

## Article

# Singing Wives and Oligarch Patrons

Sounding Out the Wealth of Russian Elites Through Popular Music

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## Abstract

Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork on Swedo-Russian musical collaborations, this article explores the link between popular music and the conspicuous consumption of Russia's wealthy elite. Presenting two specific cases, one following a Russian millionaire's wife's efforts to become a pop star and the other exploring a wealthy Russian's pursuit of patronage for emerging pop artists, the article describes how popular music became a means for Russia's rich elite not only to show off their wealth and luxurious lifestyles but also to exchange monetary means for other forms of (cultural) capital, such as fame, coolness, and associations with a Western lifestyle. Furthermore, the article situates this elite dynamic in relation to specific Russian historical trajectories, and the ways in which the influence of the economic elite within the Russian music industry creates an unlevelled playing field for professionals trying to make a living from making popular music.

## Keywords

popular music, post-Soviet Russia, wealthy elites, music industry

A rainy November afternoon, standing outside a St Petersburg metro station, I was waiting for one of my informants, the aspiring Russian artist Slava Lava, to pick me up. We had made an appointment to go for a drive around the city, and then have dinner. Hunched under my umbrella, I kept looking out for the gold-colored car she said she would be arriving in. Just as my sneakers were becoming drenched by the puddles growing under my feet, she pulled up in front of me, rolled down the window and cheerfully said: "Get in!" For a minute I just stood there looking at the luxury car in front of me. I'm not sure what I expected, but it was certainly not that I would be taking my very first (and to this day only) ride in a Bentley. As I

stepped into the fancy vehicle, I became self-conscious to the extreme about having entered it as somewhat of a drowned cat, doing my utmost to take up as little space as possible so as not to leave my wet and dirty mark on its posh interior. After apologizing for the mess, I complimented on the car which it truly was a pleasure to ride in. She told me that she had been a little reluctant about driving it, as she found it to be a little flashy. But after all, as she said: “It was a present from my husband for my 30th birthday.”

It is a well-known trope that the ‘new Russian’ economic elite that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union are prone towards conspicuously consuming (Veblen 1970) and displaying their wealth through the consumption of luxury goods such as yachts, high fashion, and luxury cars (like the Bentley described above). Less pronounced, and academically investigated, is how the wealthy elites in Russia and other post-Soviet and -socialist states have pursued glamour and celebrity status within the realms of media and show business, be it as TV personalities, online influencers, or, as explored here, pop artists (Goscilo and Strukov 2011). The latter is made audible through the coining of the term ‘singing wives’ (поющие жены), i.e., aspiring female artists like the, here anonymized, *Slava Lava*, whose careers are sponsored by their husbands (or in the case of ‘singing panties’ (поющие трусы) – by their lovers). Many of the prominent Russian pop artists in later years have had strong connections to the Russian economic elite, such as the singer Alsou or rapper Timati, whose careers are financed by their oil billionaire fathers (and in Alsou’s case eventually by her billionaire husband). In line with the new rich Russians’ embrace of (associations with) a Western lifestyle (Humphrey 2002, 180), many of these pop artists have also tended to look to the West, either through emulating its contemporary pop sounds, making attempts to break through in Western markets, or bringing in musical services from Western pop musical experts (Tolstad 2017, 2021).

This article maps out the largely unexplored role of popular music in the Russian economic elite’s display of wealth and conspicuous consumption. It asks: How did new rich Russians come to acquire such a position in the landscape of post-Soviet popular music? How has the influence of wealthy elites made itself audible in the everyday practices of popular music making in Russia? And what are the implications for professionals trying to make a living in the Russian music industry? Drawing on extensive ethnographic material, this article aims to provide thick descriptions and deep empirical insight into the consequences of the involvement of rich elites for the Russian music industry as such, and for the people working within it. Following a few remarks on method, the article describes how the influence of the wealthy elite in the Russian popular music business became possible due to specific historical developments, and how corrupt practices became an embedded part of industry structures. The article then delves into two specific empirical cases; one exploring *Slava Lava*’s efforts towards pop stardom and

the other examining a wealthy Russian's pursuit of patronage for emerging pop artists. Both cases portray how the motivations of rich Russians to invest time and money into pop music is related to the potential accumulation of cultural capital such as fame and coolness. The concluding discussion argues that this uneven distribution of resources and power within the Russian music industry has had considerable and destructive impact on the opportunities for pop musical professionalism and aesthetic quality.

## A Few Methodological Remarks

The research presented draws on material from an ethnographic case study of a Swedish music production company specializing on mediation of pop musical services between Sweden and Russia (Tolstad 2017). The name of the company has been anonymized and is here referred to as *North Star*. Likewise, all research participants have been anonymized, and are referred to in first person pseudonyms in italics. This research project grew out of a personal experience of pursuing a pop music career with a Norwegian electro pop band working with the renowned Swedish music producer *Tom-E* who married a Russian pop artist – *Masha*. She had largely abandoned her own career when coming to live with *Tom-E* in Stockholm, but the news of her affiliation with him sparked the curiosity of her former contacts in the Russian music industry. She started receiving inquiries from acquaintances operating in the post-Soviet space about whether she could facilitate various types of musical services through her new Swedish life partner. The desired services included access to song material, help with production and mixing, as well as recruitment of Swedish artists for events in Russia and its adjacent countries.

