“Sing Vasya, Sing!”: Vasya Oblomov’s Rap Trios as Political Satire in Putin’s Russia

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Oh Putin, Putin!
Who dreamt you up?
Definitely not Gogol.
Gogol couldn’t have done that!¹

Vasya Oblomov is the pseudonym of Vasily Goncharov (b. 1984—see Figure 1). His first megahit as Oblomov, “Magadan,” was released in May 2010 and displays his keen sense of satire and humor.² The song also represents his first foray into rap. Though Oblomov’s style can certainly be described as rap, he prefers the term “songs of a conversational style,”³ and he often mixes these songs with lyrical and introspective musical soundtracks and performs with live musicians. In other words, he feels that his songs differ from straight-ahead Russian rap and hip-hop, so he uses a different term. Oblomov has been quite prolific since “Magadan,” and there is clearly a market for his work. He has released two albums in less than two years, *Povesti i rasskazi* (Tales and Stories; 2011) and *Stabil’nost’* (Stability; 2012). Notably, Oblomov did not take his pseudonym from the nineteenth-century Russian novel by the same title by

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Much has happened in Russia and its “near abroad” since I finished this article late in the summer of 2013; the reader will find that some of the information is therefore outdated. In the run-up to the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, Vladimir Putin enacted several high-level pardons of political prisoners that resulted in their release, notably, former YUKOS CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky as well as the remaining incarcerated members of the protest female punk-rock collective Pussy Riot, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina. Putin-ally Victor Yanukovich is no longer in power in Ukraine and Yanukovich’s longtime nemesis, Julia Tymoshenko, is no longer in prison on disputed charges. Chechen militant Doku Umarov has been confirmed killed, while activist Aleksei Navalny did not win the race for mayor of Moscow last fall and is currently under house arrest. So these events, among others, are not represented in the present article. With the current populism and nationalism in Russia that came on the heels of its annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the Russian protest/activist movement that Oblomov represents has most certainly lost energy. It is perhaps for this reason that I feel my article is even timelier than it might be otherwise. Further, it unveils a different face—one of introspection and honor, reason and dignity—of contemporary Russia from that which we see playing out in American news outlets today.

¹ From the end of the song “Grazhdanin poet—Khiï,” words by Dmitrii Bykov, rap and music by Vasya Oblomov. The Russian for this quote reads “Ох, Путин, Путин! Кто тебя выдумал? Точно не Гоголь. Гоголь бы не смог!” This rap was originally released by the art project *Grazhdanin Poet*—which consisted of Andrei Vasil’ev, Mikhail Efremov, and Dmitrii Bykov—as “Khiï (ukrainskii rap)” on October 17, 2011. Invoking the work of Ukrainian writer Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), the rap is about the incarceration of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Julia Tymoshenko by current Ukrainian Prime Minister and Putin-ally Victor Yanukovich in October 2011 over her abuse of power in brokering a gas deal with Russia in 2009. Ellen Barry, “Former Ukraine Premier Is Jailed for 7 Years,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/world/europe/yulia-tymoshenko-sentenced-to-seven-years-in-prison.html>.

² Watch the YouTube video here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIRTrsabL_M.

³ Vasya Oblomov, live interview with the author, Moscow, Russia, February 27, 2013. The entire interview appears in *Echo: a Music-Centered Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2013). See: <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/old/content/volume-11-issue-1-spring-2013/11-1-oblomov-interview>.

Ivan Goncharov. This would have made sense, since that novel, from 1859, satirized nineteenth-century Russian nobility.⁴ Oblomov started his career not as the “rapper” Oblomov, but as the frontman of Cheboza, a Britpop-inspired rock group from Rostov-on-Don, in 1999.

Figure 1: Vasily Goncharev, photo by Lev Bodrov, used with permission

“Magadan”—a semi-autobiographical song about a lounge lizard who makes it big with one song about a quite real faraway Russian land, Magadan, famous for its prison camps and forced labor—speaks not only of the hopes and dreams of the Russian artist, but also of Russians generally.⁵ In “Magadan,” once the protagonist’s song becomes a hit, his boss at the club where he plays encourages him simply to “Poï Vasya, Poï!” or, in English, “Sing Vasya, Sing!” This cry has become somewhat of a meme in present-day Russia: Oblomov uses it often in other raps, listeners excitedly shout it out at his concerts, and it can even be heard in conversation on the street. Given the extensive political and anti-Putin message of Oblomov’s post-Magadan raps, it is clear that those who follow Oblomov and encourage him to sing on are part of the growing protest movement in Russia. Of the roughly twenty-five songs Oblomov has written, about half are explicitly political in nature, though all of his work incorporates current political themes. In a larger sense then, “Sing Vasya, Sing” has evolved into a *cri de cœur* that represents the hopes and dreams not of a make-believe club musician, but of a significant proportion of Russians who have grown tired, disenchanted, and disenfranchised under the fourteen-year rule of one man, Vladimir Putin.⁶

It is important to understand the makeup of Oblomov’s audience. If one were to draw a Venn diagram with two circles—one with Oblomov’s fan base, the other with Russian citizens who took part in

⁴ For Oblomov’s explanation on the choice of his name see Oblomov, interview, question 5.

⁵ Judging by the 3,692,455 views of Magadan on YouTube as of May 23, 2013 (with a 96% “like” rating no less), it is safe to say that Oblomov himself has, in fact, made it big in Russia. It is also worth pointing out that Oblomov has garnered this wide following without any official recognition from mainstream media outlets, which won’t play his controversial raps because these outlets are under government control.

⁶ Vladimir Putin became the de facto leader of Russia on August 9, 1999, when then-president Boris Yeltsin appointed him prime minister. Shortly thereafter, on New Year’s Day 2000, Putin became acting president, and he has ruled Russia, as president or prime minister, ever since.

nationwide political protests against Vladimir Putin from December 2011 to May 2012 (on which more below)—there would be, in my estimation, at least an 80% overlap. Much has been written about these protesters: they are urban, tech-savvy, young, middleclass, and generally well versed in world affairs. They are also generally more secular than supporters of the current government, whose interdependency on the Eastern Orthodox Church is well documented. Oblomov has made his political views officially known, by performing his rap “S chego nachinaetsia rodina” (Where the homeland begins) at one of the large protest meetings on December 24, 2011, on Sakharov Prospect in Moscow.⁷ Further, Oblomov performed his rap “Pravda” (The truth) on September 6, 2013, in support of Aleksei Navalny—who was essentially a de facto leader of the protesters from 2011 to 2012—and his run for mayor of Moscow in the fall of 2013. It is also interesting to note what type of political protester would not fit into Oblomov’s fan base. Such protesters comprise older, disaffected Russian citizens, possibly rural, who are not internet savvy yet have real problems with the current power structure in Russia for a variety of legitimate reasons. They are generally patriots, and would therefore have a problem with some of Oblomov’s acerbic parodic lyrics, which at times clearly mock Russia and Russians.

In this article I intend to discuss Oblomov’s work as political satire in present-day Russia.⁸ Importantly, Oblomov situates himself within a traditional mode of political critique that privileges satire over more open forms of protest. He says: “Quite a few classic Russian authors wrote on this theme. Chekov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy all did, and I am far from the first person to think these themes up. Right up until today it’s like this.”⁹ More specific, I will look at his three most politically motivated raps: “Poka, Medved!” (So long, Medvedev!), “VVP” (V[ladimir] V[ladimirovich] P[utin]), and “Rap Moleben” (Rap prayer). Because the last rap is based on Pussy Riot’s “Punk Moleben,” I will also discuss that episode and how it affected “Rap Moleben.” These raps were performed as trios with Ksenia Sobchak and Leonid Parfyonov. Sobchak (b. 1981) is one of the most famous Russians alive today, mostly through her work as a television personality but also through her well-known father, Anatoly Sobchak.¹⁰ Parfyonov (b. 1960)—noted journalist, author, director, actor, and television personality—was also late to the opposition, only speaking out forcefully against corruption and the vertical rule of power in Russia in the last few years. Both Sobchak and Parfyonov have suffered professionally for their outspoken ways and their anti-Putin rhetoric. By getting these two famous television personalities to perform rap trios with him, Oblomov was able to garner a much wider following for his songs. Also, by working with Sobchak and Parfyonov, Oblomov placed himself squarely in the heart of the burgeoning protest movement. Together, they represented an artistic front in that movement, which swept through Russia in 2012 and which is still

⁷ Oblomov takes the title for this rap from the famous Soviet song of the same title from the 1968 film *Shchit i mech* (Shield and sword) about World War II. To view Oblomov’s performance, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nMJPTmQ_ew.

