

RUSSIAN RAP IN THE ERA OF VLADIMIR PUTIN

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THE SPOKEN WORD has always held a special place in the hearts of Russians.¹ From the poetry recitations by Evgeny Evtushenko in the 1960s that filled stadiums to the inspired lyrics of Russian bards like Vladimir Vysotsky, Russians have sought not only beauty but also repose in artistic literary forms. This is not surprising given Russia's troubled political history over the centuries, which reached its height in the twentieth century with the repressive Soviet era. Countless volumes have been written over the years on censorship in the USSR and on the ensuing balancing act that Soviet artists endured at the hands of the authorities.

That Soviet and post-Soviet Russian rappers felt that same repression is not in doubt. What sets rap, as a genre, apart from other literary forms in Russia is its place in time: It really took hold only in the early 1990s, immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, so one cannot speak of rap, as a genre, influencing political events in the USSR. Though one could argue that the first rap in Russia was "Rap" from 1984 by the group Chas Pik, an unabashed rip-off of The Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" from 1979—widely recognized as the first commercial rap hit ever—it was not until the 1990s that Russian rappers and rap groups such as Bogdan Titomir, Liki MC, Bad Balance, and Mal'chishnik became widely known in the former Soviet Union and, with them, the rap genre itself. The fit was perfect for Russia, with its rich literary tradition and its strong history of performance art.

There are currently two rather well-defined camps in Russian rap: a party/house camp, which features light-hearted lyrics on themes such as love, having fun, and hanging out, while the second might be called a socially active political/artistic camp, which features poignant lyrics of a topical nature. There are, of course, other types of rap in Russia, but most artists, or at least most songs, could

fit into one of these two groups.² This is important for one simple reason: Your choice of camp will likely determine your chances of making it in Russian rap.

In this article, I wish to place recent developments in Russian rap into a political and cultural context. I will show how rap, in the face of the current political situation within Russia, in which freedom of speech has come under attack, has been able to provide a consistent avenue for artists to promote dissent and question power. The era of Vladimir Putin began on August 9, 1999, when President Boris Yeltsin appointed him prime minister of Russia. On New Year's Eve of that year, Yeltsin resigned and Putin became acting president until his election to the presidency a few months later. For 14 years he has been the undisputed ruler of Russia, and during this period Russia has seen tremendous growth and relative stability. In the past few years, however, it has also seen enormous tension between Putin and the Russian populace. This tension is manifested in the work of several Russian rappers. More generally, one could also say that rap, as a genre, finally found its footing in Russia during Putin's 14-year reign and broke away from its blanket imitation of the American artists who defined it in the 1990s. It is my intention to analyze the interaction of the political context with the cultural production of rap and hip hop music in the era of Putin. Further, insofar as most political tension in Russia has been concentrated in the last few years—since then—Prime Minister Putin announced in September 2011 that he and then-President Dmitri Medvedev would switch places when the president's term expired at the beginning of 2012—I will focus my analysis mostly on the past few years, and on a few key figures in particular.

Perhaps the best-known social activist rapper in Russia is Ivan Alekseev, better known as Noize MC (b. 1985). Noize began his music studies in classical guitar at the age of 10. He was soon performing with various hip hop artists, and by the time he was 20, he had already gained notoriety as a rapper. He is generally considered the best freestyle rapper in Russia, and comparisons with Eminem are frequent. His budding acting career began with the film *Rozygryshch* (2008). Though he had many recording successes prior to his solo career as a rapper, his first album, *The Greatest Hits, Vol. 1*, was only released in 2008. It was named album of the year by the popular Russian lifestyle magazine *Afisha*. Noize acknowledged the irony of the title for his first album, since in fact he already had performed more than 200 tunes by the time the album came out, so in this sense it was his “greatest hits” (Noizemc.ru).

In the past few years, he has increasingly made his political views known. In August 2010, he was placed under administrative arrest and incarcerated for 10 days in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) for “offending the authorities” at a concert there three days earlier. His group had performed a skit that highlighted the extreme corruption of the Russian police. Noize was forced to tape a video confession in order to gain his release. The confession was ironic and insincere,

though it was not perceived as such by the authorities. Later, Noize used this video confession as the chorus for his song and video “10 sutok v raiu (Stalingrad)” (10 Days in Paradise [Stalingrad]). So, as in the United States, Russian rappers have problems with law-enforcement authorities, though in Russia it has only been going on for the past several years, and only under Putin. Further, unlike in the States, there is far greater latitude in Russia with respect to what the authorities can do to someone when held in custody. Noize points out that “they didn’t let me communicate with my lawyer, my producer, or anyone else” at the time of his arrest (Alekseev 2010).

