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## A Canon in Multiple Voices

The Canonisation of VIAs in the Soviet Union and Russia

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**Abstract:** The article examines the canonisation of VIAs in late and post-Soviet Russia. Of interest are both the mechanisms of canon formation (TV shows, websites, academic publications, self-canonisation) and the image of the VIA movement drawn by these entities over time. Two dominant focuses of canonisation can be identified for the late Soviet period, one of which describes VIA music as a Soviet answer to Western rock music and attributes innovative and experimental characteristics to the VIA label, while from the other side VIA music was described as a form of mass conformist Estrada music. After VIAs fell into crisis in the 1990s, their music has been experiencing a revival in recent years within the larger context of nostalgia for the late Soviet Union. The identification of different time-bound canonisation strategies and processes opens up new perspectives on the supposed canon break at the end of the Soviet Union and makes the treatment of VIA music readable as part of current memory culture and identity constructions in Russia.

**Keywords:** Soviet Union; canonisation; VIA; nostalgia; popular culture; estrada; rock music.



## The Reorganisation of the Canon in Post-Soviet Russia

Perestroika and the end of the Soviet Union initiated a reorganisation of the literary, cinematic, theatrical and musical canon in Russia and the newly independent Soviet republics. Prominent singers and groups who had hitherto represented Soviet culture fell into oblivion, while other artists, who had been previously ostracised, living in exile or active only in the underground, achieved great popularity. Although there had been repeated smaller and larger revisions of the canon in the Soviet Union, for example with the Stalinist Cultural Revolution or the Thaw, none of these breaks was as significant as the rupture that accompanied the end of the empire. For now, not only did the ideological conditions change rapidly, but the discursive environment surrounding art and culture, distribution structures, and the manner of cultural reception was completely reorganised.

Rainer Gröbel has conceptualised this change by distinguishing between mono-canonical and poly-canonical cultures, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's differentiation of monophonic and polyphonic writing, whereby "official"<sup>1</sup> Soviet culture is categorised as a mono-canonical culture (Gröbel 2012: 44, 47). Gröbel's distinction is of heuristic value, but should be differentiated if applied to popular music and to the VIA phenomenon. The VIA movement depended on a professional musical infrastructure (conservatories, theatres, operas, etc.) to recruit most of its members and relied on state infrastructure for recording,<sup>2</sup> rehearsing and performing.

1 The distinction between official and unofficial culture, however, falls short overall and is not any longer useful for describing the Soviet cultural landscape (Yurchak 2005: 5), since it does not offer any descriptive categories for subversive elements within published films, novels, or music, or for the oscillation of cultural actors between state-sanctioned formats and subcultural counter-formats. Moreover, it postulates a uniformity of published cultural production that never existed and is based on a systematic narrowing of the field of study.

2 *Melodiia* was created in 1964 and organised in eight sections (Moscow, Aprelevka, Leningrad, Riga, Tashkent, Tbilisi, Tallinn, Baku). For more information see Kolpakov 2003.

On the recording market, the state label *Melodiia* took on the function of gatekeeper. Anyone who recorded their album professionally under this prestigious label had made it. With their own record, bands stepped out from the mass of thousands of amateur (*samodeiatel'nyi*) groups in the republics and gained a union-wide audience. In this way, the *Melodiia* record constituted a precondition for the canonisation of VIA music.

However, these conditions shaped by the Soviet state did not necessarily lead to the formation of a uniform canon. In the field of music, even more so than in literature, various mechanisms of canon formation were at work, each producing its own hierarchies. Since the 1960s, market success was a central criterion for artistic production in the Soviet Union, encompassing both official sales and unofficial circulation rates.<sup>3</sup> From the mid-1970s, chart lists were compiled in Soviet newspapers and listener preferences were ascertained. Mass media, especially television, was a further channel for canon formation. Union-wide TV shows and music magazines were established, where the stars of Soviet music presented their latest hits. The late Soviet period also saw the emergence of a popular media market and the growing commodification of art, which in turn complemented traditional fields of canon formation such as the academic review system or school textbooks.

The end of the Soviet Union shook the structures on which the success and the initial canonisation of the VIA movement were based. Similar to the better-researched fields of literature and fine arts (Cheauré 2000, McMillin 2000), a fundamental reorganisation of the cultural field also occurred in music. Foreign groups and bands, which until then had been active primarily in the underground, now moved into the cultural centre. Simultaneously, numerous new groups emerged that also broke new stylistic

3 For an analysis of this change, see Jones (2015) who discusses the evolution of the most important historical novel series in the late Soviet time, "The Fiery Revolutionaries" (*Plamennye revolyutsionery*).

ground and forged their own identity by incorporating rock and metal elements that were hitherto underdeveloped in the Soviet Union. At the same time, the institutions of canon formation changed, market structures now became significantly more important than before, and only a few editorships of the magazines previously engaged in music criticism remained unchanged.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, the canonical status of VIA music was questioned. Looking at Russian and Western books about Russian rock or pop music, one often encounters dismissive summaries about VIA music. In contrast to famous phenomena such as the Leningrad Rock Club (Steinholt 2004, Wickström 2014), no monographs, meeting higher academic standards, have been written so far about VIAs and the environment in which they thrived. That some movements or genres fall out of the canon is a common phenomenon. In his book about “The Western Canon”, Harold Bloom argues that some genres, like the historical novel, “are no longer available for canonisation” (Bloom 1994: 21) because they have lost their appeal for the audience. One could argue that VIA music was facing this fate in post-Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, VIA music is still collected and remembered in the post-Soviet period. Although the movement as such will never claim a top spot in the history of (Russian) pop or rock music due to the lacking textual, stylistic and musical originality of most groups, there are instances of canonisation at work which deserve scholarly attention. Firstly, they can help to understand the shift of cultural canons in the 1990s and 2000s. Secondly, they can teach us about the current appropriation of Soviet pop music. Thirdly, the canonisation of VIA music can also contribute to memory cultures and the study of late Soviet nostalgia by bringing once highly popular, but today oft-forgotten material into the discussion.