⁸ Notably, I will not invoke the late-Soviet concept of “stiob” (“crëd,” which can be loosely translated as “mockery” or “jive”). Though there are similarities, Oblomov’s work is of a more traditional satirical nature. For more on stiob and its American reception see Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, “American Stiob: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West,” *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 2: 179–221.

⁹ Oblomov, interview, question 38.

¹⁰ Though she has been referred to as the “Paris Hilton of Russia,” Ksenia Sobchak is in fact a far more complicated figure. Anatoly Sobchak—a former mayor of St. Petersburg and an extremely influential politician in post-Soviet Russia—and Putin were very good friends until Sobchak’s death in 2000. Putin is known, largely, to be Anatoly Sobchak’s protégé, as Sobchak took Putin under his wing in St. Petersburg in the 1990s. Beginning in October 2011, when Prime Minister Putin and then-president Dmitri Medvedev announced that they would swap places the following year, Ksenia Sobchak began to distance herself from the ruling elite of Russia, and by the time of the disputed parliamentary elections of December of that same year, she was firmly in the opposition. For more on Ksenia Sobchak see Andrew Meier, “Ksenia Sobchak, the Stiletto in Putin’s Side,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/magazine/ksenia-sobchak-the-stiletto-in-putins-side.html?pagewanted=all>.

active today, though in a less prominent form. By looking at Oblomov's rap trios I hope to show how he merges rap with satire in order to underscore some of the injustices taking place in contemporary Russia.¹¹

Before a discussion of Oblomov's rap trios, it is important to understand the role that rap plays in contemporary Russia. Though rap's history is well documented and well known in the U.S., its history in Russia is not. In its early forms, Russian rap unabashedly ripped off American forms of the genre, such as the song "Rap" (1984) by Chas Pik, which was based on the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (1979), or the album *Seks bez pereryva* (Sex without stopping) (1991) by the group Mal'chishnik, which was based on 2LiveCrew's *As Nasty as they Wanna Be* (1989). Only in the past ten years or so has Russian rap found its footing and begun a national variety that can truly be called its own.

Other important concepts in the history of American rap—race, space, place, representation, "keeping it real," authenticity, resistance, and the ghetto—are either perceived entirely differently in Russia, or are altogether non-existent. Insofar as Russian rap only began to flourish in the early 1990s, precisely when the Soviet Union ended, it is difficult to speak of a political underground message as part of its history. For the most part, Russian rappers do not represent particular regions as they do in the States (such as the West Coast, Dirty South, or the "D" [Detroit], for instance). With respect to locale, though there are many interesting rappers all over Russia, all roads still lead to Moscow, and there is little talk of rapping "regions" in Russia as there was in the States. And though post-Soviet Russia was relatively poor, the idea of "ghetto" with respect to rap was more or less not relevant. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, those who have become successful in Russian rap were generally not part of any oppressed ethnic minority. That is, most big names in the game are in fact ethnic Russians.¹² So, rather than essentially inventing a genre to serve the needs of a certain group of people, Russians appropriated the rap genre to serve their own needs and, currently, this genre is one of the most popular in Russia and is distinctly Russian in style.¹³ The appropriation of rap as a genre is true of many countries outside of the U.S. today, and it would be hard, perhaps impossible, to find a country that did not have its own version of rap.¹⁴

¹¹ Another figure who was influenced by Oblomov was, strangely enough, Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who subscribed to Oblomov's official YouTube channel in the fall of 2012 and added postings for two of Oblomov's protest raps, "Kto khochet stat' militsionerom?" (Who wants to become a police officer?) and "Poganen'ki u nas narod" (Our rotten little nation). Oblomov is the only rapper who appears on Tsarnaev's YouTube channel. See Tsarnaev's YouTube channel, with the Oblomov postings, here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/muazseyfullah>.

¹² One exception to this would be, for instance, the rapper Timati (b. 1983), who is half Tatar and half Jewish. Notably, he is one of the most popular rappers in Russia today, and he is a stalwart Putin supporter as well. Also notable is the idea of "repressed ethnic minority" in Russia, which is quite different from any American understanding of this idea. Though it is surely possible to include Tatars and Jews in such a group, it is unlikely that Timati—whose father is a wealthy businessman—would agree that he is a repressed minority.

¹³ When I asked rap legend Vladi, from the group Kasta, if rap is as popular in Russia as it is in the States, he responded, "Yes, I'd say it's the same," that is, the most popular music in contemporary Russia. Phone interview with the author, March 13, 2013.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Tony Mitchell, *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop outside the USA* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), which showcases the rich rap cultures in foreign countries such as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, and Japan. Rap has become so popular abroad that even fringe groups have latched on to the genre in order to spread their message. For example, rap has been picked up in Nordic countries, especially Sweden, in spreading a white-nationalist and neo-Nazi message, perhaps without awareness of rap's African origins. Benjamin Teitelbaum, "'Come Hear Our Merry Song': Shifts in the Sound of Contemporary Swedish Radical Nationalism," PhD diss., Brown University, 2013.

In what follows I intend to examine how a Russian artist can react to the current climate in present-day Russia, in which freedom of speech has come under fire and the rule of law has come under question. I will look at politics only as it relates to the circumstances surrounding the raps and to the themes raised therein. I will also look at the beats of the raps for clues concerning how they support the satirical message of the lyrics. Of course, Oblomov is hardly the first Russian to use satire as a weapon against an oppressive regime. One might even argue that Russia—with its long history of oppressive rulers coupled with its rich literary tradition—has produced more political satirists than any other country. But because rap is relatively new in Russia, it is unusual to see such satire mixed with the rap genre.¹⁵

The beats for Oblomov’s three rap trios mix rap with “blatnaia muzyka” (criminal music), also known as “blatniak,” which is a popular song genre that began in nineteenth-century Russia and has to do with criminals and a criminal way of life. The melodies are simple and the chords are generally tonic, dominant, and subdominant, usually in root positions. In post-Soviet Russia, blatniak has been marketed as “russkiĭ shchanson” (Russian chanson), which is essentially a new form of blatniak that also romanticizes the criminal way of life. It is not surprising that this genre gained a wide following in twentieth-century Russia, with its massive incarceration rates during Soviet times. Because of its criminal topics and the romanticization thereof, the Russian chanson is often compared to American gangsta rap.¹⁶ Though American gangsta rap was often construed as “authentic” by listeners because of its rawness and realness, the same connection should not be made with Oblomov’s use of blatniak, since he is the first to merge blatniak with rap. Still, there is an undeniable visceral reaction on the part of Russians when they hear a blatniak beat, which allows Oblomov to create an emotional connection with his listeners. He is also able to underscore the criminal side of the current political situation in Russia. He is careful to not produce a song that could be purely part of the blatniak or chanson genre since, if he had, he would open himself up to far more scrutiny from Russian authorities since blatniak is so well known in Russia. In other words, because rap is a less Russian genre than blatniak, the authorities are less likely to scrutinize it because they don’t know anything about it. By combining blatniak and rap, Oblomov creates an ideal environment in which to satirize the current political situation in Russia. One final note about Oblomov’s use of blatniak: this genre is generally more popular with older Russians, so it is possible that Oblomov is trying to appeal to them directly with blatniak. Whereas his lyrics might be thought of as targeting younger Russians, the beat might be thought of as targeting older Russians. Thus Oblomov is able to expand his potential audience.

“Poka, Medved!”

This rap was released on the Russian television channel “Dozhd’,” on which Sobchak had a program at the time, on February 29, 2012.¹⁷ In September 2011, then-president Dmitri Medvedev announced that

¹⁵ The most popular protest rapper in Russia today is Noize MC (b. 1985), who collaborated with Oblomov on Oblomov’s “Pravda.”

¹⁶ Sophia Kishkovsky, “Notes From a Russian Musical Underground: The Sound of Chanson,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/16/arts/music/16kish.html?pagewanted=all>. Two archetypal songs from the blatniak and chanson genres are, respectively, “Murka” and “Vladimirskiĭ tsentral.” See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCKfZcPObKE> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s66ta-9CnKI>.

