

# Slushai Bat'ku!

## Popular music, politics, and the legacy of Belarusian Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambls (VIAs)

by David-Emil Wickström

### abstract

Being once a central component of Soviet popular culture, the *Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambls* [Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble] (VIA) repertoire has become a shared heritage across today's former Soviet republics. While portrayed in the media as a depoliticized historical phenomenon, some music groups still active today like the Soviet Belarusian VIAs Pesniary, Siabry, Verasy and Charaunitsy have in part also become entwined with domestic politics.

Focusing on Belarus, this article explores through virtual ethnography and a multimodal critical discourse analysis the intersection between popular music and politics. It especially focuses on how Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka, drawing on populist strategies, champions artists like the mentioned VIAs that support his ideology. Over his 30-year rule Lukashenka has promoted a national identity based in part on Soviet nostalgia. The mentioned VIAs are not only important drivers of contemporary Belarusian national identity, but they also provide a bridge to the Soviet past. Not only are they (in) directly supported by Lukashenka and the Belarusian state, they in different ways also support Lukashenka and were thus notably absent in the protests following the contested presidential elections in 2020.

**KEYWORDS:** *Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambl* (VIA), Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, Pesniary, Siabry, populism, nostalgia.

**M**usicians in the Soviet Union were not instruments of the state. Yet, musicians of VIAs (*Vokal'no-Instrumental'nyi Ansambl* – Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble) as well as *estrada* (the official Soviet popular music) were linked to state structures with some of their songs also promoting Soviet ideology.<sup>1</sup> Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this legacy lives on and both Russia and Ukraine have instrumentalized popular music to mobilize people, strengthen patriotic sentiment and to raise funds.<sup>2</sup>

The use of music also includes oppositional forces: The protests in Belarus accompanying the contested presidential elections on August 9, 2020, drew on music creatively with songs like *Try carapachi* [Three turtles], *Kupalinka*, *Steny/Mury* [Walls] and *Khochu Peremen* [I want change, often called “Peremen”] becoming protest anthems. Of these songs *Khochu Peremen*<sup>3</sup> together with two songs released after the contested elections, *Vskormlennye odnoi sis'koi*<sup>4</sup> [Fed from one breast] and *Rodina*<sup>5</sup> [Motherland] referenced Soviet rock bands from the 1980s.

Musicians also marched in the protests and were arrested – like the band Dai Darogu!'s front person Iuryi Styl'ski.<sup>6</sup> While rooted in punk rock and released before the election, Dai Darogu!'s song *Kartokha*<sup>7</sup> [Potato] draws on a different form of Soviet popular music: the opening vocal line from the Soviet VIA Pesniary's [The Singers] song *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu*<sup>8</sup> [Ias mowed the clover]. Former Pesniary members and other VIA groups still active have, however, been notably absent from the protests.

Instead, these VIAs can be seen performing at state sponsored events like *Slavianskii Bazar* [Slavonic Bazar] in Vitebsk



The Belarusian state ensemble Pesniary performing at the concert RE:Pesniary, September 12, 2014, Club "Re:Public", Minsk.

PHOTO: AUTHOR

or the *Natsyianal'ny festyval belaruskai pesni i paezii* [National Festival of Belarusian songs and poetry] in Maladzechna. Anatol' Iarmolenka, VIA Siabry's [Friends] vocalist, is even seen singing the first verse of the song *Liubumuiu ne otdaiut'* [You don't give away your favorite]. Uploaded to the Belarusian music production company Aura's YouTube channel and released on September 17, 2020, this music video supports president Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Written by Aura's Iuliia Bykova and Evgenii Oleinik, the song features several well-known Russian and Belarusian musicians. The title and the refrain's closing line are taken from the conclusion of a speech Lukashenka gave on August 4, 2020, to the Belarusian parliament, decrying foreign meddling in domestic politics before the contested elections: "But she [Belarus] is ours, she is our favorite, and your favorite you don't give away":<sup>10</sup>

Here is my sky, my home, my heart  
 Here everything is dear and close to me since childhood  
 I love from my soul my country  
 Here we live, our children will live  
 In peace, love and harmony – together  
 Just know – your favorite you don't give away<sup>11</sup>

As Lozka and Makarychev point out the song has been featured "at various regime-sponsored concerts and broadcast on ANT (All-General TV) and radio".<sup>12</sup>

Focusing on Belarus this article examines such intersections between popular music and politics in Belarus, especially how

