Russian Rap and the Case of Husky: Traces of Counterculture?

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Хип-хоп — новый панк-рок
Вопреки, будто ГрОб
Всегда против, рисую жопу
Коль позвали в приличный дом[1]

I. Introduction

Non-classical contemporary music is extremely diverse. This diversity manifests itself not only in terms of genre or subgenre, origin, production, and sound, but also in terms of cultural identity (e.g. as an expression of a particular sociocultural segment). Yet this diversity emerges in the way music is perceived and interpreted too, given that different audiences interpret it through a variety of prisms.

In many cases, it is problematic to consider all non-classical contemporary music merely as part of popular culture. Even genres that are easy to categorize at first glance and are traditionally considered a product of *pop* culture (such as rock or rap music) can have a deeper cultural and/or political meaning in certain contexts: for example, music genres that survive against the odds under authoritarian regimes can become an instrument of counterculture or a segment of political/ideological opposition, as was the case with rock music in the Soviet Union[2]. In such cases, the genre leaves the realm of popular culture and often even redefines itself within a broader cultural framework: if we take the example of rock music again, it has eventually transformed from a music genre into a discourse[3].

Hip-hop culture, which emerged in the United States in the 1970s, has spread rapidly across the world, absorbing and developing local cultural aspects[4]. In this article, we will discuss the phenomenon of cultural transmutation that rap music (a segment of hip-hop culture along with graffiti art, deejaying, and breakdancing) underwent in a national culture that was perhaps least inclined to adopt its aesthetics, namely the Soviet Union and later Russia[5].

Similar to the case of Soviet rock music, Russian rap culture appears split between the mainstream and underground scenes. We will scrutinize the works of rap artists representing the Russian 'periphery' (especially the music of Husky) and try to find out whether contemporary rap culture in Russia is really a continuation — or even a rebirth in a new context — of the rich Soviet musical counterculture, whether one could trace a "historical legacy"[6] between the two phenomena.

In this article, the term 'periphery' does not strictly refer to a geographical concept, but rather to marginalized, non-dominant discourses, although in

[1] Lyrics from Slava KPSS's song *Egor Letov* (2019). "Hip-hop is the new punk rock. / Contrarian, like GrOb. / Always against, I draw an ass / If invited to a decent house". Here and afterwards, unless otherwise indicated, the translation is ours.

[2] This meaning characterized rock music in the late Soviet underground scene, but is also very pronounced today in the case of heavy or more extreme metal music in Islamic countries: in Indonesia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, the identity of rock in underground contexts has come to epitomize a multi-layered countercultural phenomenon. See: K. James — R. Walsh, *Religion and Heavy Metal Music in Indonesia*, "Popular Music", 2019 (38), 2, pp. 276-297; L. Nooshin, *Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourses in Iran*, "Iranian Studies", 2005 (38), 3, pp. 463-494; J. Otterbeck — D. Mattson — O. Pastene, *'I Am Satan!' Black Metal, Islam and Blasphemy in Turkey and Saudi Arabia*, "Contemporary Islam", 2018 (12), 3, pp. 267-286.

[3] L. Nooshin, *Underground, Overground*, op. cit., pp. 463-464.

[4] On the '*hood* construction through the localizing rap discourse, see: K. Gelder, *Subcultures. Cultural Histories and Social Practice*, London-New York 2007, pp. 117-118.

[5] With regard to a close context, an interesting study on the role of African students in popularizing hip-hop in Ukrainian university towns such as Kharkiv since the late 1980s is Helbig's volume: A.N. Helbig, *Hip Hop Ukraine. Music, Race, and African Migration*, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2014.

[6] S. Kotkin — M.R. Beissinger, *The Historical Legacies of Communism: An Empirical Agenda*, in *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. by S. Kotkin — M.R. Beissinger, Princeton 2014, pp. 1-27.

many cases these discourses actually originate outside the major centers. By 'counterculture' we mean alternative cultural structures and forms that contain clear political-ideological constructs directed against the prevailing, dominant culture; in contrast, the term 'subculture' refers to a subset of cultural (material and immaterial) elements that becomes the expression of a particular segment or stratum of society[7]. The terms are discussed in detail later in the article.

II. Russian rap in historical perspective: from underground to mainstream and (halfway) back

Rap is not a new phenomenon in the Russian music landscape. To understand the state of contemporary rap culture, it is therefore important to first delve a little into its history.

Russian rap has its roots in the late Soviet era, when it emerged in the clandestine context of the underground scene. In the case of American hip-hop culture, the (alleged) exact birthday can be marked: according to urban legend, Clive and Cindy Campbell threw a party in New York on August 11, 1974, where Clive began playing the beats that would later be considered the first example of hip-hop music[8]. By contrast, it is impossible to say when and where rap first appeared in the Soviet Union, as it took place underground and there is little relevant historical research. Some scholars link the emergence of a rap stage to breakdance and performance art collectives that appeared in the USSR as early as 1985[9], while journalist and music producer Aleksandr Kushnir claims that rap emerged in 1984[10]. Others argue that it is impossible to categorize the collectives of the 1980s as part of a broader hip-hop movement, as the overall quality of their music was poor and they copied Western models too much[11]. However, there is evidence that the term 'rap' had already found its way into the Soviet music context in 1984. In that year, the rock group Chas pik (literally: Rush Hour), which emerged from the nightclub scene in Kuibyshev (now Samara)[12], recorded the album *Rap*. It contains a song of the same name: the lyrics, which are based on a dance-pop rhythm, describe 'rap' as a special kind of rhythmic declamation of lyrics. The song was created as a challenge to the idea that "it is simply impossible to make rap in Russian" due to the supposed length of Russian words and the need to respect the rhyme and rhythm inherent to the genre; for comparison, Chas pik also include a short text segment in English, which, however, they note (before translating it), "only works at first glance, it's all in the rhythm, but the problem is that it doesn't really mean anything"[13]. It is also relevant to mention that in 1986 the movies *Tantsy na kryshe* [Dances on the Roof] and *Kur'er* [The Courier] were released, both of which contain breakdancing scenes starring young Soviet citizens visibly steeped in hip-hop culture both musically and in terms of their clothing. Even if these early textual and visual references to hip-hop culture are not concrete examples of a music genre acclimatized to the

[7] See: S. O'Brien – I. Szeman, *Popular Culture: A User's Guide*, Toronto 2018, pp. 257-290.

[8] This date is rather symbolic, as there were other DJs playing similar music at the time, yet that event – starring 'DJ Kool Herc' (the nickname of eighteen-year-old Clive Campbell) – went down in history. See E. Adjapong – K. Allen, *For White Folks Who Teach Hip-Hop-and the Rest of Ya'll, Too: Interrogating the Positionality of Hip-Hop Educators and Researchers*, "Equity & Excellence in Education", 2023, pp. 1-14.

[9] I. Kukulin, *Playing the Revolt: The Cultural Valorization of Russian Rap and Covert Change in Russian Society of the 2010s*, "Russian Literature", 2020 (118), p. 83.

[10] A. Kushnir, *100 magnitoal'bomov sovetskogo roka*, Moskva 2003.

[11] A. Zavalishin – N. Kostiurina, *Russkaia rep-kul'tura: Spetsifika nauchnogo analiza*, "Zhurnal integrativnykh issledovanii kul'tury", 2020 (2), 1, p. 62.

[12] Regarding the role of discos in Kuibyshev/Samara, it should be noted that here "new trends from the West penetrated not so much into rock circles as into the depths of the growing disco movement. The peculiarity of the local situation was that in the early 1980s discos played more or less the role in city life that avant-garde cinema had played in the 1960s, youth theaters in the 1970s, or rock 'n' roll in the late 1980s. Between 1982 and 1986, there were a number of respectable nightclubs in Kuybyshev, run by people who let it happen and had a refined cultural level and good taste". A. Kushnir, *100 magnitoal'bomov*, op. cit., p. 216.

