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Who's afraid of guitars?

Russia's fear of music reveals a deeper panic — the loss of control over its youth

Russian rock legend Yuri Shevchuk, frontman of the band DDT, electrified the crowd at a concert with one defiant line: 'Our homeland isn't about kissing the president's backside'. That single sentence earned him the wrath of the authorities. Accused of making 'negative statements about the president' and 'discrediting the special military operation', Shevchuk was fined. His concerts across Russia were cancelled. Since then, DDT has only ever performed outside the country.

Shevchuk's case is far from unique. Since Ukraine was invaded, the Kremlin has blacklisted dozens of Russian musicians. Rock icons like Boris Grebenshchikov and Andrei Makarevich, plus rap stars such as Noize MC, Oxxxymiron and Face have all fled Russia. Their songs have been scrubbed from streaming platforms after being branded 'foreign agents' or even 'extremists'.

In early 2024, it became clear just how far the regime's reach extended after members of the band Bi-2 were arrested in Thailand, the official reason being that they didn't have a work permit. Under pressure from the Russian consulate, they faced deportation to Russia. Only after days of political wrangling involving Russian opposition figures in exile and Israeli diplomats were they finally allowed to leave. Many observers have wondered: why is there such a need to intimidate musicians abroad — especially artists whose biggest hits come from another era?

That same spectacle repeated itself this autumn when 76-year-old Soviet and Russian pop icon Alla Pugacheva became the next target of state propaganda. After a long silence, she gave a YouTube interview criticising the political situation in her homeland. A simple conversation with the singer, who had left Russia in 2022, turned into a cultural and political affair as the entire propaganda machine pounced on her. Members of the Duma, state-aligned performers and even Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova sneered at Pugachevam, calling her 'old' and 'irrelevant'. Yet the number of views told a different story: by late October, over 26 million people had watched the interview.

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But even that wasn't enough for the regime. Having silenced the stars of the 80s and 90s, the authorities have now turned on today's street musicians. In October 2025, 18-year-old singer Naoko (real name Diana Loginova) was sentenced to 13 days' detention for singing songs by 'foreign agents' such as Monetochka, Zemfira and Noize MC in a public square in St Petersburg. The official charge? Her performance had 'caused a public gathering'. Videos of young people joining in on Nevsky Prospect, one of the city's major thoroughfares, went viral across Russian social media.

Naoko's arrest sparked an outcry, particularly among Russian opposition circles in exile. Many saw her as a symbol of hope: finally, a new generation daring to stand up to Putin and the war. Exile media hailed Naoko as a 'new kind of anti-war heroine'. On TikTok, clips of the dainty singer making a heart shape with her hands as she was led away in court drew comparisons to Alexei Navalny. Artists whose songs she had sung came out in support. Monetochka wrote: 'You all scowl at us, yet it's you who are afraid of guitars and songs'. A photo of a beefed-up policeman handcuffing the slim young performer became an instant symbol, making the Kremlin look grotesque: a state flexing its muscles against a young woman with a guitar.

Yet the government couldn't sit idly by and let this happen, of course. Because this was about more than music... it was about capturing the hearts and minds of an entire generation. Naoko was born in 2007, and her listeners are not much older. These young people have never known a Russia without Putin. They live in a country where the only safe songs to sing are patriotic anthems, including 'I'm Russian' and 'Let's Rise' by Shaman, the pop singer adored by state media. Anything else arouses suspicion. Singing songs by 'foreign agents' has now become a real risk.

But can waving phones to the beat of banned songs really be called an anti-war protest? Until mid-October, most young Russians lived in a comfortable bubble, listening to forbidden artists at home or through their headphones, often in blissful ignorance that the music was banned. There were rarely any consequences for this, but now, a simple street performance has been recast as a 'hostile act against the state'. The repression machine has been set in motion. A peaceful attempt to preserve a sliver of private space has suddenly become a 'crime'. Young people in St Petersburg are learning first-hand that, today, even their choice of music can land them in a police station. In an interview with

independent online outlet *Bumaga* earlier this summer, Naoko said, 'I am afraid, but my hands keep on playing. Art is the only way left to say what you think in Russia.' Now she knows: even that path is being blocked.

Fuelling resistance

Naoko's case has exposed two underlying realities. First, it laid bare the regime's panic over any voice it cannot control. The Kremlin now seems convinced that a few chords on a guitar can be as dangerous as a street protest. The state is persecuting young people who once seemed disinterested in politics — those merely annoyed by 'Grandpa,' as many call Putin. Yet repression is pushing them directly into the arms of the opposition that the regime fears most. It is teaching them that in today's Russia, you can't even choose your own playlist.

It has also revealed the internal conflict of the younger generation. Many don't see listening to banned artists as a form of protest; it's just a part of everyday life. But pretending that everything is fine doesn't work anymore. Listening to those songs has become an act of resistance. A fragile sense of inner freedom is emerging, and that is exactly what the state seeks to crush.

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After Naoko's arrest, Bumaga asked other street musicians whether they would perform in solidarity. One shrugged: 'Doesn't matter. I just like singing on the street.' But how long will mere indifference go unpunished? Many reports suggest that police have stepped up their aggression: checking IDs and threatening to confiscate instruments. Officers, too, are trying to protect themselves: after all, what happens if they don't crack down hard enough?

Meanwhile, censorship continues to take hold even further. A new law against 'drug propaganda' primarily targets rap music: even metaphorical references can now lead to prosecution. Russian rap – once the voice of the streets – is losing its authenticity. Although the law won't take effect until March 2026, musicians are already busy editing lyrics, deleting tracks and even erasing entire albums, hoping self-censorship will protect them from the ever-watchful regime. But in a country where every word can be deemed political, self-censorship offers no protection. It only drains art of its life.

It's not the sound of music that Russian authorities fear most, but the freedom to choose what to listen to. Arresting an 18-year-old for singing

a few songs tells us everything about the state of the nation. It's the sign of a regime losing its grip on those it once considered apolitical, leading it to tighten the screws ever further. One day, the thread may finally snap. But not just yet.



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