

Remixing nationalism

Gender and sexuality in Russian popular music and its reception on TikTok and Instagram

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abstract

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has exacerbated Russian nationalism, as reflected in popular music and its reception on digital media. This article explores the role of gender and sexuality in formulating and negotiating ideas about the Russian nation since the start of the full-scale invasion, focusing on the circulation and reception of the songs and music videos by the Russian singers Shaman and Tatiana Kurtukova. Both performers occupy a significant place within a broader landscape of Russian popular music and are popular on social media platforms, where users generate content that features their songs. The analysis focuses on the ways (dis)identifications with Russianness in and through popular music are performed and highlights popular music's symbolic capacity to naturalize normative ideas about gender and sexuality as well as the war in Ukraine.

KEYWORDS: Russian popular music, gender, sexuality, nationalism, Shaman, Tatiana Kurtukova, ressentiment.

Shaman, the stage name of Yaroslav Dronov, arrives on stage in a helicopter accompanied by the sound of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. He wears a black robe with a Russian flag on his arm. He takes it off to reveal a sequined hussar dolman jacket, asserting "Do not be afraid of anyone and anything and never give up! Our country is with us, and we are together. *I am Russian!*" The eponymous song starts playing and the crowd cheers in ecstasy. This video from a live performance in Novomoskovsk on July 30, 2023, reflects the

ways in which throughout 2022, Shaman has been established as a figure at the intersection of Russian militarized nationalism and Russian popular music. Dronov had been pursuing a moderately successful career since around 2013. His breakthrough came with the release of "Vstanem" [We will rise], a tribute to Great Patriotic War heroes, on February 23, 2022. On June 26, the song was broadcast in full on the program *Vesti nedeli* [News of the week] – an unprecedented occurrence for this type of news program. It was only with this state-sponsored media support and the timing of the release – remarkably, just one day before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – that his career truly took off. *Ia russkii* [I am Russian] was released on July 22, 2022.¹ Despite limited popularity within Russia, especially among the youth he supposedly targets,² he and his music were subjected to sanctions by several countries for promoting the invasion. In the summer of 2024, Shaman's music was removed from Spotify and YouTube.

SHAMAN WAS NOT the only patriotic singer that had emerged in the Russian music scene since the start of the full-scale invasion. Tatiana Kurtukova gained popularity with her song *Matushka* [Mother]. Her breakthrough came when she was invited to perform on *Pesni ot vsei dushi* [Songs with all my heart], a talk show on the state-owned network *Rossiya 1*, on July 24, 2022. Testifying to her widespread popularity, her second appearance on the same program on June 12, 2024, featured two user-made videos: footage of soldiers, fully equipped in military gear, enthusiastically engaging with *Matushka* from inside a tank, as well as a national dance ensemble from the North Caucasus performing a Lezginka-style dance to a fast-paced remix of the song.³ The user-made videos that framed Kurtukova's TV appearance further point to how it is not only the two artists that engage with nation-

alist symbolism through their respective songs, but also audiences.

In this article, I trace how ideas about Russianness circulate in popular music, focusing on the songs by Shaman and Tatiana Kurtukova and the reception by their online audiences amidst the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The questions that inform my analysis are: What ideas about Russia are circulated in the music of Shaman and Tatiana Kurtukova and how, if at all, are they contested in user-created short videos on TikTok and Instagram? How are gender, sexuality, and nationalism co-articulated?

Gender, sexuality, and Russian popular music before and after 2022

Previous research in the field of Russian popular music has detailed the ways in which music has long been a site of national identity formation, fostering nationalistic sentiment, and managing Russia's public image. Performances of *russkii rok* (Russian rock) and Soviet popular songs have been used to shape national identity, expressing nostalgia for Russia's Soviet and pre-Soviet past and serving as a vehicle for communicating national unity.⁴ Music has been used to consolidate and promote nationalism,⁵ particularly during times of conflict, such as the ongoing war with Ukraine.⁶ Research shows that gender and sexuality have also been central to Russian popular music. Performances at events like the Eurovision Song Contest served as nation-branding tools, blending sexualized imagery with national identity.⁷ Additionally, queer aesthetics in Russian music, inherent in *estrada*-style camp performances on prime-time TV,⁸ have been co-opted by the state. Originally a site for LGBTQ+ self-expression,⁹ these aesthetics have been repeatedly reworked for political purposes, serving to distract from domestic issues and engage in virtue-signaling for foreign audiences.¹⁰