Lukashenka, drawing on populist strategies, champions artists that support his ideology and positions himself as a leader and "father figure". As Dunkel and Schiller write, "[a]lthough the term populism remains contested, most researchers agree that populism is based on a binary conception of society: a 'people' on the one hand, an 'elite' on the other".<sup>13</sup> Moffitt outlines three overarching concepts of populism.<sup>14</sup> The first, populism as an ideology, is where society is seen as divided into two camps ("pure" people vs "corrupt" elite) and where politics should be the expression of the people's will. Since this "thin-centered ideology" lacks further content, it is mostly linked to other ideologies (e.g. nationalism). The second is populism as a form of political strategy, in other words how politicians strategically pursue and maintain their power through populist practices. The third concept, which is also this chapter's focus, is populism as a discourse or political performance mode and looks at how the discourse people vs. elite is created and maintained through language and performative aspects. Dunkel and Schiller argue that the performative aspect goes beyond language and should take a "culture-oriented approach to populism [looking at] *cultures of populism* [which is] the ways in which systems of meaning and cultural practices function to constitute, communicate, and reinforce populist attitudes on a discursive, interpretative, and performative level."<sup>15</sup>

**AFTER GIVING** a concise history of VIAs using existing literature, the article's second part focusing on musicians coming from the VIA tradition outlines how Lukashenka through music reinforces

populist attitudes. As Günther points out, VIAs today are elements of a broader nostalgia for the Soviet Union and are often portrayed in official media in a depoliticized way.<sup>16</sup> This fits well with Lukashenka, who, once he was elected, turned towards Soviet symbols and policies to portray his rule as common-sensical and non-politicized. Here Lukashenka draws on what Boym labels a “restorative nostalgia”, creating a national memory based on *one* singular idea of national identity in which VIAs provide a bridge to the Soviet past.<sup>17</sup>

The research informing this article is primarily based on a virtual ethnography since travel to Belarus following the 2020 protests became too dangerous. The ethnography is supported by findings from two visits to Belarus in 2014 and 2017, conversations with musicians and cultural workers as well as media accessible outside Belarus. Some of the sources (e.g. tut.by) are no longer accessible or have been taken offline due to Lukashenka’s crackdown after the 2020 protests. This is combined with a multimodal critical discourse analysis broadening the analyzed text to include not only the words, but also images, sounds and (live) performances where necessary.<sup>18</sup>

## VIAs

In the Soviet Union *estrada* was the dominant official popular music until the 1960s. Following Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s thaw, not only a jazz, but also an amateur music scene developed (in part also inspired by Western popular music). As a reaction, the Soviet cultural authorities introduced the VIA system to offer a path for amateurs to become professional popular musicians and to control the amateur music scene.<sup>19</sup> VIAs were linked to certain official structures like state philharmonics. Political interests could regulate where a VIA might emerge or what repertoire they were allowed to play. Spanning almost three decades until the end of the Soviet Union Schäfer divides the VIA-era into the following 3 distinct stages:<sup>20</sup>

Stage one is the beginning of the VIAs starting from about 1966 until the end of that decade. The first generation are in part inspired by Western beat music like the Beatles and in part by *estrada* or jazz. Founded as Liavony [Lions] in 1968, Pesniary started as a Beatles inspired band. Centered around its musical director Vladimir Muliavin, Pesniary reached the peak of its popularity in the 1970s and was central to establishing Belarusian as a sung language in Soviet popular music.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1970s (stage two of the VIA-era) we also see a second generation of Belarusian VIAs emerging, notably Verasy [Heather flowers]<sup>22</sup>, Siabry<sup>23</sup> and the first Belarusian female VIA Charaunitsy [Enchantresses]<sup>24</sup>. Schäfer argues that in stage two the VIAs develop distinct musical styles, often drawing on folkloric elements and ethnic as well as national traditions.

Within Belarus a Belarusian ethnic identity can in part be traced to Piotr Masherau’s politics of the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> As Chernyshova

argues, his policies constructed a civic-national identity that refer to an allegedly common past revolving around WWII memory, Belarusian partisan myths, pre-Soviet Belarusian folk art and customs as well as the Belarusian transition from a peasant society to an industrial Soviet one.<sup>26</sup> In terms of music the Masherau politics supported bands drawing on Belarusian folklore such as Pesniary and Siabry. As Chernyshova points out “all these different state mobilization efforts produced combined symbolic ethnic attributes with modern and civic elements.”<sup>27</sup>

WHILE VIAs PROVIDED a home for more ambitious amateur popular musicians, the amateur scene remained and continued to grow during the 1970s. To control them, rock clubs were founded in the 1980s. This influenced the VIAs which also incorporated more rock influences. The 1980s is also the final (third) VIA stage. Here we see an important musical shift: the VIA-repertoire continued the *estrada*-tradition where the songwriters and lyricists often were not part of the VIAs themselves (which made changes to the line up while retaining the band identity easier). The rock bands, on the other hand, linked songwriting and performance. Despite musical differences this resembles the ideological split seen in Anglo-US-American popular music starting in the 1960s with rock mostly associated with songs written and performed by the band itself and pop identified with a band or artist performing music written for them by a songwriter.<sup>28</sup> This latter approach is something we know from producer centered groups e.g. Ronettes (Phil Spector), Boney M. (Frank Farian) and Dschinghis Kahn (Ralph Siegel) and similarly within a post-Soviet context from formations like VIA Gra (Kostiantyn Meladze, Dmytro Kostiuk) and Serebro (Maksim Fadeev). This also means

that it is easier to replace members in a pop band or, going back to the Soviet Union, a VIA line up since they “only” have to perform – creating musical shells around a band name. As I will discuss later this also means that there can be (as in the case of Pesniary) several bands with the same or similar name.

