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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Meister, K. (2023). Civic Activism Strategies of Russian Protest Musicians after February 24, 2022. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 291, 12-16. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000595208>

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Civic Activism Strategies of Russian Protest Musicians after February 24, 2022

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000595208

Abstract

The full-scale war has brought with it new methods of suppression of the opposition, a large wave of emigration, and the closure of international companies. Many famous musicians who had already been singing about such topics as daily life under Putinism, corruption, the power vertical, and militarism have become anti-war activists, speaking out and raising money for Ukraine. In this article, I consider the situation of Russian protest music within and outside the country, as well as online.

Suppression in Russia

To understand the importance of music in the protests since February 24, 2022, it is worth keeping in mind the extent to which dissent has been suppressed, with thousands of people detained all over Russia. According to [OVD-info](#), the first month of the war was the most protest-heavy, with 15,343 people arrested (a total of 19,478 had been arrested as of January 8, 2023). In St. Petersburg, one woman was [arrested](#) for listening loudly to a song about the Nazi occupation of Ukraine (“Ukraine is Stormed by Soldiers,” Vladimir Vysotski, 1965), politicizing even those activities inside private residences.

The remaining uncanceled concerts of protest music inside Russia are the last public space for dissent, allowing a large group of people to mobilize in real time and protest in a physical space. For the artists, organizing these concerts is a big financial risk in the current Russian economy due to the likelihood that they will be cancelled. According to the journalist Aleksandr Gorbachev, the Russian music industry, if it has avoided collapse, has nevertheless shrunk dramatically: Spotify has left the country completely, Apple Music has stopped updating Russian playlists, and many artists have had to open companies outside Russia to continue to collect streaming revenue. The famous anti-war rapper Noize MC mentioned in an interview how his emigration has enabled him to finally earn money without the authorities’ involvement; only he and his listeners now determine whether he can make money.

The anti-war movement also includes the stars of the ‘80s protest music scene, such as Boris Grebenshchikov, Mashina Vremeni, and DDT. Their performances were restricted and cancelled during the Soviet era (Steinholt, 2004, p. 42–43), and now, 40 years later, they are back on the blacklists. Reactions to the blacklists that were leaked on [March 14](#) and [July 7](#), 2022, have been varied. The rap group Krovostok, for example, saw being blacklisted as a sign that they had done everything right and

openly expressed pride in it via social media. In that sense, the Russian authorities can be seen as actively contributing to activists’ sense of identity by making claims about who and what the activists are. The punk band Pornofilm, meanwhile, has stated that being blacklisted has reduced promoters’ and clubs’ willingness to work with them, as hosting a concert for the band might bring uncertainty and have negative implications for their business.

Being blacklisted does not have any clearly articulated legal impact in the way that being labelled a foreign agent does. Remarkably, however, since February 24, 2022, the authorities have begun to add musicians to the “foreign agent” list: five popular protest musicians (Andrey Makarevich from Mashina Vremeni and four contemporary rappers: Oxxxymiron, FACE, Morgenshtern, and Noize MC) have been added to the list since April 2022. The lead singer of Anacondaz has said that when the authorities began to label musicians as “foreign agents,” it revealed how repressive the law is, as the music industry is by default connected to foreign money via streaming platforms, merch sales, and concerts held abroad.

There seems to be a concern to avert any form of a possible “singing revolution,” as the emergence of any anti-war cultural elements, emblems, and symbols that might unite people is being restrained (Siegieñ, 2019). In addition, in the current context of the full-scale war, new musical propaganda has appeared: the pop singer Shaman released the song “Let’s Get Up” (*Vstanem*) exactly one day before the full-scale invasion began. Musicologist Anna Vilenskaya has explained in great detail how, beyond the lyrics, Shaman’s songs are musically crafted to make people feel sensations of great patriotism, weaponizing music for military purposes. The protest music scene picked up his ultra-patriotic song “I am Russian” (*Ia russkii*): the comedian Aleksander Gudkov responded with a parody video, “I am Narrow” (*Ia uzkkii*), that has received over 6 million views as of January 2023. This

shows how state-sponsored narratives of nationhood have been deconstructed by oppositional creatives commenting on the ideological bleakness of the original music video and lyrics.

Currently, using the term “war” in the context of the situation in Ukraine is seen as engaging in oppositional politics in Russia, as government propaganda keeps insisting that it is a “special military operation.” With the suppression of anti-war speech, the correct choice of words becomes highly important when speaking up, which might explain why “Net voine” (“No to the war”) has become one of the main protest slogans of 2022, chanted by audiences at concerts both in Russia and abroad.