Perhaps more than any other hip hop artist, Noize MC voices his dissent from official views of the Russian government. As is well known, there has been a strong surge in nationalism during Putin’s tenure in office, and often this nationalism manifests itself in racist activity. One of the most horrific incidents happened in August 2007 when a Russian neo-Nazi group beheaded two men of color, one from Tajikistan and the other from Dagestan, and uploaded the video of the event to the internet (Chivers 2007). Though the leaders of this particular neo-Nazi group were calling for Putin’s resignation, many believe that such nationalist fringe groups generally support Putin; it is therefore not surprising that Putin does not seem to be doing too much to crack down on such groups (Barry 2011).

Another arena for racism in post-Soviet Russia is the football (i.e., soccer) stadium. In that regard, St. Petersburg’s Zenit football team is often considered the worst in Russia. In March 2011, in response to the first nonwhite player to play for the team, Roberto Carlos, a fan brandished a banana, which is a common racist meme used against players of color playing in European football leagues. Zenit is notorious for such behavior (Longman 2012). Noize MC’s answer to this overt racism was “Pushkinskii Rap” (Pushkin Rap). Generally considered to be the greatest Russian writer of all time, Alexander Pushkin had a great-grandfather who was African, and by all accounts, Pushkin himself had non-Russian physical traits and slightly darker skin. Noize uses this fact to answer the racist fans of Zenit. The animated video for this song begins in the stadium with football fans chanting “Peter,” another name for Zenit (Alekseev 2011b). Noize uses Pushkin as the narrator for the song and questions the intentions of the simpleton racist fan. Here is a translation of the lyrics:

Verse 1:

My name is Aleksander Sergeevich Pushkin
 My skin doesn’t look like a cheese Danish filling
 Dark-skinned face and black curly curls
 Thanks to my great-grandfather for all of these features

Those with small minds
 Think it necessary to call me an ape

And even in school those bullies frequently joked
That my ancestors were swinging from branches not long ago

Like, my great-grandfather was the moor Hannibal
Peter the Great bought him for a bottle of rum from a dealer
Who accused me of everything
But you yourselves know how it all ended up

I didn't create a memorial to myself by hand
Both scholars and students consider me great
If you study Russian language and don't read my books
That's straight down a dead-end road

Chorus:

Where do these smarty-pants come from
Who think that "Racism" and "Russia"
Come from the same root word
You know, Pushkin's against people like you, yo

You look askance at people who don't look like you
You're blabbering something about Russian culture?
From that culture here's an answer for you:
"What, like, Pushkin's not a Russian poet?"

Verse 2:

You see, someone is lengthening the queue to paradise for you
Everyone is pushing through on the highway and you're on the shoulder
Who's bothering you, foreign workers?
Foreign students and everyone like them?

Without them your life would be lighthearted movie
With an awesome beginning, middle, and end
And you yourself would be the best dancer to everyone
If your balls didn't rub up against each other

Also, in short, about national dances:
Russians have always been a friendly nation
We only beat those who throw the first punch
Xenophobia is a thing of Neanderthals

Let's leave racism for the apes and the Australopithecus
Tell everyone "hi" from the nineteenth century
Great, your progress is impressive
There's only one thing that A. S. Pushkin can't understand. . . .

Repeat chorus

The clear mocking tone of the rap is evident from the start. Using Pushkin, who is revered by all Russians, is appropriate, insofar as racism in Russia is usually directed at persons of color and, even though many Russians don't realize it, their favorite author Pushkin was, himself, such a person. Noize is famous for his social-activist songs, and it is worth mentioning that he has a massive following in Russia. This points to the fact that, in the face of a repressive vertical power structure in which freedom of speech is under attack and racist acts often go unpunished, there is a need for legitimate sources of information that deviate from the official versions of events—hip hop songs often bridge the gap between reality and the Russian government's retelling of an event.

