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Famous Rock Singer to Face Trial

By Sergei Chernov

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Yury Shevchuk facing a crowd of protesters and police at a 2010 rally. **Igor Tabakov**

Yury Shevchuk, singer, guitarist and songwriter, is not your typical Russian rock star. He is independent, socially conscious and outspoken. In August, the St. Petersburg stadium rocker is to be taken to court on defamation charges over a canceled concert in Bryansk.

Instead of exchanging niceties with the powers that be when they deign to mix with rock musicians, he confronts them. That is exactly what he did in a televised meeting with President Vladimir Putin in 2010, asking him a series of uncomfortable questions about human rights violations and political prisoners. Shevchuk also takes part in protest rallies, supports charities for political prisoners and attends politically tinged court hearings.

Barred from Russian television and radio and refusing to perform at corporate parties on principle, Shevchuk's band DDT remains hugely popular nonetheless, packing stadiums across Russia, where Shevchuk is largely seen as a spokesman for a generation. Occasionally, he faces the odd banned concert, but last week Bryansk governor Nikolai Denin filed a defamation lawsuit against the musician.

‘Weirdos like you will
soon be flushed down
the toilet of history.’
Yury Shevchuk
DDT band member

Denin, who Shevchuk accused on the group’s website of being behind the cancellation of DDT’s April 20 concert in Bryansk, a city 379 kilometers southwest of Moscow, insists on being paid 250,000 rubles ($7,720) in damages.

“In this case, Shevchuk and his representatives will have to prove that they circulated information that corresponds to reality,” RIA Novosti quoted Denin’s spokesman as saying.

“The governor is convinced that the information distributed on the Internet is unfounded and untrue; it insults his honor, dignity and business reputation.”

According to Shevchuk’s posting on the band’s website dated April 4, the band was told that the concert was canceled for “technical reasons” shortly before the date, while the advertising campaign was in full swing and a portion of tickets had been already sold.

Sarcastically, Shevchuk wrote that Denin had called around to the directors of Bryansk concert venues to ensure that DDT would not play in his “princedom,” and to not allow the minds of his fellow townsmen to be disordered.

“What if the people will start thinking about the meaning of life, having listened to some satire and philosophy? What if they pay close attention to the personality of this ‘big boss,’ who has taken such a crooked and intricate road toward power and money?”

According to Shevchuk, the promoter in Bryansk suffered losses after having paid for advertising, similar to other concerts on DDT’s tour reportedly canceled by the authorities.

Shevchuk criticized Denin for acting “cowardly,” alleging that he gave his orders secretly by phone, rather than publicly. The band did not receive any official documents about the “technical reasons” that led to the “strange” cancellation.

Addressing Denin directly, Shevchuk concluded: “Of course, you have no idea about our constitutional rights being abused. It looks like you did not read the constitution, being too busy grieving about the people ... But I know that such weirdos as you will soon be flushed down the toilet of history, too, ‘due to the technical reasons’ that we already know too well. And we will perform in Bryansk, that’s for sure.”

By the “crooked and intricate road,” Shevchuk appeared to reference controversies that dogged Denin during his political career. Denin regained his position as governor of Bryansk as the result of a highly contested election last year.

A former Communist and governor of Bryansk since 2004, Denin ran as a candidate for the Kremlin-backed United Russia party last October but was dismissed by the Bryansk Region Court in reaction to a complaint by his main rival, Communist Vadim Potomsky, for the “counterfeit signatures” that he presented for registration.

Three days before the election, Russia's Supreme Court annulled the ruling and Denin won the election, receiving 65.22 percent of the vote, while only 30.83 percent went to Potomsky. The Communist Party and the media reported mass violations during the election.

Last September, Vedomosti reported that Denin illegally directed municipal funds to a firm co-owned by his wife and niece. The police found signs of abuse of power, Vedomosti reported, referring to a source within the Investigative Committee.

In 2005, Denin was charged for allegedly striking and killing a woman with his Toyota Land Cruiser. Denin was found not guilty.

Most recently, Denin made headlines again by using city funds to purchase his second Mercedes S500 for 5,282,000 rubles ($163,000). On July 17, his press service explained that Denin needs at least two cars of this class and reliability due to the amount of travel he does across the Bryansk region and beyond; "while one car undergoes diagnostic tests, the other is in operation."

The cancellation of the Bryansk concert was not the first time DDT has faced such a situation.

Last year, the band's concerts were canceled in a similar manner in Siberia, in Kemerovo, in the Kemerovo region town of Yurga, as well as in Tyumen and Omsk. The cancellations happened when tickets in Kemerovo and Yurga were almost sold out. In Tyumen, the band was told that no concert venue was available and a local official also forbade other local venues to host DDT, according to Shevchuk's April 24, 2012, statement.

Shevchuk pointed out that "slick bureaucrats" gave their orders via telephone, which made it almost impossible for the band to sue them.

"But we won't lose heart, because despair is a sin," Shevchuk wrote.

"We believe that this burly gang of zealous advocates of a disintegrating order will soon dissolve in the embrace of a different future."

According to Yelena Vishnya, a spokeswoman for DDT, Shevchuk will issue an official comment on Denin's lawsuit in the near future. The case is due to be heard on Aug. 15 at the Dzerzhinsky District Court in St. Petersburg.

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