Musicians in Emigration

With emigration, the context for protest concerts is becoming increasingly international, as many famous musicians have left the country. Approximately 200,000 Russians have emigrated since the start of the full-scale invasion (Kamalov et al., 2022). A large share of protest music bands are now operating from outside Russia, as activity within Russia has become unsustainable and risky.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, protest music concerts have taken place in 70 different locations across Europe, Georgia, Israel, Armenia, Central Asia, and America. The highest concentration of concerts can be observed in the most popular emigration destinations, namely Tbilisi and Yerevan (Zavadskaya, 2022). Other popular concert locations are Tel Aviv, Tallinn, and Berlin.

As the songs are mostly sung in Russian but are politically oppositional, they are understood first and foremost as propagating anti-war resistance, and resonate with communities in Ukraine, Belarus, and other countries with large Russian-speaking minorities, such as the Baltic states. According to Aleksandr Gorbachev, before the full-scale invasion, the Russian-language connection between the countries might have involuntarily supported colonial frames in which Russians perceived Ukrainian artists as “theirs”; now, it has become clearer which bands are from which countries. Moreover, many fans, especially Ukrainian ones, expect Russian bands to speak out against the war as an act of moral protest aligned with the messages in their songs. Bands such as Ic3peak, Anacondaz, and Pornofilmy have claimed that their Ukrainian audience has mostly stayed with them and continued to attend their concerts following the onset of the full-scale war.

Logically enough, in the context of war, it has become crucial to determine whether a person with a Russian affiliation stands for or against the war. These concerts allow Russian emigrants and refugees to con-

struct oppositional identities. Thus, the name of the rapper Oxxxymiron’s first charity concert tour was *Russians against the War*. Protest performances are important because they help to form new meanings, discourses, and identities that play a role in longer-term cultural change and produce feelings of collective agency that help to sustain movements (Juris, 2014, p. 242), such as global resistance to Russian aggression.

Protest music concerts outside Russia help to create short-lived communities (to borrow a term from Mischa Gabowitsch) of Russian fans, older expatriates, and new émigrés who mobilize emotionally through shared anti-war symbols. Based on qualitative interviews I conducted in Estonia in October–December 2022, for some concertgoers—such as Dmitri, 37—there is no specific community of Russians, just as there is no diaspora among expats: “It’s kind of a natural repulsion of all the immigrants” (Meister, 2022). According to McNeill et al., the power and emotional impact of music is not only connected to the lyrics; the listener can feel “carried along” by collective activities like dancing and marching (Jasper, 2014, p. 33), which facilitate the emergence of new communities in the post-lockdown era.

According to social media data published by some of the most famous bands on Instagram and Facebook (both officially blocked but still used in Russia), a remarkable number of concerts by Russian protest groups (over 188) took place outside Russia between March and December 2022, including 67 charity concerts by 11 well-known Russian protest bands. Many more tours are already planned for 2023. This is evidence of a powerful global anti-war movement.

The full-scale war prompted the music community to react fast and mobilize together to organize charity concert tours. The largest sum of money was gathered by *Voices of Peace*, which brought in €340,000 from both tickets and online streaming donations across 10 concerts. This was a collaboration between the rapper Noize MC and the indie musician Monetochka, with the *leitmotif* of their 2019 song “People with Guns” (*Liudi s avtomatami*). The performance directly addressed Russian TV propaganda by using a pop-up green screen that turned the concert into a news setting for the online audience. Two of the other major charity enterprises were Oxxxymiron’s *Russians against the War* (also livestreamed) and *Stand with Ukraine*, a collaboration between the Russian rapper FACE, the Russian punk band Pornofilmy, and the Ukrainian rock group Nery. These three concert-series managed to raise a remarkable €667,000 for Polish and Ukrainian charities helping Ukraine. Livestreaming the European concerts allowed for a bimodal flow of dissent: the concerts reached Russians inside Russia by streaming protest into their homes and allowed people outside Rus-

sia to communicate their dissent via the YouTube live chat function.

Nastya Kreslina, lead singer of the electronic music band Ic3peak, said in an interview that helping one's close relations as well as people in Ukraine is the most effective way to process trauma caused by the war, as just sitting and thinking that "everyone hates me" is not helpful: "You will have to face uncomfortable situations, go through them and survive." James M. Jasper has called attention to the role of shared stigma as a source of reciprocal solidarity, just like in Noize MC's October 2022 song "Rainy Country" (*Strana dozhdei*). He writes about the felt stigma that Russians did not do enough to prevent the full-scale war from happening and should just stop existing. The feeling is described as one's life being crossed out by the letter "Z," but now directing a new one outside Russia. Even though shame is often a demobilizing mood of withdrawal, it still offers a strong (culturally or legally enforced) collective identity (Jasper, 2014, p. 35) that makes collective events therapeutic.