In the following, the canonisation of VIAs in the late and post-Soviet period will be examined. The VIA canon is understood as the formation of a corpus of artistic works that is representative of the cultural phenomenon of VIA music and defines it aesthetically. Canonisation is understood as a time-

bound process in which such a corpus is defined and popularised. This process is dynamic, context-bound and dependent on the position of the various institutions of canonisation in the cultural field. This definition follows analytic-descriptive approaches in canon studies which aim not at establishing a normative and prescriptive order of artworks but at a better understanding of the processes and mechanisms of power behind the formation of a cultural canon (Beilein 2013: 66).

After a brief overview of the initial canonisation trends in the VIA movement during late socialism, strategies and actors of canonisation of the VIA phenomenon in the post-Soviet period will be scrutinised. I argue that by examining processes of VIA canonisation, this research can contribute to some broader questions of post-Soviet popular culture. Which groups and stylistic expressions were privileged in the process of canonisation? What factors led to the success of some representatives while others were forgotten? What were regional characteristics? By comparing the VIA (self-)canonisation to subcultural modes of self-canonisation in samizdat and beyond, I hope to bridge the gap between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ cultures. By focusing on bottom-up initiatives and transnational collaboration, I will discuss how VIA canonisation has contributed to the establishing of a common archive of popular culture uniting the republics after the end of the empire.

## VIA Music as the Soviet Answer to Rock Music

Iurii Lotman, in his text “Canonical Art as an Informational Paradox” (1973), distinguishes between cultural epochs in which cultural acts prevail fulfilling norms and epochs, and those in which cultural acts prevail that break the norms (Lotman 2002: 315). The VIA phenomenon and its history is a prime example for this polarisation. Beginning in the late 1950s, VIA music was born out of violating the norms of Stalinist art. It included formerly discredited styles such

as jazz and beat music, it spread new, non-political lyrics and established new public appearances, a new communication with the audience, a new way of behaving on stage. With time, this style became hegemonic and itself an embodiment of Soviet music. In the 1970s, VIA music was everywhere and groups made extensive use of state structures. In the 1980s, however, new groups violated the norms of the now-acclaimed VIA music. Rock music was on the rise and challenged the conformity of many VIAs. The state reacted by repressing rock music and VIAs, yet could not prevent their rise in the 1980s and 1990s.

It was exactly at this threshold in the late 1970s, when the first monograph about the VIA phenomenon was published. In 1980, Valerii Iashkin, one of the founders of *Pesniary*, both then and now one of the most famous and successful VIAs, published the book “Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles” (Iashkin 1980). This book was, surprisingly, not written by a musicologist or a cultural scientist, but by a musician.<sup>4</sup> In his introduction, Iashkin emphasized the wide range of styles among the VIAs, ranging from beat music and folk-pop to show groups and musical. For Iashkin, the VIA phenomenon was the Soviet answer to such diverse groups as *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, *Shakti*, *Shocking Blue*, *Simon and Garfunkel* or *Uriah Heep*. Contextualising Soviet VIAs within contemporary Western jazz-rock, world music and folk-pop was a way of enhancing its musical significance. The VIAs were not Soviet epigones and a poor copy of contemporary Western pop music, but contributed to a new, serious and innovative movement through their own understanding of folk-rock. Iashkin quotes a short definition by Iurii Silant’ev: “VIA ensembles are beat groups playing on electronic instruments” (ibid.: 4) and later summarizes: “From playing on primitive instruments, the VIAs came, through

experimentation and ingenuity, to the use of the most contemporary electronic techniques.” (ibid.: 5) Such definitions were quite far away from more conservative contextualisations of VIAs within the traditions of Soviet folk music and Estrada which prevailed in Soviet magazines (see for instance Saul’skii 1982).

The musical hybridity Iashkin is accentuating in his introduction is also stressed by other scholars. Alexandra Grabarchuk convincingly argues based on a case study of David Tukhmanov’s LP “On the Wave of My Memory” (1976) how the inclusion of such different styles like progressive rock, Estrada music and classical song ultimately blurred “the lines between classical, mainstream, and rock” (Grabarchuk 2015: 83). Tukhmanov was closely collaborating with various VIAs and can be regarded a key figure for late Soviet rock and Estrada music. His LP contained musical adaptations of poetical verse from Goethe, Verlaine, Baudelaire and Akhmatova. In terms of style, Tukhmanov, the composer, “blended “high” and “low” culture in a workable mélange” (ibid.: 86) and created “a progressive rock style, with a Russian accent” (ibid.: 106). On the one hand, this album can be read as part of the boom in progressive rock in Soviet music of the 1970s, on the other hand, its elements of folk and classical music remained. It was exactly this blurring of genres which contributes to the album’s enduring popularity. VIAs often shifted in a similar way between different genres (rock operas are another example for this tendency) and thus, to a certain extent, subverted the boundaries of musical genres.

Iashkin was publishing his monograph at a time when the VIA system had already reached its peak and was being challenged by Soviet rock groups, playing in the underground and who soon gathered around the famous Leningrad Rock Club. The late 1970s were the point when Soviet rock music achieved its first successes. Groups like *Akvarium* or *Mashina vremeni* became the stars of the last Soviet generation (Steinholt 2004: 26) and were extremely popular among Soviet youth. Rock music was tolerated by the authorities for some years but

4 Through this, Iashkin founded a tradition of self-canonisation among VIAs, which was later continued by Yuri Malikov (“Samotsvety”, Malykov 2009) or Valerii Iarushin (“Ariel”, Iarushin 2005).

as the groups were hard to control and the authorities became more conservative, in the early 1980s a campaign against rock music was launched (Kretzschmar 1993: 197-199). *Mashina vremeni* tried to evade this relegation by turning its status into a VIA in 1980<sup>5</sup> but could not avoid having the release of their records by *Melodiia* stopped (Steinholt 2004: 33).