AS VIDEO BLOGGER and musicologist Anna Vilenskaia somewhat reductively suggests, after February 2022, the developments in Russian popular music have proceeded in three distinct directions.¹¹ Some musicians who went into exile – such as Monetochka, Noize MC, Oxxxymiron, AIGEL, IC3PEAK – create music reflecting current events, catering to both emigrated and domestic oppositional audiences.¹² Meanwhile, mainstream pop artists like Anna Asti and Zivert produce commercially driven, apolitical music that avoids the ongoing military conflict, offering listeners an escape from harsh realities and a sense of normalcy. Lastly, propaganda artists, such as Timati, Shokk, GeeGun, Akim Apachev, and, most notably, Shaman's pop-rock, provide ideo-



Tatiana Kurtukova and Shaman.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

logical justification for the armed conflict. This three-way categorization oversimplifies a complex musical landscape, where many artists navigate ambiguous positions and engage in subtle forms of resistance and commentary that evade clear ideological labeling.¹³ These developments occur amid increasing state control of the music industry that has grown since 2022, monopolizing who and what gains popularity, especially after the departure of Western companies (Sony, Spotify) and banning TikTok (May 2024) and Instagram (banned as of July 2024).¹⁴

Theoretical starting points, material, and method

This article focuses on both the production and reception of popular music. In addition to studying the circulation of Russianness in the official music videos, examples of TikTok and Instagram user-generated videos allow for an insight into Russians' quotidian performances of gender and sexuality¹⁵ and negotiations of national identity. I understand the TikTok and Instagram videos as elements of both *affective audio networks*,¹⁶ embodiments of particular sentiment that emerge through the remixing, imitation, and circulation of audio on algorithmic platforms and as *nationalist assemblages*, a dynamic network of discourses, affects, materialities, and practices that work together to produce and sustain nationalism. Theoretically inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's work on assemblage through Jasbir Puar, the concept of *nationalist assemblages* offers a way to approach nationalism as "assemblages of sensations, affects, and forces" that engender shifting (dis)identifications, rather than stable identities.¹⁷ Constructivist theories of nationalism¹⁸ highlight its processual nature and the ways in which people reproduce and subvert nationhood in everyday life through routine activities.¹⁹ Such an understanding of nationalism is central to how music, as it travels across contexts and platforms, is co-articulated by artists and users to sustain and shape feelings and expressions of nationalism.

This entanglement of cultural production and (geo)politics can be placed against a background of Russia's self-positioning

globally. Scholars studying Russia's politics and culture have long explicated the ways its position in the global arena is tied to domestic politics. *Ressentiment*, a term coined by Nietzsche and developed by Scheler, offers one way to understand Russia's position.²⁰ Ressentiment is a psychological state stemming from suppressed envy and hatred (existential envy) that cannot be acted upon or satisfied (e.g., seeking revenge). It arises from two sociological conditions: first, the belief that the subject and the object of envy are fundamentally equal, making them interchangeable; and second, the perception of actual inequality that prevents the realization of this equality, leading to a sense of impotence. These conditions make a situation prone to ressentiment, regardless of individual psychological traits. Its sociological impact lies in its potential to lead to a "transvaluation of values," where previously esteemed values are denigrated and replaced by less significant or negative concepts. This process can transform societal value systems in profound ways.

MORE CONCRETE ANALYSES point to the ways ressentiment permeates Russia's self-understanding and appears in cultural production. Madina Tlostanova calls the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia "the Janus-faced second-class empire."²¹ Russia has tried to overcome its complex as a secondary European by formulating a version of a traditional, heteronormative, and binary gender order with a universalist appeal.²² Especially in connection with the invasion, ressentiment has been used to describe Russia's obsession with Ukraine's independence and closeness to Europe.²³ Cultural studies scholar Mark Lipovetsky speaks of the films *Brat* (1997) and *Brat 2* (2000) [Brother and Brother 2] as expressions of "imperial ressentiment that had been building up for more than 30 years."²⁴ These films, particularly *Brat 2*, frame Russia as a nation humiliated by the West, yet ultimately morally superior. The protagonist, a former soldier, embodies an idealized Russian masculinity – tough, loyal, and unyielding – who avenges perceived injustices against Russians abroad. Such narratives have gained renewed relevance in the post-2022 climate, reinforcing the Kremlin's messaging about Western betrayal and the necessity of Russian strength in the face of external threats. This article argues that ressentiment may be signaled not only through post-Soviet urban decay and violence toward the Western Other, but also through pop-rock and pop-folk music.

THE SELECTION OF material in May-June 2024 was carried out in several stages.²⁵ The analyzed material consists of official videos and songs, as well as 58 TikTok videos to Shaman's songs and 25 Instagram user-created videos for each of the songs *Ia russkii* [I am Russian] and *Matushka* [Mother]. Limited by the scope of the article, the videos represent a small, algorithmically influenced

sample. My analysis is limited to the uses of music that appear in the corpus. The analysis began with open coding and proceeded to a qualitative textual analysis of the song lyrics and a visual analysis, inspired by the insights of the semiotic approach, of the artist- and user-produced videos.