As *Masha* secured several concerts for my band in Russia, these trips exposed us to a world of pop music that was quite different from what I was used to from back home, for instance in terms of being expected to perform with play- or singback<sup>1</sup>, or receiving payments as cash in hand. This is also where I was first introduced to the term 'singing wife' when *Masha*, functioning as our tour manager, would in passing mention that an artist we were performing alongside was the wife of a well-off businessman. This impression that members of the Russian economic elite held a significant position within the Russian pop musical landscape was further confirmed as *Tom-E* and *Masha* started receiving an increasing number of inquiries for musical services from Russia and other post-Soviet countries, a majority of which came from people backed by considerable monetary means. The idea that they could build an actual business around mediating and providing musical services of this kind naturally emerged over time, as did my own curiosity following their endeavors from the sideline. As their collaborations with Russian clients continued to be characterized by misunderstandings, disagreement and even conflict, I turned that curiosity into a PhD project. From 2009-2011 I

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<sup>1</sup> Miming or singing to a pre-recorded track

followed their efforts to establish and manage their company *North Star* for a total of 18 months.

During this period, I followed the three main Russian artist projects *North Star* were working with at the time, all of which were backed by members of the Russian economic elite affiliated with the artist through marriage, family, or patronage. Two of these projects are presented in more detail below. I had an open invitation from *North Star* to attend all sessions they hosted for Russian clients, which took place with uneven intervals throughout my fieldwork period. My eight fieldwork trips to Stockholm were organized around these Russian visits, usually spanning from seven to ten days. *North Star* moved location several times during my research period, and also booked themselves into other studios around the city. My fieldwork was thus both a multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and a commuting endeavor. In addition to sitting in on a total of eleven songwriting sessions, I also attended production and mixing sessions, conducted interviews, and participated in more informal social settings such as lunch breaks and dinners, that provided considerable additional ‘backstage’ insight into research participants’ strategies, interactions, and negotiations. This ethnographic material was expanded through four fieldwork trips to Russia: two to St Petersburg and two to Moscow. Plans to conduct comparative fieldwork in Russian studios had to be redefined, I was not able to identify anyone working collaboratively in similar ways as in Sweden. Data collection in Russia thus mainly consisted of interviews with Russian songwriters, producers, DJs, managers, promoters, and record label executives, attending pop musical and social events, visiting music stores, and watching Russian music channels on TV. Research participants have worked with Russian artists like t.A.T.u., Dima Bilan, Valeriya, Alsou, Jasmin, Leonid Agutin, Angelica Varum and Polina Gagarina, as well as the TV-show Голос (The Voice) and the MUZ TV Awards. In addition, I have included data recorded through fieldnotes while attending an Arctic music festival as a performer in 2007, a few years prior to the PhD fieldwork period. This is where *Tom-E*, *Masha* and I first encountered the artist described in the second case presented in this article. This has resulted in a rich ethnographic material consisting of field notes, photographs, sound and video recordings, and information gathered from websites, online forums, and social media. All informants have been anonymized, and informed consent has been provided through initial dialogue and in ongoing interactions.

## **Contextualizing Russia’s Music Industry**

There is an increasing body of academic literature on post-Soviet popular music and industry, offering insight into topics like the continued influence of Soviet artists and genres (Günther 2021), gender and homosexuality in lyrics and performance (Amico 2014, 2016, Brock and Miazhevich 2022), the role of social media (Dunas and Vartanov 2020, Johansson et al. 2018, Popkova 2019), the emergence of a Russian and post-Soviet rap scene (Denisova and Herasimenka 2019, Ewell 2017, Poliakov, Omelchenko and Garifzyanova 2020), and popular music as a means for political protest (Semenenko 2021, Steinholt and Wickström

2016). Acknowledging that the Russian and post-Soviet popular music and its industries has gone through a series of changes in later years, I am here primarily concerned with the period within the scope of my fieldwork and PhD project, where data material stretches into the early 2010s. While the role of wealthy elites is an integral part of the empirical analysis of Swedo-Russian collaborations provided in my PhD dissertation, their significance for the development of certain structures and practices in the Russian popular music industry both during this particular period and in a wider historical perspective, remains largely understudied. The work presented here contributes to an emerging field of post-Soviet popular music research, which has rising urgency in a post-socialist context where popular music plays a significant role in strategies for regime support as well as resistance.

Understanding the presence of Russian economic elites in post-Soviet popular music industry, one must consider some of the larger structural conditions inherent in the historical transition from socialist state to market economy, and from a Soviet to a Russian music industry. Under Soviet rule, musical activity was characterized by strict state control and monopoly. To be able to operate as artists, musicians would have to pass the requirements of official ‘artistic committees’ scrutinizing everything from song material to visual appearances (Bright 1985, 124; Yoffee and Laing 2005). If approved, they would be under the management of an officially assigned artistic director (Steinholt 2005, 22), who would coordinate their touring activities through state run concert agencies (Bright 1985, 148) and the recording, production, and distribution of records through the state-controlled record company Melodiya (Gronow 1975, 92). Following these official requirements, one could qualify for the status of ‘professional artists’, who compared to ‘amateurs’ gained access not only to such privileges as instruments and sound equipment but also to status as workers, providing them with social benefits as well as the legal right to earn money from performing (Yoffee and Laing 2005; Bright 1985, 124, 148; Steinholt 2005, 22)