Iashkin's plea to see the VIAs within a tradition of innovative Western rock music was an endeavor to question the necessity of Soviet rock groups outside the VIAs by making the argument that the VIAs themselves were already performing innovative electronic and rock music. Consequently, he concluded his book with a chapter on the Tbilisi Rock Festival in 1980 celebrating the innovational strength of VIA music. There was, however, one problem with this genealogy. For Iashkin, the VIAs were committed to public spirit and high social ideals and differed in this from Western rock music. Yet it was exactly the potential of rock music as an outlet against the "system" which made independent rock groups so attractive for dissenting young men and women in the Soviet Union (Fürst 2021) and which the VIAs, with their upright and uninspired appearance, could not fulfill. Iashkin summarized the VIA phenomenon as the Soviet contribution to rock and electronic music and foregrounded its coolness while underexposing its allegiance to official aesthetics and its often conventional appearance.<sup>6</sup>

The climax of the convergence of the VIA and the rock movement was the legendary Tbilisi Rock Festival (also known as "Spring rhythms") in 1980, the first rock festival in the Soviet Union. Among the laureates of the rock festival were some of the most innovative VIAs of the time, mainly from the republics like *Gunesh* (Turkmenistan), *Integral* (Kazakhstan)<sup>7</sup>,

VIA 75 (Georgia). These bands were in alignment with promising rock groups that were playing outside the VIA scheme, such as *Mashina vremeni*, *Magnetic Band* or *Autograph*. Artemii Troitskii, in his book chapter about the festival, contrasts both currents, writing: "Tbilisi-80 brought the triumph of rock centrism – yesterday's establishment became today's dinosaurs and yesterday's underground became today's hits" (Troitskii 1987: 53). However, this festival can also be understood differently. Firstly, to call "Spring rhythms" a rock festival is, to some extent, misleading. Rock was, rather, like VIA, an umbrella term for all kinds of innovative musical styles, encompassing such different trends as the country music of *Integral*, the jazz-fusion of *Gunesh* or the folk-pop of VIA 75. By standing alongside the legends of early Soviet rock music, the VIAs featured in Tbilisi were canonised through their stylistic newness and their geographical breadth. It is noticeable that the Soviet rock groups at Tbilisi were mostly from the Soviet centre (*Mashina vremeni* and *Autograph* are Moscow-based bands), while the VIAs were exclusively from the republics. The inclusion of the VIAs, although they were not performing rock music in a strict sense, allowed the authorities to republicanise rock music, making it a union-wide movement. None of these groups, however, has made it into the canonical histories of Soviet rock music that have been written after the end of the empire. The history of Soviet rock is now told almost exclusively from the centre (mostly from Leningrad and its rock club), not from the periphery. Accordingly, groups like *Mashina vremeni* or *Autograph* have reached a canonical status for Soviet rock music, while VIAs failed in doing this. The rock music label in its myriad variations, in many cases, served not primarily as a musicological marker, but, rather, as a stylistic and attitudinal one.

5 The group was elected the best VIA in 1980 and 1982 by the readers of the Newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets*.

6 It is somehow surprising that Iashkin, a member of *Pesniary*, a group usually not associated with rock music, was obviously insisting on being perceived as a rock group, not an Estrada band.

7 *Integral* has published on their website many interesting photos about the Festival, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20140203010440/http://na-nax.com/ru/photo/category/179-2010-02-15-21-52-37.html>.

20140203010440/http://na-nax.com/ru/photo/category/179-2010-02-15-21-52-37.html.

## VIA Music as Estrada and Folk-Music in late Soviet TV-Shows

Television has played a decisive, probably the most decisive role, in the popularisation and canonisation of VIAs since the early 1960s. Before the beginning of the internet age, television can undoubtedly be regarded as the main channel of canonisation in the fields of Schlager, Estrada or folk music. The Soviet example here parallels the rise of popular music shows in Western Europe since the 1950s, where a singer's or group's public appearance was often the beginning of a successful career. Since many people could not afford to buy LPs and Soviet radio for a long time only played popular music and VIAs occasionally, TV shows were crucial for familiarising the audience with the latest hits, as well as pushing the commercial success of albums.<sup>8</sup> This, more or less, holds true in the field of Estrada music even today, since new media do not play a decisive role for the mass popularity of a genre overwhelmingly listened to by older people.

Soviet music magazines were another important medium. In 1976, *Moskovskii Komsomolets* started to publish the first Russian chart lists which featured a special section on VIAs based on readers' responses to the journal's appeal. Although the number of replies was rather low (in 1976, *Pesniary* was voted the best VIA with only 749 votes) and mirrored readers' preferences in Moscow (the journal was Moscow-based), the publication of the chart lists had a canonising effect which grew in the following years. Other journals like *Muzykal'naiia Zhizn'* regularly reported on festivals and VIAs.<sup>9</sup>

8 Martin Lücke writes about the commercial significance of an appearance in the "ZDF-Hitparade", a very successful TV format for Schlager in Germany: "an appearance on the show was a significant commercial factor for the star and the record company behind it, since every song sung raised its sales numbers in the range of 10,000 to 30,000 copies in the following week." (Lücke 2010: 39).

9 These journals, however, never had the audience and influence of comparable music or teen magazines in the US and Western Europe.