***Ia Russkii* and *Matushka*: Two performances of properly gendered Russianness**

Matushka [Mother], published on March 24, 2022, is a folk-pop track by Tatiana Kurtukova with influences from electronic dance music. *Ia russkii* [I am Russian], first published on YouTube on July 22, 2022, is a pop-rock song by Shaman, featuring folk-style singing. These two songs have enjoyed comparable popularity during the invasion, each totaling more than 50MM views on YouTube.²⁶ This section analyzes the entanglements of nationhood, gender and sexuality in the music videos and song lyrics and identifies the ways in which these are in line with state-promoted versions of nationalism, highlighting how the songs and videos combine ressentiment and normative gendered presentations.

In the official music video to *Ia russkii* (now removed from YouTube because of Shaman's channel ban, but reuploaded on other channels)²⁷ Shaman appears in two settings: alone in a wheat field and later performing in a concert hall with a group of fans waving Russian tricolor flags. Shaman's music video negotiates patriotism by blending traditional and official Russian symbols with a contemporary, youthful image, positioning him as a "new patriot" in a post-February 2022 context. The overall style of parts of the video filmed in a concert hall evokes memories of earlier patriotic propaganda pop/rock singers like Oleg Gazmanov²⁸ and the Liube band. What sets him apart from these singers is the absence of visual or textual references to the military. Shaman is not represented as a "soldier" and is never depicted in proximity to battlefields (see article by Anna Schwenck and Anastasia Bondarenko in this special issue). In the official video *Ia russkii*, he is stylishly coiffed and costumed, and his movements are carefully choreographed to the camera angles, such as when he clenches his fist and kisses the cross or leans with the microphone stand.

"MUSIC, AS IT TRAVELS ACROSS CONTEXTS AND PLATFORMS, IS COARTICULATED BY ARTISTS AND USERS TO SUSTAIN AND SHAPE FEELINGS AND EXPRESSIONS OF NATIONALISM."

RATHER THAN AN explicit reference to the ongoing invasion or internationalist Soviet patriotism, Shaman's style creates a more ambiguous articulation of Russianness. With the Russian invasion constructed in Kremlin discourse as a "special military operation" rather than a full-scale war, there is a clear divide between civilians – Shaman being a civilian singer – and combatants – soldiers not shown in his videos. Implicit references to the Soviet Union emerge in the choice of setting – the wheat

field. Wheat fields, not uncommon in Russian pop folklore (as seen in *Kon'* [The Horse], a song first performed by the Liube in 1994 with the line "I will come out into the field at night with my horse..."), can also evoke Ukraine's former role as the "breadbasket of the Soviet Union."

Shaman distinguishes himself from the previous generation of patriotic singers by incorporating contemporary visuals. These include his bleach-blond dreadlocks, which provoked controversy as a national hairstyle when the video was first released, and two black-and-white outfits: an oversized white shirt and slim leather pants in the first part of the video (a vague and perhaps overly stylish reference to male peasant garb, lacking any regional identity), and a rocker outfit with skin-tight leather pants in the second part of the music video. His appearances, despite him presenting "Russian," include several "Western" influences, such as the rock-concert style of the music videos and his clothes (see also Anna Schwenck and Anastasia Bondarenko in this special issue).

HIS COMPLEXION gets dangerously close to the absolute idea of "racial" whiteness.²⁹ Ethnicity and otherness are prominent features of the music video's two epilogues. One of these shows African Americans singing *Ia russkii* as they cruise along a California highway and the other repeats this trope with space aliens. These two endings suggest that Shaman is "Russian" not only out of spite (*nazlo*) toward the whole world, but also the observable universe, which the Soviet Union once aimed to colonize while competing with the US. This can also be read to reflect the imagery and language of decolonization strategically used to rally support within Russia and to present Russia as a defender of a different, non-Western global order. Black people and space aliens are then shown to align themselves with Russia. This also exemplifies the flexibility of the term *russkii*: anyone can be *russkii* as long as they share the appropriate cultural values.³⁰

The lyrics of *Ia russkii* proceed as follows:

I breathe in this air / The sun in the sky looks at me / A free (*vol'ni*) wind flies above me / It is the same as me // And I just want to love and breathe / And I don't need anything else / Just the way I am, and you can't break me / And all because // Refrain: I'm Russian. I keep going to the end / I'm Russian, my blood comes from my father / I'm Russian, and I've been lucky / I'm Russian, to spite the whole world (*vsemu miru nazlo*).³¹