[13] Another mention of the rap genre can be found in the song *Meloman* (Melomaniac, 1987) by the rock band Alisa. The same band recorded another song the following year, which was included in their third album released by the state label Melodiia, entitled *Totalitarnyi rep* (Totalitarian Rap): in this case, however, the term 'rap' is used provocatively, as a deliberate mixture of the countercultural 'Westernized' concept with bold criticism of the Soviet system, and it should therefore not be understood as a 'definition' of the rap genre.

Russian context[14], they do testify to the extent to which this culture and its specific terminology were known in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Hip-hop at this time was part of a larger underground music movement that, intentionally or not, took on an ideological element by embodying a polarized opponent of the formalized, censored Soviet mainstream music such as that proposed by VIAs (*Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambl*, Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble): VIA bands were formed by professional musicians who were close to rock music in terms of genre, but did not carry the ideological element that constituted underground music (including rock) in the Soviet context[15].

However, the reception and self-identification of hip-hop, as well as the position that Russian rap occupies within the cultural continuum, have changed more than once over the last four decades. The first important change occurred in the late 1990s, when authentic rappers emerged on the Russian stage: among them, the group Mal'chishnik (from whose experiences a mature rapper like Dolphin later emerged), the gangsta break-dancers Bad Balance (here Ligalize starred for a period), rappers Mister Maloi (better known for hit, *Budu pogibat' molodym*, I will perish young, 1993), Babangida, Lok Dog. This first shift determined the beginning of a confrontation between Russian rock and rap cultures, which were once allied underground phenomena. This confrontation eventually led to sharp, even violent divisions between the two social segments, affecting both the artists and their fans. Significantly, young followers of rock music spread a saying that "rap is faeces" (*rep eto kal*)[16]; on the other side, rappers often resorted to physical violence against rockers, which generally went unpunished in the turbulent times of the Russian 1990s.

These conflicts can be seen in part as an indirect consequence of the loosening of state control during this period. In the 1980s, neither of the two music segments was part of the official or tolerated stage and, forced underground by state-imposed censorship, could not enjoy commercial success. In short, these movements belonged to the same cultural environment and there they coexisted. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the formerly strict state control vanished, allowing all segments of underground music to reach a wider audience. This situation aroused the interest of professional Russian music managers – and also that of the newly emerged class of Russian businessmen, who began to view the once forbidden music as a potential investment opportunity. One of the most prominent cases is the remarkable success enjoyed by Viktor Tsoi's band Kino (literally, "Cinema"), an icon of the underground new-wave scene that started off as a cult band and grew into national stadium-level stardom. Much of Kino's success is attributed to its musical director, Yuri Aizenshpis[17], who was also, albeit very indirectly, involved in the rise to mainstream success of one of the most popular Russian boybands of the 1990s, Laskovyi Mai (literally, "Tender May")[18]. The band's practices (including a widespread use of full playback with lip-syncing during supposedly live performances)[19] were far from ethical from the perspective of rock music ideology. Yet it was the band's director, Andrei Razin, who introduced Aizenshpis to Tsoi[20]. This episode suggests the proximity of mainstream music and former

[14] It is interesting to note, however, that there have been precursors to 'rapped' declamation in music in the Soviet Union since the late 1970s: consider, for instance, Vladimir Vysotskii's 'epistolary' song *Dorogaia peredacha* [Dear Program, 1977] or Sasha Bashlachëv's vocal imitation of the 'music' produced by a train on the railroad in his *Poezd N°193* [Train No.193, 1984].

[15] See: M. Napolitano – V. Zherebov, *On and Beyond Egor Letov. Rock and Punk Music from (Soviet) Siberia*, "Studi Slavistici", 2021 (18), 2, pp. 132-133.

[16] I. Kukulin, *Playing the Revolt*, op. cit., p. 80.

[17] *Iurii Aizenshpis, v 1988-1990 godakh prodiuser gruppy "Kino"*, "Kommersant", 2000, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/155377 (latest access: 16.12.2025).

[18] Laskovyi Mai's actual director and music copyright owner was Andrei Razin, another prominent figure in the emerging Russian show business scene. See: World Media Alliance Label, Inc. v. Believe SAS, No. 24-12079, 2025, https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca11/24-12079/24-12079-2025-07-28.html (latest access: 16.12.2025).

[19] D. Macfadyen, *The Russian "Rockumentary": Documentary Films and Rock, Pop, and Chanson*, "The Russian Review", 2010 (69), p. 681.

[20] M. Leonov, *"On zazhigal zvezdy iz kuskov torfa". Den'gi na raskrutku "Kino" vzial u voroskogo obshchaka i vernul s protsentami: 80 let Iuriiu Aizenshpisu*, "Novaia gazeta", 2025, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/07/20/on-zazhigal-zvezdy-iz-kuskov-torfa (latest access: 16.12.2025).

underground icons within the newly formed music business model. Including seemingly different figures as Razin and Aizenshpis in the same narrative helps shed light on the nature and role of the 'artistic director' in the Russian context of the period, which diverged starkly from the Western definition. While the term 'producer' typically refers to the person in charge of the production side of music, 'direction' is usually managed by the A&R department of the artist's label or a professional performing an equivalent task. In 1990s Russia, A&R departments in a commercial and operational sense were not yet sufficiently developed (if they existed at all). As a result, the producer was often associated not only with the musical aspect, but also with financial resources, public relations, and, more generally, propelling the artist toward mainstream success (hence the moniker *tolkach*, "fixer")[21]. In this sense, the success of both Kino and Laskovyi Mai can be traced back to the networking skills and vision of their respective 'directors', who, within the novel business environment, often shared expertise and took inspiration from each other's work, thus putting both former underground artists and new mainstream bands on the same level.

Thus, the end of censorship, combined with skillful artist management and an open business environment in the early 1990s, brought many of the formerly underground musicians to the forefront of major success – a considerable change for artists who literally just the day before had played only for their local cult following and whose technical and musical skills were often virtually non-existent. From intimate, private performances in flats for a close circle of friends and underground art lovers, these artists could suddenly become stadium stars, with occasional appearances on central television. Their once self-released records, mainly distributed unofficially on bootleg tapes, were now appearing on major or even government backed labels.

In the course of the first post-Soviet years, the capitalization of the music business began to grow to the level of Western counterparts – albeit with a delay of almost thirty years, if one compares the phenomenon with the commercial breakthrough of rock 'n' roll in the 1960s, which in the Western world was associated with the success of the Beatles. The change in the political system had affected the landscape of underground music culture in some way – and at the time it seemed as if this change had happened for good.

While formerly underground bands like Kino, DDT or Akvarium enjoyed their arena tours and nationwide recognition, so did rappers. The decisive difference, however, which soon led to confrontation, was one of perception. On the one hand, rappers who only reached a wider audience and made a commercial breakthrough in the late 1990s ('second wave' rappers such as Kasta, who have been active since 1997, or those mentioned above) appeared at the time as the first and only rap artists Russia had ever had; their music was perceived as a newly formed act. On the other hand, rappers, who initially belonged to the same underground strata as their rock counterparts, quickly adopted a very different ideological stance: they abandoned their political countercultural identity and focused instead on personal and/or urban ('ghetto') struggles and aspirations, adhering to the thematic 'agenda' of Western hip-hop[22]. If style defines – as Dick Hebdige's seminal volume illustrated[23] – a subculture (and a counterculture), hip-hop stylistic features got "frozen" at the moment, being transformed into a fashionable trend, into "commodities"[24]. It was, in a sense, a similar story for rockers: while practically all Russian rock music had developed within the internally differentiated underground scene, there was a loud confrontation towards the mid-2000s. While

[21] P. McMichael, *"That's Ours. Don't Touch". Nashe Radio and the Consolations of the Domestic Mainstream*, in *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, ed. by V. Strukov – S. Hudspith, London 2018, p. 75.

[22] See: I. Kukulin, *Playing the Revolt*, op. cit., p. 86. A thematic agenda that should not, however, be oversimplified: "gangsta [rap]'s very real political energies lay in the struggle to come to terms with an age in which there was a dramatic decline in popular protest politics, precisely for a community that had a vital protest history". E. Quinn, *Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*, New York 2005, p. 30.

[23] D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London-New York 1979.