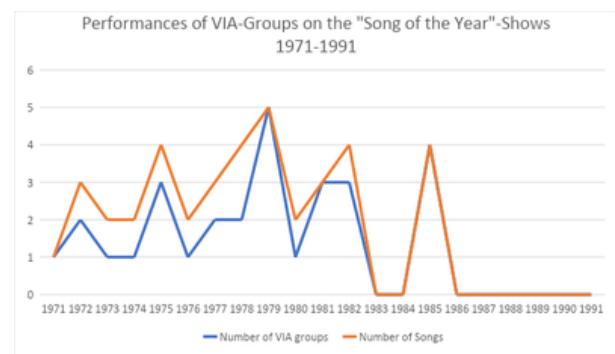


Fig. 1: Performances of VIA-Groups on the "Song of the Year"-Shows 1971-1991

Starting in 1962 with *Goluboi Ogonek* and *Muzykal'nyi kiosk*, Soviet television featured TV shows on popular music where Estrada singers and small pop groups performed. The most prestigious of these shows was "Pesnia Goda" (Song of the Year), which was broadcasted annually on New Year's Eve. "Song of the Year" was a highly regulated event, comprising many ideological songs and artists (Grabowsky 2012: 31) but also mirroring the taste of the Soviet audience. Initially, its atmosphere was very official with many army officers and politicians in the audience, but the show became more liberal and international in subsequent years (Evans 2011: 629). The show started in 1971 and featured the 20 most successful hits of the past year, voted for by the Soviet audience.<sup>10</sup> Among the most popular performers were Soviet singers and songwriters like Lev Leshchenko, Iosif Kobzon and Alla Pugacheva, but also some VIAs. The show provides a great example through which to track the popularity of VIAs among the audience and within official discourses throughout the late Soviet period.

The diagram<sup>11</sup> lists performances of VIAs on the "Song of the Year" shows from 1971-1991. One can see that the number of groups which were invited to the shows and who performed their songs was rather small. Only eleven groups participated in the

10 Evans gives a comprehensive account of how difficult it was to select these songs due to censorship and the heterogeneity of taste and audience (Evans 2011: 629-632).

11 Data taken and arranged from the website [http://pesnyagoda.my1.ru/1971\\_75.html](http://pesnyagoda.my1.ru/1971_75.html).

shows: VIA *Smerichka* (1971, 1972), VIA *Pesniary* (1972, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1979), VIA *Samotsvety* (1973, 1974, 1977, 1982, 1985), VIA *Plamia* (1975, 1978), VIA *Chervona Ruta* (1975), VIA *Orizont* (1978, 1979), VIA *Ariel'* (1979), VIA *Verasy* (1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1985), VIA *Ialla* (1981, 1982, 1985), VIA *Siabry* (1981), VIA *75* (1985). Other groups participated in *Pesnia* shows as well but were not introduced as VIAs,<sup>12</sup> so I have refrained from mentioning them in this list. If one follows the timeline of their performances, one can see that only VIA *Samotsvety* had long-lasting success in this format through the late Soviet period. The success of other groups, in contrast, was a phenomenon of distinct time periods. One can also see that the climax of VIA popularity within the show was around 1980, while in the early 1970s and the late 1980s, VIAs played only a minor role.<sup>13</sup> Looking at the regional distribution of the performing groups, most of the groups came from Russia (*Samotsvety*, *Plamia*, *Ariel'*) and Belarus (*Pesniary*, *Verasy*, *Siabry*), followed by Ukraine (*Chervona Ruta*, *Smerichka*), Moldavia (*Orizont*), Uzbekistan (*Ialla*) and Georgia (VIA *75*).

In contrast to the VIAs performing at the Rock Festival in Tbilisi, the groups participating in the “Song of the Year” shows were more conventional. They were more traditionally instrumentalised, their style was more aligned to traditional Estrada music

and their appearance and outfits were more modest than the rather extroverted appearance of, for example, *Gunesh*. They appealed primarily to a Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian audience and did not strive for global recognition like *Gunesh* did. Looking at the songs performed, one can see from the example of *Pesniary* that classical folk songs (for instance, “Kosil las' koniushchinu” or “Dobryi vecher, devchonochka”) were preferred, although the group also had other, more experimental songs in their repertoire.

In comparison to the Rock Festival in Tbilisi, one can identify two threads of canonisation in late Soviet times. The first and more influential was the canonisation of VIAs as representatives of Soviet Estrada music, foregrounding Russian groups and bands from Belarus and Ukraine. The second was the canonisation of VIAs as representatives of Soviet rock and electronic music, foregrounding bands from the Caucasus and Central Asia. There were only small overlaps between both sections of the VIA phenomenon, represented by groups such as *Pesniary* or VIA *75*, which incorporated both styles. It is important to note that both threads were officially canonised: they were sent on tours abroad, they recorded their LPs with *Melodiia* and performed at festivals.

## Against the Decline – The Perception of VIA Music in the 1990s

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the VIAs became history. What was already foreshadowed in the perestroika years was now undeniably apparent: in a more liberalised system, particularly in regard to arts and literature, there was no need for an official label like the VIA as the state had no need to organise tours (*gastrol'i*) to cultural houses all around the Soviet Union. This shift did not necessarily mean that VIA artists were jobless after 1991, most of them continued their careers in some form. But it meant that the VIA as a singularly Soviet phe-

12 Such as the famous VIA *Zemliane* which participated in 1981, 1983, 1984. The popularity of the designation VIA changed throughout the years. This can also be seen by looking at the famous ZD (Zvukovaya Dorozhka) awards of *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, which had the category “Best VIA” up until 1983 when it was replaced by the category “Best Ensemble”. This change also fits to the different labelling of former VIAs at the “Song of the Year” shows in the 1980s and does not necessarily mean that the VIAs became less popular. It is important to note that the notion of Estrada also changed throughout the 1970s. As David MacFayden (2001) has shown, artists like Alla Pugacheva redefined the genre in this time by reinterpreting the lyrical and stylistic codes of Estrada, liberalising the genre and opening it up for more daring political and stylistic expressions.