Embodying ressentiment, Shaman constructs the outside world in these lyrics as an antagonist, positioning Russianness as reactive ("you can't break me") but virtuous ("I've been lucky"), taking pride in the face of felt degradation in opposition to per-

ceived foreign hostility. Placing Shaman in a chain of patriarchal continuity, "my blood comes from my father," the lyrics contain another reference that virtue-signals in line with nationalistic, pro-Russian narratives – the word *vol'ni* (see article by Aleksej Tikhonov in this special issue). *Vol'ni* suggests an elemental unbound sense of liberty, unlike its synonym *svobodni*, which means free within an existing (imposed) system of rules. "Free wind" (a common phrase in the Russian language), along with the bird flying freely in the video around the same time, are signifiers of personal and national independence that is beyond rules or external constraints. Shaman is free not just within a system, but free in a defiant, primal and untamed sense, one that is beyond rules and laws.³² This usage reinforces a nationalist self-image of Russians as inherently independent and resistant to imposed authority,

particularly from encroaching foreign powers.³³

References to nature, a source of nation-building in both songs, emerge in both choruses and the refrain of *Matushka*:

How many more years should I ask the cuckoo for, / Tell fortunes about my maiden love on a daisy. / Cold spring water, fresh honey in honeycombs, / In an open field on a dark night I will drown in the starry sky. // Refrain: Mother Earth, white birch tree, / For me [you are] Holy Rus', for others, a splinter (*zanolon'ka*).³⁴

In *Matushka*, nature imagery and maternal symbols are central to the construction of feminine-coded national identity. The use of "Mother Earth" in the title of Kurtukova's song evokes associations between girlhood ("my maiden love"), collective territory, and identity that appear premodern or "lost to modernity." In the context of the full-scale invasion, *Matushka* can be read to hint at a crucial way women, as a metonymy for the national territory, symbolize the national collectivity: it is supposedly for the sake of protecting women that men go to war.³⁵ The line "For me [you are] Holy Rus', for others, a splinter (*zanolon'ka*)" further establishes a stark inside/outside binary; "holy" to Russians, as an Orthodox-tinged elusive promise of a world different from, and better than, the postmodern West,³⁶ *Rus'* is nuisance for outsiders. This contrast articulates the core emotional grammar of ressentiment: what "we" cherish and is threatening to "them." As with *Ia russkii*, the singer's identity emerges from antagonism in resistance to misrecognition.

In ways more explicit than Shaman, Kurtukova negotiates gender-appropriate patriotism through her clothes. The use of folk elements in her costumes increases across the three music videos released in March 2022, January 2023, and April 2024.³⁷ The first video features Kurtukova in a headscarf tied below the chin in traditional folk clothes difficult to pinpoint to

a certain region of Russia, against a white studio background; the second is a live performance of *Matushka*, with Kurtukova in the same headscarf but in a more elaborate costume with a black vest with embroidered details, instead of a blue shirt, on a stage with black background and simple graphics, accompanied by playback. The third is a decidedly more comprehensive production. It features retro color grading and Kurtukova first as an angelic figure in beige clothes against the sunset and dawn, and then in “Russian, Kumyk, Buryat, and Nenets folk costumes”³⁸ against a variety of simple graphic backgrounds. This third video also seems to establish a link with *Ia russkii* when Kurtukova first holds a sheaf of wheat, resembling the statue of Russia in VDNKh’s³⁹ “Friendship of Peoples” fountain, and then stands in a blurred yet recognizable wheatfield à la Shaman.

THE USE OF FOLK DRESS by Kurtukova, who herself is likely to be read as an ethnic Russian, stands out compared to Shaman.⁴⁰ While Shaman does not cross any ethnic lines, Kurtukova’s multiple folk costumes can be interpreted as Russians occupying the top of the hierarchy in the multinational federation; she is the embodiment of multiple ethnicities at once. Throughout the video she moves from embodying an ethnically Russian woman to symbolizing multiple ethnicities, back to a “beige” angelic figure as the universalist Russia with a heap of wheat. The heavenly figure can be also seen as Kurtukova herself embodying Holy *Rus’*. *Rus’* itself is a reference to the term imbued with various meanings. *Rus’*⁴¹ in the historical sense refers to the political entity that emerged in Eastern Europe and does not include Kumyks, Buryats, and Nenets, indigenous groups that the Russian Empire colonized. In the video of Kurtukova wearing folk costumes of these ethnic groups, and in the YouTube comment to the music video, paradoxical “multinational *Rus’*”⁴² emerges as an amalgam of the discourse on *Rus’* with Russian multinationalism, the idea of the peaceful interactions between Russians (*russkie*) and indigenous ethnic groups (*korennyye narodi*) across the imperial and Soviet past.⁴³