Noize's latest album, *Novyi al'bom* (New Album), has several songs that protest the rise of racism and fascism in Russia. When asked about these "antifascist" songs, such as "Edem 14/88" (Eden 14/88), and why he felt the need to address this issue, Noize answered:

It upsets me that these views are gaining popularity. I get the chance to hang out with many different people. Currently, it's not shameful to be a xenophobe or a racist. As if it's OK to think that way. It's difficult to say why this is so. First, people simply forget what is inherent in this way of thinking. Too much time has passed already; the generation that remembers World War II is gradually fading away. Also, there are concrete political figures who, through their actions—consciously or unconsciously—exacerbate the situation. (Alekseev interview, 2012)

Clearly, Noize considers Vladimir Putin to be one such figure. Noize is becoming more and more political in the face of the crackdown on political dissent in Putin's Russia. The fact that he has a massive following is comforting as Russians face the difficult situation regarding nationalism and racism in their country.

Noize's most famous protest song has to do with a well-known car accident in Moscow that happened on February 25, 2010. In order to understand the song "Mercedes S666" (Mercedes S666), it is important to understand a few things about driving in contemporary Russia. They have a special, powerful, and nationwide law-enforcement agency dedicated to traffic safety, called the Gosudarstvennaia inspektsiia bezopasnosti dorozhnogo dvizheniia (State Inspectorate of Automotive Traffic Safety), or GIBDD for short, which is actually part of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs. It is widely known as a nefarious organization whose primary goal, it would seem, is to extort money from drivers. (I myself have been pulled over on various occasions while driving in Russia, and the methods they use to get bribes are highly sophisticated.) The traffic accident was between a large black Mercedes S500, which carried Vice President Anatoly Barkov of Russian oil giant Lukoil, along with his driver and bodyguard, and a much

smaller Citroën C3, which carried Olga Aleksandrina and Vera Mikhailovna. By most accounts, the head-on collision on Leninskii Prospekt occurred when the Mercedes, in an effort to thwart Moscow's insufferable rush-hour traffic, crossed the double lines to travel in the oncoming traffic lane. Surprisingly, this is common in Moscow, especially for official cars that carry a blue flashing light on top. That Barkov's Mercedes was traveling toward the city center during the morning rush hour while the Citroën was traveling away was sufficient proof for most Russians that Barkov's car was in the wrong. There is no need for a car traveling freely with little traffic to swerve into the oncoming rush-hour's slow-moving traffic. Aleksandrina and Mikhailovna died in the crash, while the three occupants of the Mercedes suffered only minor injuries. Quickly, the official account of the accident reported that the driver of the Citroën, Aleksandrina, was to blame and, since the driver of the at-fault car died in the crash, the case was closed.

Almost immediately, Noize MC composed "Mercedes S666"—he is a friend of Aleksandrina's sister, Anastasia Aleksandrina, and felt he needed to act. Almost immediately after the accident, Anastasia Aleksandrina herself, who is also known as the hip hop singer Staisha, published an open letter to the authorities about the accident on the rap portal rap.ru. About the necessity to shine a light on the injustice of the accident, Noize said:

In this situation, I am not blindly worshiping the principle of the presumption of innocence. If you don't attract attention to the situation dramatically then everything gets hushed up. . . . [The police] acted quickly and with one specific aim, saying the driver of the Citroën was the guilty party. If I hadn't drawn attention quickly, then it would have been easier to cover this up. I understand that I will have a mess to clean up later, but I could not stand on the sidelines. (Werman 2010)

"Mercedes S666" is a take on the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" (Werman 2010), and the video depicts Anatoly Barkov as Satan. The video is extremely scathing in its indictment of Barkov, specifically, and of the current power structure in general. What follows is a translation of the entire song:

Verse 1:

Allow me to introduce myself, I'm Anatoly Barkov
 I don't have leathery wings, no vampire fangs.
 In my position I'm not interested at all
 In such low-class things.
 Vice president of Lukoil is something to be reckoned with.
 You need to look respectable, without excessive glitz.
 All of these satanic spoofs you are doing are complete childishness,

Any resemblance I have to the actual devil is totally lacking
 Because a real demon has nothing to do with a clown.
 Let's leave the masquerades for the heavy-metal stars.
 I'm a different kind of person, of the higher sort.
 I don't see problems that can't be solved with bribes.
 I don't know people whose lives are more important than my interests.
 I'm not concerned what the press writes about me.
 So if you are in the way of my Mercedes
 In any account you'll be guilty of the traffic accident.

Chorus:

Mercedes S666

Out of the way pleb, don't get hit,
 Piteable mob, tremble, there's a king on the road,
 We're late to hell, make way for the chariot.