13 By the late 1970s, the organisers tried to meet the tastes of the audience better, so popular film songs and even rock music were included (Evans 2011: 642) Some former VIA artists, Alla Pugacheva, Viacheslav Dobrynin (both former members of *Veselye rebiata*), and Aleksander Rozenbaum (*Poiushchie gitary*), the most famous among them, performed regularly at the shows as solo artists.

nomenon with all the conditions shaping their existence had passed away. Valerii Shchelkin, in his monograph about the *Legends of VIA-Music*, laments that “[in] the early ’90s there were no songs performed by vocal-instrumental ensembles on radio and television at all.” (Shchelkin 2007: 453) With the VIAs, the institutions which had made them great, also changed. Television faced the “erosion of propaganda structures and differentiation of a functional system of mass media” (Amelina 2006: 45). This was noticeable, among other things, in a radical change in the content broadcast, in the emergence of new television channels, and in new financing structures (advertising).

The most important music show of the 1990s was “Starye pesni o glavnom” (Old Songs about the Most Important), a New Year’s TV show, presenting Soviet hits from the 1950s, 60s and 70s in an updated, musical-like ambience (Oushakine 2007: 454-455). The show was a prime example of Soviet nostalgia in the early post-Soviet years. Contemporary pop stars performed the classical hits of the Soviet period but the repertoire of VIAs did not feature prominently within the shows. In the first show devoted to the 1950s and early 1960s, understandably, VIA songs did not appear at all. In the second show, celebrating the turn of the year 1996-1997, only *Veselye rebiata*’s classic hit “Liudi vstrechaiutsia” made it into the show where it was performed by Igor Nikolaev. It lost, however, most of its initial appeal due to a strange combination of ballet dancers, synthesizer beats and Nikolaev’s lackluster moves. In 1997-1998, the show was devoted to the golden hits of the 1970s. Since the VIAs were at their peak in this period, their repertoire also found its way into the show. *Ivanushki International* performed *Veselye rebiata*’s “Aleshkina Liubov”, Vladimir Presniakov-Mladshii *Poiushchie gitary*’s “Net tebia prekrasnei” and Filipp Kirkorov “Ukhodilo leto”, a duet by *Vas-saga* and *Veselye rebiata*<sup>14</sup>.

*Veselye rebiata* and *Poiushchie gitary* were the only two VIAs whose songs made it into the most popular music show of the 1990s. Both groups had not been represented in the *Pesnia goda* shows of the 1970s and were some of the most Estrada-like groups of the whole VIA phenomenon. While the 1980s were shaped by the VIAs moving towards rock music, the 1990s saw the exact opposite. Being still labelled as a VIA in Russian television now meant performing Estrada-music, easy-listening lyrics about love and pleasing pop-beats. Obviously, the shows wanted to represent global music heritage, ranging from “Hafanana” by the Mozambican artist Afric Simone via European disco beat (*Boney M*, *Dschingis Khan*) to Gloria Gaynor’s “I will survive” and French chanson (“Mamy blue” by Hubert Giraud). Serguei Oushakine overlooks this strong tendency towards internationalisation in his analysis of the show, when he interprets it as a prime example of post-Soviet “retrofitting” of the Soviet past. This nostalgic trend certainly existed, but was accompanied also by the endeavor to make Soviet Estrada a natural part of the history of Western pop music. VIAs, however, did not play a major role in this process. Their heritage was barely acknowledged within these endeavors, while the particular style of their performances (fancy costumes, large instrumentation etc.) was mostly neglected.

Another interesting example that shows the clash of cultures in the 1990s is the show “Musical Ring”, a format, where four groups were invited to battle against each other in duels, where the audience decided the winner. On June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998, *Samotsvety* and *Pesniary* were “fighting” against *Rok-Ostrova* and *Star* for the audience’s approval. This contest was orchestrated as a battle between the 1970s and the 1990s, between Soviet and post-Soviet pop music. The performances of the groups were interrupted by short provocative questions by the audience. Iurii Malykov, the creator and leader of *Samotsvety*, was asked why all his fellow musicians left the group; a young woman asked why the happy songs about the bright future, which *Samotsvety* was famous for, ultimately produced

14 The last song was not an original VIA composition but a cover of the song “Cara mia” by the Spanish disco-pop group *Baccara*.



the lost generation of the 1990s. She also asked whether, in retrospect, the group had not better sung other songs. *Pesniary* were asked why they were allowed to travel abroad in the Soviet period and if this did not mean bowing to political logic and neglecting artistic freedom. Although such provocations were a regular part of the show, they also signaled a new view on the VIAs. For the young generation, the old songs and styles were no longer appealing. Although both groups in the end won their battles, they left the ring as losers, since their untimeliness was so obvious in contrast to the nonconformist appearance of, for instance, *Rok-Ostrova*.

## The Soundtrack of Nostalgia – The VIA Revival in Putin’s Russia

The rise of late Soviet nostalgia in Putin’s Russia has been accompanied by a heightened interest in the history of the VIAs. In 2001, a concert entitled “Our Address is the Soviet Union”, named after *Samotsvety*’s hit, was held in the Kremlin Palace, featuring the greatest hits of VIA music; a similar event was repeated in 2002 (Shchelkin 2007: 455). In 2006, on *Samotsvety*’s 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary, another big concert was held in the Kremlin Palace, at which many Soviet VIAs participated. By performing at the centre of power, such concerts signaled that VIA music was held in the highest esteem in Russia.<sup>15</sup> In recent years, there have been several TV shows and documentaries illuminating the history and the legacy of VIAs. I want to shortly introduce two recent shows devoted to the VIAs on two of the main TV channels. These shows are quite representative for the public appearance of VIAs today and the way these groups are perceived among the public. Being broadcast on the main TV channels brings the performers a

<sup>15</sup> Unsurprisingly, *Samotsvety*, whose jubilee was the reason for the occasion, had a reputation of faithfulness towards the Soviet regime in the 1970s and could, obviously, preserve this reputation.

large amount of publicity and can be regarded as an appreciation of their work. This appreciation goes hand in hand with a limit on the number of artists presented. Since the time slots for the shows are tightly calculated, the number of performers is limited. Such shows are therefore particularly pertinent to examine the popular perception of VIA music in Putin’s Russia.