The visual aspects of both performances also reflect the contradictory and ambiguous nature of Russian mainstream nationalism. As feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis points out, rather than a fixed and homogenous body of tradition and custom, the “cultural stuff” of the nation is a rich resource, full of internal contradictions. The depository of cultural signifiers can be used selectively.⁴⁴ While the gendered representations in the two videos proceed along the lines outlined by Yuval-Davis, her point about women’s particular duty to bear the “burden of representation,”⁴⁵ can be deepened with Julia Cassiday’s analyses of Russian popular culture and the notion of *cisgender drag*. The concept points to the ways in which appropriate – unambiguous and exaggerated – gendered performances that do not cross the boundaries of one’s own sex and gender are expected from both Russian men and women. Her argument that “*cisgender travesti* became a central strategy for performing citizenship under Putin”⁴⁶ reflects the sartorial and stylistic choices in the original music videos and points to the tension between authenticity and

caricature in portrayals of Russianness. To perform gendered and sexualized Russianness, both Shaman (in the first part of the video) and Kurtukova lean into a depository of vaguely folk clothes. The public reactions to Shaman’s attempt to copy Western rocker masculinities with his leather pants in the second part of the official video (and in his other performances) reflect the anxiety caused by his failure to convincingly align Western glam-rock aesthetics with the rigid norms of Russian state-sanctioned *cisgender drag*.⁴⁷

Music as a vehicle of state-promoted nationalism

The uses of *Rus’* and *russkii* and the visual signifiers that draw on a vast repository of official and folk symbols position the songs with Russian state-promoted mainstream versions of nationalism. This reflects the ways in which the terms have been understood “from below” by Russian people themselves: *russkii* is seen to encompass both national/ethnic belonging and citizenship. Such a version of nationalism is characterized by the pervasive influence of Soviet legacies in contemporary conceptualizations of nationalism, patriotism, and multiculturalism, emphasizing stability and unity, and reproducing positive myths about Russia’s multi-ethnic past.⁴⁸ Since the 2010s, the divide between ethno-centric and civic-centric Russian nationalism has been hard to distinguish, with the ambiguity present at all levels of political discourse.⁴⁹ Putin has generally avoided making nationalism a central element of his popular appeal,⁵⁰ and has kept the definition of “Russianness” intentionally vague.⁵¹ The clear nationalist and expansionist currents both in Soviet and Pan-Slavic fashion have, however, been identified by scholars of Russian popular music.⁵²

WITH RUSSIA WAGING a war in Ukraine, the uses of *russkii* by Shaman and *Rus’* by Kurtukova become part of the nationalist assemblage. The lyrical themes of both songs establish a chain of equivalence between national pride, individual freedom, resilience, and defiance against external opposition, all allegedly attributed to a strong sense of Russian identity, which one pursues *despite* outside pressure. This theme is most salient in the song lyrics, although the proud open poses of Shaman who clenches his fist and Kurtukova who embodies innocent femininity also communicate this visually. This fits neatly into a long-existing discourse of the Russian state about “Russia rising from its knees,” which portrays a “Russia” “that had risen (during the Soviet era), fallen (during the 1990s), and is rising again (under Putin).”⁵³ This narrative, Eliot Borenstein finds, “always reaffirms Russia’s role as the hero of history while emphasizing its status as the world’s victim or offended party.”⁵⁴ Lipovetsky identifies “superiority, chosenness, resentment” as key characteristics of Russian racism and Soviet mythologies⁵⁵ – which I read as expressions of *resentiment* in Shaman’s *Ia russkii* and Kurtukova’s *Matushka*. Thus, while “hot” Russian nationalism proceeds in the trenches or on the margins of the Russian state,⁵⁶ a more palpable nationalist-patriotic *resentiment*, a sensibility that posits Russianness as a distinct set of values under threat from outsiders and thus worth cherishing and protecting, is articulated in

these songs. At stake, then, is the construction of “[a] recognizable and reliable, but ultimately fantasmatical, identity.”⁵⁷ Produced as they are amidst a “civilizational” conflict, the two songs shore up pro-war rhetoric and normalize the violent acts of war. The next section analyzes the ways in which ideas about Russianness are performed, upheld, reclaimed, and contested in short user-made videos.

User-generated videos: negotiations of gender, sexuality, and nationalism

This section analyzes TikTok and Instagram user-created videos that remix the songs *Ia russkii* and *Matushka*. *Matushka* is more popular as a source of music for remixes, with 88.8 thousand Instagram reels as of June 2024 (compared to 11.6 thousand featuring *Ia russkii*).⁵⁸ Three overarching themes are identified, unequally distributed across the music by Shaman and Kurtukova.