Mercedes S666

Out of the way pleb, don't get hit.
 Piteable mob, tremble, there's a king on the road.
 We're late to hell, make way for the chariot.

Verse 2:

In the underworld I'll be stewing in the next pot alongside Evisuokov
 But now I'm alive, healthy, and fully stocked
 100 percent insured from any problems
 And, moreover, I've known Putin for a long time.
 I possess the skill to change space and time.
 All surveillance cameras stop working at once.
 But if there is any evidence of my crime recorded on them
 Then you can stuff your popular opinion up your ass.
 People will yackity yak, and then calm down
 The dog barks and the elephant keeps a clean reputation.
 I have to be honest, I don't even really remember
 Who Vera Sidel'nikova and Olga Aleksandrina were.

Repeat chorus

When Noize raps, "I'm a different kind of person, of the higher sort / I don't see problems that can't be solved with bribes / I don't know people whose lives are more important than my interests / I'm not concerned what the press writes about me," he is tapping into an angst and a sense of helplessness that lie in the hearts of all Russians. He skillfully creates a picture of Barkov as Satan, changing the number of the car to 666 and making many artful allusions to the underworld.

The chorus of the rap accurately depicts how many of those in power feel with respect to their fellow citizens on the road. Finally, the fact that Barkov has “known Putin for a long time” speaks to the fact that if, indeed, someone knows Putin personally in Russia, there is the general feeling that that person is above the law—such incidents as this traffic accident prove the fact.

Largely because of this rap and a few other journalistic interventions, an investigation was launched into the true cause of the accident, making it all the way up to then-President Dmitri Medvedev. In this fashion, Noize and other activist rappers are able to alter the course of events in Russia. Ultimately, in September 2010, it was determined that Barkov was not at fault in the accident. However, the seeds of revolt had been planted by late 2010; a solid case could be made that incidents such as this famous traffic accident caused the intense unrest and political protests after the contested Russian parliamentary elections in December 2011. An even stronger case could be made that Noize’s incarceration in August 2010 in Volgograd, mentioned above, was a result of “Mercedes S666.”

Vasya Oblomov is a Russian rapper whose lyrics are, arguably, even more controversial than Noize’s. Vasya Oblomov is the pseudonym of Vasily Goncharov (b. 1984), who currently lives in Moscow. His first megahit as Oblomov, “Magadan,” was released in 2010 and won several awards. The song displays his keen sense of satire and humor, as he ridicules many current memes of contemporary Russia. The song also represents his first foray into rap. Oblomov—a musician, rapper, writer, activist, and intellectual—often draws the ire of the authorities, which can be risky in present-day Russia. Though his style can certainly be described as rap, he prefers the term “songs of a conversational style,” and he often mixes these songs with interesting and introspective musical soundtracks. He started his career not as the rapper Oblomov, but as the frontman of Cheboza, a Britpop-inspired rock group from Rostov-on-Don, in 1999.

Oblomov’s songs deal with the many injustices in the Russian political system and the various peculiarities of Russian culture: the endemic corruption in the Russian police force in “Kto khochet stat’ militsionerom?” (Who Wants to Become a Police Officer?), the shady side of Russian politics and the Russian judicial system in “Zhal’” (Too Bad), the hopelessness of the cultural elite in “Magadan,” or the disputed elections of December 2011 in “Paganen’kii u nas narod” (Our Rotten Little Nation). Three particularly contentious songs are those written by Oblomov and performed along with two famous political activists and television personalities, Ksenia Sobchak and Leonid Parfenov: “Poka Medved” (So Long, Medvedev), “VVP” (for Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin), and “Rap Moleben” (Rap Prayer). The first is an open letter to then-President Medvedev. Its openly mocking tone chides Medvedev about his decisions surrounding the return to power of Putin. The second is about Putin himself and is not praiseful of the leader, which is to say quite enough about the song. The

third, “Rap Prayer,” is about the craziness surrounding the now-famous Pussy Riot episode.

About the crackdown on dissent currently going on in Russia, and about censorship, Oblomov says:

I write about that which I think is important. I act according to the principle “I can’t be quiet.” Lev Tolstoy wrote his books according to the same principle. As far as freedom of speech is concerned, of course, in a different world it would be possible for my songs to be heard on radio stations or state television and so on. One state television station wanted to invite me on to its program and sing a song in connection with an album launch, but since they could not find one song that they could play, they said: “We can’t invite you, since we can’t find one appropriate song.” They invite me to a radio broadcast to have a conversation and give an interview, but at the same time they’re afraid to put my songs in their rotation for whatever reason. It’s a fact, but it doesn’t mean that I shouldn’t write about it. First I write a song, and then something happens with it, or doesn’t happen. . . .