The same principles were applied to the enforcement of intellectual property rights. Protected through national as well as international legislations, copyright is legally understood as ‘a bundle of rights’ in creative works (such as a song), affording its authors (and thus rightsholders) exclusive rights to copy, adapt, perform, and broadcast it (Frith and Marshall 2004, 6-7). When others use the song in these various ways, rightsholders are entitled to payment for each incident of use. When songs are played on various types of media (such as streaming platforms, radio, TV series, in concert) it thus generates income for copyright holders. The collection of copyright fees and the remuneration of this income to rightsholders is commonly administered by a series of copyright collection societies, who “monitor music activity in a given territory, and collect and distribute fees accordingly” (Wallis 2004, 104). To increase the circulation of their songs, rightsholders will often license the rights in their songs to third parties like record labels and music publishers who apply their (administrative) resources towards more widespread distribution of the songs on the rightsholders’ behalf, as

well as securing the remunerations that this circulation generates. In return, publishers and labels take a percentage of the income that is accumulated. These are funds that labels and publishers in turn can apply towards the recruitment of new talents and production of new music. Copyright can thus be said to constitute one of the music industry's main structural features, representing a main source of income, providing the framework for business decisions, and functioning as the going currency for all sectors of the industry (Frith and Marshall 2004, 1-2).

While the Soviet Union did have legislation that protected individual property rights in musical works, enrollment in the system of collection and remuneration of copyright fees was only afforded to songwriters who were recognized as 'professionals', i.e., approved for membership in the Soviet Composers' Union. This implied that there was a whole range of 'amateur' songwriters who were cut off from potential income through these channels. Unrecognized by the official systems, 'amateur' artists and songwriters would thus have to find other, and often illegal, ways to get their music out to their audiences, such as illegal concerts and the widespread practice of *magnitizdat* – the unofficial production and distribution of tapes, which has later been connected to the high levels of music piracy in post-Soviet Russia (Biasoli 2021).

Recognizing cultural work (herein music making) as a specific kind of *practice*, Mark Banks (2017) is concerned with the inequalities and inequities occasioned by such work. Arguing for "a more even distribution of positions and rewards in the cultural industries" (Banks 2017, 2) he has coined the notion of *creative justice* to raise awareness of and address *injustice* in cultural work. The monopolized and ideologically controlled Soviet music industry can be said to have been characterized by one such kind of creative injustice, as it clearly privileged some music workers over others based on their levels of political loyalty.

As described in detail by Shiraev and Danilov (1999), the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 with its disintegration of public institutions and rapid privatization, ended the state's music monopoly and led to a thorough restructuring of the Russian music industry. While the elimination of censorship enabled formerly banned (mostly rock) artists and bands to prosper, the collapse of the government system also left many musicians without economic, administrative, and organizational support. The lack of a properly functioning system for the collection and remuneration of royalties and copyright fees implied that many Russian pop performers were almost completely economically reliant on profits collected through concerts and touring. Whereas local government would previously facilitate their concert activities, pop artists now had to look elsewhere for the substantial financial investments needed to organize money making tours around the country. They found these sponsors among the new rich elite that soon came to dominate Russian show business, and a small group of 'Moscow magnates' who by the late 1990s reportedly controlled the country's music market (Shiraev and Danilov 1999, 217). The potential new source of income and profit inherent in the emerging private music industry also made it a lucrative arena for criminal

groups, making “[b]ribery, violence, and extortion [...] common characteristics in the music business” (Shiraev and Danilov 1999: 220).

While perestroika implied that “[c]apitalist relationships replaced the old governmental support system of popular cultural and pop music” (Shiraev and Danilov 1999, 217), the Russian music industry that emerged was to little extent (re)built around a stronger implementation of intellectual property rights and copyright. While having legislation for the protection of copyright in place, Russia has over the years repeatedly been internationally criticized for its lacking inability to enforce it properly. The country has for instance been placed on The International Intellectual Property Alliance’s Priority Watch List due to high levels of copyright infringement and piracy (IIPA 2010), which has been highlighted as the Russian music business’ most prominent challenges (Goldenswaig 2006, 3). The low functionality of the system for the collection and remuneration of copyright fees and royalties implies that the circulation of songs has provided minimal revenue for rightsholders, depriving them of income they should legally be able to accumulate. During my fieldwork period in 2009-2011, research participants expressed very low levels of trust in these systems, suspecting collection societies of illegitimate collection of fees on their behalf, and of keeping rather than redistributing collected fees.<sup>2</sup> They described operating within a highly informalized music economy, where income was still primarily generated through concerts, and where cash payments continued to be a preferred form of transaction. These structural conditions had significant implications for who could gain access to and operate within the Russian music industry and how. The transition into a Russian music industry thus seems to imply a transition from one type of creative injustice to another – from one where access, resources and opportunities were unequally distributed based on political loyalty and ideological control to one in which “[u]nfair privileges and the hoarding of wealth undermine the capacities of the less privileged to participate and contribute as social equals” (Bansak 2107, 3).

## Two Models of Financing

Based on fieldwork observations and interactions, I identified two main models for how artists and song materials were recruited, managed, and not least financed in the pop musical landscape in which my research participants were operating. The first of these models is centered around what I refer to as a *pradjuser*, drawing on the Russian pronunciation of the word producer (продюсер). I make a distinction between a producer and a *pradjuser* since a producer usually refers to someone who primarily works with songwriting and sound production, while a *pradjuser* most commonly takes on a more an all-encompassing role in the creative and practical management of pop musical careers that resembles the Soviet model of the

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<sup>2</sup> These types of corruption have also been reported in Russian media, one example being the investigation into suspected embezzlement of 500 million rubles in the Russian Authors’ Society (RAO) (Kozlov 2015).