The first show is entitled “VIAs of the Soviet era” and was broadcast as an episode of the weekly Saturday evening show “Segodnia vecherom” (Tonight) on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The show was staged as a roundtable with videoclips and performances illuminating key aspects of the VIAs. Five men participated in the roundtable: Bari Alibasov (*Integral*), Viacheslav Dobrynin (*Veselye Rebiata*), Vladimir Vinokur (*Samotsvety*), Iurii Loza (*Integral*), Iurii Malykov (*Samotsvety*), accompanied by an expert and guests from other VIAs. The greatest hits of Soviet VIAs formed the core of the shows, with the former performers then telling stories about them. VIA music is here understood to be tantamount to Estrada and Schlager music. Another two shows about VIAs were featured as part of Andrei Malakhov’s “Privet, Andrei” show: “The Best VIAs: We Remember the Golden Hits of the Soviet Union” on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and “The Best VIAs: Songs for the Soul” on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Many guests (Dobrynin, Malykov, Mikhail Plotkin, Anatolii Aleshin) had already been part of the “VIAs of the Soviet Era” show, while representatives of Belarusian groups *Pesniary* and *Verasy* were featured in Malakhov’s show more prominently.

Contemporary TV shows about VIAs limit themselves to a couple of well-known groups like *Samotsvety* or *Veselye Rebiata*, while leaving out experimental styles. It still seems to be important to show the VIA phenomenon as a union-wide movement, so representatives of groups from Uzbekistan, Georgia, Kazakhstan or Belarus are often invited as guests. Stylistically, these shows, however, differ from their Soviet predecessors. In contrast to the modest appearance of moderators and guests in highly official shows like the *Pesnia* series, in contemporary shows, they wear extravagant outfits and

gimmicks such as artificial moustaches or oversized sunglasses. Another difference lies in the inclusion of moments of surprise into the shows like inviting surprise guests or staging reenounters.<sup>16</sup> Despite the inclusion of new cover groups and imitators like the *New Samotsvety* into the shows, VIAs appear as a merely historical phenomenon of the Soviet time and are presented in a completely depoliticized way. To a great extent, Malakhov's shows can be read as examples of Soviet nostalgia, idealising its music and lifestyle. This claim is supported by obvious references to Soviet TV shows, particularly to clips of the *Pesnia* shows of the 1970s. However, problematic aspects like drug abuse, disputes within the group, censorship or emigration are also addressed in Malakhov's show, painting a more colorful and ambiguous picture of the movement. Despite these differences to the Soviet time, these shows mostly reproduce the official canons of the Soviet time and its TV shows.

Another form of canonisation is found in documentaries devoted to the VIA phenomenon in general or to individual groups and songs from a historicising perspective. In 2012, the Mir24 television channel broadcasted a nearly half-hour long documentary on the VIAs entitled "Sdelano v SSSR: VIA." The documentary mentions the Soviet band *Druzhba* and The *Beatles* as the main influencers of the phenomenon and presents Western influences as a decisive contribution to the genesis of the VIAs. VIAs are presented as a union-wide and stylistically broad phenomenon. Thus, in addition to the inevitable *Pesniary* and representatives of well-known VIAs such as Malykov, reference is also made, for example, to the influences of local jazz culture on the music of the Azerbaijani group *Gaia*, to the playful use of southern European elements in the Moldavian VIA *Norok*, or to the tours of the Georgian folk-pop group *Orera*. Greater weight is given here to the various

governmental restraints and restrictions with which the VIAs were confronted.

Another example of VIA canonisation can be found in the TV series *Pesnia s istoriei* (Songs with History) on the TV channel Moscow 24. Every episode lasts about half an hour and presents the history of one song, its genesis, reception and cultural significance. The series was broadcast from 2016-2018 on a regular basis and presented the history of fifteen VIA songs. *Samotsvety* and *Veselye Rebiata* were represented by three songs, *Siniia ptitsa* and *Leisia, pesnia* with two songs and *lalla, Zemliane, Pesniary, Siabry* and *Poiushchie gitary* each with one song. The viewers encounter classics of VIA music like "Moi adres Sovetskii Soiuz" (*Samotsvety*) or "Vologda" (*Pesniary*) but also receive interesting background information about some of the most popular songs. The episode on "Uchkuduk" from the Uzbek group *lalla*, for instance, recounts that the song was forbidden for some time in Uzbekistan due to its indirect references to the former labor camp site and its strategic significance for uranium extraction. In contrast to other shows, all stages of the VIA phenomenon are represented, from its early beginnings to late successes like *Zemliane*. The songs of the VIAs are presented here as culturally significant events, questioning their reception as light Estrada music without any serious content.

TV is the most important canonising authority in post-Soviet Russia. Soviet, particularly, late-Soviet heritage, plays an important role in many formats and works as an identity marker for many viewers. They are mostly familiar with the most famous and successful VIAs of the 1960s and 70s and know their main representatives. Many of them have made a career as soloists in post-Soviet Russia and have emancipated themselves from their beginning as members of VIAs, but nevertheless remain bound to the VIA phenomenon in many respects. As in comparable Estrada cultures in Western Europe, the scene is dominated by a small number of groups, mainly from Russia and Belarus. *Samotsvety*, *Veselye Rebiata* and *Pesniary* are the most visible and widely rep-

16 Most of these elements can also be observed in TV shows on Schlager and pop music in Western Europe, its appearance on the Russian screen is probably an import of these influences.