[24] Ivi, p. 96.

some Soviet rockers from the underground scene tried to combine Western esthetics and sonic resemblances to Western postures – generally well aware of how that music was created in the West[25] – their main merit still resided in the ideological and lyrical components, even if they could now appear in mainstream contexts such as radio or major festivals. Conversely, the first decade of the twenty-first century in Russia saw the rise of a new generation of rock bands who seemed to take Western rock music influence to another level of esthetic and sonic resemblance, while leaving much of the social and political content behind (e.g. bands Slot or Arkona on the heavier music spectrum, or Zemfira, the most prominent mainstream rock artist). This situation eventually led to the fan community of the latter examples beginning to label the 'classic' underground artists as "fossil amateurs"[26] or even as representatives of "shitrock"[27].

The public thus stopped perceiving rock and rap artists, who were no longer outlawed (the legal framework being an important element in defining countercultural deviances[28]), as spearheads of political change[29]. The confrontation between fans and representatives of these two genres was fought on the ground of esthetics, musical taste, and lifestyle, not political or ideological aspirations. In the 1990s and up to the mid-2000s, neither rock nor rap music could be unequivocally categorized as counterculture, except for fringe examples[30]. During this period, there were only isolated examples of counterculture, mostly associated with local music stages and semi-official or unofficial youth movements outside the big cities and far from the central cultural environment. None of these examples were prominent enough to form a proper movement.

We can assume that the conflict between the rap and rock genres at the time reflected that pursuit of 'identity' that characterized early post-Soviet society as a whole in its embryonic phase. In fact, narrowing our focus on rappers, although they imitated Western rap and took up 'ghetto' motifs in their music, they embodied a specific segment of post-Soviet society and thus differed radically from their Western counterparts: the Russian reinterpretation of rap in the 1990s took place in a context that had little or nothing to do with the original US one; rap was generally perceived as a genre "symbolizing new life"[31], i.e. post-Soviet life, and therefore the excesses and search for scandal were imported, imitated and given new meaning. The protagonists of this musical phenomenon also differed and still differ greatly from their US counterparts: they often do not come from a disadvantaged situation (unlike the rappers from

[25] See: Y. Steinholt, *Siberian Punk Shall Emerge Here: Egor Letov and Grazhdanskaia Oborona*, "Popular Music", 2012, 3, pp. 401-415.

[26] In 2018, a curious discussion on this topic took place between Iurii Shevchuk (frontman of one of the most iconic Russian rock bands, DDT, whose roots lie in the Soviet underground scene, although lately they have been releasing music with progressive rock elements that is by no means lacking in technical skill) and one of the most prominent independent journalists in Russia today, Iurii Dud'. The conversation is available online on Dud"s YouTube channel (https://youtu.be/98pE29S5Gb4, latest access: 09.06.2025).

[27] The term *govnorok* (shitrock) was, ironically, first introduced into the discourse by one of the most avant-garde bands of the Soviet underground scene, Nol' (Zero). It eventually became a street-language term used by rap aficionados and Western-influenced contemporary rock fans to define the bands that emerged during the Soviet era and that often (though far from always) possess a high technical level in terms of musical talent and production.

[28] See: D. Hebdige, *Subculture*, op. cit.

[29] However, this perception was far from reality, as the existence of the underground culture was more a symptom than a cause of the decline of the authoritarian regime. See: J. Pekacz, *Did Rock Smash the Wall? The Role of Rock in Political Transition*, "Popular Music", 1994 (13), 1, pp. 41-49.

[30] Egor Letov (1964-2008), his Siberian punk entourage and their followers represent such a fringe example. In an effort to stay within the then-decaying countercultural movement, he claimed that any pursuit of commercial success and wider reach was tantamount to becoming 'part of *popsa*' (a pejorative Russian term for pop culture, which was seen by Russian rock musicians as something to be ashamed of not only on a sonic but also on an ideological level); he also changed his band name from the provocative but acceptable Grazhdanskaia oborona (literally: Civil Defense) to the absolutely obscene Egor i Opizdenevshie (literally: Egor and the Fucked-Up), just to block his own project's path to publication. Letov even joined a radical political party with fascist tendencies, which also pushed him out of the limelight in the West – ostensibly all with the aim of remaining in the counterculture by any means necessary. See: D. Sidorenkov, *'Nas khotiat sdelat' chast'iu popsa'*, "Drive", 1991, http://www.gr-oborona.ru/pub/anarhi/1056980821.html (latest access: 09.06.2025); Y. Steinholt, *Siberian Punk Shall Emerge Here: Egor Letov and Grazhdanskaia Oborona*, op. cit.; M. Napolitano – V. Zherebov, On and Beyond Egor Letov, op. cit.; F. Fenghi, *It Will Be Fun and Terrifying: Nationalism and Protest in Post-Soviet Russia*, Madison 2020.

[31] E. Dorokhova, *Fol'klornye istoki russkogo repa*, "Chudozhestvennaia kul'tura", 2017 (19), 1, https://artculturestudies.sias.ru/2017-1-19/yazyki/5220.html (latest access: 09.06.2025).

the Bronx to whom they refer), but are "representatives of the academic and artistic *intelligentsia* who come from very wealthy families"[32]. Significantly, the most commercial rapper on the Russian scene in the last two decades, Timati, is the son of a prominent businessman.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, then, Russian rap did not express a rebellion against segregation or racism, but was configured as a form of liberation and generational expression in relation to a biographical past of an entire society undergoing rapid and paradigmatic change. From this shift in perception and recreation, spaces for a completely indigenous development opened up for the future 'russkii' rap, as was once the case for rock music.

Towards the end of the 2000s, the political situation in Russia started to change again, quite rapidly sliding back towards authoritarian rule. However, during the period prior to the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the situation was more one of self-censorship than of actual mass repression – something that became increasingly clear after February 2022. Still, the initial sense of freedom and relative prosperity that characterized the 2000s faded as the regime tightened its grip in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The year 2007 may be seen as marking the beginning of this gradual sociopolitical (and cultural) process: in Russian internet culture, the slogan/meme "Give me back my 2007" (Vernite mne moi 2007) became a popular catchphrase, also used in the musical underground scene. While we do not claim that a meme alone can serve as evidence of a shift in public perception regarding artistic freedom, it is arguably a legitimate parameter. Widespread memes, as part of popular culture, may serve both as an artificial promotion of a particular narrative and as genuine elements of contemporary folklore[33]. It has been observed that political memes are generally short-lived and tend to be outlived and outperformed by those with greater social relevance[34]. At the same time, their original meaning can evolve significantly over time, sometimes taking on more peripheral messages[35]. Regarding the 2007 Russian meme, even if it carries a political thrust (as a distorted quote by the then first deputy prime minister Medvedev), its widespread use transformed it into a symbol of nostalgia, moving further away from the initial reaction to Medvedev's political statement and reaching more fringe social communities, such as the underground rock and hip-hop subcultures. The decline of freedom has thus led to a transformation of the Russian internet landscape, which gradually became a breeding ground for alternative discourses amid increasing censorship[36].

At this point, rap culture quickly started to move back in the direction of counterculture – or rather, it reinvented itself in a new context, gaining relevance at the same time. More and more voices began to call for political and social change, while song lyrics became as sharp and critical as they were in the Soviet rock counterculture of the 1980s. Curiously, as was the case with Siberian underground rock, such a shift in rap culture was more evident in provincial Russia than in big cities like Moscow or Saint Petersburg. When lyrics played a pivotal role and effectively defined the way rock music was perceived (even if it did often not sonically correspond to 'rock' in its Western definition), rock was more than just a genre. This phenomenon reached its zenith in the peripheral underground movements of the late Soviet era. If one had to look for genuine countercultural voices in contemporary Russian music, it seems that the rap scene of the periphery is the context in which it could sprout back to life.