About censorship, because of the internet you can upload anything you like. Thus there’s no censorship at all. I write that which I think is necessary and act as I see fit. After all, the internet essentially helped musicians open a path to the public. Since, if earlier there was an editor-in-chief of a radio or television station who needed to approve your clip before an audience saw it, then now all those barriers are gone. You film a clip as you like and make a song as you like, upload it to the internet and, if anyone at all likes what you did, then that person will find it. And thus, of course, in the event you write a song, there is not even any question of censorship. There’s no one to demand it. (Oblomov 2013)

Oblomov’s “Zhal’” is a good example of his incisive poetry. The song is a laundry list of complaints about contemporary Russian society and of things in which Oblomov does not believe. What follows is an excerpted version of the song:

I don’t believe the deputies, they’re in the system, and it doesn’t matter whether they’re with them or not.

I don’t believe what they write in Russian newspapers, or in the answers during the Q&A.

I don’t believe in documentary TV programs, since they’re all made for us at someone’s urging.

I don’t believe in honest billionaires, and I don’t believe Gazmanov when he sings about officers.

I don’t believe in an honest president, nor do I believe in doctors or their patients.

I don’t believe in jurisprudence or justice—tell me, why would I?!

I don’t believe the beggars or the bums in the subway, nor do I believe in those who voted for United Russia.

I don't believe in the future of Russian soccer, and I don't believe that we've got the same Coca-Cola.
 But time will put everything in its place and, chances are, we are already right there.
 We'll walk around and smile at each other, and at difficult times we'll hold out a hand.
 Morality will become more important than any letter of the law and no icon will be necessary to do good deeds.
 Civil society in a law-abiding state, and the person whom they just yesterday reproached for nonconformity
 Will not be able to find a reason for dissatisfaction, mistrust, or banal anxiety.
 The thought is that all of this will be true, a classic author once wrote us in a letter.
 But it's too bad that neither you nor I will get a chance to live in that beautiful time.
 And I'm sad that neither you nor I will get a chance to live in that beautiful time. (Oblomov 2011)

At first Oblomov raps about what it is that he doesn't believe in, but toward the end of the song, he talks about a beautiful future. However, in the penultimate line—in which he quotes directly from the famous Russian poet Nikolai Nekrasov's collection of poetry "Railways"—Oblomov comes back to a common overriding feeling among intellectuals in Russia, the notion that things will certainly get better in Russia in the future, but that Russians currently alive will simply not live to see it. One gets a sense of Oblomov's political underpinnings when he writes about several of the things in which he does not believe: Russian newspapers and TV, an honest president or honest billionaires, or the judicial system.

As is well known, on February 21, 2012, five members of the punk-rock collective Pussy Riot staged a mock concert in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, demanding, among other things, the removal of then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin from power. The ensuing court battle and incarceration of three of the five, and Putin's personal involvement in the case, garnered worldwide media attention. This event put all Russian artists on notice—you could either play by the rules or go against them and face the consequences. Like Noize MC, Oblomov is firmly part of the latter group. About the Pussy Riot episode, Oblomov said:

It seems to me that everything that happened was simply the result of a huge universal stupidity. At first, certain people with church titles had the great idea to campaign for political power and participate in political life. And after that stupidity, different people had the great idea to dance in a church and sing

