Rock star Yuri Shevchuk imagines an anti-nationalist Russian democracy

The performances of his band, DDT, are like teach-ins.

by Amy Frykholm in the September 9, 2020 issue

Yuri Shevchuk and DDT in Toronto in 2013 (Photo by Sergei Mutovkin via Creative Commons license)

With American democracy quaking under what feels like new assaults daily, it may be a strange time to ask this question: What will it take to build democracy in Russia? Both our own democracy and our attempts to export it have had mixed results. Yet now, as we confront some of the most profound and difficult questions in our society, might be a moment to learn from the trials and errors of others.

I have found myself turning to an icon of Russian rock for inspiration. His name is Yuri Shevchuk, and he is Russia's equivalent of Bono, without Bono's corporate sheen. Since the early 1980s, Shevchuk has been probing the possibility of Russian

democracy.

In Eastern Europe, rock music has a history as a provocateur of democracy. Because during Soviet times rock was considered a “noxious form of capitalistic decadence,” in Ian Buruma’s words, it was frequently banned—and the music went underground. There it formed itself into a voice of defiance, a cry for help, and what music critic Jon Pareles calls a “token of freedom.”

In Russia, one of the bands that formed underground was called DDT. Shevchuk was the lead singer and primary songwriter. In the intervening decades, he has become a major figure—perhaps the major figure—of Russian music. His songs are about the relationship between Russian society and freedom, about both spiritual and political liberation, and about how to create a new Russia out of the ashes of the Soviet Union.

Democracy in Russia is fraught with particular problems not found in the US context. In the summer of 1999, I was in St. Petersburg studying Russian at a language school. One of my professors—a delightful, hilarious, insightful man—shocked me by saying that he opposed democratic reforms in Russia. Russians just aren’t ready for democracy, he said. Democracy in Russia is tantamount to chaos. That’s why we need a strong leader like Vladimir Putin, he added.

I was confused. In my mind, all delightful, hilarious, and insightful people had to support democratic reforms. How could it be otherwise? And no insightful person would throw his weight behind Putin, a thug and an autocrat if there ever was one.

That same summer, I sat down with a woman who as a young girl had lived through the siege of Leningrad in 1944. Her memory of it was vivid. She walked me through the siege almost a day at a time, telling me how her family had survived that traumatic experience.

I came to understand these two perspectives as related. In the time since I first visited Russia as a college student in 1991, the year that the Soviet Union fell apart, I have heard story after story of personal and collective trauma. I met a man who had returned from Stalin’s gulags only to find every member of his family dead. I met victims of rape, war, betrayal, and starvation. There is no family in Russia untouched by the waves of trauma that have washed over that country. When my professor spoke of democracy as chaos, he was speaking not as an enemy of freedom but as a survivor of trauma looking for a way to move forward without

adding to the pain of the next generation.

This collective trauma is democracy's worst enemy. Traumatized people live in a mode of hyperalertness. They turn away from one another. "On the societal level," Sean Guillory writes of Russia in the *New Republic*, "this results from an event that shatters the bonds of social life and damages the sense of community."

One could argue, and some commentators do, that Putin has attempted to re-create that sense of community identity through patriotism and national pride. His annexation of Crimea and his wars in eastern Ukraine, south Ossetia, and elsewhere are aimed at the reassertion of a Russian empire. They are meant to build Russian pride. But his methods have in fact only visited more trauma on the people—through oppression and violence. Putin's regime has combined the worst of authoritarianism with the worst of a kleptocratic capitalism. It would be hard to argue that during Putin's regime any healing of the national psyche has taken place.

National healing, whether in the United States or in Russia, has to happen through democracy. This is because, as we have seen in our own country, authoritarian forms of power do not bring peace. They only perpetuate violence. Is there a path forward for democracy in Russia, or is it a hopeless ideal, the realm of a few scraggly activists who risk their lives for something that can never be? Could democracy be a force for good, a force for healing? Or would it only lead to more trauma? Is there a form of democracy that could be built within Russia that would be particular to Russian society but would begin to heal national and collective wounds?

Enter DDT. Shevchuk and DDT made their mark by creating mass spectacles that mixed Shevchuk's poetry with political commentary, sharp-edged musical numbers, and ecstatic dancing. I first heard Shevchuk's gravelly voice on a cassette tape in 1993, when I was teaching English in Tallinn, Estonia. One of my Russian-speaking students from the Mari El Republic—not far from Shevchuk's own home republic, Bashkortostan—made a copy of the tape for me in the music library, and I carried it back to South Dakota. For years, I listened to this tape in my car, singing along to songs like "Rodina" (Homeland) and "V Eto" (In this)—songs about the complexity of Russian identity, about military conflict in Central Asia and Afghanistan, about what it means to have a homeland with such a painful history:

Even though the songs were in Russian, I found them expressive of my own experience as an American—someone whose people have gotten caught in never-

ending wars that have not furthered the cause of freedom as we had been told, and yet our hopes for a freer, better, and more equal society have not died.

In “V Eto,” Shevchuk sings about the remnants of the Soviet war in Afghanistan:

> Here lies my brother,
> And I observe
> The birch trees
> Growing from his chest.
>
> Even though my enemies rot,
> And my friends betray me.
> I will live on.
> I will move on.