The collapse of the Soviet Union is accompanied by the demise of the Soviet VIA system, but not of the en-

sembles themselves. Several VIAs survive. Adjusting to the conditions of a capitalist market economy, they operate differently which also affects their lineups.

## Belarus, national identity, and populism ...

Belarus was “late to the nineteenth-century nation-building stage” as Krawatzek and Weller point out.<sup>29</sup> Unlike other former Soviet states like Ukraine, the first Belarusian language newspapers, history and grammar were published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to this development there are two dominant approaches to Belarusian history.<sup>30</sup> The first focuses on how Belarus flourished during the Soviet Union. It celebrates the Soviet

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Union's achievements and centers on how the Soviet Union repelled the Nazis from the occupied Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union Belarus pursued a path of radical Othering of Sovietness, often referred to as *adradzennie* [rebirth].<sup>31</sup> This second approach to Belarus' history is ethno-cultural. It promotes Belarusian as the official state language and national history from a non-Soviet perspective. *Adradzennie* emphasizes Belarus' historical link to Europe and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as well as the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (BNR). The Soviet period is presented as one of repressions and suffering. Especially Belarusian rock music, which emerged in the 1980s, blossomed during *adradzennie* with Liavon Vol'ski among the most prominent and outspoken artists to emerge.<sup>32</sup>

**PROVIDING AN ALTERNATIVE** to the ethno-cultural approach, Lukashenka's presidential campaign in 1994 focused on corruption and chasing state officials and intellectuals, nostalgia for Soviet stability (including closer ties to Russia) and restraint regarding market reforms and privatization.<sup>33</sup> Drawing on the people's dissatisfaction with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Lukashenka positioned himself as a leader-figure speaking for the people fighting an elite. Lukashenka embedded his campaign within a form of Soviet ideology (language, economic, social).

Since post-Soviet Belarus was ethnically quite homogenous and Russian as a language dominated this approach can be read as a form of "civic" nationalism based on shared ideas of the Soviet Union. As March argues, Lukashenka continued his populist approach after his election.<sup>34</sup> In Lukashenka's legitimization the people gave him their mandates through a direct form of democracy of which e.g. the referendums in 1995 and 1996 were a part of:

**These referendums enable the strengthening of presidential power by providing a plebiscite dealing with his political conceptions, and maintaining the illusion of the decisive role of the people in political and social choices.**<sup>35</sup>

The post-Soviet ethno-cultural approach and *adradzennie* was thus replaced with his initial election in 1994.<sup>36</sup> As Ioffe points out, this was in part also due to the majority of the population following the collapse of the Soviet Union being against Belarus becoming an independent country as well as the failure of the Belarusization campaign following independence. Furthermore, Lukashenka is a proponent of civic nationalism which he sees more fitting for Belarus as a country.<sup>37</sup> Russian was elevated to a state language on equal footing with Belarusian, an effort to reintegrate Belarus with Russia was launched, privatization was halted, the "selective and strategic memory commemorating the sacrifices made by Soviet citizens during World War II"<sup>38</sup> was highlighted and state symbols were changed stressing the Soviet heritage in line with Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia.<sup>39</sup>

With the designation of a national ideology in 2003 Lukash-



Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka attended the wood chopping challenge among journalists in November, 2022.

SOURCE: [HTTPS://ENG.BELTA.BY/VIDEO/GETRECORD/1791/](https://eng.belta.by/video/getrecord/1791/)

enka further moved away from an ethnic towards a Soviet collectivist idea of national identity based on shared values, which Leshchenko calls "egalitarian nationalism" based around Soviet collectivist principles applied to post-Soviet Belarus.<sup>40</sup>

**LUKASHENKA RECAPTURED** and continued Soviet ideals and state structures – which is also parodied in popular culture like when the TV sketch *Belorusy piout o situatsii v Ukraine* [Belarusians sing about the Ukrainian situation] on the Ukrainian Dizel Show points out that Belarus still is the Soviet Union, just small and not aggressive.<sup>41</sup> Lukashenka's election, however, also marks the beginning of oppression and censorship for many (rock) musicians.<sup>42</sup>

Lukashenka, the former head of a Soviet state farm in Belarus, draws on populism as a discursive-performative tool in which, following Ostiguy, "flaunting of the low is the core feature of populism":<sup>43</sup> Lukashenka portrays himself as an anti-elitist with rural roots, often using *trasyanka*:

**[...] the lexical, grammatical, and syntactic mixture of different languages (Russian and Belarusian, Russian, and Polish, Russian and Ukrainian) [...] employed mainly in rural regions [...] especially when he [Lukashenka] wants to emphasize his concern for the day-to-day problems of the public.**<sup>44</sup>

He can also be seen doing hands on work like portrayed in two official videos from 2022: In one Lukashenka is chopping wood on his compound and in the other he is instructing citizens and reporters on how to correctly chop wood. Here he also has no qualms to dress in working clothes and wear a wool hat.<sup>45</sup>

### ... and music

As Lozka and Makarychev point out, "[b]y depoliticizing dissent and framing it as deviant behavior, the regime seeks to strip oppositional movements of their political agency and deny them legitimacy".<sup>46</sup> This strategy includes music – Lozka and Makary-



Vladiir Muliavin was the leader of the best-known Belarusian VIA Pesniary.

PHOTO: AUTHOR

chev briefly mention the song *Liubumuiu ne otdaiut* (discussed in the beginning of this article) as one example of Lukashenka's depoliticization strategy in which dissenters are framed as deviant because they are against Lukashenka (and Belarus) and thus want to give the loved one (Belarus) away to foreign powers. This fits with a general meddling with music policy: Since he came to power in 1994, Lukashenka has repeatedly cracked down on the music scene. A primary target is the Belarusian language rock scene whose musicians tend to oppose Lukashenka.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, Lukashenka has in numerous interviews and state appearances hinted at his musical taste and practice, which has an anti-elitist or populist stance: An amateur baiian-player who would have also liked to play guitar, he portrays himself as an avid music listener – especially when driving. While also able to listen to *klassika* [Western Art music], he has a preference for *narodnaia muzyka* [folk music] and songs.<sup>48</sup>

**WITHIN THE REALM** of popular music, Lukashenka seems to have a soft spot for Belarussian VIAs. Along with *estrada*, the VIA repertoire was a central component of state-sanctioned Soviet popular culture. The VIA-ensembles have become a shared heritage across today's former Soviet republics and contemporary post-Soviet popular music still contains their traces. This includes contemporary covers of Soviet (VIA) songs like those on VIA Volga-Volga's album *Pesnya.Ry*<sup>49</sup> – the title a pun in itself by referencing the VIA Pesniary – or groups playing on the name as VIA Iabat'kastan'. By drawing on Belarusian VIAs, Lukashenka

not only portrays himself as a person whose music taste matches that of the general population, but he also exploits a Soviet legacy which fits with his civic nationalist approach to Belarus.

This is one of the ways of how music is used for populist ends by politicians as practice and deliberate strategy.<sup>50</sup> Through this kind of staging, Lukashenka draws on non-elite images and this “flaunts the low” in his own performance. His discursive approach to populism includes performative aspects such as gestures and how he dresses.<sup>51</sup> Lukashenka's use of populist staging<sup>52</sup> showcases him as a man, or, to use one of his nicknames, *bats'ka* [father – Russian: *bat'ko*] of the people.

VIA references packaged within contemporary popular music and the ironic use of the VIA-label has, however, not only been used as a humoristic element, but also with political undertones. Returning to VIA Iabat'kastan the name can be read as a slight against Lukashenka and his VIA-preference: it contains the hashtag #Iabotka, meaning “I am Batka”, similar to the slogan “Je suis Charlie” used in the aftermath of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting. The word *Batka* is used here as the mentioned commonly invoked reference to *Bats'ka* Lukashenka [Father Lukashenka]. Discussing Russian meddling in the Belarus protests, an article in the Russian newspaper *Novaia Gazeta* mentioned #Iabotka as a Russian attempt at a pro-Lukashenka branding which emerged in Belarus in 2020.<sup>53</sup>

The use of VIA in the Belarusian group deVIation is more a critique of the VIA-System itself. The group maintains a critical political stance with their song *Tvoi bats'ka fashyst*<sup>54</sup> [Your father is a fascist] which is a punkified cover of Televizor's “Tvoi papa – fashist”<sup>55</sup> originally released 1987. Once more, *bats'ka* is used – here by the band deVIation – as a reference to Lukashenka.

Moving away from *bats'ka* VIA Demotivator's music video *Medved-stori* [Bear-story] is also political: On July 4th 2012 members of the Swedish advertising firm “Studio Total” initiated the pro-democracy stunt “Teddybear Airdrop Minsk 2012”<sup>56</sup> where they dropped teddy bears with messages promoting free speech and human rights from an airplane in violation of Belarusian air space.<sup>57</sup> This incident caused a diplomatic scandal between Belarus and Sweden and resulted in the Swedish ambassador Stefan Eriksson, who also maintained contacts with the opposition, having to leave Belarus.<sup>58</sup> *Medved-stori* which music includes the main keyboard line to ABBA's *The Winner Takes It All*<sup>59</sup> comments on the incident and the accompanying video shows footage from the stunt.