¹⁷ Watch the YouTube video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gdIvjF99ac>. Note that the name of the Russian president is “Medved” in the title. At first, roughly ten years ago, Medved was an acronym for the political party “MEzhregional’noe DVizhenie ‘EDinstvo,’” which later became the party of Vladimir Putin, “United Russia” (or in Russian, “Edinaia Rossiia,” or “EdRo” for short). Later, “Medved” became a famous Internet meme for a famous picture featuring a

he would not stand for president of Russia in upcoming elections but, instead, back Putin for this post. Putin of course accepted these terms and suggested that Medvedev be prime minister if Putin again assumed the presidency. Later Putin and Medvedev declared that this arrangement had been planned long ago. This swapping of power—which citizens referred to as the “rokirovka” (castling), the move in chess in which the king and rook swap places in order to protect the king—made many Russians feel uneasy and powerless. The parliamentary elections in December 2011, which tested the waters for this power swap, were largely disputed, and there were numerous reports of nationwide voting irregularities, all in favor of Putin’s party, United Russia. The ensuing protests, also in December 2011, were unexpected and much larger than initially thought, and they caught the governing authorities by surprise. In one of more improbable episodes of the unrest, then Prime Minister Putin immediately accused U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of provoking the unrest.¹⁸ “Poka, Medved!” (see Figure 2) was written in the aftermath of all of this, and during further protests after the new year of 2012. Its February 29 release date was only four days before the Russian presidential election, which Putin won with 63% of the vote.

Figure 2: Video for “Poka Medved”

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0007.201>

The beat to “Poka, Medved!” is simple and void of the many synthesized sounds that make up most popular hip-hop tunes. Example 1 shows my transcription of this simple beginning. It begins with a two-voice melody, played by a tenor sax and bass trombone, in the key of A minor, and unequivocally evokes a simple Russian blatniak song. Like many such songs, there are but three chords, tonic (i), dominant (V), and subdominant (iv). Here they occur in an oscillating 6/4 context: the first four bars are all tonic, while the bass oscillates between 1 and 5. In addition to the winds there are the faint sounds of bells in the mix, as well as Oblomov’s voice setting up the ensuing rap. At the end of the excerpt, the full complement of the beat enters, with bass and various drum sounds (not shown in the example).

The video for “Poka, Medved!” is at once simple and revealing. Throughout most of the video the viewer sees close-up shots of the three rappers’ faces. They are wearing the popular Russian sailor t-shirts (tel’niashchka), but it is unclear why. Only at the end of the video can the viewer understand that they are standing on a small inflatable raft, something like a lifeboat, that was popular in Soviet times, in front of large projected waves on a screen and fake waves on the set. The message is one of difficult times: a small lifeboat adrift on a large ocean. The trademarked name of the lifeboat, “Romantika” (“romance” or “romanticism”), harkens back to a simpler Soviet time. At the very end of the video the viewer sees that Sobchak is holding an iPad, in a reference to the final stanza of the rap, “Thanks for not spamming or botting.” Also, Parfyonov holds a sign with “146%” written on it, in a reference to the farcical claim by authorities that 146% of the electorate had turned out to vote in the December elections.¹⁹ And in a final nod to Soviet times, the three give a “pioneer’s salute.” The pioneers—something like Boy Scouts and Girl

bear, the slogan for which was “Preved, Medved!” (which, in its poorly written Russian, translates as “Hi, bear”). So, “Poka, Medved!” is a play on that meme. If not for the soft sign at the end, the Russian word for bear—“Medved”—is exactly the same. Based on these two usages of Medved, Russians began referring to Dmitri Medvedev as “Medved” during his presidency.

¹⁸ David M. Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, “Putin Contends Clinton Incited Unrest Over Vote,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/world/europe/putin-accuses-clinton-of-instigating-russian-protests.html>.

¹⁹ Seth Abramovitch, “Putin Clings to Victory as Russia’s Voter Turnout Exceeds 146%,” *Gawker.com*, December 4, 2011, <http://gawker.com/5864945/putin-clings-to-victory-as-russias-voter-turnout-exceeds-146>.

Scouts in the United States, with the exception that it was a requirement to be a pioneer in the Soviet Union—were “always ready” for the task at hand. Perhaps here the rappers are saying that they are ready to help the Russian government if needed, in light of the problems raised in the rap. The Soviet references—the sailor’s t-shirts, the “romantic” lifeboat, the pioneer’s salute, and the blatniak beat—give the impression that Oblomov is saying that, for all its faults, there was a greater sense of justice, or perhaps decency, in the Soviet Union than in Putin’s Russia. Perhaps this even suggests a certain ironic nostalgia for socialism, ironic because Oblomov is representative of Russian youth, for the most part, and can himself scarcely even recall Soviet times. Following Example 1, I give a transcription and translation for “Poka, Medved!,” in Example 2, after which I discuss some of the more notable satirical elements of the rap.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the beat for "Poka, Medved!". It consists of four staves. The top two staves are for Tenor Sax and Bass Trombone. The bottom two staves are for a piano accompaniment. The Tenor Sax and Bass Trombone parts are in bass clef and feature a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The piano accompaniment is in bass clef and features a steady eighth-note bass line. The score is labeled with "a:" and "i" below the first two staves, and "5" below the third staff. The piano accompaniment is labeled with "a: iv", "iv6/5", and "V" below the bottom staff.

Example 1: Beginning of the beat for “Poka, Medved!”

<u>Пока, Медвед!</u>	<u>So long, Medvedev!</u>
Е-е! Здесь Вася Обломов, Ксения Собчак и Леонид Парфёнов, И Российский народ, весь, все до единого здесь!	1. Yeah! It’s Vasya Oblomov, Ksenia Sobchak, and Leonid Parfyonov 2. And the Russian people, everyone’s here, down to the last person!
Дмитрий Анатольевич, нам Вас жалко, За олигарха вступилась Пугачева Алка, А Ваших сторонников след простыл. Вот российский народ про Вас и забыл! Все обсуждают премьер-министра – Уйдет он медленно или быстро? Народ на митингах топчет снег, А Вас как будто бы больше нет!	3. Mr. Medvedev, we feel bad for you, 4. Alla Pugacheva went to bat for the oligarch, 5. While your supporters vanished into thin air. 6. It seems the Russian people forgot about you! 7. Everyone’s discussing the prime minister— 8. Will he leave slowly or quickly? 9. People at meetings are trampling snow, 10. And it’s almost like you’re no longer there!

Example 2: Transcription and translation into English of “Poka, Medved!”