a song. And then a third group of people had the great idea to begin a judicial process for this. One stupidity resulted in another. And nothing would have happened if that Russian court had had enough brains to not incarcerate those women and punish them in some other way. But no, the court decided to incarcerate them. It was yet another stupidity. This ball of stupidity multiplied and became this global absurdity, leaving the confines of Russia and getting discussed in the world media. Most shameful, it's simply a result of universal stupidity. And then, when it became clear that different people had made many idiotic decisions, the propagandists were left no choice but to accuse some secret enemies of Russia and say that they want to ruin us. After all, one must vindicate oneself. In my view it was simply stupidity after stupidity and a huge ball of craziness. This is what "Rap Prayer" was about. I didn't make anything up; I simply outlined all of the absurdity that has taken place in the country for the past year. In Russia, we had a great actor, Yuri Nikulin, who often said: "I don't create anything funny—it's enough to look at life, notice some things, list them, and this will seem funny and absurd." But, just the same, it's from life. The song "Rap Prayer" is about the same thing. Moreover, I didn't lie with one word, didn't make anything up, I simply connected the whole chain together, and it already looks like nonsense. This was the point. Generally, I feel sorry for all people in that situation, because it's really a situation of global idiocy. I was dismayed with how it all went down. I don't like Pussy Riot, the music or the women. It was just a classic Russian stupidity—one person said something, another one did something, a third went somewhere, the court decided something, unrightfully or rightfully, the media wrote something, and as a result, millions were wasted by Russian authorities on the image of Russia abroad, money was simply thrown into the trash can, and in the eyes of the world Russia turned into a place where Putin is fighting with Pussy Riot. To be completely honest, I was ashamed by this. That this happened. I experienced a feeling of shame when this all happened, precisely the process of the prison sentence. I had a feeling of shame. It seemed to me that this was all wrong. I signed a letter that other artists were signing calling for the release of those women. I really believe that what they did does not call for a prison sentence. (Oblomov 2013)

This long quotation encapsulates the frustration that many Russian artists now face under the current political situation. More than anything, the fact that one must choose sides in the debate is becoming more and more obvious; either you back Putin and the present power structure, or you do not. The fact that he became involved in the Pussy Riot case means that he is part of the popular culture, and Putin wants contemporary artists to know that.

Oblomov's response was a brilliant trio, again with Sobchak and Parfenov, entitled "Rap Prayer." The video begins with Russian Eastern Orthodox music and all three "rappers" dressed in black religious garb. What Oblomov does with his lyrics is exactly what Yuri Nikulin did, as evidenced from the quote above, "I don't create anything funny—it's enough to look at life, notice some things, list

them, and this will seem funny and absurd.” The rap is addressed to the Holy Mother, and simply goes through all of the events surrounding Pussy Riot. What follows is my English translation of “Rap Moleben”:

This is a rap prayer in support of religion
 Preserving stability and a sense of moderation
 Oblomov, Parfenov, and Ksenia Sobchak
 Are sending a sign to the Holy Mother

Dear Mother, pay attention
 To what kind of sufferings we're enduring
 All winter our country fought with a foreign enemy
 There were several protest meetings and then

A group of particularly dangerous girls in a church
 Shouted something and stomped their feet
 Demanding immediately to drive someone out
 Do we all really need this, Holy Mother?

How did the people gang up on the patriarch?
 Because of the watch? Because of some gift?
 His holiness doesn't look at clocks
 He doesn't even really know whether they're there or not

Evil bloggers are urging us to sink the boat
 Along with the patriarch, with his tobacco and vodka
 Along with the nano-dust in his apartment
 Along with that girl living there, either Lena or Ira

With the drivers of the Gelandewagen and BMW
 With the clergy and the perpetrators of traffic accidents
 With the president and prime minister
 They are shaking the boat slowly so that it sank quickly

Along with the envoy from the Ural wagon factory
 Not waiting for 2018
 Dear Holy Mother, please guide us
 And at the same time wipe out the accounts of the protests' sponsors

The religious gatekeepers' feelings are offended
 Bikers with flags are cruising around memorials
 The patriarch wisely kept silent for a long time
 But the sinners won't repent

After all, doesn't it enter their minds that Russian justice
 Tries us for our sins, even if we are stupid

And will certainly put us on the right path
By means of an Orthodox Christian prison sentence

Orthodox Christianity is the only unity for us
Chekism, nationalism, and self-preservation
Echo-Moskva engages in sacrilege
And sows discord in the minds of our citizens

But the sacred support for our Orthodox faith
Strengthened the people's spirit and our judicial system
And blessed the criminal case of May 6
And the driving away of the students from "Occupy Abai"

And didn't allow the investigation to return those millions to Ksenia
So that the devil didn't confuse her for sponsoring the violence
And god-servant Ksenia was rejected from the saintly Mus TV, from ORT
and TNT
And all kinds of evil TV.

And the Moscow OMON were given apartments
Bastrykin apologized and was forgiven
We thank You for Your angelic patience
Don't pay any attention to public opinion

You definitely know what is necessary for our country
Who should be in the Duma and who in the Kremlin
Holy Mother Russia lives justly
The courts will decide the fate of Pussy Riot impartially

Thank you for your support, all Russians are with us
Holy Mother, don't kick anyone out. Stay -with us!