The inauthenticity of Shaman's heterosexuality

In most TikTok videos, posted from his official TikTok account, Shaman appears alone singing songs in the studios or in concert arenas. This carefully curated image constructs him as a professional patriotic performer representing state-sanctioned values, including heteronormativity. TikTok creators subvert this image by satirizing the authenticity of Shaman's heterosexuality. A prominent example involves mocking his purported relationship with Ekaterina Mizulina⁵⁹ – a pairing that is interpreted not as a reflection of genuine personal affiliation but as a symbolic performance of idealized heterosexuality in service of nationalist ideology. In one such video, Mizulina, with her robotlike gestures⁶⁰ which add to the feeling of artificiality, declares “I listen to Shaman and no one else” accompanied by the caption, “When the school psychologist tries to find out what music you listen to, and your playlist has music that would get you 30 life sentences.”⁶¹ This move exaggerates the consequences of *not* liking Shaman's music, suggesting that it is so ideologically loaded it becomes socially risky to not be his fan. By placing this exchange in a school context – where authority figures control behavior – creators frame both Shaman's patriotism and his heterosexual performance as unnatural and imposed. Shaman's virile hypermasculinity is unlike the accepted and even celebrated ambiguous masculinity of Russian pop stars such as Filipp Kirkorov and Nikolai Baskov, who are widely assumed to be homosexual.⁶² Whereas Kirkorov and Baskov rely on camp flamboyance,⁶³ Shaman presents a patriotic heterosexual masculinity that clashes with his queer-coded Western glam-rock style. This mismatch, amplified by forced appearances with Mizulina, makes his heterosexual per-

sona feel forced. In their videos, TikTok users apply self-irony to reveal the performative and artificial nature of state-mandated identities, including Shaman's heterosexual persona.

ANOTHER VIDEO INCLUDES a montage of Shaman and his brother side by side, beginning with *Ia russkii* and ending with “*Ia LGBT seks-instruktor iz NATO*,” [I am LGBT sex instructor from NATO]. Originally released in March 2021 by the band Neverlove, where Shaman's brother is a frontman, the song ridicules Russian state homophobia.⁶⁴ Remixed in the song are the words of a Russian TV pundit, cautioning that “sex LGBT instructors from NATO will sexually educate our children if we don't” with exclamations in German, tightly associating LGBT with Germany, and thus with the West. In the TikTok the following lines from the refrain are heard: “I am LGBT-sex-instructor from NATO / I am teaching the nation how to bang in the ass / You will have to complete an induction by me / The hetero(sexual)s will not hide from us.”⁶⁵ They appear in quite stark contrast to Shaman's message of national purity and nationalist determination. In April 2024 Neverlove publicly denounced “Western values” and suggested the song is a quip at West, not Russia.⁶⁶ The pro-Kremlin pundit's original words, Neverlove song lyrics, as well as their juxtaposition to Shaman all exemplify the ways in which pro-Putin and oppositional figures rely on hypersexualized language to discredit their opponents.⁶⁷ The user-created TikTok videos critique heterosexuality and heteronormativity in Shaman's work. They do so without much expressive means, such as dressing up, acting, or lip-syncing, but rather through a recontextualization of the existing material.

Reinforcement of national belonging through body's cisgender drag

The analyzed Instagram reels to the sound of *Ia russkii* mostly reinforce and reinterpret the nationalist message rather than subvert it. They show the colors of the Russian flag prominently displayed in various public events and attached to clothes.

Several videos feature male and female gymnasts and dancers. In performing acrobatic and athletic feats to the sound of Shaman's song, these people can be interpreted as aligning themselves with the message of the song; as *russkie*, they are strong “to spite the whole world.” The reels of people posing with the flag as individuals and collectives, as well as the use of balloons and colored plaques illustrate the unstable boundaries between individual bodies and the body politic.

This theme can also be identified in videos that use *Matushka*, which feature children and women dressed in traditional Russian clothes. The videos use the music transition at the beginning of the chorus. Performing feminine *cisgender drag*, women without makeup turn fully

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in videos that use *Matushka*, which feature children and women dressed in traditional Russian clothes. The videos use the music transition at the beginning of the chorus. Performing feminine *cisgender drag*, women without makeup turn fully

made up and sometimes wear a *kokoshnik*, a Russian folk head-dress. Popular-folk stylizations of music, of which Kurtukova's song is an example⁶⁸ lend themselves easily to using one's body to the rhythm of the song to perform nationalism through dress. Further, given the ubiquity of children's folk ensembles in Russia, the use of such songs reflects a form of benign nationalism that reinforces a collective cultural identity. In line with the bio-political turn, Instagram reels where people use their bodies to perform nationalism are instances of people's bodies becoming, voluntarily, through techniques of self-management and appropriate presentation, and forcibly, expandable building blocks of nationalism.⁶⁹