## Pesniary, Muliavin, and Lukashenka

A more common use of the VIA-label are parodies like the mentioned Dizel Show's *Belorusy point o situatsii v Ukraine* which includes a parody of Pesniary's *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu* or Potap and Nastia's *Chumachechaia Vesna*<sup>60</sup> [Freaky Spring] making fun of VIA performance practice. A recurring source of musical and visual inspiration which unites these two examples is arguably the best-known Belarusian VIA Pesniary and its leader Vladimir Muliavin. In *Chumachechaia Vesna* Potap and Nastia also visually stereotype his trait of being half-bald and with a prominent handlebar mustache.

Continuing their activities into post-Soviet Belarus, Pesniary remained popular both in Belarus and Russia. At the opening of the annual Belarusian festival *Slavianskii bazar* in 1994 Muliavin for the band's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary sang *Berezovyi sok* [Birch juice] as a duet with Russian *estrada* star Alla Pugacheva and in 2001 Muliavin hosted an anniversary concert in the Moscow venue Rossiia [Russia].<sup>61</sup> At the same time many bands have paid tribute to Pesniary's work including two Belarusian compilations (Pesniarok; RE:Pesniary)<sup>62</sup> and a Russian fictionalized mini-series about Muliavin that was released in 2023.<sup>63</sup>

**PESNIARY'S REPERTOIRE** thus remains known to many in the former Soviet Union. It serves as a common pop cultural reference beyond Belarus across the former Soviet republics. According to Günther, Pesniary has been part of a core VIA canon since the 1970s.<sup>64</sup> A 2017 Russian survey placed the group at third place of most liked Soviet groups. This provides *one* explanation for the numerous Pesniary parodies.<sup>65</sup>

Despite this, Pesniary had evolved into a musical shell in post-Soviet Belarus, in other words a band, but where the musicians were not necessarily part of the original line ups. This is in part due to infighting among the members of Pesniary which resulted in several ensembles using the name. After a presidential decree in 1998 only one ensemble, the state ensemble Pesniary, was allowed to use the name. Other groups drawing on the name persisted like Belorusskie Pesniary [Belarusian Pesniary] headed by former Pesniary member Vladimir Misevich.<sup>66</sup>

Muliavin, however, remained the central person: With the mentioned presidential decree, Lukashenka not only got directly involved elevating Pesniary to matter of national interest, but also reinstated Muliavin as the state ensemble's artistic director.<sup>67</sup> Lukashenka also spoke at Muliavin's funeral on January 28, 2003.<sup>68</sup> As he stated in an interview, he had not only supported, but also pressured Muliavin to remain creative with Pesniary.<sup>69</sup> Lukashenka renamed a street after and erected a statue of Muliavin. He also opened a museum dedicated to Muliavin inside the Belarusian State Philharmonic Society.<sup>70</sup> On its page describing culture and music in Belarus the official presidential website explicitly mentions Pesniary (and Siabry).<sup>71</sup> Through these (and other) activities Muliavin and Pesniary have been elevated to national symbols.

## VIA and state support

Lukashenka has also expressed preferences for musicians from the VIA Verasy including Vasil' Rainchyk, Aliaksandr Tsikhanovich and Marta Holubeva. When Tsikhanovich passed away, Lukashenka offered his condolences,<sup>72</sup> and when Rainchyk turned 70 years, Lukashenka congratulated him.<sup>73</sup> The musicians were

also given official roles: Rainchyk has been a member of the Belarusian Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) jury as have his Verasy colleagues Iadviha Paplauskaia and Tsikhanovich. As Bratachkin highlights, Lukashenka prioritizes ESC achievements using loyalists to choose contestants for the ESC.<sup>74</sup>

The mentioned VIAs also profit from being included in state-supported events. The mentioned "Slavianskii bazar" and the "Natsyianal'ny festyval belaruskai pesni i paezii" regularly feature some member of Siabry, Verasy, Pesniary and Charaunitsy – also after the elections in 2020. Rainchyk, Tsikhanovich, Paplauskaia as well as Siabry's Iarmolenka have also been on the jury of the "Slavianskii bazar".<sup>75</sup> Within Belarus at least two former VIAs, the state ensemble "Pesniary" as well as the Verasy ensemble within the *Molodezhnyi teatr estrady* [Young estrada theatre] receive state support.

