

Exiled Electronic Duo AIGEL on Viral Fame, Singing in Tatar and Independent Art

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May 15, 2024



Aigelband / Instagram

On a recent Friday night in Warsaw, Poland, over 300 people filled a small university-run club to see exiled electronic duo AIGEL — but few, if any, spoke the language of the song they were eagerly awaiting.

“I must not miss *the* song,” a woman in the crowd tells her friend in Russian as they move away from the dance floor toward the bar.

When the song, “Piyala,” finally starts, the crowd cheers loudly and starts jumping to the beat.

AIGEL made history when “Piyala” (“Glass” in Tatar) [topped](#) several global streaming charts late last year, becoming the first song in the Tatar language to achieve worldwide success.

Initially released in 2020 on the band's fourth studio album of the same name, "Piyala" found renewed popularity when it was featured in the viral Russian TV series "Slovo Patsana," which [dramatizes](#) the republic of Tatarstan's thriving gang culture of the late 1980s.

Its fame has made the AIGEL a household name, sparking mixed reactions among listeners in Russia because of the duo's anti-war stance while also bringing attention to the status of minority languages in the country.

"Ilya and I were watching it happen with a feeling of restrained joy. It's like watching your child conquer new heights, live their own life, [find] their own friends, [their] own listeners," recalls AIGEL's frontwoman, Tatar singer-songwriter Aigel Gaisina.

"There was also this feeling of something like, 'Oh, you've finally listened closely to this one, but we also have other great songs!'" Gaisina's bandmate, music producer Ilya Baramia, adds with a laugh.

The Moscow Times spoke with AIGEL shortly after their Warsaw concert, a stop on their 2024 European and U.S. tour.

Blacklisted by the Russian authorities over their vocal opposition to the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine, the duo now lives and performs abroad, with Gaisina residing in Germany and Baramia in Montenegro.

"Our creative process hasn't changed at all [since we moved]," said Baramia. Before Russia invaded Ukraine, he had been based in St. Petersburg, while Gaisina resided in her native Tatarstan.

"We have a [shared digital] folder with about 40 to 50 beat samples for songs. At some point, Aigel chooses one of them and comes up with a song, then sends the voice [recording] to me and I finish up the music," Baramia explained.

"When the song starts taking shape, we move to sending it back and forth on Telegram," he adds. "We almost always only see each other at our concerts."

Related article: [Viral Russian Gang Drama Revisits the Ultraviolence of 1980s Kazan](#)

Yet their new life abroad has brought at least some changes for the duo, who record songs in Russian, Tatar and English.

At the start of the band's concert in Warsaw, Gaisina surveyed the audience to decide whether to introduce each song in Russian or English.

Only a few raised their hands to indicate that they didn't understand Russian, as most of the audience appeared to be exiles from Russia and Belarus.

"I speak English because no matter how many people in the audience understand Russian, I really want everyone who comes to see us to understand [me], to be on equal terms," Gaisina explains.

“I still burst into [Russian] when I realize that I can’t express certain thoughts in English because my English isn’t that good,” she adds.

“Piyala” was written in Tatar, a Turkic language spoken by Russia’s non-Slavic Indigenous community of the same name. [According](#) to Russian census data, the language has lost 1 million speakers over the past decade.

In an environment where Tatar and other minority and indigenous languages in Russia are being [pushed toward extinction](#) by the Kremlin’s policies of russification, the song’s success has become a political message of its own.

“It’s a *poetic* statement,” Gaisina jokes when asked whether she sees singing in Tatar as a political statement.

Though “Piyala,” a love song, was never intended to carry a political message, its viral success made it a lightning rod for heated debates among the Russian public.

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In February, a Russian propaganda clip featuring a [heavily edited version](#) of the song circulated online. Without the band’s permission, its Tatar lyrics were replaced with Russian-language calls to vote in the presidential election.

Meanwhile in Ukraine, where “Piyala” also topped major song charts, many debated whether it was acceptable to listen to a band from Russia while the Russian army was invading their country.

“I am very pleased to know that people in Ukraine listen to us,” says Gaisina. “We are very grateful because we know how difficult it can be to overcome your loathing of the context and keep an artist who might trigger you in your playlist.”

“Piyala” also caught the attention of Russia’s “patriotic” pro-war circles, according to Gaisina.

“There were a lot of outraged people who found our social media after listening to the song, saw that we are against the war and felt deeply offended,” said Gaisina.

“[These] people, who really didn’t want to face the context [of the war], were forced into it through us. They had to make [an independent] choice in their head whether to listen to this music or not,” she explained. “That’s the power of art that doesn’t intend to manipulate [the people].”

But for Gaisina, the most moving impact of the song’s popularity was an online flashmob by Indigenous groups of Russia who [recorded covers](#) of “Piyala” in their native tongues and posted short clips online. The viral trend then spread across the [former Soviet republics](#) and even led to clips in [Japanese](#) and [Chinese](#).

“That made my heart tremble,” says Gaisina. “I think that turned not exactly into a political statement, but into a movement of cultures that are pushed aside because of small numbers,

but which still exist.”

Though AIGEL’s music — whether intentionally or not — sparks challenging but vital conversations on war and peace and cultural diversity, the duo has few hopes for the future popularity of their music and that of the country they left behind.

“I have a very pessimistic approach to everything and I think that is kind of a protective mechanism. We never expect anything from any material we release,” Gaisina said of “Piyala” at the start of the interview. “It is always a pleasant surprise [when a song of ours gets popular].”

This pessimistic outlook resurfaces as the conversation ends and Gaisina is asked what kind of Russia she would want to come back to.

“I don’t believe that I will come back. I don’t believe that the change I need will happen in the next century. I have no illusions about that,” says Gaisina.

Her fatalistic approach is echoed by Baramia, who appears to balk at the question.

“Oh, I don’t want to come back to any kind of Russia at all!”

AIGEL will kick off its U.S. tour on June 7 in New York City. More information on dates and tickets [here](#).

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