III. Rappers between mainstream and underground scenes

As the political situation changed, so did rap music on a global and local level. Since the late 2000s, rap began to gain success and popularity in Russia, as the genre overtook rock music in terms of

[32] Ibidem.
[33] S. Zannettou *et al.*, *On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities*, in *Proceedings of IMC '18. ACM*, New York 2018, p. 188.
[34] Ivi, p. 199.
[35] B. Dancygier – L. Vandelanotte, *Internet Memes as Multimodal Constructions*, "Cognitive Linguistics", 2017 (28), 3, pp. 565-566.
[36] D. Kostoglotov, *Istoricheskoe soznanie v internet-memakh: k postanovke problemy*, "Vestnik RGGU. Seriia 'Literaturovedenie. Iazykoznanie. Kul'turologiia'", 2021, 9, p. 134.

audience ratings and preferences worldwide (in the United States, this overtaking was registered in 2017)[37].

In two decades, rap in Russia has differentiated and developed countless subgenres, which various scholars have attempted to categorize according to themes, lyrical self, and forms of expression. Notwithstanding differences (and shortcomings) in their approaches, the proposed categories always include commercial, mainstream, gangsta-style rap on the one hand and socio-political, civic, protest rap on the other[38]. While the first type was easy to find in the 1990s, the second emerged explicitly only in the late 2000s, marking a new important turning point in the history of Russian rap; there are cases of rappers who could initially be seen as belonging mainly to the gangsta style, but then evolved into civically engaged musicians, as was the case with the rap group Kasta. In a sense, the gradual emergence of 'protest rap' has come as a reaction to the socio-political situation in the country, but it is also the specifically Russian (albeit found in other contexts too)[39] result of a discursive line inherent to the genre, a line that has to do with the lyrical Self projected in the lyrics.

The lyrical Self – a construct that is never fully identifiable with the artist who projects it – is a fundamental fulcrum in the world of rap music[40], which has a "strong 'experiential' imperative" linked with the street or '*hood*[41]. It is an evolving Self that is often in search of their own identity; it can be a small, marginalized, or oppressed subject, but one that is aware to be endowed with a Voice[42]. Unsurprisingly, then, in rap lyrics there are frequent parallels between the Self and the Other (or a generic 'they'), which differs substantially from the Self (or an amplified 'we')[43] which is self-defined in this opposition[44]. It is at this point that rap can transform into a socio-political artistic act: the Self found in 'russkii' rap can be seen as developing a 'neoromantic' discursive line[45], in which an often hypertrophic personality reflects on what is wrong with himself/herself and the world around them. In doing so, s/he strives to reflect the worldview shared by a community that already exists or is being defined. This vision tends to be as close as possible to reality in order to be able to criticize (if not change) it, and in this sense the character of the reflection is political, civically engaged[46]. At this point, hip-hop culture can turn into a subculture (and potential counterculture), for which by definition society is a "problem" – and, only on a second level, the other way around[47].

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[37] Nielsen, *2017 U.S. Music Year-End Report*, January 2018, https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2018/2017-music-us-year-end-report/ (latest access: 09.06.2025).

[38] See: E. Dorokhova, *Fol'klornye istoki*, op. cit.; A. Korchinskii, *Bog Khaski*, "Russkaia rok-poeziia: Tekst i kontekst", 2020 (20), pp. 116-123; V. Krasnoshchenkov, *Rep v kontekste rossiiskoi kul'tury: o pravomernosti vyrazheniia 'russkii rep'*, "Chelovek: obraz i sushnost'. Gumanitarnye aspekty", 2021 (52), 4, pp. 97-114.

[39] For Polish rap see, for example, A. Ajres, *Riferimenti e follow up letterari nei testi del rap polacco*, "Lingue e linguaggi", 2022 (48), pp. 7-25.

[40] See also: S. Menrath, *Represent what... Performativität von Identitäten im HipHop*, Hamburg 2001; A. Saddik, *Rap's Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage*, "The Drama Review", 2003 (57), 4, pp. 110-127; A. Perullo, *Hooligans and Heroes: Youth Identity and Hip-Hop in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania*, "Africa Today", 2005 (51), 4, pp. 75-101; K. Bower, *Minority Identity as German Identity in Conscious Rap and Gangsta Rap: Pushing the Margins, Redefining the Center*, "German Studies Review", 2011 (34), 2, pp. 377-398.

[41] Hip-hop culture is "an expression of being *at* home and *away* from home at the same time". K. Gelder, *Subcultures*, op. cit., p. 118.

[42] Something already noted by Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace in their sui generis analysis: M. Costello – D. Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present*, New York 1990.

[43] In this sense hip-hop culture can be seen as creating a *Gemeinschaft* (community, as opposed to the term *Gesellschaft*, society) (see K. Gelder, *Subcultures*, op. cit.). Gelder draws on the influential volume by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887).

[44] See: A. Boichenko – S. Zhuchkova, *Chto skryvaet russkii rep? Tematicheskoe modelirovanie tekstov russkoiazychnoi khip-khop stseny*, "Zhurnal sociologii i social'noi antropologii", 2020 (23), 2, pp. 130-165; V. Krasnoshchenkov, *Rep v kontekste rossiiskoi kul'tury*, op. cit.

[45] On 'neoromanticism' in Russian poetry and 'bard' writing, see for instance: M. Lipovetsky, *"Svet sostoit iz t'my i zavisit tol'ko ot nas": Sergei Zhadan i neoromantizm*, "Vozdukh", 2017, 1, pp. 225-234. Interestingly, many authors whose texts are labeled by Lipovetsky as 'neoromantic' are indeed singer-songwriters and musicians (from Galich and Okudzhava to Zhadan himself).

[46] See also: E. Frolova, *Rep kak forma sotsial'no-politicheskoi refleksii v sovremennoi rossiiskoi kul'ture (2009-2013 gg.)*, Moskva 2015.

[47] N. Polsky, *Research Method, Morality and Criminology*, in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by K. Gelder, London-New York 2005, p. 70. Multiple sources stress this contrast between society (its mainstream, dominant discourses and culture) and subcultures. Hebdige defines it in the terms of "noise" vs. "sound" (or "harmony") (D.

Such an overt politicization of the genre – a politicization that has also affected other forms of Russian art such as poetry and theater in these years[48] – is a feature that has become more prominent since the 2010s, reflecting the social and political changes that have gripped Russia, particularly after the events in Bolotnaia Square in May 2012 and the repression that followed[49]. It is this type of rap that makes this genre so special in its Russian acclimatization.

Beyond systematizations as well as beyond the politicization of the genre, however, an overview of rap products of the last two decades reveals the distinct specificity of the genre in its Russian acclimatization, which is perhaps inevitable given that rap, as some scholars point out, is inherently tied to the local language and to the '*hood* narrative, thus to realia and cultural characteristics of the target context[50]. Since rap as a genre is strongly linked to the textual dimension, it is at this level that the characteristics of what has become 'russkii' rap emerge most clearly. However, it is necessary to consider the phenomenon as an essentially multicoded text complemented by music, performance and/or image (video clip, album cover, or projection during the performance).

In today's context, it is difficult to determine the popularity and success of an artist or music group based on sales criteria; instead, views on channels such as YouTube or the number of followers on Twitter or Instagram can give a more accurate idea of which songs or artists are most popular, although even in this case algorithms photograph a somewhat conditioned situation. It is not uncommon for controversial videos or tweets to be circulated simply because of the chatter they generate, regardless of the acknowledged or unacknowledged quality of the song in question. To give an idea of what this music genre is today, it would therefore be superficial to compile a list of the most listened to hits or rappers. Instead, it is more representative to identify the overarching features that characterize today's 'russkii' rap.

First of all, a distinction between two 'types' of rappers emerges clearly: on the one hand, there are artists who, album by album (or concept album by concept album), develop their own creative line and certain thematic strands, carving out their characteristic stylistic features or even poetics; on the other hand, there are rappers who stick to 'imported' albeit acclimatized gangsta traits in their production (and in many ways they thus come close to *blatnaia pesnia* and *russkii shanson*)[51], aiming above all to score another hit. Since socially engaged 'trademarks' are only present in a rapper's production when they are repeatedly and consciously developed by the artist, the category of 'protest rap' is typical mainly of the first 'type' of rappers, although single tracks containing slant social commentary can also be found in gangsta music (as in the case of Morgenshtern's song *12*).