‘artistic director’. Based in a *pradjuserskij tseñtr* (a production center) rather than a music studio, a *pradjuser* tends to have a total control of the artists they have signed, from the writing and release of song material to concert bookings and media strategies, making decisions on musical style, as well as public image and style of clothing. Having ownership of the artist’s or band’s name implies that band members can be discarded and replaced at the *pradjuser’s* whim.

This level of control and ownership can be obtained as it is the *pradjuser* who makes the financial investments into the artist projects, and thus also subsequently benefits from the profits that are generated. *Masha* could for instance share how she, as a member of a *pradjuser*-led Russian girl group, would receive her income through ‘pocket money’ from the *pradjuser* and was left with nothing when she decided to leave the group. The funds that a *pradjuser* acquires can in turn be invested into new artist projects, who are recruited through the *pradjuser’s* network of contacts or scouted among the contestants in singing contests where they are often invited as judges and jury members. Some *pradjusers*, like Maxim Fadeev or Iosif Prigozhin, have made big names (and fortunes) for themselves in this way.

The second type of investment into pop musical careers – and the one under main scrutiny here – is that of the wealthy benefactor. Most commonly this is a family member, such as a spouse, a parent, or a sibling. While providing the financial resources for the artistic project of a wife, a lover or a child, these wealthy benefactors will seldom be involved in the actual management of the artist. Rather, it is quite common to hire someone to take on the role as a *pradjuser*, i.e., taking care of the many aspects of the (aspiring) artist’s career, albeit for cash payment and no ownership in project itself. This implies that the (wealthy) artist will have more creative leverage in a musical project, whilst the overall control remains with the (financial) good-will of his or her wealthy benefactor. Several of my informants functioned in these kinds of *pradjuser* roles, which not only provided income, but could also help *pradjusers* build a track record towards establishing themselves more independently. A variant of the wealthy benefactor is rich patrons taking on the role as *pradjusers* themselves, also for artists they are not related to, taking on the creative control of the artist despite having little musical know-how. A prime example here is the high-profile Russian artist Dima Bilan, who has for several years been *pradjused* by the wealthy businesswoman Yana Rudkovskaya. In the following, I will present two empirical cases providing insight into how the practice of financing artist careers through wealthy investors might unfold in practice.

### **Slava Lava – A Singing Wife**

Having grown up in what she herself describes as “a normal St Petersburg family”, *Slava Lava* was in her mid-twenties when she met and married a successful Russian businessman and ruble billionaire. Considering her husband’s financial situation, *Slava* did not have to work to make a living. However, while they were living in St Petersburg, her husband worked in Moscow during the week, leaving



her with a lot of time on her hands to spend on her own. When I first met *Slava* in *North Star's* studio in Stockholm, a pop artist career was merely one of several projects she had going on: Not only was she working as a VJ for a Russian music TV channel, but she was also establishing a jewelry house and running a modern art gallery – both with the financial support of her husband and both carrying the *Lava* name. Later she has also become central in her husband's establishment of a large *Lava* sports complex in St Petersburg.

Considering how none of these ventures were (at the time) turning a profit, one might argue that this resembles what is in Alexei Yurchak's description of the male careerist referred to as "woman's business" (*zhenskii biznes*) (2003). He describes it as a business career that is presented as a gift to a woman from a successful businessman, typically in beauty, fashion, or culture. It is not expected to make a profit but is rather an expense paid by a businessman "to keep the woman busy, so that she won't bother him" as one of Yurchak's interviewees puts it (Yurchak 2003, 84). Within a normative model where the female partner's main task is "to relieve the male careerist of the preoccupations of personal life [...] it is [...] crucial that a "woman's business" be seen by both men and women as secondary to a man's business, dependent on male support, and more hobby than real business" (Yurchak 2003, 84). Entering into these many different activities might signify a desire in *Slava* to carve out a space for herself beyond her role as a wealthy businessman's wife – the irony being that it is precisely this position (and the resources she has available through it) that allows her to explore these different directions for herself.

Before *Slava* started working with *North Star* in Stockholm, she had already for some time made efforts to establish herself as a pop artist in Russia, where she had hired *prodjuser Misha* on monthly basis to help her manage and organize the musical and practical aspects of her aspiring career. This work was organized through *Lava Studio*, a music studio (or *prodjuserskij tsentr*) that her husband had built for her in Moscow. Situated on the third floor of a flashy glass building with a doorman at the entrance, *Lava Studio* was a spacious facility with a large reception area, a big kitchen and lounge area with floor to ceiling windows, a luxurious bathroom, as well as a recording room and a state-of-the-art studio. The fact that the studio was built around *Slava* was evident in how the walls of the reception area were covered in wallpaper prints of *Slava* as well as pictures of her with various Russian and international celebrities. In the floor outside the entrance to the studio there was embedded something that resembled a Hollywood Walk of Fame star, with *Slava Lava's* name and handprints as well as the date the studio was established on it. As she still did not have much of a career to speak of, the layout and décor of the studio came across as a display of her imagined and desired glamorous artist life rather than a reflection of what she had in fact achieved. The impression that this studio was primarily aimed at the production of glamour rather than music, was underscored by the fact that the space set aside for music making made up a very small part of the overall studio facilities compared to the upscale common areas.