<p>Вот выступили бы на Поклонной горе Или на Сахарова в декабре, Сказали бы свое слово публично, А премьер-министру можно и лично, О том, что думает наш президент, За Вас же голосовал огромный процент! Как победить коварный Госдеп? Страна в смятении, а Вас все нет!</p> <p>Мы писали Вам в Твиттер, Но Вы молчали! В Фэйсбуке писали – Вы не отвечали! Дмитрий Анатольевич, дайте ответ: Есть оранжевая угроза или нет? Стоит бояться отката назад, Системного кризиса, попадания в ад? Взрывов домов, коварных чеченцев, Доку Умарова, нападения немцев? Как нам понять без Вашего слова: Нужен нам Вова или не Вова? Неужто Путин нас всех спасет?</p> <p>Сказали бы честно, что Вас не ебет, Что тихо стояли Вы у руля И нами не правили даже и дня.</p> <p>Мы все про Вас знаем, мы видим насквозь, Что были мы вместе, что будем мы врозь.</p> <p>Никто и не думал Вас оскорблять, но, Дмитрий Анатольевич, даже блядь Сейчас печется о судьбах страны! Выборы были, и они странны.</p> <p>Даже стрелки часов не повернуты вспять, Путин вернется, повернет опять. Хоть раз бы сказали нам всем от души! Поговори же с нами, не в Твиттер пиши!</p> <p>Полиция осталась ментами по сути, А в Ваших речах, помимо мути, Нет ни слова на злобу дня – Дмитрий Анатольевич, так нельзя!</p> <p>Потом напишут: «Мол, был молодцом, Президент России с человеческим лицом. Сидел 4 года, решений не принимал, Освободил кресло, в Сколково преподавал».</p> <p>Успел вроде как предложить реформы Но, кроме дебильной полицейской формы, Ничего после оставить не смог. Оно и понятно – всего один срок.</p> <p>Спасибо, что не спамил! Спасибо, что не бот! И подпись: «С уважением, российский народ».</p>	<p>11. If only you had appeared at Poklonnaia Gora 12. Or at Sakharov, in December, 13. And made your speech publicly, 14. And to the prime minister, privately, 15. About what our president is thinking, 16. A huge percentage of us voted for you! 17. How can we defeat that sly U.S. State Department? 18. The country's in turmoil, and you're nowhere to be found!</p> <p>19. We wrote you on Twitter, 20. But you were silent! 21. We wrote you on Facebook, 22. But you didn't respond! 23. Mr. Medvedev, give us an answer: 24. Is there an orange threat or not? 25. Should we be afraid of a kickback, 26. A systemic crisis, or a trip to hell? 27. Or explosions of homes, cunning Chechens, 28. Doku Umarov, or an attack by the Germans? 29. How can we understand without your input: 30. Do we need Putin or someone else? 31. I'll be damned, can Putin really save us all?</p> <p>32. If you just told us honestly that you don't give a fuck, 33. That you were calmly standing at the helm 34. And that you hadn't ruled us for even a day.</p> <p>35. We know all about you and see right through you, 36. That we were together and that we will be apart.</p> <p>37. Nobody thought to offend you, 38. But, Mr. Medvedev, even a wench 39. Has the fate of the country at heart! 40. We had elections and they were strange.</p> <p>41. Even the hands of a clock don't turn back, 42. Putin will return, and turn them back again. 43. If only you told us all just once from your heart! 44. Talk with us, don't write on Twitter!</p> <p>45. The police remain cops in essence, 46. And in your speeches, apart from the mumbo-jumbo, 47. There's not a word about the latest news— 48. Mr. Medvedev, that's not right!</p> <p>49. Then they'll write: "Well, he was great, 50. A Russian president with a human face. 51. He served four years, didn't make any decisions, 52. Vacated his seat, and went to teach at Skolkovo."</p> <p>53. He kind of managed to propose reforms 54. But aside from those ridiculous police uniforms, 55. He wasn't able to do anything else afterward. 56. It's understandable—he only had one term.</p> <p>57. Thanks for not spamming! 58. Thanks for not botting! 59. And the signature: "Respectfully, 60. The Russian people."</p>
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Example 2 (cont.): Transcription and translation into English of “Poka, Medved!”

Virtually every line in this rap has a satirical element to it. The beauty to Oblomov’s work is that he simply strings together facts of what has happened recently in Russian politics, highlighting the ridiculousness of it all. The song is addressed to then-president Medvedev, from the Russian people. In lines 3–10, Oblomov makes reference to Putin’s return, the protest meetings, and Medvedev’s demise. Lines 11–18 ask Medvedev why he did not address the protesters back in December, and why he seemed to disappear. Line 17 refers to the U.S. State Department (Gosdep), and how Russians can defeat it, but it also refers to the cancellation, on February 14, 2012, of a popular politically charged television show that Sobchak anchored, “Gosdep with Ksenia Sobchak.” Putin and his allies often fall back on blaming the U.S. State Department for interfering with Russia’s internal affairs, and it is common for Russians to hear and talk about the U.S. “Gosdep.” In lines 19–31 there are references to the roles that Twitter and Facebook played in the protests, the Orange revolution of Ukraine, and the Chechen wars. Lines 41–44 refer to the time reform that Medvedev pushed through, by which Russia no longer observes daylight savings time, and the fact that Putin will return daylight savings when he is back in office. The rest of the song already places Medvedev in the past tense, how he was a nice guy who really didn’t do much, and then went to teach at the new tech campus he started, Skolkovo. At the end they thank Medvedev for not spamming or botting, and sign off.

With “Poka, Medved!,” and with the exposure that Sobchak and Parfyonov lent, Oblomov’s audience grew rapidly. Though he had used a blatniak beat before, “Poka, Medved!” was probably the clearest such usage to date. By making Medvedev the object of his ridicule, however, Oblomov was sidestepping the true paramount figure in Russian politics. So, with the next trio, he went straight to the main source of Russia’s political power, Vladimir Putin.

“VVP”

This rap was released on YouTube on May 16, 2012.²⁰ At this point, Putin had just returned to the presidency after his inauguration on May 7. Notably, there were large violent demonstrations the day before, on May 6, in which dozens of people were injured and hundreds were arrested.²¹ Once again, the rap uses a clear blatniak style for the beat, with a synthesized keyboard playing a simple melody, again in A minor, accompanied by single notes in the keyboard left-hand bass line. Almost immediately, in m. 3, the rest of the beat enters, with bass, drums, and various percussion sounds. It is clear from the simplicity of the beat, and from the fact that it is so similar to the beat of “Poka, Medved!” (though at a slightly slower tempo) that the focus of “VVP” (see Figure 3) will be on the message of the lyrics. The video is also quite similar to the previous rap. The three performers are shown close up, in a studio, and the background shows a video projection, this time of counter protests in favor of Putin. They are wearing simple white t-shirts with the word “Vashchi” (Yours) printed on them, in a play on the popular pro-Putin movement “Nashchi” (Ours). In other words, Oblomov, Sobchak, and Parfyonov are claiming to be part of the “Ours” movement, and pro-Putin. The three signs they are holding, from left to right, in translation, read “Stability Forever!,” “Everyone is lying to you!,” and “Stability is awesome.” The satirical element here is clear: they support Putin and are trying to inform him that there are bad people out to get him, when in fact they do not support Putin at all. Example 3 shows my transcription and translation for the rap.

²⁰ Watch the YouTube video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDfxmDgH5Ew>.

²¹ Ellen Barry and Michael Schwartz, “Arrests and Violence at Overflowing Rally in Moscow,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/07/world/europe/at-moscow-rally-arrests-and-violence.html>.

Figure 3: Video for “VVP”View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0007.201>

<u>BBП</u>	<u>VVP</u>
Е-е! Здесь Вася Обломов (Вася) Ксения Собчак (Ксения) И Леонид Парфенов (Лео)	1. Yeah! It's Vasya Oblomov (Vasya) 2. Ksenia Sobchak (Ksenia) 3. And Leonid Parfyonov (Leo)
Владимир Владимирович, тут такое дело... Не хотелось бы, чтобы это Вас как-то задело, Но народ рассказывает про Вас разное: И хорошее, конечно, и совсем безобразное. Мы всецело поддерживаем здоровое начинание, Но никто не выполняет Ваши обещания! Вас разводят как лоха на каждом шагу, У Парфёнова спросите!	4. Mr. Putin, here's the thing... 5. We really didn't want to offend you anyhow, 6. But people are saying different things about you: 7. Good things, of course, and completely shameful things as well. 8. We entirely support your sensible beginning, 9. But no one is fulfilling your promises! 10. They're playing you like a sucker at every turn, 11. Ask him Parfyonov!
Все так, я не вру! Деньги отмываются даже на борьбе с коррупцией, Ни один полицейский не знаком с конституцией, Нургалиев наврал про успехи реформы, Деньги распилили даже на пошиве формы!	12. It's true, I'm not lying! 13. Money is being laundered even in the fight against corruption, 14. Not a single police officer is familiar with the constitution, 15. Nurgaliyev lied about the success of the reforms, 16. They siphoned off money even in making the uniforms!
Голикова врет Вам про здравоохранение, Вам безбожно врут опросы общественного мнения, Фурсенко врет про реформу образования, Про пользу ЕГЭ и про школьное питание.	17. Golikova is lying to you about healthcare, 18. Public opinion polls immorally lie to you, 19. Fursenko is lying about education reform, 20. About the benefit of the national standardized test and about school lunches.
Вам врет Фонд патриотического кино, Они пият бюджет и снимают гавно.	21. The Patriotic Film Foundation is lying to you, 22. They cut into the budget while they film shit.
Движение "Наши" и кремлевская молодежь В заслуги Вашей партии ставят овощи и рожь. Вам гонят пургу в Министерстве обороны – Армия заебается, не работают законы.	23. The “Ours” movement and the Kremlin youth 24. Give your party credit for vegetables and corn. 25. They're talking nonsense to you at the Ministry of Defense— 26. The army's all fucked up, and the laws aren't working.
Новости превратились в Ваш видеодневник, Был Медведев Раша, а у Вас какой ник?	27. The news has evolved into your video journal, 28. There was “Medvedev Russia,” but what was your user name?
Видимо, Вы начали обо всем догадываться, Что ложь обступила и продолжает подкрадываться. Вовремя дистанцировались от "Единой России". Мутная партия! Скажи, Василий!	29. Apparently, you've begun to understand everything, 30. That the deception has surrounded us and continues to lurk. 31. You distanced yourself from “United Russia” on time. 32. It's a troubled party! Tell us, Vasily!
Конечно! Какие тут могут быть друзья! Вот раньше всем заправляла президентская семья. Пока в Питере борются с пропагандой пидеров,	33. Of course! What kind of friends could you have there! 34. Earlier the president's family controlled everyone. 35. As they were fighting the homosexual propaganda in St. Petersburg
Чуров наврал Вам про результаты выборов.	36. Churov lied to you about the election results.
Вам вешают лапшу на уши про пенсионные льготы, В Интернете Вашими сторонниками являются боты. Люди смеются над Вашими перестановками, Близнецов обзывают Димками и Вовками.	37. They pulled the wool over your eyes on retirement benefits, 38. On the internet your supporters are bots. 39. People are laughing at your shakeups, 40. People castigate their twins as Dima and Vladi.

