta chjerna (The Shit Mill)*, which criticizes the omnipresent pro-government propaganda.

### **Pop and the rest**

Noize MC recorded the already-mentioned *Ljudi s avtomatami* (People with Rifles) with the indie-pop singer Monjetochka (Coin). On her breakthrough record from 2018, Monjetochka released the song [Ruskij kovcheg \(Russian Ark\)](#) referring to the 2002 film of the same name by director Alexander Sokurov. The final words of the film are “We must sail forever, we must live forever.” The following year, during the forest fires in Siberia, she released *gori gori gori* (burn burn burn!). Fire here acts as a metaphor for the many problems and contradictions that afflict Russia. The song asks, what to do, in the land of poetry, when the art is all gone?

During last year’s protests in support of the opposition politician Alexei Navalny, protest videos incorporating the song [Tarakana \(Cockroaches\)](#) were widely shared on TikTok. This is a 2019 song by the new band PALC, expressing the dissatisfaction of young people in Russia with the current political situation. More precisely, the TikTok phenomena was a [remix by producer BassnPanda](#), which complemented the original catchy melody with a new pulsating electronic bass line.

In recent years, several Russian music projects have gained international recognition, some due to the political focus of their lyrics. Among the most famous are the experimental hip-hop duo IC3PEAK and the avant-pop band Shortparis. In 2018, IC3PEAK made a clip for the song [Smjerti boljshje njet \(Death is No Longer\)](#), in which, among other things, they criticize police brutality. The release of the clip was followed by the cancellation of their concerts across Russia. Two years later in the song, *Mars* they criticized the ostentatious militarism and general lack of freedom in the country. As for Shortparis, they build on the tradition of experimental music and experimental art in general. Their work reflects on political reality, connecting it with the questions and history of philosophy, with a layer of irony. Rather than describing reality, their creations capture feelings and thoughts. The best illustration is their 2021 song [Struktury nje vychodjat na ulici \(Structures Don’t Take to the Streets\)](#),

referring to a slogan associated with the French protests of 1968, which rejected the theoretical framework of structuralism. On the same album we also find the song *Jablonnyj sad* (Apple Orchard). In the [accompanying video](#) clip World War II veterans bury apples. It can be considered a commentary on the war in Ukraine and the political situation in Russia.

### **In conclusion**

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a number of Russian musicians - including some not mentioned here - canceled their planned performances. Symbolically, they expressed disagreement with the actions of the Russian Federation. Lumen is an interesting exception. They let it be heard that their concerts are not primarily an entertaining event and in the current conjuncture represent an opportunity to meet with like-minded people. And finally, the Rapper Oxxxymiron canceled all his actions in Russia, while announcing a series of anti-war charity concerts *Russians Against War* outside the country. The first will take place on March 15 in Istanbul. It will be streamed live, and all proceeds will go to help Ukrainian refugees.

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### **P.S.**

Translated from Czech by AN for ESSF.

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