Despite *Misha's* efforts and the symbolic projections of the *Lava Studio*, her endeavors into the Russian music market had not been very successful. She described this to me as a difficult time, where she felt uncomfortable with what they were doing, and where they were “searching for a style” as she felt what she was doing was “not hers”. And then *Anya*, one of her Russian friends living in Stockholm, put her in contact with a Swedo-Russian couple she had gotten to know, i.e., *Tom-E* and *Masha*, to see if there might be a potential for working together. When *Slava* made the trip to Stockholm to meet with them, *Tom-E* had almost instantly proposed a different, more “rock-y” sound for her, and finally she felt understood, *Slava* said. She later explained to me how she thought that good quality music was not to be found in Moscow, but rather in Europe and America, and that this was the kind of music she wanted to make as it was “closer to her” and that she was “more comfortable” in Stockholm. This expressed notion that “Western pop music is in a sense “more her”, allows her to provide an association between herself and a “Western lifestyle” as something that come naturally to her – i.e., it is a form of cultural capital that is already embodied within her.

From the very beginning, *Tom-E* and *Masha* knew *Slava's* career pursuits had the financial backing of her wealthy husband, and this was indeed also a strong motivation for them to take her on as a client. They negotiated a deal to produce a full album, receiving a bulk sum for each song they finalized. This was meant to cover songwriting, production, recording and mixing, as well as additional expenses. *Slava Lava* thus became the first big Russian artist project that *North Star* took on. While *Tom-E* would now function as the main music producer on her project, her *pradjuser Misha* would still administrate and organize things on the Russian side of things, managing the communication with *North Star*. Simultaneously, he also functioned as *Slava's* musical advisor, managing her creative and musical interests, accompanying her on her songwriting and/or vocal recording sessions to Stockholm, and providing input on the creative and musical aspects of the songs being written and produced.

Both in terms of their collaboration with *Slava* and in their interaction with other established and potential Russian clients, *Tom-E* and *Masha* were quite articulate about the fact that part of what they were offering went beyond the musical services themselves. Indeed, part of their business was built around being able to provide an association with the high-end style and coolness of the internationally renowned Swedish world of pop music. This was reflected in how they booked famous and exclusive studios in Stockholm for their sessions with Russian visitors, setting them up with well-known songwriters and producers (and consequently also an association with the pop stars they had worked with), picking them up at the airport in upscale rental cars, and ‘wining and dining’ them on local hip bars and restaurants.

For *Tom-E* and *Masha*, the deal with *Slava* represented a welcome opportunity for a certain economic security, at least for a limited period. This outlook was initially amplified through *Slava's* fulfillment of an additional stereotype about Russian

‘singing wives’ as it soon became clear that there were considerable limitations to her vocal and artistic abilities. The standing joke became that *Slava* ‘not being able to sing’ would keep her coming back for the various production services *North Star* could provide. “I hope her album is never finished,” *Masha* laughingly said, “or else we will lose our reliable and steady income!” In time, the assumption that the payments they received would considerably outweigh the workload they put in, and that the project would thus provide some ‘easy money’, turned out to be a considerable miscalculation. The bulk payment deal they had entered did not for instance specify how many hours *North Star* were to spend on each song. Due to *Slava*’s lack in vocal talent, the process of recording, processing, and producing vocals required considerable resources in terms of both time and workload. Over time *North Star* also felt that *Slava* (mainly through her *pradjuser Misha*) was to an increasing extent negotiating prices and the services included in them, making them speculate that maybe *Slava* was on a more limited budget than they initially imagined. When I told *Tom-E* about my ride in *Slava*’s gold colored Bentley, he laughingly remarked that he was “clearly not charging her enough!”

While they renewed their deal for another album, the collaboration between *Slava* and *North Star* faded over time, and the planned second album was never released. This was partly because *Slava* became pregnant with her first child, and that she seemed to prioritize working with some of her other endeavors – especially her art gallery and her husband’s sports complex. Up until this day there is nothing that indicates that she is still pursuing a career as a pop artist. *North Star* on their hand did not chase the deal further, as it had proven not to represent the ‘easy money’ they had initially imagined. Their time and resources were now freed up to pursue other, and hopefully more lucrative, projects.

The trajectory of the *Slava Lava* project highlights some of the main issues related to the role of the wealthy elites in the Russian popular music industry. It illustrates how money rather than musical talent can enable individuals to pursue an artistic career, effecting not only musical quality, but also the working conditions for industry professionals like *Misha* who have few other choices than to cater to the needs and wants of their wealthy employers. For *Slava*, the search for a version of herself that she felt comfortable with was made possible through her access to money, allowing her to eventually land in an ‘art gallery self’ that could provide the glamour, recognition, and cultural capital she was longing for. The same opportunities are not afforded to those who are primarily ‘in it for the music’, who must play according to a set of rules where the game is rigged in favor of the economic elite.

### **Stanislav – An Oligarch Patron**

A few years prior to their work with *Slava Lava*, *Masha* had been asked to help recruit participants for a singing contest being arranged as part of an arctic music festival in the town of Salekhard, Siberia. While they had already found contestants from the different Russian arctic regions, the festival had trouble

recruiting singers beyond Russia. In addition to helping find participants from countries like Norway, Sweden, Greenland, and Canada, she pitched my band as entertainment for the festival, while *Tom-E* was invited to be head of the jury for the singing contest. The festival was celebrating arctic culture and music, and the concept of the competition was that they would on day one sing a song that reflected where they were from (their home region), and on day two perform what the festival referred to as a “world smash hit”.