Example 3: Transcription and translation into English of “VVP”

<p>За митингами, показанными по всем каналам, Платились бабки и преимущественно налом. Автобусами с регионов свозили народ, Изображали нереальную поддержку – так вот.</p> <p>Михалков ляпнул, что Ваша власть от Бога – Не догнал даже токарь из-под Таганрога! На митинге поддержки за Вас и за ЕдРо Народ прорвал оцепление и ринулся в метро.</p> <p>Странно, что Вам это все неизвестно. Есть решение! Если интересно,</p> <p>Заводите «Твиттер», следите сами за всем, Регистрируйтесь в «Фейсбуке», и затем...</p> <p>...будете в курсе событий в стране – Это информативнее, чем Ваш вакуум в Кремле.</p> <p>Верьте нам, Владимир, мы с Вами не первый год, Если что – мы на связи! Российский народ.</p>	<p>41. At the meetings, which they're showing on all channels, 42. Money was paid, mainly in cash. 43. They brought in people from the regions by bus, 44. They feigned unbelievable support, just like that.</p> <p>45. Mikhalkov blurted out that your power was from god— 46. Even the lathe operator from Taganrog didn't get it! 47. At the meeting in support of you and United Russia 48. The people broke through the cordon and rushed into the subway.</p> <p>49. It's strange that you don't know about all this. 50. There's a solution, if you're interested,</p> <p>51. Start a Twitter account and watch everything for yourself, 52. Register on Facebook, and then...</p> <p>53. ...you'll be aware of what's going on in the country— 54. It's more informative than your vacuum in the Kremlin.</p> <p>55. Believe us, Vladimir, this isn't our first year together, 56. If there's anything else, we'll be in touch! The Russian people.</p>
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Example 3 (cont.): Transcription and translation into English of “VVP”

Oblomov is careful not to attack Putin personally in his raps; he knows that could be dangerous. As an example of what can happen when artists offend the authorities in Russia, Noize MC, arguably Russia's most famous protest rapper, was incarcerated for ten days in August, 2010, in Volgograd, after authorities felt that he had offended the local police at a concert performance. At that performance Noize and his group mocked how police in Russia generally take bribes. Law enforcement officials working the hall reported the incident to their superiors and, before long, Noize found himself in a holding cell, where he remained for ten days on charges of hooliganism. They did not allow him to see his lawyer or producer, and the authorities made him tape a video confession (which he later used as the chorus for a song, “10 sutok v raiu” [10 days in paradise]).²² Noize and Oblomov are friends—Noize appears in the video for Oblomov's “Pravda”—so clearly Oblomov knows of this episode and the unpredictability of reactions to his work. In “VVP” the rappers are completely on Putin's side, warning him of potential problems. If one listens to Putin, it is clear that he is addressing problems by announcing reforms, fighting corruption, and keeping the people safe, among other issues. However, many of Putin's promises are empty, and that is what this rap is about. In line 8 Oblomov announces, “We entirely support your sensible beginning”—who wouldn't, since Putin says, for the most part, what people want to hear—but goes on to point out all of the actions that Putin ordered that aren't happening. Of course, Putin is well aware of the fact that his orders are not being followed, and herein lies the satire.

Lines 12–26 discuss all of the corruption going on and how various high-ranking public officials (Nurgaliyev, Golikova, Fursenko) and organizations (the police, the Patriotic Film Foundation, “Ours,” the Ministry of Defense) are taking advantage of poor old Putin. Line 27 states, “The news has evolved into your video journal.” This is an astute observation to any Russia observer, who recognizes that there

²² Ivan Alekseev (aka Noize MC), interview with Aleksandr Shchadov from August 11, 2010, retrieved from <http://www.rusnovosti.ru/programms/prog/61884/103927>.

has been, for many years now, an incessant stream of “news” stories whose sole purpose is to lionize Putin. Currently, there are no true independent television news channels in Russia, and only a few print and radio outlets might be considered as such.

Lines 29–48 describe how Putin distanced himself from United Russia during the presidential election. This was a calculated move, of course, but the rap trio assumes nothing, plays stupid, and acts in solidarity with their leader. They discuss how Putin’s Internet supporters were bots (line 38) and how governing officials bused in people to attend counter protests in support of Putin (lines 43–44). Once again, social media—Twitter and Facebook—are prominent in the rap, this time as a solution to Putin’s seeming ignorance of the goings-on in the country (lines 51–52).

“VVP,” though slightly more tepid than “Poka, Medved!,” represents a direct plea to Vladimir Putin. Though satirical, its message is clearly in support of those who question Putin’s lock on power. The song’s beat is quite similar to that of “Poka, Medved!” and the two can be thought of as complementary songs, both addressing the President of Russia, with all the current issues in Russia as a backdrop for their themes. There was still one major issue of 2012 in Russia that had yet to be addressed by Oblomov, Pussy Riot.

“Rap Moleben”

On February 21, 2012, five members of the punk-rock collective Pussy Riot staged a mock performance in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, demanding, among other things, the removal of then prime minister Vladimir Putin from power. They described the song they played as a “Punk Moleben” (Punk prayer), in which they prayed to the Virgin Mary to rid their country of Vladimir Putin.²³ The ensuing court case and incarceration of three of the five on charges of religious hatred, and Putin’s personal involvement in the case, garnered worldwide media attention. “Rap Moleben” (Rap prayer) (see Figure 4) is Oblomov’s answer to the Pussy Riot situation. Given the heightened tensions surrounding Pussy Riot, it is hard to put into words the courage displayed by the three artists in the rap trio, knowing that they too could risk incarceration for their actions.²⁴ Through satire, they are able to express their opinions and bring the ridiculousness of the entire situation to the fore, while making sure not to give the authorities anything that they could use against them in a court of law or the court of public opinion.

So much media attention has been given to Pussy Riot that it is hard to give an objective opinion of what happened. Though it is difficult to side with the prosecution, the episode’s Western reception, almost universally on the side of the defense, is also not without fault. In his “Pussy Riot, Freedom of Expression, and Popular Music Studies after the Cold War,” Nicholas Tochka argues convincingly that the Anglo-American reception of Pussy Riot was strongly influenced by Cold War constructs, which resulted in certain misunderstandings of the situation by Western artists and media outlets.²⁵ After speaking of a pre-1989 Cold War ideology, he says:

²³ Watch the YouTube video, with translation, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPDkJbTQRCY>.

²⁴ At one of his concerts in Moscow Oblomov spoke of a conversation he had with his mother in which she asks, offhandedly, “so they haven’t thrown you in jail yet?” He confirmed in my interview with him that this had happened (Oblomov, interview, question 34)—there is a very real sense among artists such as Oblomov that, with one wrong move, they could share the fate of Pussy Riot.

²⁵ Nicholas Tochka, “Pussy Riot, Freedom of Expression, and Popular Music Studies after the Cold War,” *Popular Music* 32, no. 2: 303–311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S026114301300007X>.