resented among them. Groups from other republics are less frequently invited to shows: many countries, including the Baltic states, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, or, most noticeably, Ukraine,<sup>17</sup> are missing in the formats discussed here, despite having a long tradition of VIA music. Thus, these shows mirror the tradition of a “small empire”, focusing mainly on Russia, Belarus, Georgia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan while leaving out VIA traditions from other republics. In many ways, the canon established by late Soviet TV shows and chart lists, is reproduced in post-Soviet shows. More experimental groups like, for instance, *Dos Mukasan*, *VIA 75* or *Firyuza*, are, with the exception of *Integral*, missing in the shows.<sup>18</sup> VIA music has been growing in significance in recent years. Anniversaries are celebrated with TV shows and documentaries (for instance, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Samotsvety* was celebrated in a 100-minute show on Russia 1 in February 2021). This growing interest in the VIA phenomenon signals a reappraisal of their musical heritage,<sup>19</sup> which remains, however, bound to the narratives of the late Soviet period and is dominated by nostalgia for these years.<sup>20</sup>

## VIA Canonising on the Internet

In Soviet public life, many cultural phenomena fell outside of official canonising activities. Émigré writers, samizdat artworks or subcultural rock groups were virtually inexistent in schoolbooks, newspaper articles or TV shows and were therefore deprived of

public recognition. As a consequence, émigré communities were building a second or a counter-canon, appreciating artworks invisible in public discourse. Such movements were self-canonising, since they circumvented the official institutions and processes of canonisation and established their own archives, procedures of recognition or self-historicising activities. The best example of such self-canonisation is the art of Moscow conceptualism, interpreted by Georg Witte in exactly this way (Witte 2000). They edited their own collected volumes, organised their own retrospectives in museums and wrote their own encyclopedias.<sup>21</sup> With the rise of the Internet, other media were emerging as platforms for self-canonisation. Blogs or websites enable artists to conserve their works and to write their own histories at comparably low costs. At the same time, the internet works as a de-canonising medium (see Schmidt 2013: 167), questioning established hierarchies and broadening the corpus of available works. The internet also democratises the process of canon-building. The audience is a part of the canonising process (Howanitz 2020: 82) and can advance popular artworks or pieces of music.

In today's Russia, websites devoted to the VIA phenomenon serve as a repository for VIAs and their remembrance. They give the most comprehensive overviews of bands, soloists, composers, songs and other elements linked to the VIA phenomenon. They are often operated by deeply committed individuals who upload lyrics or videos and collect photography and records from all the various VIAs. They are devoted to the VIA phenomenon in its breadth and do not limit themselves to single groups or styles. In the following, two websites and their main canonising strategies shall be presented.

17 In the Ukrainian case, political reasons are the likely cause for this exclusion, since most of the shows examined here have been broadcast after the Russian-Ukrainian crisis in relations in 2013-2014.

18 This can be read as another parallel to similar TV shows in Western Europe which also do not feature experimental styles and differing interpretations of Schlager or Estrada music.

19 To some extent, the label VIA itself remains a common denominator, as the success of the TV series *Vokal'no kriminal'nyi ansambl'* (2018-) about a secret VIA preventing historical artefacts from being brought out of the country.

20 On nostalgia for the Brezhnev years in general, see Dubin 2015.

21 Other scholars, like Mikhail Iampol'skii, however, questioned the possibility of self-canonisation. He writes: “The canon cannot be a matter for the individual because the very notion of canon presupposes a certain social consensus which makes it possible to attribute a particular author to it. But no individual reader can make a work canonical because the act of canonisation does not rely on individual aesthetic experience.” (Iampol'skii 1998: 215).

The website *sssrviapiesni.info* is run by OlegUD and is one of the largest catalogues of VIA music and its history on the internet. The objective of the site is characterised as follows: “And let this site be a small contribution to the popularisation of the VIA era, a reminder to all lovers of VIA about their favourite songs, which they can find on this site.” (OlegUD 2007) 142 groups<sup>22</sup> are presented on the website, concert records, songs, rock operas, lyrics and much more. The site is regularly updated and amended and has already been active since 2007. Primarily, the website functions as a gigantic archive for VIA music. For this, there are cooperations with users and other websites. There are many hyperlinks to further archival sites such as *gruppassr.ru* and the number of people contributing to the website by providing records or information is rather high, looking at the acknowledgments mentioned on *sssrviapiesni.info*. The archival practice of the website is de-hierarchising with all groups being treated more or less on an equal footing. The groups are listed in alphabetical order and not in a temporal order or based on page impressions. The political attitude of the site is openly nostalgic. The Soviet Union is flaunted in the website’s title, its hymn is hyperlinked prominently. The hymn has no connection to the VIA movement and serves only as a political and emotional marker for nostalgia. VIA music here becomes tantamount to the music of the multinational empire. In the section “About our Site”, it is argued that such music could only thrive in the USSR and thus become a marker for Soviet exceptionality.

*Via-era-narod.ru* works in a very similar way to *sssrviapiesni.info*. The website is run by Valerii Kolpakov, who started his project in 2005 and is depicted on his website in a tracksuit on which the letters “SSSR” are printed in big letters. This kind of self-presentation can be read as a political statement for Soviet nostalgia and pro-Soviet sentiments. For

Kolpakov, as he writes in the section about the history of his site, VIA music derived from a particular Soviet generational identity, which he emphasises in opposition to “western polit-technologists” who “want to take from us the feeling of pride and dignity” (Kolpakov 2005). This is not only a political statement, but also a genealogical one. The roots of VIA music lie, if one reads the phenomenon in such a way, not so much in Western pop music and Beatlemania as in a particular Soviet identity unattainable for the people who did not live through this time. Kolpakov’s website is less detailed than *sssrviapiesni.info* and relies more on a hypertextual structure forwarding users to other websites. The most interesting section is the one about *Melodiia*, where the website gives background information about the origin of LPs and statistics about the VIA music market. Apart from Kolpakov’s role as an administrator and author of numerous short essays about VIA music, the website benefits from an active group of readers who contribute concert records and archival information about VIAs and discuss the material in the guest book.