Digital Spaces

The question of what the common spaces for protest are is an important one. Even music videos on YouTube can be a platform for protest, spreading the message through audiovisual idea packages. Animation is one of the more flexible ways to artistically show dissent, anger, and despair, as well as reflect on the surreal reality, as in the videos for Monetochka's "Burn" (Gori) by Sergey Kolesov and in Nogu Svelo's new song "Anthem of the Doomed" (*Gimn Obrechennykh*). The video for the latter was produced by the famous cartoonist Oleg Kuvaev, the maker of *Masyanya*, who is also outspoken about the war. These kinds of audio-visual collaborations are another emerging format of joint activism, adding new visual ideas that elaborate the meanings of the songs.

It is curious to observe the dramatic rise in popularity experienced by some protest music bands during the first shockwave of the full-scale war. For example, viewership of Ic3peak's YouTube channel rose steadily from February 24 (1.9 million weekly views), peaking during the week of March 4–10 (with over 6.5 million weekly views). According to Google Trends, the week of February 27–March 5 brought the greatest interest in the band throughout their existence (Ic3peak was founded in 2013).

Both Ic3peak and the avant-pop band Shortparis had previously depicted Russian militarism in their music videos. Examples include "Moscow Speaking" (*Govorit Moskva*) by Shortparis and "Marching" (*Marsh*) by Ic3peak. The former video addresses fear as the basis of Russian nationhood, where the actual life of a person has no value. The aesthetics of the set and costume design

mix ideas from the Bolshevik Revolution with contemporary protest in a choreography loaded with symbolism, linking it to workers' rights and the value of one's work (symbolically, it was released on May 1, or International Labor Day, in 2021). Mastery of such fine artistic tools of resistance has become even more crucial now to avoid a group's concerts in Russia being cancelled. Even though Shortparis released new anti-war music videos, their meticulous approach prevented their 2022 concerts in Russia from being cancelled.

In another approach to digital platforms, some videos—such as "Death No More" (*Smerti bol'she net*, 2018) and "Dead but Pretty" (2022) by the electronic duo Ic3peak—use a green screen to make it look as though they were filmed in Red Square, in front of the FSB headquarters and parliament building, using it as a digital space of protest. It seems that conducting the protest digitally has not ended up limiting them, as they are making use of online protests including video effects added in post-production that would be life-threatening or get them arrested at the actual locations. Even though Ic3peak have always been open about their queer identities, it was only after the beginning of the full-scale war that they showed—in the "Dead but Pretty" video—the band members kissing police officers of the same sex in Red Square. Culturally, this emulates Voina's video "Kissing the Police" (2011), which features same-sex kisses between a member of the artist group and women police officers, except Voina's kisses were not consented to by the police.

Conclusion

The full-scale war and the ensuing restrictions in Russia have pushed many popular musicians to speak up and emigrate, among them Alla Pugacheva and her husband, Maxim Galkin, who was also declared a foreign agent due to his activism. Protest musicians have used the creative tools at their disposal to raise money for Ukraine and support oppositional communities in Russia and abroad. These concerts continue to play a crucial role in sustaining the anti-war movement globally while simultaneously helping Russian participants to construct their anti-war identities, condemning the Putin regime and standing with Ukraine. Previous experience of addressing problems in contemporary Russia is helping protest musicians to survive even in the new austere circumstances, finding creative ways and new spaces to voice dissent.

About the Author:

Katarina Meister (MA in Fine Arts) is currently an MA student in the Russian Studies department at the University of Helsinki. They are a member of the art and memory activist group SLED, which organized the art program “Siberian Childhood: 70 Years Since the March Deportation” (2019). Currently, they study the Russian protest music scene in Estonia and Finland.

Concert Statistics Based on:

Russians Against War (Oxxxymiron), Voices of Peace (Noize MC, Monetcchka), Charity concert for Ukrainians (FACE, Nervy (UA), Pochlaya Molly, T-Fest (UA), Makrae (UA), Barz (UA), Stand With Ukraine (FACE, Nervy (UA), Pornofilm), Charity concert (Pornofilm, ВАН.ROMA), Songs Not Bombs (Dmitry Spirin), Uncancelled tour (Manizha), I3peak, Samoe Bolshoe Prostoe Chislo, Boris Grebenshchikov, Zemfira, Shortparis, Vasya Oblomov, Noize MC, Monetcchka, FACE, Boris Grebenshchikov, Mashina Vremeni, Kasta, Krovostok, Nogu Svelo!, Anacondaz, Morgenstern

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Editors: Stephen Aris, Fabian Burkhardt, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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Responsible editor for this issue: Robert Orttung

Language editing: Ellen Powell

Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2023 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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