The “freedom” and political potentials of punk uncovered in the English-speaking reception of Pussy Riot were beholden to this pre-1989 legacy. In assuming liberal democratic rights to self-expression, or in positing transnational solidarities around what seemed to be shared identity politics or commitments to musical resistance, Western musicians and journalists located Pussy Riot’s statements within a political-economic regime the collective’s members themselves would not necessarily recognize. The attribution of a “Freedom of expression” to the women exemplified commentators’ insistence on situating the collective within a particular regime of “natural” rights and artistic subjectivities. However attractive the idea of the universality of individuals’ rights to “artistic expression” may be, the notion remains imbricated in the post-Cold War hegemony of a liberal democratic ideology.²⁶

Tochka makes the excellent point that the “freedom of expression” upon which the Pussy Riot case hinged was based on an understanding of that concept that was a construct of the Cold War and of Western thought. The point is that the episode got caught up in something much bigger than a simple case of hooliganism, which may have resulted in misdemeanor charges in most countries in the world. The long list of famous artists—including Björk, Madonna, Paul McCartney, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Sting—who came out in support of Pussy Riot shone an unfortunate spotlight on the event. Had the media attention never happened it is quite possible that the three imprisoned women—Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich—would never have been sent away. Notably, not everyone in the West was against the prosecution. On a recent trip to Russia to investigate the Boston Marathon bombing, after U.S. Congressman Steve Cohen criticized Russia for their crackdown on expressive freedoms, U.S. Congressmen Dana Rohrabacher and Steve King went out of their way to support the prison sentences for Pussy Riot:

After Mr. Cohen took a moment to criticize Russia for its prosecution of members of Pussy Riot, the band that carried out a “punk prayer” protest in Moscow’s main cathedral, Mr. Rohrabacher said he disagreed. Representative Steve King, Republican of Iowa, also said the prosecution seemed justified. “If anyone came into my church,” Mr. King said, “and did that, it would be difficult for me to stand up and say they had a human right to do that.”²⁷

Adding to the complicated nature of the case is the intimate relationship between church and state in present-day Russia. Kirill I, the head of the Russian Eastern Orthodox Church, has claimed that Putin’s power comes from God, and the unshakable support of church for state, and vice versa, is not in question. One of Pussy Riot’s main goals with “Punk Moleben” was to highlight this unhealthy relationship in Putin’s Russia. Specifically, the chorus of the song—“Sran’, sran’, sran’ gospodia” (Shit, shit, shit of the lord)—is meant as a reference to Putin’s government and its relationship to Kirill I’s church.

“Punk Moleben” begins with “Bogoroditse Devo, Raduīsia” from Vespers, in a setting by Sergei Rachmaninov (see Example 4). “Bogoroditse Devo, Raduīsia” is an Eastern Orthodox “Ave Maria” hymn or prayer and part of the Ordinary of Vespers, which is part of the Eastern Orthodox “All Night Vigil” (vsenoshnoe bdenie). Pussy Riot substitutes “raduīsia” (Hail) with “Putina progoni” (Drive Putin out). So, “Bogoroditse Devo, Raduīsia” (Virgin Mother, Hail!), becomes “Bogoroditse Devo, Putina progoni” (Virgin Mother, drive Putin out).

In a nod to Pussy Riot’s usage of Rachmaninov’s setting, Oblomov uses the same prayer, “Bogoroditse Devo, Raduīsia” in the most common Eastern Orthodox chant of anonymous authorship, to begin his “Rap Moleben” (see Example 5).²⁸ No words are changed in the rap, which is a way of

²⁶ Ibid., 308.

²⁷ David M. Herszenhorn, “Delegates Visit Moscow for Insight on Boston Attack,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/03/world/europe/lawmakers-in-moscow-in-inquiry-on-boston-suspects.html>.

²⁸ Watch the YouTube video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqTbNvC9XjA>.

acknowledging Pussy Riot's song without too much risk (by not using Rachmaninov's setting or not changing the words as Pussy Riot did). Once again Oblomov uses a basic blatniak beat, which immediately follows the brief opening of Eastern Orthodox chant. And all is once again in the key of A minor. This opening, shown in Example 6, is played by a synthesizer, and is accompanied by bass and drums. The three harmonies are clearly outlined in the bass, and the melody is simple and diatonic.²⁹

Figure 4: Video for "Rap Moleben"

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0007.201>

2. Богородице Дево, радуйся

Покойно, легко, очень нежно

С. Бо-го-ро-ди-це Де-во, ра-дуй-ся, Бла-го.

А. Бо-го-ро-ди-це Де-во, ра-дуй-ся, Бла-го.

Т. Бо-го-ро-ди-це Де-во, ра-дуй-ся, Бла-го.

Б. Бо-го-ро-ди-це Де-во, ра-дуй-ся, Бла-го.

Example 4: From Rachmaninov's Vespers, "Bogoroditse Devo," which Pussy Riot uses at the beginning of "Punk Moleben"

Из Нотного собрания Московской регентско-певческой семинарии

«Богородице Дево...»

Напев Воскресенского монастыря

Бо-го-ро-ди-це Де-во, ра-дуй-ся, Бла-го-дат-на-я Ма-ри-е,

Example 5: "Bogoroditse Devo, Raduŝia" from Voskresenskii Monastery Chant, used by Oblomov at the beginning of "Rap Moleben"

²⁹ The opening melody in the beat of "Rap Moleben," until the downbeat of m. 2, bears a striking resemblance to the opening of Nautilus Pompilius's "Gudbaĭ Amerika" (Goodbye America): by leaving out the D5 and G4 neighbor notes in the first bar of "Rap Moleben," the A-minor melodies are exactly the same. Perhaps this is a musical borrowing from Nautilus Pompilius, a famous Soviet/Russian perestroika-era rock band (or perhaps a reference to saying "goodbye," satirically, to American influence in Russia). Watch the YouTube video of "Goodbye America" here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIbOnGX_syc.

Example 6: The opening Blatniak beat for Rap Moleben, synth. and bass

The video for “Rap Moleben,” like those of the other rap trios, is simple and telling. The background is an angelic white, and the three rappers are dressed all in black. A close-up of their praying hands is shown, and when the camera moves back it is clear that they are all wearing black cassocks. They are also wearing clerical collars typical of Catholic priests, but not of Eastern Orthodox clergy. In yet another subtle way the three rappers are buffering themselves from the events going on in Russia. That is, by using the clerical collars they are distancing themselves from Russian Orthodoxy. The background remains a heavenly white for the entire rap, and at the end there is a credit on the screen, in which is written (I have provided an English translation):

Над роликом работали:

Those who worked on the video:

Чарлз Спенсер Чаплин
Мамонт Дальский
Абрам Березов-Гусев
Абрахам Бреге (Швейцария)
Блин и Хил Клин (США)
И прочие гундѣжники

Charles Spencer Chaplin
Mamont Dal'skiĭ
Abram Berezov-Gusev
Abraham Brege (Switzerland)
Blin and Khil Klin (USA)
And other whiners

This short list features figures generally linked to liberal causes or to anti-Putin sentiment. Charlie Chaplin was known to have left-wing sympathies, and Mamont Dal'skiĭ (1865–1918) was a famous Russian actor and anarchist. Abram Berezov-Gusev refers to three Russian oligarchs—Roman Abramovich, Boris Berezovsky, and Vladimir Gusinskiĭ—who have all had problems with the governing authorities in Russia and who have financed opposition candidates.³⁰ Abraham Breguet was the founder of a famous Swiss watchmaker (about which more below). Blin and Khil Klin refers to Bill and Hillary Clinton; “Blin” is a popular mild swear word in Russian that Russians used to refer to Bill Clinton, and Hillary Clinton was said to have supported anti-Putin demonstrators. And other “whiners” refers to a word that is often used by authorities to describe anti-Putin protestors. Example 7 shows my transcription and translation for “Rap Moleben.”

³⁰ Berezovsky died on March 23, 2013, at his home in England of an apparent suicide.