**IN OTHER WORDS**, the members of these former VIAs have state support either directly through Lukashenka's intervention or indirectly being included in events and official committees and

juries. This links the musicians to the state and is probably a reason for the fact that the musicians themselves tend to be low-key about their political leanings – or toe the state line and support Lukashenka. This is in line with Günther's observation that "the commemoration of VIA music is mostly apolitical", the aim being more to create a nostalgia for audiences' youth.<sup>76</sup>

While expressing no political views in interviews, former Pesniary vocalist Anatolii Kasheparov

did perform with a Pesniary-ensemble in the Donetsk Peoples Republic (DNR) in 2017.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Charaunitsy performed twice at the festival "Donetskie Samotsvety" [Donetsk Gems] in DNR in 2015 and 2016.<sup>78</sup> Kasheparov argued that the show was for friends, but these performances in occupied DNR violated Ukraine's territorial integrity and could be read as pro-Russian political acts. Liavon Vol'ski picked up on and parodied these events for his show on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty:

Henykh, there are six or five 'Pesnyary' [singers].  
Obviously, everyone needs to earn money somewhere!  
So, it doesn't matter where they play now -  
Crimea or LNR, DNR.  
They don't care – the train station or the bazaar,  
Who is a criminal here, who is a clown, who is a tsar.  
Just pay the fee.<sup>79</sup>

As the lyrics demonstrate, Vol'ski not only parodies Kasheparov's 2017-concert in DNR but also the numerous Pesniary-offspring opportunistically performing anywhere for money. Using the melody from Pesniary's song *Vologda* accompanied

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by a synth playing the bass line on each beat of the bar and the chords on the off beats the song's sound parodies low-status solo performers singing and accompanying themselves on a synthesizer. The clip includes video footage from the DNR and other concerts and was produced for Radio Svoboda [Radio Liberty].

Some musicians also openly demonstrate support for Lukashenka. Verasy's Vasil' Rainchyk, in an interview with the Belarusian news service *Belta*, backed Lukashenka's Belarus after the contested 2020 elections.<sup>80</sup> Siabry's Iarmolenka has in several instances performed songs which can be read as supporting Lukashenka and his policies like this article's opening example *Liubimuiu ne otdaiut*. Another example is *Slushai Bat'ku* [Listen to the Father] which Siabry performed at a televised concert on March 8, 2006.<sup>81</sup> Together with female (background) vocalists Iarmolenka praises the qualities of the father in form of a call and response:

**Female singers: He'll settle grudges easily,  
Female soloist: He's reliable and calm.  
Female singers: He just looks, you can see right away,  
Iarmolenka: Who's  
Iarmolenka & female singers: the master of the house  
[...]  
Iarmolenka: Listen to the father  
Female singers: Morning, night and day<sup>82</sup>**

The person in the refrain saying "*Slushai Bat'ku*" is Iarmolenka with the female singers adding that this should be done all the time. Not only does this dialogue between Iarmolenka and the female singers clearly mark a gendered hierarchy, but the song can be – and was – read as a call to be obedient and to listen to Lukashenka since the title uses the mentioned nickname for *Bats'ka Lukashenka*.<sup>83</sup>

The concert was hosted 11 days before the presidential elections in Belarus – in which Lukashenka was reelected for his third term. While Iarmolenka stressed that there is no reason to link the song to the political situation in Belarus and that *Bat'ko* is also used for the head of the household, both he and the songwriter Oleg Sorokin in separate interviews stated that the song was written with Lukashenka in mind.<sup>84</sup>

Siabry also opened the 2021 "Slavianskii Bazar" where Iarmolenka performed the song *Ty pomnish* [You remember].<sup>85</sup> The lyrics describe how people in the past interacted with each other while today they spend time on their smartphones and send emojis instead of calling each other.

**Everything was so easy, everything was so important  
Where did all that one day disappear to  
It's not about old, outdated things  
And not about nostalgia for those times**

**We all changed, suddenly became strangers  
Stopped talking to each other  
Got stuck in accounts of different networks [social media]  
And became examples for our children<sup>86</sup>**

The song culminates in the bridge with a call for change and to refocus on ourselves which is musically stressed by the band shifting to a half-time feel:

**But maybe it is time to stop all this?  
Change ourselves and change the world.  
Open for ourselves something that knows no price,  
It's not for nothing that God gave us souls.<sup>87</sup>**

The images projected in the background are everyday pictures from the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s. This song can be read as a strange form of reactionary, or to use Boym's term, restorative nostalgia<sup>88</sup> back to a "simpler" time where maintaining personal relationships through letters and phone calls was important – which is probably synonymous with the Soviet Union. This is a good example of how VIAs today are presented in a depoliticized way, as a historical phenomenon of the Soviet Union.<sup>89</sup> Siabry not only embodies this historical past with its own history, but also through the nostalgia which the lyrics and the performance display. This Soviet nostalgia idealizing a past lifestyle and alleged values falls in line with Lukashenka drawing on the Soviet Union and thus being the custodian of Soviet

values. Following a year of protest against Lukashenka, these values are symbolically reinforced with the song opening the 2021 "Slavianskii Bazar". As Dunkel and Schiller stress:

**Nostalgic references to an idealised past evoke a longing for – and return to – a supposedly better and simpler time. Memory culture reinforces populist narratives by framing a specific act, artist, party, or politician as the custodian of traditional values and defender against perceived threats to the cultural fabric.<sup>90</sup>**