As with any rap song, there are numerous allusions to current events. For instance, the "foreign enemy" is the United States (immediately after the December 2011 protests, Putin went on record as saying that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the US government were to blame), while the "someone" in "demanding immediately to drive someone out" is Putin, since Pussy Riot was demanding his departure from government in their song. But, as Oblomov points out, he is simply commenting on what has happened recently, and is not making anything up. One of the main issues that the Pussy Riot episode highlighted was the increasing involvement and interdependency of the national government and the Russian Eastern Orthodox Church, led by Patriarch Kirill I. There was a famous episode of an expensive Breguet watch, worth roughly \$30,000, which Kirill I wore to a meeting with a government official. Realizing that this did not give the right impression of the church, editors airbrushed the watch off his wrist for publication

of the photo, but they forgot to airbrush the reflection of the watch on the table (Schwartz and Mackey 2012). This famous episode is part of “Rap Moleben,” in the fourth stanza.

In a larger sense, though, what happened with Pussy Riot highlights greater problems with the Russian government. It also has soured people’s relationship to the church. About this, legendary rapper Vladi, from the group Kasta, says:

In Russia there exists a loyal relationship to Christianity, to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, but this situation with Pussy Riot somewhat worsened this relationship with Christianity and, more specifically, with the church.

Because the church should, in theory, simply ignore what happened and somehow forgive. That’s how the church should conduct itself. However, it all ended with prison sentences and loud trials. And people, looking at all that, began to understand that the church was not at all doing what Jesus urges us to do. (Vladi 2013)

What all of this underscores, then, is a top-heavy Russian governing system in which freedom of speech is under attack, and artists are forced underground. It is a system in which one must take sides: there is little opportunity to simply ignore the situation.

Without question, the most famous rapper who supports the Putin government in Russia today is Timati (b. 1983 as Timur Yunusov). He is an artist in the party camp of hip hop, and his lyrics are for the most part uncontroversial. He has become more of an entrepreneur in the past few years, launching several ventures in clothing and producing, and he has appeared with such American artists as Snoop Dogg (at Timati’s great expense), Busta Rhymes, Timbaland, and P. Diddy. Judging by a concert by Timati and one of his many protégés, L’One, that I attended, his fans are numerous and faithful.

Before the Russian presidential elections of March 2012, Timati famously filmed an election commercial in support of Putin’s candidacy (Timati, 2012a).³ Even more famously, Timati’s support for Putin resulted in an invitation for a postelection party commemorating Putin’s victory, to which only 40 guests were invited. One of the more famous photos of Timati features him, in full hip hop garb, with Putin, both waving a victory sign.

Timati’s involvement in politics does not endear him to Russia’s cultural elite, but it needs to be said that he, more than others, is a true hip hop artist. By this I mean that he uses all available channels at his disposal to further his career and achieve his goals. To be sure, there are those who would call this opportunism as well as those who might call him a sell-out, and that might be a fair judgment for Timati. But no one can deny that, in the face of “keeping it real,” the most successful hip hop artists in the United States are, to one extent or another, opportunistic. That Timati has branched out to start his own line of clothing (Black

Star by TIMATI) and his own production company (Star Factory 4) is in line with many of the biggest names in American hip hop, such as P. Diddy or Jay Z. Timati is concerned with promoting Russian artists beyond Russia's borders. He says:

I want to bring new big names to the market and make them big stars. So that they can shine not only in our country but also beyond its borders. . . . My goal is to take a Russian self-made product and raise it to an international level and make it the equivalent of anything from America, Asia, or Europe. My goal is to break stereotypes and promote so that Russia could be proud of its heroes in the West. (Timati, 2012b)

In following Timati, one gets the sense that there is an obsession on his part to prove himself in the West as a great hip hop artist. This obsession, which is part of Russia's larger obsession with the West and, more specifically, with the United States, is unique to Russian hip hop. Those who are invested in hip hop in Russia are aware of its American roots and, for these hip hop fans, making it in America would be a coup.

Beyond the obsession with American hip hop that this camp of rap represents in Russia, Timati's alliance with the current Russian power structure has proven quite beneficial for him. All channels are open, and he is free to pursue any project that he desires. Notably, there is a strong audience for this brand of hip hop in Russia, and many interesting new artists have aligned themselves with Timati, an artist who represents an antipode, in many ways, to Noize and Oblomov.