<u>Рэп-молебен</u>	<u>Rap Prayer</u>
Ну вот и мы, 2012 год. Всё не закончивается. От всей души.	1. Here we are, the year 2012. Nothing has ended. Honest to god.
Это рэп молебен в поддержку веры, Сохраняя стабильность и чувство меры. Обломов, Парфенов и Ксения Собчак Пресвятой богородице посылают знак.	2. This is a rap prayer in support of religion, 3. Preserving stability and a sense of moderation. 4. Oblomov, Parfenov, and Ksenia Sobchak 5. Are sending a sign to the Holy Mother.
Дорогая Богородица, обратите внимание, Какие у нас происходят страдания. Всю зиму страна боролась с внешним врагом. Было несколько митингов протеста и потом,	6. Dear Mother, pay attention, 7. To what kind of sufferings we're enduring. 8. All winter our country fought with a foreign enemy. 9. There were several protest meetings and then,
Группа особо опасных девушек в храме Что-то кричала и топала ногами, Требовала срочно кого-то прогнать. Нам всем это нужно, святая мать?	10. A group of particularly dangerous girls in a church 11. Shouted something and stomped their feet, 12. Demanding immediately to drive someone out. 13. Do we all really need this, Holy Mother?
А как ополчились люди на патриарха? Из-за часов! Из-за какого-то подарка! Его святейшество часов не наблюдает Есть они или нет он толком не знает.	14. Why did the people gang up on the patriarch? 15. Because of the watch! Because of some gift! 16. His holiness doesn't look at clocks 17. He doesn't even really know whether they're there or not.
Злые блоггеры призывают топить лодку, Вместе с патриархом, табаком и водкой Вместе с нанопылью и его квартирой С проживающей там то ли Леной, то ли Ирой,	18. Evil bloggers are urging us to sink the boat, 19. Along with the patriarch, with his tobacco and vodka 20. Along with the nano-dust in his apartment 21. Along with that girl living there, either Lena or Ira,
С водителями Гелендвагена и BMW – Служителями церкви – виновниками ДТП, Вместе с президентом и премьер министром Раскачивают медленно чтоб потопить быстро,	22. With the drivers of the Gelandewagen and BMW, 23. With the clergy who cause traffic accidents, 24. With the president and prime minister 25. They are shaking the boat slowly so that it sank quickly,
Вместе с полпредом с урал вагон завода Не дожидаясь 2018-го года. Богородица, милая, пожалуйста разрули, Счета у спонсоров протеста заодно обнули.	26. Along with the envoy from the Ural wagon factory 27. Not waiting for 2018. 28. Dear Holy Mother, please guide us, 29. And at the same time wipe out the accounts of the protests' sponsors.
Оскорблены чувства верующих охранников Байкеры с флагами ездят вокруг памятников Патриарх мудро и долго хранил молчание Но грешники не додумаются до покаяния.	30. The religious gatekeepers' feelings are offended 31. Bikers with flags are cruising around memorials 32. The patriarch wisely kept silent for a long time 33. But the sinners won't repent.
Ведь не придет им в голову, что российский суд Судит нас за грехи наши, и даже тех кто глуп, Обязательно наставит на путь исправления Путем православного тюремного заключения.	34. After all, doesn't it enter their minds that Russian justice 35. Tries us for our sins, even if we are stupid, 36. And will certainly put us on the right path 37. By means of an Orthodox Christian prison sentence.
Единым целым для нас является православие Чекизм, народность и самодержавие. Занимается кошунством эхо москвы Сеет разлад в умах граждан страны.	38. Orthodox Christianity is the only unity for us 39. Chekism, nationalism, and sovereignty. 40. Echo-Moskva engages in sacrilege 41. And sows discord in the minds of our citizens.

Example 7: Transcription and Translation into English of “Rap Moleben”

<p>Но священное стояние за православную веру Укрепило дух народа и судебную систему И осветило уголовное дело 6 мая Разгоны студентов с оккупай абай</p> <p>И породило в депутатах добрые мотивы Принять закон имени Яковлева Димы И помогло к концу года потерять места Всем тем кто против и оставить тех кто за.</p> <p>[The following stanza was deleted and replaced with the previous stanza at some point] И не позволило следствию вернуть Ксюхе ее миллионы Чтоб не попутал ее дьявол спонсировать погромы И отвели рабу Ксению от святого Муз ТВ, от ОРТ, ТНТ И всякого дурного тв.</p> <p>И одарен был жилплощадью московский омон. Бастрыкин извинился и был прощен. Благодарим за ангельское Ваше терпение, Не обращайтесь внимания на общественное мнение.</p> <p>Вы же точно знаете, что нужно нашей стране, Кто должен быть в думе, а кто в кремле. Живет по справедливости святая матушка Русь. Суды беспристрастно решат судьбу Пуссь.</p> <p>Благодарим за поддержку, и с нами все россияне. Богородица, не прогоняй никого! Оставайся с нами!</p>	<p>42. But the sacred support for our Orthodox faith 43. Strengthened the people’s spirit and our judicial system 44. And blessed the criminal case of May 6 45. And drove off the students from “occupy Abai”</p> <p>46. And fostered good intentions with the deputies 47. So they passed the law in honor of Dima Yakovlev 48. And, at the end of the year, punished those who were 49. Against the law, while helping those who agreed with it.</p> <p>[The following stanza was deleted and replaced with the previous stanza at some point] 50. And didn’t allow the investigation to return those millions to Ksenia 51. So that the devil didn’t confuse her for sponsoring the violence 52. And god-servant Ksenia was rejected from the saintly Mus TV, from ORT and TNT 53. And all kinds of evil TV.</p> <p>54. And the Moscow OMON were given apartments. 55. Bastrykin apologized and was forgiven. 56. We thank You for Your angelic patience, 57. Don’t pay any attention to public opinion.</p> <p>58. You definitely know what is necessary for our country, 59. Who should be in the Duma and who in the Kremlin. 60. Holy Mother Russia lives justly. 61. The courts will decide the fate of Pussy Riot impartially.</p> <p>62. Thank You for your support, all Russians are with us. 63. Holy Mother, don’t kick anyone out. Stay with us!</p>
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Example 7 (cont.): Transcription and Translation into English of “Rap Moleben”

This is one of Oblomov’s finest raps, a watershed moment for his career. All he is doing is retelling the events of 2012, highlighting just how crazy it all was. The tone of “Rap Moleben” is one of support of religion (line 2), as a supplication to the Holy Mother (line 5). Lines 6–9 refer to the protests and the “foreign enemies” (the U.S.), and lines 10–13 refer to Pussy Riot. Notably, Oblomov makes no direct mention of “Pussy Riot” or any of the events surrounding them, thus insulating himself from government criticism. As mentioned, Pussy Riot highlighted the increasing interdependency of the national government and the Russian Eastern Orthodox Church, led by Patriarch Kirill I. Lines 14–25 of “Rap Moleben” highlight this unhealthy interdependency. There was a famous episode involving an expensive Breguet watch, worth roughly \$30,000, which Kirill I wore to a meeting with the Russian Minister of Justice in 2009. Realizing that this did not give the right impression of the church, editors airbrushed the watch off of his wrist for publication of the photo, but they forgot to airbrush the reflection of the watch on the table. At first the church denied that Kirill I had the expensive watch, but ultimately it admitted that the watch was his.³¹ The blogger referred to in line 18 is Aleksei Navalny, who is in many ways the leader

³¹ Michael Schwartz and Robert Mackey, “Russian Church Admits Photo Was Altered to Hide Patriarch’s Watch,” *New York Times*, April 5, 2012, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/russian-church-admits-photo-was-altered-to-hide-patriarchs-watch/>.

of the present anti-Putin opposition and who is currently fighting a court case to stay out of prison.³² (It was Navalny's blog that uncovered the watch scandal.) Also mentioned in lines 19–23 is a list of other questionable cases of clergy misconduct, all of which underline the symbiotic relationship of church and state in Putin's Russia.

