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Russia's Censorship Laws Are Killing Its Pop Culture

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Let's say you decided to become a writer or musician in Russia in 2026. If you hope that your book or album will be accepted by a publisher or label for release, distribution and promotion, the result of your creative work must meet certain criteria.

Taking into account the new laws that came into force on March 1, you should not mention drugs in any form, any relationships other than heterosexual ones, or anything that might discredit "traditional values" or — even more so — the Russian army.

You should not mention "foreign agents" or "undesirable organizations," question the state's version of the history of World War II or equate the U.S.S.R. with the Third Reich, discuss terrorism or suicide, insult representatives of the authorities or religious feelings, or, in principle, touch on the political situation in modern Russia in any way — even if you are a fanatical supporter of President Vladimir Putin's regime, it won't save you.

I would very much like the above to be an exaggeration or a dramatization. But in practice, things are even worse. Firstly, because there are many lesser-known prohibitions, your potential publisher's or label's lawyers are dealing with the same smoke and mirrors as you are. It is no coincidence that the music industry's immediate reaction to the new law banning drug propaganda on the internet was the mass editing of songs on streaming platforms or their removal altogether.

"Justification by the genre" is a boundless territory for interpretation, just like "traditional values," "justification of terrorism" and other abstract repressive categories from Russian legislation. Clearly, the wording of censorship laws results in confused lawyers recommending that equally confused publishers err on the side of caution. And so intimidated publishers, unwilling to pay huge fines or face imprisonment, rush in panic to pre-censor their portfolios and approach future collaborations with extreme caution.

Amid this panic, it is important to acknowledge that this is not merely a matter of temporary inconveniences or concessions, but about the systematic destruction of modern Russian pop culture as we have known it since the early 1990s.

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Let's imagine that Viktor Pelevin were a debut author in 2026, bringing the manuscript of his hallucinogenic magnum opus "Babylon" (also known as "Homo Zapiens" or "Generation P") to a publisher; or that the unknown director Viktor Ginzburg attempted to now adapt it for the screen. Or imagine the band t.A.T.u. deciding to record the hit song "Gay Boy" for their first album, or the debut singer Zemfira wishing to release the song "The Sensors Are Scaling," which begins with the line, "You take drugs."

All of these people would have, without a doubt, soon received rejection letters and, in the best-case scenario, remained underground or emigrated. Try this mental exercise of "fitting" post-Soviet cultural figures whom you consider iconic into the realities of 2026, and you will most likely be horrified. The picture becomes particularly depressing when we consider that, in addition to these mechanical, state-orchestrated factors aimed at halting the cultural process, there are also global ones associated with the tyranny of algorithms, Big Tech, cancel culture and other horsemen of cultural doom.

It would seem that these Western horsemen are precisely the threat to Russian culture and "traditional values" which the State Duma is attempting to protect with repressive laws, but this is an illusion. I was partly susceptible to it myself two years ago when, in an article for Novaya Gazeta, I described the Russian authorities' censorship policy as "neo-Suslovism," referring to the Soviet Ideology Secretary Mikhail Suslov, who thought that no expense should be spared where ideology was concerned.

I was wrong, because there has long been neither dogmatism nor a distinguishable ideology behind the Kremlin's actions. As of 2026, it looks more like a chaotic, largely self-perpetuating campaign to ban everything the government can get its hands on — seemingly for the love of the game — with the targets increasingly (and increasingly absurdly) being either apolitical rappers or openly pro-Kremlin figures, such as the writer Alexander

Prokhanov or the blogger Sergei Markov.

In my opinion, these signs of the deideologization of censorship open up opportunities for protest capable of producing positive results even in the event of practical failure. It is worth noting that this would also serve the purely pragmatic interests of the industry itself, particularly its music segment. Reportedly, against the backdrop of anti-drug censorship, Russians are increasingly buying MP3 players in order to download pirated, authentic versions of tracks and also organizing a virtual funeral for Russian rap. I would venture to suggest that this is only the beginning, and that with the release of the first "post-ban" singles and albums, labels will notice a significant decline in audience interest.

Because, no matter how close modern hip-hop may be to pop music, the protest factor remains an existential element of the genre. Not necessarily political protest, but protest against conformism and law-abiding behavior. Without drugs and rebellion against social norms, hip-hop loses its counterculture identity and becomes pure pop.

An audience that has a competitive alternative in the form of Western hip-hop, as well as a newfound retromania via MP3 players, will most likely simply stop listening to absurdly censored Russian songs with substitutions such as "fracking" instead of "smoking." In that case, labels and artists will inevitably lose money.

The State Duma deputies justify the drug ban with the cliché that they are protecting children. But it's noticeable that publicly questioning whether editing hip-hop tracks beyond all recognition is an effective method of protecting young people from drugs is less controversial than questioning the appropriateness of the law against spreading "fake news" about the Russian army, or any other law restricting free expression in the name of national security.

This, in my opinion, presents an excellent opportunity for collective statements by record companies and artists, for petitions, requests for additional consultations in parliament with industry representatives and other forms of realistic, safe disagreement.

This would not be a suicidal act of political protest or opposition, it would be a neutral call for public discussion.

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Although President Ronald Reagan's United States is difficult to compare with Putin's Russia, the 1980s campaign by the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) can serve as a relevant example for the modern Russian industry. The PMRC was a committee of the wives of U.S. congressmen who united in 1985 over their outrage at the music that American children were listening to. They were particularly concerned about themes of drugs, Satanism and sex in the songs of artists such as Prince, Cyndi Lauper and Madonna.

But in this case, the industry pushed back.

The culmination of the protest by musicians and coalitions of performers, writers and executives was a lengthy Senate hearing, during which Frank Zappa, Dee Snider and John Denver sharply criticized the "Washington wives" for misinterpreting songs and highlighted

the counterproductive nature of censorship, turning transgressive music into a forbidden fruit.

Although the PMRC ultimately achieved its main aim of placing "Parental Advisory" labels on recordings with explicit lyrics, this label gained cult status as a kind of quality mark, and musicians who protested against the PMRC — either in the Senate or through their music — earned additional respect in the eyes of fans.

I have always believed that criticising Russian artists and writers for their silence on the war in Ukraine is a mistake and an impulsive call for senseless sacrifices to the regime. They are powerless to stop the war, but they are able to attempt to defend the already extremely narrow territory of their creative freedom. For example, they could push for the replacement of harsh, punitive censorship with disclaimers on the album cover or an audio notice played before the start of a track.

Even if it sounds like begging a dictator for minimal rights is humiliating, it is still less degrading than censored songs in which "pills" become "beef patties" and "cannabis" turns into "kebab."

This is not ironic, but pathetic — and not so much because it shatters the entire countercultural myth of rap nonconformity, but because the artists and record labels have done absolutely nothing to even attempt to protect their work from the censor's knife.

In that case, fans themselves will protest against this business-as-usual mentality, continuing the mass purchase of old iPods for the illegal downloading of unmutilated music. After all, if there is one right still respected in Russia, it is the right to piracy.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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