There is no dividing line between the first and the second 'type' of rappers in terms of success and 'mass' dimension; therefore, artists in the first category should not be considered 'elitist' or lesser known. As an anecdotal episode in a school in Khabarovsk suggests[52], complex lyrics like those

Hebdige, *Subculture*, op. cit., pp. 90, 133), Williams as an "antithesis" relationship (J.P. Williams, *Subcultural Theory. Traditions and Concepts*, Malden 2011, p. 3), Gelder as a "position-taking" narration (K. Gelder, *Subcultures*, op. cit., p. 2).

[48] See: M. Lipovetsky, *The Formal is Political*, "SEEJ", 2016 (60), 2, pp. 185-204; L. Oborin, *Russian Political Poetry in the Twenty-First Century*, "Harriman Magazine", 2017, 1, pp. 50-59.

[49] Due to their civic commitment to artistic production, musicians, writers, poets, actors, and filmmakers are known to have increasing difficulties in continuing their activities in Russia, and especially after the beginning of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, many of them have left the country (among the rappers mentioned in this article, for example, Noize MC, Oxxxymiron, Face, Morgenshtern).

[50] K. Gelder, *Subcultures*, op. cit.; A. Muchtarova – O. Alimuradov, *Nekotorye lingvisticheskie osobennosti angliiskikh i russkikh rep-tekstov: sopostavitel'noe issledovanie na materiale mikrozhanra graim*, "Aktual'nye problemy filologii i pedagogicheskoi lingvistiki", 2020, 2, pp. 133-146.

[51] In a recent article, music critic Denis Boiarinov points out that many rappers have persistently turned to the *shanson* genre since the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, internalizing the criminal theme and thus also transfiguring their own image. D. Boiarinov, *'Budushchee za shansonom, potomu chto my vse zadolbalis"*, "Meduza", 2023, https://meduza.io/feature/2023/11/13/buduschee-za-shansonom-potomu-chto-my-vse-zadolbalis (latest access: 09.06.2025). On *shanson*, see A. Gordienko, *Outlaw Music in Russia. The Rise of an Unlikely Genre*, Madison 2023.

[52] In February 2016, a schoolgirl in Khabarovsk in the Far East of Russia was asked by her teacher to recite a poem by Osip Mandel'shtam. In front of her classmates, the girl began to declaim the text of *Perepleteno* [Intertwined] by Oxxxymiron, while a friend

of Oxxxymiron are no less popular than hits with a much more 'banal' content like *Baklazhan* [Eggplant, 2015] by Timati: although the latter's 284 million views on YouTube speak for themselves, the 97 million collected by the former's *Gorod pod podoshvoi* [The City Under the Sole, 2015] reward the 'politicized' complexity of this 'minstrel' (as he defines himself in the song)[53].

As stated, politicized rap in a hostile and repressive context may give rise to a subculture, which points "to the limits of majority practices" and offers "new practices or cultural forms as an alternative"[54]. Moreover, if the definition of counterculture stresses that it be – with various degrees of commitment – "*explicitly*" political (while subcultures "may be political")[55], Russian rap today could be considered a representative of counterculture too. However, although the lyrics of songs by – to name a few artists – Oxxxymiron, Kasta, Noize MC, or Face present their listeners with criticism of the status quo, it would be too superficial to read these efforts as a symptom of the existence of a mature countercultural movement today. Their rap questions dominant discourses and the official, 'normalized' culture, exposing the arbitrariness of cultural phenomena[56]. If culture can be seen as the lifestyle chosen by an organized group of interacting people defined as a society[57], a lifestyle that combines the social and spiritual spheres of human realization and sets the limits of the 'possible' within this society[58], then a counterculture emerges when the established, 'sacralized' cultural norms are transformed and 'desacralized' by a group of people who consciously engage in such cultural revision and adhere to a new set of socio-political values and beliefs which they express through cultural objects (often music). Given the hostile context in which this countercultural 'embryo' is born, everything depends on its strength, appeal and potential, whether it can actually develop and even jeopardize the culture by acquiring its specific "cultural capital"[59] and then profiting from it. If the subculture acts within the culture, influencing its development in certain directions, then the counterculture deliberately aims at disrupting the coherent evolution of the dominant culture and at superimposing a new set of ideas, styles, approaches[60]. Indeed, the crucial trait distinguishing counterculture is that it is not so much interested in criticizing and polemicizing with the cultural paradigm (which it can also completely ignore), but rather in proposing a concrete alternative according to which one can live, think, and behave. "Put bluntly: [its] goal is to change the world"[61]. Counterculture hopes for a different life and a different society[62], it does not simply reject the older, existing one.

Indeed, the absence of this hope is where the 'protest music' of the 2010s has been criticized by some commentators: according to some views, these artists "verbalize a particular moment", but fail to "go beyond this moment" and offer "nothing that would serve people in the longer term"; if "political consciousness" must not become a mere "theater of decency", it should lead to the "formation of a new esthetic experience", on the basis of which a concrete (counter)culture shall be built[63]. If artists

filmed the performance and posted it in real time on social media. The video went viral, partly because the student received an excellent grade at the end.

[53] In his more recent song *OIDA* (2022), he describes himself instead as a "troubadour". Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace also found a precursor to the rapper in the minstrel and the troubadour of medieval Europe (M. Costello – D. Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers*, op. cit.). The number of views is attested as of December 16, 2025.

[54] S. O'Brien – I. Szeman, *Popular Culture*, op. cit., p. 260.

[55] Ivi, p. 262. A seminal work on the topic is Theodore Roszak's renowned volume *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York 1969).

[56] On this arbitrariness see R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris 1957.

[57] See M.J. Herskovits, *Cultural Anthropology*, New York 1955.

[58] See: D. Pivovarov, *Religioznoe samoopredelenie cheloveka v kontekste kul'tury*, in Idem, *Filosofiia samoopredeleniia*, Orenburg 1996, pp. 41-70.

[59] P. Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by J. Richardson, Westport 1986, pp. 241-258.

[60] In certain cases, subculture and counterculture are so close to each other that they are recognized as related phenomena, yet they differ in their relation to the dominant culture.

[61] S. O'Brien – I. Szeman, *Popular Culture*, op. cit., p. 263.

[62] See: J.M. Yinger, *Countercultures: The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside Down*, New York 1982; J. Martin – C. Siehl, *Organizational Culture and Counterculture: An Uneasy Symbiosis*, "Organizational Dynamics", 1983 (12), 2, pp. 52-64.

[63] madeofstraw, *Slava psikhonavtam: itog 10-kh kak prognoz voobrazhaemykh 20-kh*, "Syg.ma", 2022, https://syg.ma/@madeofstraw/slava-psikhonavtam-itogh-10-kh-kak-proghnoz-voobrazhaiemykh-20-kh (latest access: 09.06.2025). This commentator metaphorically summarizes the attitude of many artists as follows:

limit themselves to polemicizing, criticizing, or ridiculing (producing *stëb*-style pieces), they cannot be considered representatives of counterculture[64], not even in the loose terms this phenomenon could be described in the neoliberal global context we are experiencing, the depiction of which is beyond the scope of this article. However, it must be noted that 'russkii' rap has recently also exhibited an internally diverse constructive element, especially in its peripheral instances, a constructive element that can overcome the limits of the 'contextual verbalization'.

IV. Peripheral rap: the case of Husky

One of the most striking examples of a peripheral discourse and esthetics within the relatively successful contemporary Russian rap scene is Dmitrii Kuznetsov, better known as Husky (1993-), a rapper from Buryatia, a region far-flung from the central or 'Western' part of Russia.

Husky's works stand somewhat out when compared to other Russian rappers, both in terms of themes and approach to creation, which is poetically imbued, yet in its own, unpretentious way: Husky is not heavily influenced by Western gangsta rap (like Morgenshtern or Kasta); his lyrics do not resort to satire wrapped in an otherwise deliberately crude reflection on social issues (like those of Krovostok); he does not deftly flirt with literature to release novel-like concept albums (like Oxxxymiron).

Husky seems to be borrowing from (or revisiting) a tradition traceable in the countercultural environment of the Soviet 1980s (and of the Russian periphery of the 1990s): he combines an authentic, slightly distorted understanding of Western music culture (in this case, hip-hop) with his personal intellectual but crudely executed lyrical content and, as a by-product, achieves cult status and nationwide recognition through the release of his self-produced albums.