**“THIS SOVIET NOSTALGIA IDEALIZING A PAST LIFESTYLE AND ALLEGED VALUES FALLS IN LINE WITH LUKASHENKA DRAWING ON THE SOVIET UNION AND THUS BEING THE CUSTODIAN OF SOVIET VALUES.”**

As the 2020 demonstrations however also showed, VIAs are not only used by Lukashenka and his supporters, but also by the protesters. As Lysenka argues in her article on Pesniary as Soviet and national heritage, the two Pesniary songs *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu* and *Malitva* [Prayer], were actively repurposed by the demonstrators and have thus become part of an unauthorized Belarusian heritage.<sup>91</sup> *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu* also makes another, albeit silent, appearance in Dai Darogul's oeuvre. The music video to *Baiu-bai* [Nighty-night]<sup>92</sup> presents a dystopian reinterpretation of an episode from *Nu, Pogodi!* [I'm gonna get you!], a well-known Soviet children's cartoon.<sup>93</sup> In the cartoon the

protagonist (a rabbit) is chased through a wheat field by the antagonist (a wolf) in a combine harvester musically accompanied by Pesniary's song *Kasiu Ias kaniushynu*. Referencing this scene, the combine harvesters in *Baiu-bai* are driven by dehumanized Belarusian police whose faces are disfigured and bloodied (looking almost like Zombies), chasing normal citizens trying to flee across the Belarusian border. From the back of the machines riot police jump out. The lyrics are sung from the perspective of a policeman who sees himself as Lukashenka's right finger ["*Batin pravyyi perst*"] and who is only afraid of regime change ["*Tol'ko smena vlasti moi edinstvennyi koshtar*"].

Introduced by a march-like snare solo the up-tempo song (around 99 bpm) goes into a half-time feel during the song's bridge (which starts at 2:47). The video shows a riot police officer beating up an elderly woman accompanied by the melody of the official Belarusian national anthem played on the electric guitar.<sup>94</sup> The bridge's lyrics describe how the cop has collected bonuses, filled the paddy wagon and now feels better:

**Brought the bum in – 10  
For the alcoholic – 20  
For the granny with the white-red-white flag – 100 rubles  
Ripped a picket line with a report – 150 to my salary  
And filled the paddy wagon and my soul lightened up<sup>95</sup>**

Both the lyrics and the visual imagery are in stark contrast to the first verse of the anthem's lyrics which focuses on how peaceful and generous Belarus' inhabitants are:

**We, Belarusians, are peaceful people,  
Wholeheartedly devoted to our Motherland.  
We are generous friends, tempering our strength  
Living in a hardworking and independent family.<sup>96</sup>**

At the same time the cop is also hardworking and devoted to Belarus, just in a different way than some listeners of the anthem might think.

The *Baiu-bai*-video went online before the elections (July 18, 2020) and eerily predicted the police brutality and Lukashenka's necropolitics<sup>97</sup> that would follow.

As these examples show Pesniary is not only instrumentalized by Lukashenka but has become part of a Belarusian heritage as well as a pop cultural reference. This points to the polysemic nature of music which can take on different meaning for different people and shows that the government cannot dictate how songs or groups are perceived.

## Conclusion

The remains of the Soviet VIAs live on. This points to a shared supranational Soviet heritage and nostalgia back to the music of the audiences' youth – seen also in the repurposing of VIA-material by contemporary bands as parodies, covers, quotes and tribute albums. It can also be heard and seen in the revival of VIAs with little (or no personal) connection to the original VIAs. To

some extent these developments parallel currently active Soviet rock bands. In the rock bands, however, the front person, who is mostly also the songwriter, has remained active, while in most of the VIAs – including those mentioned in this article – the composer, an artistic director or a key figure from the original ensemble has remained with the performing personnel mostly changing. While some of the original members like Muliavin and Rainchyk composed parts of the repertoire, the VIAs, unlike the Soviet rock bands, heavily relied on songs written by songwriters not part of the groups. In other words, the VIAs function as musical shells. This makes it easier to bring in any figure related to the VIA – like in the case of Charaunitsy or the numerous Pesniaryy-offspring – and not necessarily an iconic front-figure like in Soviet rock bands.

The VIAs are also featured at state funded events – also after the elections – and officially recognized. They are thus linked to the Belarusian state and follow the state line. This is both an explanation to why VIAs have been notably absent from protest and why they still are musically active. Here another link to the Soviet empire can be seen: Lukashenka has in part adopted the Soviet power structure of tying artists to the state and thus trying to control the music industry. This is also linked to Lukashenka's populism as a discursive-performative tool and strategy of depoliticization.

