

It's Hip to Be a Hipster in Russia

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Хипстер: hipster, more or less

You know them. They are the cool-looking young people in skinny jeans and long scarves at the bookshop Республика, buying the latest novel translated from Japanese. Or the guys in oversized spectacles watching art-house films at the Пионер movie theater. Or your young neighbors at the dacha community, collecting dead batteries to take to IKEA for recycling and carrying their kids in brightly colored, natural dyed, all-cotton papooses. Are they хиппи (hippies)? Not quite, but there is a bit of the Summer of Love about them. Are they модники (fashion-forward)? Well, yes, sort of. But there is a slight counter-culture element to their style. So who are they?

I finally found out. They're хипстеры (hipsters). But what exactly is a хипстер, and does a Russian хипстер differ from an American hipster?

To get the answer, you have to go back about 60 or 70 years in America, when the first

incarnation of hipsters appeared. A hipster was hip, a hepcat — someone who eschewed mainstream culture, typically a white person hitting the black jazz clubs. In the 1950s and 1960s, hipsters were also called beatniks. Think: smoky cafe, bearded men, women with long hair, everyone snapping their fingers and talking about the French New Wave.

Today English-speaking hipsters are defined variously. Some definitions stress their trendy appearance, love of high-tech gadgets, and apolitical views. Other definitions insist that their politics — progressive, liberal — are important. One definition describes them as "young, usually urban Bohemians who cultivate an ironic sensibility" — which is so cool I want to be a hipster right this instant, or as soon as I figure out what an ironic sensibility is.

Russian хипстеры appeared on the scene on Oct. 8, 2008 — or rather, they were defined on that day in article by Yury Saprykin, editor of Афиша (Afisha magazine). He wrote about the young people at the annual Афиша picnic, whom he described as part of an urban subculture without a name. He decided to call them хипстеры, and used a definition of American hipsters from one particularly mean-spirited article. They were, in Saprykin's received view: первая в истории Запада молодёжная субкультура, которая ни к чему не стремится, ни о чём не мечтает, не протестует, не бунтует, не изобретает, не меняет жизнь; хипстеры — самовлюблённые твари (the first youth subculture in the West that strives for nothing, dreams of nothing, doesn't protest, doesn't rebel, doesn't invent, doesn't change life; hipsters are creatures in love with themselves).

He defined their Russian cousins exclusively in terms of their style: носят узкие джинсы или цветные лосины, отращивают чёлки, надевают большие очки без диоптрий ... в кармане у них молескин, в руке плёночная мыльница (they wear skinny jeans or brightly colored leggings, grow out their bangs, wear big glasses with non-corrective lenses ... they've got a Moleskine notebook in their pocket and a film point-and-shoot camera in their hand).

He ends his piece: Никто не презирает хипстеров больше, чем сами хипстеры. (No one disdains hipsters more than hipsters themselves.) Well, judging by his description of something like middle-class, pretentious гопники (hicks) — who'd want to be one? In fact, another commentator writes: Если хочешь кого-то оскорбить, назови его хипстером. (If you want to insult someone, call them a hipster.)

So is it good or bad to be a хипстеп? I don't know. But I do suspect that the people writing most caustically about them are probably wearing skinny jeans and big glasses.

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