Although the lyrics remain of paramount importance (which is typical of both rap music in general and the Russian underground tradition in particular), other elements besides lyrics play an important role in Husky's songs: the music itself, the artist's approach to live performances, and his rather peculiar arrangements, including atonal backing vocals and a distorted high-harmonic guitar. All these elements taken together bear a signature that could be compared to that of the Siberian punk movement inspired by Letov – not in terms of the specific sound, but rather in terms of the artist's position and the perception of his music[65].

The so-called Siberian punkers (represented by Egor Letov and his entourage, and later by the musicians they influenced) tried to recreate the sounds they admired from their Western counterparts in their own way and with their own unique production techniques[66]. Similarly, Husky in many ways seems to musically recreate the early Bristol stage rather than 'traditional' hip-hop. This is palpable in the vocal execution: instead of traditional rapping, his flow is full of twisted, often atonal vocalizations that often fall into focus and form the hooks of the song. But it is also evident in the arrangement of the beats, which creates a heavy, suffocating atmosphere like in Massive Attack's *Blue Lines* (1991), and in which noise or even heavily distorted electric guitars are often heard – the result is similar to the harsh, anti-esthetic counterpoint of Portishead's approach, whose use of electric guitar mimics the delicate jazz sound on top of hip-hop beats.

As far as the texts are concerned, Husky's works are considered poetic, even "spiritual" pieces[67], heavily influenced by the Russian literary tradition,

"get drunk, yell mean things about the boss, and then we'll go back to work the next morning at the same alienating company".

[64] In retrospect, however, one could also provocatively discuss the actual 'countercultureness' of past countercultures. Another open topic of discussion in today's world is virtual, digital countercultures in a context where the internet is largely monopolized by big tech companies. Both topics are beyond the scope of this article.

[65] References to Letov can also be found in the production of other contemporary rappers, who in some cases have even included samples of his songs in their new works. This is the case with the poetic dialog between Letov's refrain of *Vsë kak u liudei* [Everything As It Should Be] and the eponymous track by Noize MC, in which Egor Letov's laconic verses are expanded into a contemporary social commentary.

[66] See M. Napolitano – V. Zherebov, *On and Beyond Egor Letov*, op. cit.

[67] E. Zhdanova – Iu. Kobina – G. Ilagaeva, *Russkoiazychnaia reppoeziia kak otrazhenie dukhovnykh poiskov (na primere tekstov D. Kuznetsova)*, "Mir nauki, kul'tury, obrazovaniia", 2020 (81), 2, pp. 548-550.

whose melancholy the rapper brings into a music genre 'imported' from the West. On this level, the virtual dialog with Egor Letov's esthetics becomes clearer. Aleksei Cherniakov argues that in *Durachok* [Fool, 2015] Husky directly polemicizes with the image contained in Egor Letov's iconic song *Pro durachka* [About a Fool, 1990], and that he does so by drawing on elements of both Russian underground culture and folklore tradition[68]. Letov's musical text is in fact a variation of ritual chanting. However, this variation is primarily expressed through the execution of the song itself, not through the lyrics. What we are saying is that in this song Husky is not simply reworking Letov's approach to the written text of his songs. His re-elaboration goes further and deeper than the lyrics; it encompasses the entirety of Letov's images, sounds and execution techniques. This example is perhaps the most researched to date, but it allows the suggestion that parallels between Letov's poetic language and Husky's at least exist, if they are not prominent.

In the song *Pulia-dura* [Misfired Bullet, 2017], Husky makes an unexpected and, at first glance, radical confession:

> Я не хочу быть красивым
> Не хочу быть богатым
> Я хочу быть автоматом
> Стреляющим в лица
> (пуля-дура)[69].

Behind the façade of the literal reading of these lines (which might sound like an attempt to provoke the audience), there is a deeper level of metaphorical representation: Husky interweaves an inner dialogue with discourses and images typical of Siberian underground rock culture and sparkled by Letov and his entourage (e.g. the metaphor of the counterculture actor as a "soldier" and of his act as a "firearm" or "bullet")[70]. In Husky's song, this image stands in contrast to consumerism and the capitalist goals of life (attractiveness and wealth). Thus, Husky's poetry is not as straightforward in its use of metaphor as it might initially seem. It weaves (counter)cultural heritage into its imagery, suggesting a certain continuity with the works of late-Soviet artists, and it appeals to an audience whose cultural code aligns with this poetic language.

Some of Husky's songs were frowned upon by the Russian authorities and some of his music videos available online have even been blocked in Russia, albeit mostly because of their visual content and not the lyrics. Indeed, Husky deliberately appeals to a provocative imagery, a feature that some scholars see as mere *épatage* intended to reach his target audience[71] (as in the example mentioned above or in songs such as *Piroman*, Pyromaniac, 2017, and *Führer*, 2017). However, we believe that Husky's art is more than just an attempt to shock, provoke, and therefore be heard.

Husky was born and raised in the gloomy, ever-gray Russian province, he was fed with its esthetics: in these suburban contexts, echoes of Soviet architecture dominate the landscape, while the 'wild 1990s' with their brutal, quasi-lawless state have left visible traces in the social infrastructure.

> Еду по России, не доеду до конца
> Где панелька моего отца?[72]

In Husky's lyrics, this decadent, depressive atmosphere is mixed with deeply rooted Russian cultural motifs, such as the mystical idea of fate and damnation even after rebirth.

> Прятаться в мутной воде
> Вынырнуть в колыбельку
> И врастать помаленьку в панельку[73].

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[68] A. Cherniakov, *Tri 'durachka': ob odnom letovskom obraze v perspektive russkogo repa*, "Russkaia rok-poeziia: tekst i kontekst", 2018 (18), pp. 87-100.

[69] "I don't want to be pretty / I don't want to be rich / I want to be an assault rifle / Shooting into faces / (misfired bullet)".

[70] Egor Letov speaks of his works as "happy bullets" (see *Grob-Khroniki*, "Kontrkul'tUr'a", 1991 (3), pp. 22-30), and this reference can also be found in many of his songs, and even in songs by other artists associated with Siberian punk, such as Chërnyi Lukich.

[71] As suggested in E. Zhdanova – Iu. Kobina – G. Ilagaeva, *Russkoiazychnaia rep-poeziia*, op. cit., p. 549.

[72] "I drive across Russia, cannot reach the end / Where is my father's panel block?". From *Panelka* (Panel house, 2017). This colloquial term describes the crude residential architecture that still dots the landscapes of many less attractive neighborhoods in Russia and many countries of the former Soviet bloc.

[73] "To hide in the murky water / Emerge into the cradle / And bit by bit grow into the panel house". From *Panelka*.

These cultural references also contain images from current everyday life in the suburbs (the '*hood* narrative typical of hip-hop as a genre)[74], which become a new, specifically Russian cultural material:

Знать ту самую палатку в околотке
Давиться полторахой на коробке[75].

In Husky's lyrics, the Russian melo-poetic tradition and the postmodernist esthetics of Egor Letov merge and lead to a complex poetic structure. In this structure, several textual inputs containing ideas from different cultural and linguistic areas, form an integrated perception model. This model, accompanied by an often twisted and deliberately anti-esthetic sound layer, affects the listener beyond the purely literary or descriptive level. As a result, the integrated layers form a kind of multidomain integrational cognitive network.

An example of such a multidomain system in Husky's poetic approach can be found in the chorus of one of his songs, *Bit shataet golovu* [The Beat Shakes the Head, 2017]. Consider the hook refrain line:

Бит шатает голову
Голову мою
А перед выцветшей иконою
Господа молю[76].