Validation vis-à-vis the West through consumption of nationalism

The most popular reel to *Ia russkii*, amassing 728 thousand views, is an image of Kanye West wearing a t-shirt designed by Gosha Rubchinskiy⁷⁰ with the word "Russian" in pseudo-Old Church Slavonic typeface. It features the comment "Nash slonyara" [Our elephant]. Calling somebody "elephant" on Russian social media is a way to compliment individuals seen as outspoken, aligning with traditional or pro-Russian political views. This example, alongside the African Americans at the end of Shaman's video, indicates an evolving sense of nationalism that constantly looks to the West (here to the US) for approval. As Tlostanova notes, "[t]he subaltern empire, even when claiming a global spiritual and transcendental superiority, has always been looking for approval/envy and love/hatred from the west, never questioning the main frame of western modernity, only changing the superfluous details."⁷¹

Some videos are posted by commercial promotional accounts: *Matushka* is used by a balloon decoration company and a video filming company. Company info appears on top of a video of a woman holding the Russian flag made of differently colored balloons against the blue sky. Shaman's song is featured in an unboxing video of a World Cup branded football with referral links to the e-commerce platform *Wildberries* (similar to the online retail platform Amazon). Another video compares excessive and poorly made manicures of American women with the overlaid text, "I really feel sorry for the Americans," transitioning into the "Russian" stylish manicure by the salon that placed the advertisement. This exemplifies how the nationalist assemblage is rooted in the everyday practice of consumption⁷² by both women and men and attests to how any platform logic is primarily an economic one, built for revenue and propelled by individual feeling and self-expression.⁷³ In reflecting the ways Russian nationalist sensibilities function in parallel with neoliberalism, these Instagram users – as individual entrepreneurs – capitalize on the wave of nationalism by promoting their goods and services through the use of these songs.

National (dis)identifications in the second-class empire

This article has argued that Shaman's and Tatiana Kurtukova's music articulates properly gendered and sexualized visions of

Russian national identity, which are in line with the ideological visions of Russianness promoted by the state. I have identified *resentiment*, as a key sentiment in the music by Shaman and Kurtukova, which combines the superiority and chosenness of the singers as "Russians" with resentment toward the outside world. Women and men, femininities and masculinities, all within a neat framework of cisnormative heterosexuality are central to representations of Russia in the ambivalently nationalist music studied in this article, which can be seen in contrast to overtly militarized music and cultural products.

This music is also used by TikTok and Instagram users to assert, negotiate, and negate the geopolitical hegemony of Russia over the "West" amidst the ongoing full-scale invasion. As elements of affective audio networks, the user-remixed videos engage with the music of Shaman and Kurtukova. In doing so, the users build on the expressions of banal nationalism steeped in *resentiment* in the original music videos. The user-created content revealed a variety of ways to remix nationalism. These range from explicit alignment that channels its *resentiment* through the body, to counter-identifications that shatter the normalized conventions of gender and sexuality, to an ambivalent disidentification by entrepreneurial individuals using the nationalist resources music for their own purposes. Music thus narrates – and contributes to – a normalization of the full-scale invasion, heteronormative gender and sexuality, and "colder," everyday varieties of nationalism. 

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- 3 https://youtu.be/_d8xY3BoWzI?si=RGXVAuaDhKyx_jb. Accessed 3 April 2025.
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25 100 TikTok videos were downloaded using TikTok Data Extractor Apify, 50 each with hashtag Shaman in Cyrillic and Latin script. After cleaning the data given the prevalence of hashtag hijacking, whereby hashtags promote unrelated content, only 58 of 100 videos were deemed relevant. A similar search was performed with hashtags aiming to capture Kurtukova’s remixes, but the data was irrelevant, and the videos had less than half a million views, compared to Shaman’s average of seven million per video. Since accessing user-remixed videos on TikTok proved challenging, a second supplementary stage involved the use of the Instagram search function for one song by each artist.

26 Shaman’s music video had 56MM at the time of writing in June 2024. Shaman’s channel has been deleted since July 4, 2024. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20240627100930/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAPwIEWzqjE>. Shaman’s videos have been reuploaded to multiple mirror channels, see notes 27 and 37.

27 The re-uploaded video can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/dNP9nfpggUY?si=ovbj5HxXoFCFn30e>. Accessed 10 January 2025.

28 For an analysis of Oleg Gazmanov’s Made in USSR video with similar aesthetics, see Wickström and Steinholt, “Visions of the (Holy) Motherland in Contemporary Russian Popular Music,” 322.

29 The non-specific version of Christianity and whiteness bring him close to an idea of Westernness; the video for *Moi boi*, the analysis of which is beyond the scope of this article, features signs reminiscent of the German SS.

30 Matthew Blackburn, “Mainstream Russian Nationalism and the ‘State-Civilization’ Identity: Perspectives from Below,” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 1 (January 2021): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.8>.

31 Ia vdykhai etot vozdukh/ Solntse v nebe smotrit na menia/ Nado mnou letaet vol’nyi veter/ On takoi zhe, kak i ia. // I khochetsia prosto liubit’ i dyshat’/ I mne drugogo ne nuzhno/ Takoi, kakoi est’, i menia ne slomat’/ I vse potomu chto...// Pripev: Ia russkii, ia idu do kontsa!/ Ia russkii, moia krov’ ot ottsa/ Ia russkii, i mne povezlo/ Ia russkii vsemu miru nazlo!