The undisputed winner of the competition was *Snezhana*, a young girl from the northeastern region of Chukotka, Russia. On the first day she gave a powerful performance drawing on the indigenous background of the Chukchi people she grew up among, vocally conveying a hunt, complete with the sounds of growling animal sounds, oars in water and seagulls singing. The performance was highly impressive and deeply moving and received standing ovations and cheering from the audience. This scenario repeated itself on day two, when *Snezhana* displayed breathtaking vocal abilities in her performance of a powerful pop ballad, resonating with the likes of Celine Dion and Mariah Carey. In conversations with *Tom-E* and *Masha* afterwards, we discussed the immense potential in combining these two expressions – her indigenous sounds and diva pop – into something of a contemporary Russian Björk. At the award ceremony, *Tom-E* surprised everyone by giving her an additional prize – a week recording with him in Stockholm.

When *Snezhana* visited *Tom-E* to work with him in his Stockholm studio, *Tom-E* and *Masha*’s belief in her potential was thoroughly strengthened. However, developing the project towards potential success would require a lot of effort – and thus time and resources that they quite simply did not have. They would for instance have to bring in a range of songwriters and producers that could work with *Snezhana* over time to explore and develop the cutting-edge sound that would be required for her to break through internationally. Further, considering how *Snezhana* was currently living on the other side of the world, the time difference alone would make collaboration complicated. The most practical solution would be to arrange for her to move closer to Stockholm, but then they would also have to cover her living expenses. Considering their economic situation, they were not even close to having the funds to make the project a reality and simply had to give it up.

Three years later, *Tom-E* and *Masha* could share some exciting news. They had recently had a visitor, *Stanislav*, who had attended the arctic music festival in Salekhard, and wanted to meet them as he was visiting Stockholm. When *Masha* described him, I could vaguely recall a man in an Adidas sweatsuit who would hang out backstage and in parties during the festival. When they told him about how and why the *Snezhana* project had stranded, he asked them how much money they would need to realize it the way they imagined. They mentioned a ballpark figure of several hundred thousand euros, and he promptly said he was able, and willing, to help them out. *Tom-E* and *Masha* were flabbergasted – and very excited about this surprising turn of events.

While not giving that impression during the festival, it turned out that *Stanislav* was a man of rather considerable means. Throughout *North Star's* collaboration with *Stanislav*, the issue of *how* he made his money was never discussed. While I suspect it might be related to oil and/or gas (as Salekhard is the capital of the Yamal-Nenets region, Russia's top oil and gas province), *Tom-E* and *Masha* were not eager to probe too far into it. We were all explicitly aware of the link commonly drawn between big money and crime in Russia, but they seemed to feel that the less they knew, the better. This way they could avoid the potential moral conundrum of having to decide whether this was money they could accept with a clean conscience. They understood *Stanislav's* motivation for investing in the *Snezhana* project to be the opportunity to 'hang out with artists and celebrities', much like he had done during the festival, but now potentially on an even more glamorous scale.

After confirming with *Snezhana* back home in Chukotka that she was on board with the project, they started making plans for their collaboration. For *Tom-E* and *Masha*, a main element in the contract needed to be that they would have full artistic freedom and control over the project, and that *Stanislav* could not challenge or interfere with their creative decisions. *Stanislav* on his hand, was entitled to be present in the studio at any time while they were working on the project, to keep track of the process and hang out with the people involved. As they landed the agreement and money was transferred, *Snezhana* moved from Chukotka into an apartment in the suburbs of St Petersburg, that was owned by *Stanislav*. *Tom-E* and *Masha* started setting up songwriting sessions in Stockholm to initiate the elaborate process of developing a unique musical sound for *Snezhana*, with the aim of landing a "US number 1 hit". The first round of sessions was characterized by experimentation and exploration of themes, sounds, and expressions, and the writers invited and involved a slightly overwhelmed *Snezhana* during this process. They asked her about her culture and personal story, and to contribute with ideas and musical elements from her Chukchi background, so that this could be weaved into the unique *Snezhana* sound they were working towards. *Stanislav* was there for most of these sessions, and seemed content hanging around in the studio.

While they had written a handful of songs in the first round of sessions, *Tom-E* considered this as merely a first step of the process. To him, and many of the other writers, they still had quite a way to go before they 'cracked' the sound that could take her all the way to the top. For *North Star*, this was indeed also the premise of the deal they had set up with *Stanislav*; a major part of the investment would have to go into producing a musical expression that had the potential for success. However, as they entered the second round of songwriting sessions in Stockholm, signs started to emerge that *Stanislav* was perhaps not fully on board with this strategy. When he arrived, he was, much to *Tom-E* and *Masha's* surprise, accompanied by *Serafim* – an aspiring Russian songwriter and producer. While *Serafim* did not participate in sessions, he would discuss the music being made with *Stanislav*, answering *Stanislav's* concerned questions about whether what the Swedes were cooking up music wise was 'normalna' – i.e., was it weird or okay? In between

sessions, the two of them also proposed to *Tom-E* and *Masha* that *Serafim* could produce something for *Snezhana*. *Tom-E* was thoroughly provoked by the suggestion to do some ‘ethno rock’ as that was “exactly what we’re trying not to do here!” They felt it was clearly in violation of the contractual term that *Stanislav* could not interfere with the creative choices of the project. While they ended the round of sessions on amicable terms, the first cracks in their collaboration started to show.

