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A beacon of hope for Russia's cultural scene

The future of Russia's once world-class culture doesn't look bright. Its greatest hope lies in its creative music scene

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, news regarding Russia's world-class culture has been so bad that its very survival is uncertain. In the beginning, many musicians, actors and fine artists publicly criticised the war. When that didn't change anything, they broke up into three factions. Russian musicologist Anna Vilenskaya as well as journalist Andrei Perzev, who, looking at film and theatre people, observed that there are those who continue to publicly condemn the invasion, those who are silent but avoid openly supporting the war and those who publicly joined the campaign of the regime.

The state immediately launched an extensive campaign of repression against the first group, forcing many well-known artists to go abroad or depriving them of their basis for work and income. But those who show support for dissenters are also at risk. For example, 84-year-old Liya Akhedzhakova publicly criticised the war and was ousted from the theatre ensemble she'd been working with since 1977, while the play she was starring in was cancelled. Then, when her colleague Ksenia Rappoport expressed her solidarity with Akhedzhakova via social media, her play was also dropped before the premiere.

Radical repression of artists

Even those who don't openly rebel against the Kremlin but do not toe the government's new totalitarian cultural line either can lose their jobs. A prominent example is Zelfira Tregulova, director of Moscow's prestigious Tretyakov Gallery. Unquestionably, the well-known art historian did great work – mounting successful exhibits, acquiring many modern artworks and not least, opening a branch of the gallery in Samara. Nonetheless, according to the online newspaper *Meduza* which cited a source in the Russian Ministry of Culture, Tregulova was forced out last month because she was deemed to no longer fit the new ultraconservative political course. Patriotic circles in Moscow had

criticised her exhibits and claimed that they failed to reflect Russia's 'traditional values'.

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The governing Russian elite's mainstream pro-war stance is reflected in its antimodernist, nationalistic, reactionary take on culture. Art and music are not just 'improper' when made by obvious opponents but also when they integrate foreign, let alone *Western*, influences. The pervasive repression means that creative artists, especially those in the classical and theatre sectors, cannot just disappear into any niche, no matter how small, when they fall into political disfavour. But the disappearance of even minimally dissenting spirits lowers the artistic standard of Russian museums and theatres. The deciding factor is no longer the individual's knowledge or competence, but rather their willingness to hang the pro-war 'Z' around their neck, notes Alexander Baunov of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

This polarisation is inversely reflected abroad: conformist artists are hardly booked, whereas artists critical of the government are celebrated all the more. Well-known Russian filmmakers, for instance, took part in the 2022 Cannes Film Festival, where Kirill Serebrennikov's film *Tchaikovsky's Wife* entered the main competition. The director fled Russia after a long travel ban had been lifted.

It is also not clear if and how critical Russian plays or films d'auteur can survive in exile. The Russian language is not broadly spoken, so it's primarily the Russian diaspora who make up paying audiences. For that reason, it is mostly countries of the former Soviet Union, where locals often know Russian, that can provide sanctuary for the dissidents. This is why many famous Russian artists fleeing government persecution headed to the Caucasus and Central Asia – rather than the wealthy but linguistically largely incompatible West.

The exception of the music scene

Only in the music scene is the situation different, although it also includes conformists, whom Vilenskaya calls 'propaganda musicians'. But these have no concept and the officials don't know yet what they want. Most significantly, the quality of their work cannot be compared with what dissidents produce. Russian TV presenter Dmitry Nagiyev, who

publicly refused to host the *MUZ-TV* awards – which only went to conformist acts –agrees. He'd rather wait to honour the 'actually best musicians'.

Many of the top musicians of all genres have left the country, including singer-songwriter Zemfira, Little Big (famous from the 2020 Eurovision Song Contest) and the experimental electronic music band IC3PEAK. Unlike theatre artists, being in exile does not cut them off from audiences in Russia. Nonconformist music continues to reach its audience back home over hard-to-control online routes, where exile events and sessions are streamed and music files are shared.

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All of the most successful Russian music acts are nonconformist. Andrei Perzev points out that Little Big has some 7.2 million subscribers on YouTube, while 'patriotic' acts aimed at younger people stagnate at five to six figures – despite being omnipresent in domestic media. The latest video of hip-hop artist Oxxxymiron, who has been declared a 'foreign agent', has received 14 million clicks on YouTube. It's no surprise that the Russian government is attempting to block this last freely accessible Western social network.

But blocking YouTube is unlikely to curtail the influence of oppositional musicians' on Russian listeners, even when leaving aside workarounds like virtual private networks (VPNs). Vilenskaya finds that it is not propaganda pop but rather the music created by those in exile that best addresses the needs and reality of Russians who feelisolated in the current system. Similarly, Perzev invokes the young people in the Soviet Union who made cassette copies of 'forbidden' music, which, unlike the ideological Soviet sound, was reputed to be extremely good. In the 1980s, underground concerts were pursued by the police – a scenario that could well be reproduced for Moscow and Saint Petersburg subcultures in the next few years. After Soviet repression ended, dissident artists filled football stadia – unlike the conformist musicians of official USSR cultural programmes.

The music scene's greater power of resistance does not just apply to the stars of Russian youth. The generation of musicians banned in the Soviet Union, who have mostly older listeners, collectively reject the inner-Russian turnabout to purely 'patriotic music'. Legendary rock stars like DDT and Aquarium quickly denounced the Russian war of aggression.

Even 73-year-old Alla Pugacheva, one of the most important Russian

pop singers of the 20th century, went into exile in protest.

The greatest hope for Russian culture lies in the creative music scene – both young and old.

Of course, all their music was immediately eliminated from Russian radio playlists. But traditional media, which is easily controlled, can't silence successful music. Even the older audiences use the internet to access music by 'undesirable' musicians for home consumption. It is much harder to suppress really popular music than other types of art.

Modern, young bands with contemporary sounds can find new fans outside Russia. The electronic duo IC3PEAK, which has always criticised the Kremlin, will be making a guest appearance with the legendary British Chemical Brothers at a major Finnish electronic music festival. Since leaving Russia, the two Muscovites had 16 gigs on an international club tour, 15 of them sold out. One downer in the midst of their success is that Ukrainian musicians repeatedly refuse to go onstage with Russian musicians – even those who openly criticise the war.

Thus, the greatest hope for Russian culture lies in the creative music scene – both young and old. It is capable of producing anti-war heroes like John Lennon and of spreading a flame for peace in a gloomy, retrograde 'Russian World' of dull heroic patriotism. For the rest of Russia's cultural scene, the future looks as grey as Russian TV and radio.



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