The fact that both Noize and Oblomov were classically trained brings up another interesting point about Russian rap—people who engage in the genre often come to it later, and from backgrounds as instrumentalists and performing musicians. Further, unlike in the States, Russian rap did not emerge as part of a cultural movement, and it is not therefore perceived as a dissident art form by itself. Russians hip hop fans are generally aware of the history of the genre in the States, and many of these fans listen to great American rappers. However, they usually don't understand the lyrics, and they are listening either as an act of protest or an act of American solidarity. The following quotation, from a history of Russian rap, summarizes:

The main problem with Russian rap today is that there is very little “home-grown” talent in rap and too many prejudices around this theme, which places rap in Russia into an unfavorable situation. It's extremely interesting that, if hip hop arose as a music and subculture of the “African American ghetto,” with its strongly aggressive attitude toward the white population (which is fair to say not only of the USA but, for instance, of France as well), then in Russia hip hop appeared as an international culture predominantly perceived by the

“white” segment of the population, and therefore one cannot speak of a “ghetto subculture” in Russia. (“History of Russian Rap” 2009)

The typical Russian hip hop fan generally comes to the genre out of interest in American culture, listening to American artists, and then migrates over to local Russian artists once it becomes clear that such artists are around. This is an important point in order to understand how rap is perceived in Russia, and how it began. It is getting to the point where fewer people have a good understanding of the American roots of rap and hip hop. At a recent concert in Moscow, by Timati and L'One, I was impressed by how younger audience members knew almost nothing of American rap (only Wu Tang Clan was mentioned), while knowing quite a lot about Russian hip hop artists. Not surprisingly, as Russian rap matures and its following grows, the link to rap's American roots becomes more distant.

It is also worth pointing out that, with respect to “representing” regions of the country (a time-honored element of rap in the United States), all roads ultimately lead to Moscow, even in 2013. Sure, there are famous rappers outside of Moscow, but if you've made it in the rap game, you are likely in Moscow, like the following big-name rappers and rap groups who now reside there: AK 47 (originally from Beriozovskii), Kasta (Rostov), Noize MC (Iartsevo), Vasya Oblomov (Rostov), Basta (Rostov), and Dzhigan (Odessa). Occasionally, a big-name artist who lives in Moscow is actually from Moscow, like Timati or Guf, but more often than not, people still come to Moscow to make their career in rap.

That nationalism is prominent in Putin's Russia is not in question. Hardly a day goes by when there is not news of some new patriotic or nationalistic trend. This nationalistic environment, and the backlash against it, affects hip hop in Russia in various ways. Because rap is a poetic art form, it is scrutinized to a far greater extent than other art forms. Also, the authorities realize that it is wildly popular, and they can see its influence on its citizens. It would seem that the sadness of being a rap artist, or any artist, in Putin's Russia lies in the fact that one *must* choose sides—either to be with Putin or to be against him. To do neither is to wither away in obscurity. Of course, there are many talented hip hop artists who practice their craft without getting involved in politics, but the fact that everyone must take a stance on Russia's present power structure is unique. In the States, we saw this to some degree during the Bush administration, for example, when the Dixie Chicks were excoriated for taking a political stance against the president. However, the type of political pervasiveness that is present in Putin's Russia could never be part of the artistic environment in post-Cold War America.

Perhaps it could be said that Russian rap represents the best and the worst of present-day Russia: its dissident voice crying out for freedom, and its opportunistic underside playing the patriotic card for self-advancement. Rap, wherever it is made, has always been controversial, and this is quite evident in Putin's Russia.

I think Oblomov says it best when speaking about what can be done and what needs to be done in order to improve Russia's lot:

I think that if you don't do anything, then nothing will ever happen. I think that one needs to request, to demand from one's country that it become better. One needs to be able to recognize one's problems in order to be able to fix them. Nor must one sit and say, "We're the best, the most beautiful," with no good reason to do so. In that case there's nothing to strive for. If you think that you're the best then you have nothing to strive for, and that's not really the case. One needs to acknowledge one's mistakes in order to fix them. (Oblomov 2013)

NOTES

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2. The party camp would include artists such as Dzhigan, KReeD, L'One, Mot, and Timati, and the political and artistic camp would include artists and groups such as AK 47, Assai, Basta (aka Noganno), Guf, Kasta, Krovostok, Noize MC, and Vasya Oblomov.

3. Notably, the YouTube version of this video has only 477 likes versus 2,769 dislikes as of April 8, 2013, which shows, to an extent, what people think of Timati's support for Putin.

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