The chorus' image results from a combination of conceptual models that belong to very different cultural domains which are represented linguistically by three different inputs[77]. The line "*Бит шатает голову*" ("the beat shakes the head") begins with a concept familiar to every rapper and rap music lover: the 'beat'[78] is a rhythmic stress in music that, in the context of hip-hop, is often metonymic for the instrumental foundation on which the lyrics are recited. This concept gets integrated with the Russian slang expression 'шатать голову' which not only literally means 'to shake one's head,' but also – in street jargon – 'to drive one crazy, to disturb.' The line can thus be read hierarchically, from the most obvious to the lowest level, depending on the contextual surrounding. The artist has created a double-scope metaphor: he has mixed a 'foreign' and very 'modern' concept related to rap music with the vulgar language of the Russian suburban periphery.

Moreover, in the next line, this image is mapped onto the cultural domain of the Christian (Orthodox) tradition through the mention of mercy and abjection, as well as of a "decayed", "faded" icon (fading colors reflecting the feel of the Russian suburbs). It is also noteworthy that the entire line is embedded in an atonal, chaotic musical performance[79]. Thus, the perception of Husky's poetry and of its complex multidomain system has the potential to create broader cultural conceptualizations, similar to the effect acquired by symbols of mass culture[80].

The lyrics of those Russian rappers whose esthetics are not just for entertainment but rather convey a cultural message or express the subjective view of the world in a more serious way (as in case of Husky's works or, for example, Oxxxymiron's con-

[74] See K. Gelder, *Subcultures*, op. cit.

[75] "To know that tent in the suburbs / And choke on the liter-and-half bottle at the pitch". From *Panelka*. The term 'korobka' (literally, box) refers to the field hockey pitch. Since the 1990s, these outdoor playgrounds have often been in a dilapidated state and used by local drug dealers and youth gangs.

[76] "The beat shakes the head / My head / And in front of the decayed icon / I beg the lord".

[77] To explain this metaphor, we employ the terminology of the "conceptual integration theory" developed by G. Fauconnier and M. Turner in 2002. We refer here in particular to the discussion of the perception of more complex metaphors based on the blending of conceptual structures from different domains. G. Foucannier – M. Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*, New York 2002, p. 131.

[78] This concept is an obvious element of jargon that has only relatively recently been adopted from English. It appeared in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (БСЭ) in 1970, in the Russian Orthographic dictionary (Орф.) in 1974, in the Dictionary of Foreign Words (СИС) and in the Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary (СЭС) in 1979 (N. Kotelova (ed.), *Slovar' novykh slov russkogo iazyka*, Sankt-Peterburg 1995, p. 102). However, as the Russian National Corpus registers, the word has only been in regular use since the second decade of the new millennium (https://ruscorpora.ru/word/main?req=%D0%B1%D0%B8%D1%82&seed=1645366135269290; latest access: 09.06.2025).

[79] It is also worth noting that the verb *shatat'* in this context, as well as the references to Orthodox religious artifacts, can be interpreted as placing the poetic narrative within masculine, suburban traditionalism, which is certainly not foreign to Husky's imagery. However, considering his work only through this lens is as unsophisticated as refusing to acknowledge this dimension altogether.

[80] See the theoretical framework of Fauconnier and Turner on conceptual integration and the perception of more complex, not necessarily literary, metaphors. G. Foucannier – M. Turner, *The Way We Think*, op. cit., p. 292.

cept album *Gorgorod*, 2015), cannot be considered merely as literary texts[81]. A broader and more complex question is how their musical pieces as a whole fit into the cultural (and political) landscape of contemporary Russia.

Although they have all the elements characteristic of a peripheral counterculture, including those typical of the late Soviet (Perestroika) period, Husky's work cannot be unequivocally regarded as a purely underground phenomenon and, therefore, as part of the counterculture per se.

While Egor Letov did achieve cult status and his cultural legacy extends far beyond the mere underground rock music stage and its fan base, most of his Siberian brothers-in-arms and followers outside his immediate circle (such as Kazakhstan's Adaptatsiia or Tyumen's Tëplaia Trassa) never really reached mainstream recognition, nor had the chance to perform at major festivals and be mentioned in the major media. On the contrary, Husky has achieved a reasonable level of mainstream recognition, appearing in newspapers and performing at such big festivals such as VK-Fest, which can in no way be associated with counterculture.

In this regard, another point of discussion is the stance of Russian public figures when it comes to the war in Ukraine, which is important not only for the regime's ideological framework but also for Western perceptions, which see the lack of anti-war statements as support for the ongoing aggression. As for Husky, he operates in a gray area: on the one hand, his participation in cultural events in the occupied territories of the Donetsk Republic and his friendship with Zakhar Prilepin[82] (a prominent pro-war writer) protected him from further repression; yet on the other hand, the socio-political position he expresses through his lyrics and public appearances is overtly critical of the current political regime and the social situation as a whole[83].

This critical stance has indeed caused him problems, such as the banning of music videos and the labeling of some of his lyrics as extremist. Husky's example is illustrative and crucial for understanding the emerging Russian underground music scene. At a historical moment when both the Russian regime and European perceptions interpret the war in Ukraine as a clear cultural and ideological dividing line (albeit from opposite points of view, of course), artists like Husky stand on neither side because they operate within a subjective value system largely inspired by Russian peripheral culture. Husky thus embodies the voice of a counter-critical underground context in the making, a context in which opinions are forged at the grassroots level without looking at things from a purely political point of view.

Overall, Husky has paradoxically managed to maintain the spirit of the underground artist in terms of visual presentation, impact and nature of his artistic stance in a more natural way than many of his colleagues within the genre. In his pseudo-autobiographical documentary *Liutsifer* [Lucifer, 2019], Husky admits that he has tried to preserve "the image of the Russian poet from the working-class suburbs" (имидж русского поэта с рабочей окраины; minute 16.48)[84].

With this in mind, it is perhaps appropriate to rephrase Margaret Freeman's take on the perception of poetry and the poet's voice in their own work: "Considerations of genre (. . .) and distinctive treatments of form (. . .) may identify an individual poet

[81] As suggested in E. Grudeva – A. Diveeva, *Lingvisticheskie i ekstralingvisticheskie aspekty izucheniia sovremennykh russkoiazychnykh rep-tekstov*, "Nauchnyi dialog", 2021, 9, p. 82.

[82] A friendship he comments on, for example, in this interview: https://youtu.be/WUZHA9hYXGg (latest access: 09.06.2025).

[83] Even the lyrics of his 2022 song *Bog voiny* [God of War] sound more like a general condemnation of war, although the artist does not take a position on the current conflict. In the wake of the European aftershock caused by the outbreak of war on the continent, the absence of a clear social stance by any poet, artist, or activist against the ongoing aggression (or against the Russian regime) is often perceived as complicity. However, Husky appears to deliberately stand his ground, focusing instead on more pressing issues for himself and his target audience, such as persistent problems in the Russian periphery: poverty, futurelessness, and social marginalization. Husky diverts the attention of the Russian suburban middle-class away from the war. This can lead to the perception of this rapper as belonging to the same category as ultra-right pro-war Z-bloggers, but being part of this group is likely not his intention, nor is it an accurate categorization.

[84] In this movie, the rapper talks about his search for his own personal dimension and the obstacles that resulted from the excessive media attention that would have ultimately ruined the image he was trying to preserve.

through style"[85]. Husky's 'gopnik'[86] style, the red jumpsuit, the typical for Russian suburbs thug poses are all elements presented as an additional layer to perceive and understand the artist who deliberately pokes fun at the "hypothesis of the author"[87]. Husky's approach to poetry and music, combined with his deliberately chosen image, sets the stage for the artistic act of individual, civic and cultural dissent. Furthermore, this artistic act is projected into the cultural underground realm with a nod to the broader Russian poetic tradition – in a sense, in the same way that Egor Letov's brutish and crude stage persona and music contradicted his (pseudo-)intellectual approach to his own art, bringing in the dual image of an intellectual provocateur, of a musician appealing to the crude, primitive and aggressive form while relying on a wider literary and cultural tradition.

V. Conclusion

In September 2022, Oxxxymiron self-released a new single titled *OIDA*, which was officially banned in Russia a year later as its content allegedly advocates the violation of Russia's territorial integrity (the lyrics include the verse "Ingria will be free"). The folkloric-style refrain states, like a mantra, the intention to rebuild (*peresobrat'*) the Russian "house": "take the house, live in it, choke in it, and we will rebuild it". Although there is no specific political program, the will to rebuild Russian society is intrinsic to this song and appears implicitly in the artistic activity of many musicians, especially after February 2022.

