

# Local Promoter Speaks Out Against Boycotts

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Popular American indie rock band The National was the latest international band to cancel scheduled appearances in Russia for political reasons.

With a growing number of Western artists boycotting Russia in protest of its annexation of Crimea and destabilization in southeastern Ukraine, a St. Petersburg concert promoter has spoken out against their actions, saying that these musicians are only hurting fans. Ilya Bortnyuk, whose agency Light Music has brought many international acts to St. Petersburg and organized the popular Stereoleto music festival since 2002, believes that boycotting targets the wrong people, with politicians left unaffected.

In fact, he believes that boycotting is actually helping President Vladimir Putin further isolate Russia from the rest of the world.

"Of course, it is not right," Bortnyuk told The St. Petersburg Times in a recent interview. "If they want to make a statement against the politics of Vladimir Putin or our state, they should

do something that could really influence the situation or at least bring their message to those they are protesting against."

"As a result, people who have nothing to do with it [the politics] in the least degree are the ones who are being punished. This is the main thing that I disagree with."

"If you want to punish McDonald's, you don't buy their products. However, if you stop buying kebabs from a kebab stand nearby because of its proximity to McDonald's, it will not harm McDonald's at all. Even if there is an indirect link between them, it's most likely that the people whom they are protesting against won't even know about it, that's what it is about."

Bortnyuk founded Light Music in 2000. Since then, it has brought such acts as Sparks, Sonic Youth and Morrissey to and launched the annual Stereoleto festival in 2002. The upcoming Stereoleto festival, scheduled for July 12 and 13, will feature acts from Norway, Ireland, Sweden, Georgia, Cuba, France and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

According to Bortnyuk, the refusals from international artists to perform in Russia have become more frequent after the Federation Council voted unanimously on March 1 to send Russian troops to Ukraine.

"At least three artists have refused to come to Russia, one of which is quite well-known," he said. "I also know a few other cases where artists have refused to come when approached by different promoters. So far, I do not know of any more cases of artists canceling already scheduled concerts, except for The National."

Last month, The National, one of America's premier indie rock bands, canceled concerts in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev, citing the current political climate as the reason.

"Due to the ongoing political crisis in the region, we are sad to report that we have decided to cancel our shows in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev this summer," the band said in a statement on April 22.

"We remain hopeful of coming to play for you in the future and we sincerely hope this current instability is resolved in a positive, democratic and peaceful way. Take care of yourselves and we hope to see you soon."

The National was scheduled to perform at St. Petersburg's A2 Club on July 31. The promoter was the Moscow-based agency Melnitsa.

"I think these artists and their management don't understand that by refusing to come to Russia, they don't deliver their message to those they are protesting against," Bortnyuk said.

One band that refused to come to Russia and make itself heard was Blondie, with the band's decision motivated by human rights violations in Russia. On Feb. 7, Blondie posted an image of the official request to perform at the Winter Olympics in Sochi on Twitter with the words, "Pass. Human Rights," handwritten on it.

For Bortnyuk, Blondie's refusal is different from the others.

"The thing is that the Olympics were an event held directly by the state using the money of the state, the money of Putin's, it was his project," he said.

"It is all logical here, absolutely. But when I, or other promoters or some small club, who do not have anything remotely to do with the state's money and state agencies, have artists refusing to come, it just makes no sense."

"Take The National. It is solely the band's fans that suffer. And, naturally, promoters, who try to bring these bands. I believe that by refusing to come, these artists effectively support Putin's policies, rather than protest against them. Their actions are showing that Putin managed to destabilize the situation, to make life even worse for ordinary people, including cultural life. They help him, rather than the ordinary people; they make things worse for ordinary people, for their fans."

According to Bortnyuk, rock fans should not be held accountable for the Kremlin's actions.

"It is clear that they have a negative attitude toward the policy of the Russian Federation, to the policy of Putin, but it looks like World War II, when all Germans were seen as Nazis," he said.

"If you were a German, you were a fascist who supported Hitler and wanted to kill everyone and burn everything around. But in reality it was not like that. Yes, many, maybe the majority of the population supported Hitler and were fascists, but not everybody was like that. It is the same now. To associate everybody in Russia with the occupiers of Crimea is stupid."

Bortnyuk is skeptical of official Russian polls, which claimed that more than 90 percent of Russians supported the annexation of Crimea. "In this case, one should try and decide if it is true that 90 percent really supported it and, if so, who are those people that supported it," Bortnyuk said.

"Maybe most people who would go to a concert by The National would not support something like this. But I think it doesn't matter who supports what. When the U.S. attacked Iraq, did everybody stop performing in the U.S.? The majority of the population in the U.S. supported the war then."

"I am against the war in Ukraine. The average person is against the war in Ukraine. So what? This whole situation is wrong. The measures taken against certain politicians may be justified, but when a band does not come to Russia, it does not influence anything at all, except for making the lives of ordinary Russians worse, in this case the fans of one band or another. If a fan of The National supported the addition of Crimea to Russia, their views are hardly going to change because of this boycott. But if they did not support it, they will be at a loss. In any case, if a band wants to make a statement, let them come here and say something at the concert. Or give an interview. Otherwise, it is somewhat abstract. 'We will not come' and that is all."

Unlike The National, U.S. band 30 Seconds to Mars performed in both Russia and Ukraine in March, and showed clear support for the Euromaidan protesters in Kiev during their concert there. The band's frontman, actor and musician Jared Leto, spoke in support of Ukraine during the Academy Awards ceremony on March 2 and addressed his Ukrainian

audience directly when performing with his band in Kiev on March 13.

"You guys are in the midst of something really beautiful and it may be difficult, but there is no price too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself," he said, according to the Contactmusic.com. Website.

"And I want to let you know, I understand other bands have cancelled their shows, but there was no [expletive] way, no [expletive] way 30 Seconds to Mars wasn't going to be here in this beautiful city, in this great country here tonight."

According to the website, Leto then dedicated a song to the "true believers out there," and waved the Ukraine flag while leading the audience in a "Glory to Ukraine!" chant. Leto also paid tribute to the Heavenly Hundred, the protesters killed by security forces and pro-government thugs by visiting the shrine on Kiev's Independence Square.

Since Putin came to power in 1999, various international artists have boycotted Russia over the war in Chechnya, the Georgian conflict in 2008, the imprisonment of feminist punk band Pussy Riot, anti-gay legislation and politically motivated trials seen in the past few years.

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