Line 30 refers to the main judicial reason for trying Pussy Riot, that worshippers' "feelings" had been "offended." And line 37, "an Orthodox Christian prison sentence," shows the hypocrisy of the church, insofar as forgiveness is a main tenet of Christianity. "Echo-Moskva" radio, one of the last independent news sources in Russia, is mentioned in line 40 as an organization that "sows discord in the minds of" Russians. Lines 46–49 deal with the "Dima Yakovlev Law," the well-known anti-American adoption measure that came into force on January 1, 2013. Interestingly, that stanza replaced another stanza (lines 50–53) about the troubles that Sobchak faced in her career after she joined the opposition, as she could not find a TV show that would sponsor her. This could be because they wanted to bring up the Yakovlev Law, or perhaps because Sobchak seems to be moving away, slowly, from the opposition.³³

The beauty of "Rap Moleben" lies in its subtle satirical tone. By "siding with the church," the three rappers are ostensibly on Putin's side, but it is clear that they are ridiculing the strange state of affairs surrounding Pussy Riot and the issue of free speech in Russia. Notably, there is not one use of profanity in "Rap Moleben"—by contrast, both of the previous rap trios used profanity. I asked Oblomov about free speech and censorship when I interviewed him in February 2013. He said:

I act according to the principle "I can't be quiet." Lev Tolstoy wrote his books according to the same principle. As far as freedom of speech is concerned, of course, in a different world it would be possible for my songs to be heard on radio stations or state television. One state television station wanted to invite me on to its program and sing a song in connection with an album launch but, since they could not find one song that they could play, they said: "We can't invite you since we can't find one appropriate song." They invite me to a radio broadcast to have a conversation and give an interview, but at the same time they're afraid to put my songs in their rotation for whatever reason. It's a fact, but it doesn't mean that I shouldn't write about it. First I write a song, and then something happens with it, or doesn't happen.³⁴

With respect to the Pussy Riot episode, it is worth quoting Oblomov's answer in its entirety:

It seems to me that everything that happened was simply the result of a huge universal stupidity. At first, certain people with church titles had the great idea to campaign for political power and participate in political life. And after that stupidity different people had the great idea to dance in a church and sing a song. And then a third group of people had the great idea to begin a judicial process for this. One stupidity resulted in another. And nothing would have happened if that Russian court had had enough brains to not incarcerate those women and punish them in some other way. This ball of stupidity multiplied and became this global absurdity, leaving the confines of Russia and getting discussed in the world media. And then, when it became clear that different people had made many idiotic decisions, the propagandists were left no choice but to accuse some secret enemies of Russia and say that they want to ruin us. In my view it was simply stupidity after stupidity and a huge ball of craziness. This is what "Rap Moleben" was about. I didn't make anything up; I simply outlined all of the absurdity

³² Andrew Kramer, "Russian Opposition Leader Asserts Innocence at Trial," *New York Times*, April 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/25/world/europe/russian-opposition-leader-aleksei-a-navalny-asserts-innocence-at-trial.html>.

³³ Andrew E. Kramer, "Twitter End to Love Story Born in Russia's Protests," *New York Times*, February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/world/europe/kseniya-sobchak-russian-celebrity-marries-and-the-groom-is-not-yashin.html>.

³⁴ Oblomov, interview, question 26.

that has taken place in the country for the past year. In Russia we had a great actor, Yuri Nikulin, who often said: “I don’t create anything funny—it’s enough to look at life, notice some things, list them, and this will seem funny and absurd.” But, just the same, it’s from life. The song “Rap Moleben” is about the same thing. Moreover, I didn’t lie with one word, didn’t make anything up, I simply connected the whole chain together and it already looks like nonsense. I don’t like Pussy Riot, the music or the women. It was just a classic Russian stupidity—one person said something, another one did something, a third went somewhere, the court decided something, unrightfully or rightfully, the media wrote something, and as a result millions were wasted by Russian authorities on the image of Russia abroad, money was simply thrown into the trash can, and in the eyes of the world Russia turned into a place where Putin is fighting with Pussy Riot. I experienced a feeling of shame when this all happened, because of the prison sentence. It seemed to me that this was all wrong. I signed a letter that other artists were signing calling for the release of those women. I really believe that what they did does not call for a prison sentence.³⁵

This long quote encapsulates the frustration that many Russian artists now face under the current political situation. More than anything, the fact that one must choose sides in the debate is becoming more and more obvious; either you back Putin and the present power structure or you do not. The fact that Putin himself became involved in the Pussy Riot case, speaking out on behalf of the prosecution, means that he is part of the popular culture, and Putin wants contemporary artists to know that. Also telling is Oblomov’s quotation of the actor Yuri Nikulin, who is considered one of the greatest satirists of the twentieth century in Russia.

★ ★ ★

To be an artist in present-day Russia is not easy. As a democracy, Russia is experiencing unpredictable growing pains. It need be said that, for all of his heavy-handed techniques, Putin still remains a relatively popular figure in Russia, though his popularity has been waning since his reelection to the presidency in 2012. It is hard to express the bravery of the three women of Pussy Riot who were incarcerated in 2012. They did not back down from their stance—that the church and state in Russia are too intertwined and that Putin must go for there to be real change—and they conducted themselves with dignity at their court hearings. In “Punk Moleben” Pussy Riot sings “Virgin Mother, drive Putin out” and, at the second chorus, “Virgin Mother, become a feminist.” At their defense, Yekaterina Samutsevich, speaking in her own defense, said, “I think that if we had sung, ‘Virgin Mother, protect Putin’ and ‘Virgin Mother, don’t become a feminist,’ we would not be here right now.”³⁶

Getting material out is another problem for a protest artist in Russia. Because almost all channels of media are controlled by the government, Oblomov has not been able to have his material played on those channels. Instead, Oblomov uses the Internet, which allows him to reach an ever-growing base of fans who, as mentioned, are generally young, urban, and tech savvy. There are popular rappers who are played on the major media outlets, such as Timati, L’One, GeeGun, and KReeD. None of these rappers has anything controversial in their lyrics however and, as I mentioned earlier, Timati is a strong supporter of Putin and the Russian government.

How Oblomov situates himself as an artist is also of paramount importance. Not only does he view himself in the same vein as great Russian satirists such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Yuri Nikulin, it is also

³⁵ Ibid., question 33.

³⁶ *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer*, HBO documentary, produced and directed by Mike Lerner and Maxim Pozdorovkin, 2013.

worth pointing out the general aura that Oblomov tries to create for his character. There is an entire persona behind the pseudonym. At concerts and in video clips, Oblomov often wears a high-neck collared shirt with a vibrant flowing ascot, with or without a peacoat—a simple Internet search will yield such an image. And with this image I contend that Oblomov is not only potentially harkening back to nineteenth-century Russian satirists, but also to the Decembrists, that group of early nineteenth-century Russian aristocrat abolitionists who ended up being executed or sent to labor camps in Siberia after their revolt of December 1825. They, like Oblomov, were reform minded, though their protest methods were far more direct. This time-honored Russian sense of satire, and the history surrounding it, are hallmarks of Oblomov and help to situate him within contemporary Russia. Because they are uniquely Russian, they also insulate him, to a degree, from the authorities.

By simply putting out the facts, often satirically stating them from an opposing point of view—as Stephen Colbert does on the *Colbert Report*—Oblomov is accomplishing two goals. First, he is protecting himself from government censorship. After all, how could he be censored for saying “we’re with you, Holy Mother!”? Second, and more importantly, he is providing an outlet for a disenfranchised opposition movement in Russia in the face of growing state control of all media under Putin’s power. For example, in “Kto khochet stat’ militsionerom?” (Who wants to become a police officer?), Oblomov narrates a story of being a police officer from Rostov-on-Don. He goes through all the types of normal police behavior in Russia: extortion of bribes; planting of evidence; manipulating the judicial system; racial profiling; violent arrests; and unwarranted traffic stops; among many others. Everyone in Russia knows that the police force is, by and large, intractably and endemically corrupt. Those who challenge Russian authorities and try to unveil this corruption are often made targets of the authorities, and sometimes such challengers pay with their lives, such as the human rights lawyer Sergei Magnitsky or the journalist Anna Politkovskaya. By speaking as a police officer in “Kto khochet stat’ militsionerom” and simply talking about what everyone knows happens, Oblomov is also unveiling the corrupt and unlawful ways of the Russian police force. Whether in open form or as subtle satire, protest in present-day Russia is controversial. It need be said that there is still a sizable number of citizens who do not share the beliefs of the protesters from 2011–2012. This is part of the difficulty of engaging in protest movements now in Russia. Though they also represent a large swath of Russian society, protesters are keenly aware that many of their compatriots support Putin and back his policies. Still, it takes enormous courage to stand up to repressive authorities in Russia today, and Oblomov does so with aplomb and audacity.