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34 Skol’ko mne eshche godochkov u ukushkii posproshat’,/ Pro liubov’ svoiu devich’iu na romashke pogadat’./ Kliuchevoi vody studenoi, v sotakh svezhego medku,/ V chistom pole temnou noch’iu v nebe zvezdnom utonu.// Pripev: Matushka-zemlia, belaia berezon’ka/ Dlia menia – Sviataia Rus’, dlia drugikh – zanozon’ka.

35 Nira Yuval-Davis, “Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations,” *Narodna Umjetnost-Hrvatski Časopis Za Etnologiju i Folkloristiku* 40, no. 1 (2003): 19.

36 John P Burgess, *Holy Rus’: The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia* (Yale University Press, 2017), 2.

37 Three videos have been published to accompany *Matushka*: 2022-03-24, the first video featuring the song, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mtxEBvzkHs>; 2023-01-14, live performance of *Matushka* with playback <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gCvRrF5SA4>; 2024-04-12, the official music video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFcIXxkFxK4>.

38 Quote from the comment, posted by Kurtukova, to the music video.

39 VDNKh, an abbreviation for Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy [Vystavka dostizhenii narodnogo khoziaistva] is a permanent trade fair and amusement park in Moscow, featuring architecture and sculpture.

40 In her study of Cossack folk performances, Olson notes that while male Cossacks used uniforms to signify their identity and host (*voisko*) affiliation, women's dress has not served as a Cossack identity marker since the late 19th century; instead, female attire has become a symbol of Russian peasantry, with its style indicating regional origins. Laura Olson, *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity* (Routledge, 2004), 166.

41 *Rus'* was originally an East Slavic tribal community and early state that emerged in the 9th and 10th centuries, with Kyiv as its center before later shifting to Vladimir. It has often been cited to support the historical continuity of the Russian state and the idea of Slavic unity. However, its interpretation and use have been highly contested. Russian school history books have removed references to Ukraine and Kyiv, renaming ‘Kievan Rus’ simply as ‘Rus.’ <https://meduza.io/news/2023/04/19/iz-rossiyskogo-uchebnika-dlya-chetvertogo-klassa-ubrali-upominaniya-kieva-v-razdeleniye-o-kievskei-rusi>

42 The original comment posted under Kurtukova's third video reads, “Khit vseia mnogonatsional'noi Rusi *three Russian flag emojis*” (A hit for the entire multinational *Rus'*).

43 Blackburn, “Mainstream Russian Nationalism and the ‘State-Civilization’ Identity.”

44 Yuval-Davis, “Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations,” 17.

45 Yuval-Davis, 18.

46 Cassidy, *Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism*, 59.

47 In a TikTok clip of Shaman performing “*Moi boi*,” a title that can be understood beyond the literal “my fight” to also mean “my boyfriend,” owing to the Anglicism *boifrend* in Russian, the overlaid text reads: “Why does he look like he is singing it for his boy?” In the video, Shaman sings wearing tight leather pants, a shiny silver jacket and the Russian flag on his arm. Leather pants here and in several tabloids emerge as a controversial sartorial choice.

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58 This can be compared to international and local popstars: Taylor Swift's “Shake It Off” had 907 thousand reels; Billie Eilish's “Birds of a Feather” had 2,4 million. Anna Asti's “Tsaritsa” had 70 thousand, while Instasamka's “*Za dengi da*” [For a price, yes] had 99 thousand. All figures are as of April 2025.

59 Ekaterina Mizulina is Executive Director of the National Center for Children's Assistance (2017–2020), member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, and Director of the “League for Safe Internet” established with the support of the Russian government and parliament.

60 This article points out that some users experience the “uncanny valley effect,” the feeling of unease and revulsion, when encountering objects that are almost human-like but not quite, when seeing Mizulina. “Mizulina vnezapno stala internet-zvezdoi. Ei pripisyvaiut roman s SHAMAN i somnevaiutsia v tom, chto ona chelovek [Mizulina Suddenly Becomes an Internet Celebrity. She Is Accused of Having an Affair with SHAMAN, and There Are Doubts About Whether She Is Even a Real Person],” Lenta.ru, December 9, 2023, <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/12/09/mizulina/>.

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64 https://www.tiktok.com/@your_you_u/photo/7306208826485722369. Accessed 1 July 2024.

65 Ia LGBT-seks-instruktor iz NATO / Ia obuchaiu natsiui trakhat'sia v sraku / Pridetsia proiti moi instruktazh / Naturaly ne spriachutsia ot nas.

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