Not too long after, *Stanislav* was throwing a big birthday party for himself in St Petersburg, and *Tom-E* and *Masha* were invited as guests of honor. Taking on the role as a nanny for their young daughter, I was able tag along for the celebration. Upon arrival, we all met up in *Stanislav*’s apartment. *Tom-E* and *Masha* were somewhat exhausted, as *Stanislav* had, after picking them up from the airport, been driving them around playing them music he had written and produced himself and asking for feedback from his Swedish guests. While his apartment was nothing out of the ordinary, his position as an oligarch type rich Russian was confirmed as he showed us the blueprints for the neoclassical gold and marble mansion he was building for his family in the outskirts of St Petersburg. The stairwell of the three-floor apartment was also filled with photographs of *Stanislav* with different Russian and international celebrities, resonating with what was perceived to be his motivation for investing in the *Snezhana* project.

*Tom-E*, *Masha*, their daughter, and I were staying in *Snezhana*’s apartment, as she had hastily gone back to Chukotka for a while on occasion of her mother’s death. *Stanislav* was somewhat disappointed about it, as she was meant to perform at his birthday party. Especially so since another one of his proteges (the daughter of a friend) could not perform either as she had secured a spot to perform on a popular Russian TV show. The party itself was an extravagant affair with extensive decorations, free flow of food and drinks, dancers and entertainers performing in the room, as well as several artists singing on stage in his honor. *Tom-E* and *Masha* were seated at *Stanislav*’s table, and were clearly showed off to the many other guests presents. The overall mood was cheerful, but behind the scenes something was cooking. Talking around *Snezhana*’s kitchen table the previous night, *Tom-E* and *Masha* had shared some frustrations about their collaboration with *Stanislav*. A planned writing camp for *Snezhana* in Stockholm would have to be rescheduled, as he had booked a gig for her in Russia in the middle of the designated period. He had also arranged for *Snezhana* to record one of his own songs in a Russian studio, and *Tom-E* suspected that they would soon be presented with more material of this kind. Increasingly, he was taking on a role resembling that of a *prodjuser*. Not only was this taking *Snezhana* in a completely different musical direction, but it was also in breach with their contract.

During the third round of sessions, *Tom-E* and *Masha* felt that they were really starting to get somewhere with *Snezhana*’s sound, although not quite there yet. They were still exploring how to translate *Snezhana*’s background and indigenous musical elements into catchy and cutting-edge pop music and felt that many of the things they were writing were primarily experimental, yet important, steps towards

international hit potential. *Stanislav*, on the other hand, expressed his discontent of the fact that the project was still in the writing phase. Surely, they did by now have enough songs to start recording, releasing, and promoting *Snezhana's* music? Back in Russia he asked *Tom-E* to send him a copy of what had been done in the last round of sessions. *Tom-E* reluctantly complied but instructed *Stanislav* not to share it with anyone as these were rough sketches not intended for outside ears who “wouldn't understand”. It soon turned out that *Stanislav* had not followed these instructions and had asked for feedback on the material from Russian producers and songwriters he knew. Their feedback was apparently that it was ‘strange’ and ‘not good’, and an upset *Stanislav* got back to them demanding to know what *North Star* were actually doing with his money. Why was it dragging out? Why were they not releasing music? And what was the deal with these weird songs coming out of the previous round of sessions? As the discussion between them escalated, it became obvious that he increasingly suspected that *North Star* was framing him, trying to steal his money.

At this point, *Tom-E* and *Masha* were becoming quite anxious, especially since they still did not know where *Stanislav's* money came from. If he was indeed involved in illegal affairs, should they be worried that they could be facing repercussions in the form of violence? Fortunately, *Stanislav* landed on taking legal action through the Swedish court system, which ended in a settlement between the two parties. Left with no funds to develop the project further, *Tom-E* and *Masha* reconciled with having to relinquish their creative involvement as the process continued under the control of *Snezhana's* oligarch patron.

## Concluding Discussion

As illustrated through the two cases outlined above, the presence of the wealthy elite in the field of popular music in Russia has several implications – both on a structural level and for those trying to make a living from making music. Those of my Russian informants who were pursuing a career in the music industry without significant economic privileges, would in various ways all share their frustrations about having to compete with and cater to the interests and resources of rich people. *Pavel*, a singer, songwriter, and producer could for instance recount how he had made it to the semifinals of a TV singing talent show but was met with demands to pay a significant sum of money (that he did not have) to secure a place in the finals. *Pavel's* example reflects a widely shared notion among my research participants of the Russian music industry as being an unlevelled playing field, where musical talent alone was not enough and where access to money increased one's opportunities to pursue a career as a pop artist. Reflecting the case of *Slava Lava* and her limited vocal abilities, research participants would also lament how monetary means enabled members of the wealthy elites to pursue pop musical careers despite a lack of musical talent. Research participants would here be concerned with the consequences they felt this had for musical quality. Even the major Russian pop star (and oligarch daughter/wife) *Alsou* has stated: “A lot of

rich girls want to sing in Russia. [...] But most of them can't sing, they just want to be famous" (Rivkin 2005).