The reaction of the Russian regime to this particular song, as well as to other (from the Kremlin's point of view) uncomfortable cultural products, is revealing. Since the beginning of the military aggression in Ukraine, the Russian authorities have adopted an alarmingly authoritarian posture. In April 2022, Bashkortostan's well-known rapper Face (Ivan Drëmin) was fined, threatened with property confiscation, and forced into shutting down his business in Russia because of his non-compliance with the requirements for 'foreign agents' (a status he was assigned at that moment) – and his case is far from isolated.

One should be wary of viewing an artist or an artistic act as a bearer of counterculture simply because of their public stance against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The polarizing attitude which draws a clear dividing line between 'pro' and 'con' positions is perhaps an understandable human reflex given the gravity of the events at hand. As far as Russian artists and the regime's reaction are concerned, the situation is far from clear-cut. While personal attitudes to the current war seem to be a decisive factor in the Russian regime's considering a cultural act hostile and forcing it underground, the mechanism of repression is still in the making and cannot be compared to the comprehensive censorship apparatus of the Soviet era – even if it appears to be moving in that direction. At the same time, the nature of contemporary Russian musical counterculture is not yet fully defined – neither in terms of form nor content. Both the authoritarian ideology and the underground culture – and thus the counterculture – are still developing.

In the medium term, the reaction to war as a factor could become a trigger mechanism for the musical counterculture – similar to what happened in the early days of Western hippie culture in the 1960s, which emerged as a reaction to the Cold War and the aftermath of the Vietnam campaign. In today's Russia, however, the conditions are those of a much more repressive state and increasing cultural isolation, which force the artists to resort to their local, peripheral cultural and artistic concepts. At this point, the decisive difference in the development of the Soviet musical counterculture and of the contemporary Russian one becomes clear. The example of Husky discussed above is a vivid illustration of this: in his music, underground culture grows on a specific cultural ground. Soviet underground artists

[85] M. Freeman, *Authorial Presence in Poetry: Some Cognitive Reappraisals*, "Poetics Today", 2015 (36), 3, p. 226.

[86] The colloquial term 'gopnik' refers to Russian semi-criminal violent youths from the suburbs whose lifestyle ranges from petty crime to local gangster aesthetics. See: V. Gavriliuk, *The Gopniks as a Phenomenon in the Youth Community*, "Russian Education & Society", 2011 (53), 1, pp. 28-37.

[87] M. Freeman, *Authorial Presence in Poetry*, op. cit., p. 226.

– both rockers and rappers – often had access to the Western sources of their genre. Even though Western rock and pop music was mostly unavailable (if not demonized) at the official level, the black market for music records was far from non-existent. However, they did not have access to production methods: they reproduced the music using trial-and-error DIY, while basing their actual art on Russian literary traditions, largely rooted in the culture of the intelligentsia. Contemporary Russian artists, who are only now being pushed into the underground context and into a semi-legal stance, have access to both the method and the source of inspiration (provided we still believe that rock and rap music are predominantly a Western phenomenon, at least from the point of view of form); yet they no longer invoke the literary and intelligentsia traditions: the intertextual framework sometimes evident in rappers' lyrics and music does not as a rule represent a voluntary spiritual or intellectual affiliation to a particular tradition, but functions as a conceptual context composed of very different allusions to culture that are tangible references for their audience[88]. This new grassroots culture thus grows on a barren or 'unfertilized' soil as a result of an adaptation and evolution of alien cultural stimuli in a local context in accordance with an existing cultural tradition. This situation defines the identity and nature of this contemporary potential counterculture in the making – as it goes underground under the pressure of an increasingly repressive state.

Today's Russia is actively re-creating mechanisms of cultural censorship reminiscent of the Soviet 1980s, when many rock artists were persecuted not directly for their political position or unauthorized artistic activity, but for other 'crimes' according to the Soviet code – for example, for the "crime of idleness" (*tuneiadstvo*), i.e. for not being officially employed, or for the "propaganda of homosexualism and degeneracy" which were forbidden in the USSR just as they are in Russia today (e.g. this accusation was made against Boris Grebenshchikov and the musicians of his band Akvarium after their performance at a festival in Tbilisi in 1980)[89].

In a sense, it is Russian politics itself that has pushed music to take a constructive position: through its repressive policies and the waging of a cruel war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has broadened the spectrum of actions, ideas, behaviors, and instances that are consequently considered subversive, deviant, and punishable. What could simply be seen as sterile polemics, critical posturing, biting satire or even poetic naivety has gained political capital, because by suggesting the possibility that things could be different than they are, it implies the chance for socio-political upheaval and renewal. Russian politics has done even more: it has emphasized the distance between the mainstream and the periphery, making the once blurred line between what is allowed and what is not very clear. Unauthorized artistic acts have emerged in all their 'peripherality' – that of discourse, and that of context. Being 'peripheral' today often means living abroad in addition to inhabiting the suburbs and the province which characterized the origin of the majority of Russian rappers (Face and Morgenshtern were born in Ufa, Husky in Ulan Ude, Kasta and Basta in Rostov-on-Don, Makulatura in Kemerovo, Gnoinyi in Khabarovsk, 25/17 in Omsk, Aigel in Naberezhnye Chelny, Noize MC grew up in Belgorod while Oxxxymiron in Europe, namely Germany and the UK[90]; also, the first Russian platform for rap battles, Slovo, opened in Krasnodar in 2012, followed by Versus in Saint Petersburg just a year later)[91]. But it also means existing on virtual platforms as long as they provide a safe space for unallowed discourses in the country and make it possible to reach a wider audience regardless of geographical distance.

[88] To get an idea of how many intertextual references can be found in rap lyrics, the digital project *Pochitai starshikh* is useful: https://yandex.ru/project/gigi-za-mozgi#hero1 (latest access: 09.06.2025).

[89] See: A. Troitskii, *Rok v Soiuze: 60-e, 70-e, 80-e*, Moskva 1991.

[90] Kazakh rapper Skriptonit can be added to this list as his rap is in Russian. Interestingly, mainstream rappers such as Timati, Guf or Pharaoh are all from Moscow.

[91] Some scholars argue that rap battles in the context of Russian culture are a nostalgic echo of wandering market theater, i.e. performances in carnival squares often associated with political and social satire through humor and aesopic depiction of facts of life. See, for instance: E. Semënova, *Ulichnyi teatr v sovremennom mediaprostranstve kak redutsirovannaia forma karnaval'noi ploshchadi*, "Nauka televideniia", 2018 (14), 2, pp. 59-76.

Not all Russian rap music embodies countercultural instances; in fact, in many cases it can still be said to delve more within the realm of subculture (characterized by sound, style and lexicon, but lacking specific cultural and political capital). However, the changed situation in Russia, echoing Soviet tendencies, means that artistic movements, whether intentional or not, acquire an ideological element by simply expressing opposing views to the content fed to the public by official, censored culture.

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♢ *Russian Rap and the Case of Husky: Traces of Counterculture?* ♢

Martina Napolitano, Vladimir Zherebov

Abstract

In this article, the authors examine the history and current state of the diverse landscape of Russian rap music. An overview of the evolution of hip-hop summarizes how the genre emerged in the mid-1980s as part of the broader underground movement. In the 1990s, the drastic change in the sociocultural context was followed by the dissolution of the Soviet counterculture represented by music genres such as rock and rap. Based on this historical context, the authors examine the esthetics and cultural significance of contemporary Russian rap as a possible cradle of a new musical countercultural movement. Using the example of Russian rappers from the periphery such as Dmitrii 'Husky' Kuznetsov, the authors discuss the nature of the emerging musical underground and draw parallels with the musical landscape of the late-Soviet Siberian underground. Finally, the article lays the foundation for further research on the development of Russian underground culture under the conditions of the restoration of the country's authoritarian politics.

Keywords

Russian Music, Russian Rap, Soviet Rock, Counterculture, Dmitrii 'Husky' Kuznetsov.

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