## Conclusion

This review of the most important epochs and actors in VIA canonising has brought an impressive steadiness of the canon to the fore. From monographs, TV shows, internet websites and festivals, one can extract a core canon<sup>23</sup> of a few VIAs (*Samotsvety*, *Veselye Rebiata*, *Pesniary*), which has remained more or less constant since the 1970s. This relatively small core canon is complemented by a surrounding canon, bringing together such different bands as *Orera*, *Ialla*, *Verasy*, *Integral*, *Zemliane* and many more. This surrounding canon is more flexible and varies throughout the decades. It is more international than the core canon which mainly covers groups from Russia and Belarus.

22 It is hard to say how high the number of VIAs has been in the Soviet Union. There are, to my knowledge, no official statistics, estimations range from several hundreds to several thousands.

23 For the difference between core and surrounding canon, see Beilein 2013: 71.

The core canon is primarily produced through TV shows which work as a hierarchising medium in canon formation, while the surrounding canon is produced by TV, the internet and self-canonising activities. Particularly the VIA websites analyzed in this paper function as a de-hierarchising medium that treats single groups more or less equally. In this way, websites such as *sssrviapesni.info* build a huge archive which allows different canonisations in the future.

Regarding musical style, the canonised groups mainly perform easy-listening pop-music with folk elements, such as in the cases of *Pesniary* or *lalla*. Despite the concentration on some famous groups, it is important to emphasise that their songs are mostly perceived as part of the bigger VIA movement with quite homogeneous styles, lyrics and conditions. The VIA label is bigger than the groups who embody it. It would be interesting to see how this is perceived in former Soviet republics such as Belarus or Kazakhstan. Further research needs to be done on this to examine whether there are tensions or rivalries between different contexts of canonisation, for instance in the case of *Pesniary*, which is both remembered as a Soviet and a particularly Belarusian phenomenon.

Absent from both the core and the surrounding canon are experimental groups such as *Firyuza*, *Gunesh* or *Dos Mukasan*, which were mostly based in Central Asian republics. The further away from the old imperial center, the more difficult it becomes to remain a part of the VIA canon. It is interesting that former members and fans of such groups are, in a kind of compensatory move, responsible for some of the most encompassing band histories of VIAs.<sup>24</sup> VIA music is often conceptualised as a distinctively Soviet phenomenon, and while it certainly was, this labeling underexposes global synchronicities such as *Beatlemania* or the boom in world music since the 1960s. Above all, this can be observed on

VIA websites which do not conceal their pro-Soviet sentiments. Both the exclusion of innovative and experimental musical approaches under the VIA umbrella and the rare acknowledgement of global influences tend to make VIA music more conservative and streamlined than it actually was. This can also explain the low scholarly attention towards VIA music so far.

Recalling this paper's argumentation, one can also discern the main strategies and processes of appreciation of VIA music in late and post-Soviet Russia. There are various markers for the elevated status of some groups within the VIA canon: access to privileged performance locations such as the Kremlin Palace; invitations to prestigious TV shows, for instance on New Year's Eve; special TV shows devoted to individual artists such as Malykov or to single groups such as *Samotsvety*; or background articles about the genesis of famous songs or groups. Such 'soft' signs of success are, as a rule, accompanied by economic success and symbolic recognition like the titles "Honored/People's Artist of the Soviet Union/Russia" which is held by many former VIA bandleaders. What can also be observed in TV shows is the repetition of the same stories and songs over and over. This is a general feature of Estrada music and Schlager. Mass success can only be achieved if a majority of the audience knows the songs and artists performed. By narrowing down to a handful of successful artists, the Estrada canon becomes tight, leaving little room for experimentation and expansion. Since the audience listening to VIA music is ageing, the songs and groups presented tend to decrease over the years. Thus, many groups and songs fall out of collective memory and into oblivion.

How can these results be put into relation to more general questions of canon formation in Russia and what does the canonisation of VIA music imply for identity formation in post-Soviet Russia? At the moment, one can observe a revival of late Soviet popular culture in Russia. TV series located in the 1960s or 70s are highly popular with the audience, as are late Soviet material culture and popular films of the time. This rise in late Soviet nostalgia has also

24 See for the example of *Dos Mukasan* Baidabekkyzy 2017, for the website of *Gunesh*'s former band member Oleg Korolev see Korolev 2021.

brought VIA music back to the fore. Its presentation is nostalgic since it exhausts itself in the repetition of the past. No new songs or styles are presented, old men sing the songs of the old time. Critical aspects such as drug abuse, censorship or emigration are mostly concealed, while the easy-listening quality of VIA music is foregrounded. The commemoration of VIA music is mostly apolitical; the recollection of one's own youth reshapes political aspects. This recollection is embedded into a collective experience of allegedly joyful and peaceful years under Stagnation. Another aspect of collective identity construction lies in the multinational character of VIA music. Although Russian groups prevail in TV shows and on websites, VIA music is always conceptualised as a union-wide phenomenon by inviting Belarusians, Kazakhs, Azeris or Uzbeks to the shows. This can be read as a kind of imperial nostalgia, where all the lost children of the Soviet time return to the former imperial center to celebrate its past. Last but not least, the current presentation of VIA music can also be read as an expression of patriarchal identity. Single male band leaders are celebrated as musical geniuses and organisational master minds. Although women also appear in shows or documentaries, they are outnumbered by men. VIAs are staged as hierarchical ensembles with ageing strong men at the top, making them a mirror of post-Soviet Russia.

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*Starye pesni o Glavnom 3. Muzikal'nyi fil'm (ORT, 31.12.1997), accessible: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxRhdl5\\_Gn0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxRhdl5_Gn0)*

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