While Alsou is widely considered to have actual musical talent, her hired *pradjuser* *Konstantin* still decided to leave his position as he became frustrated when he did not feel she was committed to making music but rather treated it as "a hobby for a rich girl". The same sentiment was expressed in *North Star's* involvement with *Polina*, a young talented singer sponsored by her wealthy mother and the third artist project they were working with during my fieldwork. She had hired *Genya* as a *pradjuser*, and both he, *Tom-E* and *Masha* became increasingly resigned as sessions would be cancelled or rescheduled because she had suddenly decided to take a vacation trip with her girlfriends, or simply 'didn't feel like it'. The notion of pursuing a pop career as 'a fun hobby' was subject to considerable moral judgement among my research participants, as it was considered something you should put all your efforts into due to a passion for music. Simultaneously, this reflects a more general concern many of my research participants had about a "lack of professionalism" in the Russian music industry. They described working for rich clients as being highly unpredictable and requiring constant flexibility, as plans made could be changed or cancelled 'on a whim', and new ideas were presented with demands of immediate realization. In addition to the frustration this way of working caused among songwriters, *pradjusers*, promoters, and organizers I met in the field, they also considered it to be highly inefficient. In their experience and opinion, this kind of short-term, project-based work practice had largely become the standard within the Russian music business as whole. Many of them ascribed this to how the lack of a functioning copyright remuneration system influenced the distribution and flow of financial resources. While expressing a longing for a 'functioning system' like they have 'in the West', most of them had to keep on taking assignments from those with the resources to pay them. A common trope throughout my fieldwork among my Russian research participants was thus that they did not really have a music industry, "only showbiz!", something that they did not expect to change any time soon [Tolstad 2021].

The structural conditions for making pop music in Russia during this period implied a significantly uneven distribution of power and influence, in which an affluent elite could have a strong hold on the opportunities, lives, and careers of others. This is perhaps particularly prominent in the relationships between artists who do not have their own funds, and thus depend on the resources, aspirations, and whims of their rich patrons and *pradjusers*. The relationship between *Stanislav* and *Snezhana* is for instance strongly characterized by the fact that her artist project is made possible by his money, leaving her to sing at his birthday party, worry that he does not like what *North Star* is doing music wise, record his songs and perform the gigs he books, and to stick with him when the collaboration with *North Star* goes sour. Band members in girl groups like *Masha's* are left with nothing if or when the *pradjuser* decides to replace them with newer (and often younger) members. *Masha* could for instance share how one of her former band mates kept it going by living



on the yacht of a rich man as his mistress, being expected to perform and entertain whenever he had guests around. When I met with Dima Bilan's international coordinator *Ksenyia*, right after she had organized a duet between him and the American pop artist Anastacia, she expressed her admiration for the management team of the American artist, while also making a point of the contrast to how it worked in Russia: "In the West everyone is working for the artist, while in Russia the artist is working for everyone else". For her, this was particularly related to Bilan's dependency on his *pradjuser* Yana Rudkovskaya, who collected most of the profits from his musical endeavor, while also having the main say in the creative choices to be made. Although having been pushed to work very hard, Bilan could not rely on any other income than what Rudkovskaya was willing to give him. "In Russia, the artists are slaves!" *Ksenyia* complained. Similarly, the media has more recently reported disputes between several high-profiled *pradjusers* and their signed artists, such as hip-hop artist Egor Kreed's fallout with Timati's Black Star Label, singer Nargiz Zakirova's criticism of *pradjuser* Maxim Fadeev after being dropped from his label, and Antokha MC's lawsuit against his *pradjuser* Eduard Shumeiko.

*Ksenyia's* rather dramatic comment illustrates how these music professionals remain acutely aware of the creative injustice characterizing the industry they operate within, as well as the overarching structures conditioning this injustice. However, as long as the copyright remuneration system remains broken, and money talks more than music, industry professionals have few other options than to continue to operate within this unlevel playing field, reluctantly reproducing unprofessional conduct, precarity, tendencies for corruption and lacking musical quality.

In the years following my period of study, Russia and its music industry has gone through several changes. The rise of social media has provided new channels for the promotion, distribution, and consumption of music, which has created additional, alternative, and more autonomous opportunities for aspiring artists to launch careers, interact with audiences and turn a profit from their music. Bringing forth successful artists such as Monetochka, Oxxximiron and Manizha, this development has inevitably had influence on the working conditions and practices of professionals in the Russian music industry. Simultaneously, the country has under Putin increasingly moved towards an authoritarian rule that has had consequences for the pop musical industry in several ways. After my fieldwork *Tom-E* and *Masha* experienced a decreased interest among their network of Russian music professionals to collaborate with and operate in 'the West'. In the current political landscape, musicians who voice their critique of or opposition to Putin or the Russian war on Ukraine continue to face various types of repercussions from the government, leading many to flee the country. In addition to the well-known example of Pussy Riot, Russian artists have been fined for expressing anti-war statements from stage, such as veteran rock singer Yuri

Shevchuk<sup>3</sup> declared foreign agents, such as in the case of singer Zemfira<sup>4</sup>, and having their songs removed from official radio and TV playlists (Sedlyarova and Tobias 2022). The rich Russian elite have increasingly been met with demands of loyalty to the Russian regime, whilst facing heavy sanctions and confiscation of resources by Western countries. The significance this development has had for the current role of the wealthy elite in the Russian popular music, and the creative injustice it entails, remains unexplored and calls for further academic investigation.

## **Author Bio**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/08/16/veteran-russian-rock-star-fined-over-onstage-war-criticism-a78585>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/popular-russian-singer-zemfira-declared-foreign-agent-by-government-20230211-p5cjq4.html>

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