Vladimir Putin employs similar strategies in Russia. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine the singer Shaman got a boost as a young, (relatively) fresh face singing patriotic songs and promoting Russian nationalism.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, the repercussions following the so called *golaia vecherinka* [naked party] organized by Anastasia Ivleeva in Moscow in December 2023 has shown how conservative body politics and "traditional values" have become more prominent in Russia: Following the naked party, several musicians faced performance bans and in at least once instance (Kirkorov) was removed from prerecorded New Year shows.<sup>99</sup>

The VIAs remain important for a Belarusian national identity: They invoke a musically successful (Soviet) past and highlight a stylized Belarusian folklore and language in addition to the more typical *estrada* fare that they also produced. Returning to the 2020 protests in Belarus, this, however, does not mean that Pesniary's songs only remain part of an officially authorized heritage: Muliavin and Pesniary's songs have also become symbols for the protesters showing that the political instrumentalization of music by the state is not always successful. ✖

**David-Emil Wickström** is a Professor at the Popakademie Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

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The article is dedicated to the musicians I met in Minsk.

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- 83 Listening, this time to a teacher teaching his audience, was in 2021 the downfall of the Belarus ESC entry. According to the European Broadcasting Union, Galasy ZMesta's 2021 entry "Ia nauchu tebia!" [I'll teach you] had political undertones which goes against the ESC's rules. Since Galasy ZMesta's resubmitted version was also considered political Belarus was not allowed to participate in 2021. Eurovision Song Contest, "Statement From the Ebu Regarding Belarus Eurovision Song Contest 2021 Entry." *Twitter* (2021): accessed April 11, 2022, <https://twitter.com/Eurovision/status/1370023010325831688>; N.N., "Ebu Statement on Belarusian Participation." *Eurovision Song Contest* (2021): accessed April 11, 2022, <https://eurovision.tv/story/ebu-statement-on-belarusian-entry-2021>.
- 84 Barsukov, Evgenii, "Avtor 'Slushai Bat'ku' Nazval 'Nesusvetnoi Gadost'iu' Pesniu 'Sania Ostanetsia S Nami'." *Salidarnasts'*, December 30, 2010; N.N., "Eto – Pesia! Tupiki SNG." *Novaia Gazeta*, March 13, 2006; N.N., "Iarmolenko Zapel Pro Bat'ku." *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, March 10, 2006; Shurochkin, "Slushai Bat'ku!"
- 85 Siabry, "Ty Pommish (Slavianskii Bazar 2021 – Kontsert Otkrytie Iubileinogo XXX Festivalia – Prem'era Pesni)." *Youtube* (2021): accessed August 02, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nE1oNQptFFY>.
- 86 *Vs'e bylo tak prosto, vs'e bylo tak vazhno, Kuda zhe vs'e eto ischezlo odnazhdy? Ved delo ne v starykh, otzhivshikh veshchakh, I ne v nostalgicheskikh tekh vremenakh. My vse izmenilis', chuzhimi vdrug stali, Obshchat'sia drug s drugom sovsem perestali. Zavisli v akkauntakh raznykh setei, I sluzhim primerom dia nashikh detei.*
- 87 *A mozhet pora eto vse prekratit'? Samim izmenit'sia i mir izmenit'. Otkryt v sebe to, chto ne znaet tseny, Ne prosto ved dushi nam Bogom dany.*
- 88 Boym, *Nostalgia*, xviii.
- 89 See Schwenck and Bondarenko in this issue.
- 90 Mario Dunkel, and Melanie Schiller, "Afterword: Popular Music and Populism in Europe," in *Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe*, ed. Mario Dunkel, and Melanie Schiller (Oxon: Routledge, 2025), 175.
- 91 Lizaveta Lysenka, "Soviet Music Heritage as a Discursive Middle Ground in Belarusian Political Conflict," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* vol. 28, no. 6 (2022).
- 92 Dai Darogu!, "Baiu-Bai." *Youtube* (2020): accessed December 07, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbnfNBMXgQ>.
- 93 Viacheslav Kotionochkin, "Nu Pogodi! Vypusk 6." (1973): accessed August 15, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHIToiwPBWo>.
- 94 Similar to the Russian national anthem the Belarusian anthem's melody is from the Soviet Belarus anthem, but with new lyrics chosen by a commission headed by Lukashenka in 2002.
- 95 *Bomzha priv'ez – desiatka, Za alkasha – dvadtsatka, Za babku s belo-krasno-belym flagom – 100 rublei, Porval piket s dokladom – 150 k okladu, A polnyi avtozak nabil i na dushe svetlei*
- 96 *My, belarusy – mirnyia liudzi, Sertsam addanyia rodnai ziamli, Shchyra siabruem, sily hartuem, My u pratsavitai, vol'nai siam'i.* Press-sluzhba Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus', "Gosudarstvennyi Gimn Respubliki Belarus'." *Ofitsial'nyi Internet-Portal Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus'* (2022): accessed August 31, 2022, <https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/simvolika/gimn>.
- 97 Lozka, and Makarychev, "Depoliticization and Necropolitics."
- 98 See Polkov in this issue.
- 99 N.N., "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service Russian Celebrities Face Event Cancellations and Legal Action After Attending 'Almost Naked' Party." *Meduza*, December 26, 2023.