It is hard to render the emotional content of these lines in English. At DDT concerts with thousands of people singing them at the top of their voice, the meaning deepens still more. The work of DDT and Shevchuk has seemed to me to be about forming the new democratic Russian society—not through ideology but through feeling.

DDT’s work is about forming a new, democratic society—through feeling, not ideology.

Democracy has to be trained. It has to be inhabited. For Shevchuk, the language and passion of rock music is that training ground. Shevchuk saw that Russia’s own form of democracy would have to come from within. It would have to be uniquely Russian, and music could help to shape that identity and the self-understanding that might, eventually, lead to political freedom.

But what would the new, democratic Russian person look like? How would he or she behave? How would society or culture be different when democracy had taken hold? Much of DDT’s music has been in protest mode, as the band has shone a light on the political evils of living in an oppressive system. But in a music video from DDT’s latest album, I believe we catch a glimpse of the positive side of the equation. In Shevchuk’s imagination, the new Russian democratic person is young. He is unafraid, unflinching—and yet he is also utterly normal. He isn’t a hero of the battlefield; he is not a mega-millionaire or a celebrity. He’s just a guy getting on a

bus.

The music video for the song “Lyubov ne propala” (Love hasn’t vanished) begins with one of the most basic absurdities of contemporary Russian life:

In the opening scene, a man dressed in a tiger suit hands out advertisements on the street. This is a common sight: grown people dressed in ridiculous costumes trying to attract attention from indifferent passersby for products that no one wants. It is an emblem of a failed capitalism, full of false promises and cheap hopes.

Each time you pass one of these people standing on the street corners of Russia’s cities, it feels like a moral dilemma. You have no interest in what they are hawking, and yet in front of you is a human being who would not be doing this if he had any other viable options. How should you handle the interaction? Should you pause and acknowledge the person? Should you take what he is giving just to be nice, even if you are going to throw it away two steps later?

This is the dilemma of a young man, the soon-to-be main character of the music video, who is walking toward the guy in the tiger suit. He smiles broadly and warmly, reaches out as if to shake the man’s hand, and then accepts the advertisement. It’s a curious moment, not at all endemic of contemporary Russian street life. The young man seems to have about him an inner freedom, a fearlessness, a warmth that is unusual. He makes a genuine connection, and the man in the tiger suit responds with a surprised, “Thank you.”

Ahead of him, the young man sees that the bus he wants to get on is pulling away. He dashes toward it and stumbles onto it, while his fellow travelers glance up coldly from their phones. We are back in the old Russia, the one that feigns utter indifference to social life and common spaces, where people live in fear and ignorance of one another. The young man composes his face into the acceptable public scowl.

But we already know this isn’t the real man. What has created this fuller human being, this vision of healing, whom we have glimpsed for a brief moment? It has not been Putin, with his visions of a lost Russian grandeur that can only be reclaimed by violence. This man’s sense of inner freedom and interconnected humanity has been created by music. Our hero puts on his headphones, and the song begins, “Love

hasn’t vanished.” His face responds instinctively, without guile, to Shevchuk’s voice and to the music.

He begins to mouth the words just as a young woman gets on the bus, puts on her headphones, and also begins to sing the same words to the same song. Across the crowded bus, the two of them pantomime the words to the song. It feels almost like a moment from the film *La La Land*. It’s endearing; it’s also so sentimental you want to blush. With all the experimentation that DDT has done over its career—with rock, punk, heavy metal, Russian folk music, and more—this is the band’s first experiment with straightforward pop music, and the lighthearted goofiness of it seems to contain a little irony.

After we understand that the man and woman have fallen in love, the video cuts away to a more standard DDT moment: a massive concert, at which the two young people dance with thousands of others to the rousing chorus of the song:

> Love hasn’t vanished.
> Love hasn’t vanished.
> It’s a little tired
> Yes, a little tired.
> But love hasn’t vanished.
>
> The moments are in our hands
> They are following us with their eyes.
> Those who come after us.
> Those who dance after us.

The dancers dance simultaneously as individuals and as one. They sing the same words in their own voices. Since the early 1990s, DDT’s performances have had this flavor, as if they were teach-ins for what it might mean to be both united and free.

This translation of Shevchuk’s music—all of its familiar images and themes, including prayer and the fate of the nation and the preponderance of rain in the Russian landscape—into a popular idiom might be a result of this sense of running out of time to get his message across to “those who dance after us.” Shevchuk is reaching the end of his career. He will not necessarily be the one to teach the next generation of dancers. Have they learned enough?

There are a few more moments in the music video that are worth our attention. One focuses on the bus driver, a Central Asian man who at a stoplight is scrolling on his phone, looking at photographs of a woman and a child. These loved ones are clearly far away. The bus driver begins to sing a different song—a song in another language—while for a moment “Love hasn’t vanished” recedes into the background. Few people in contemporary Russia are more degraded, more disparaged, more ignored than the many Central Asian immigrants who have come to Russia’s cities looking for economic opportunities. Shevchuk pauses in his rousing anthem of the future to include the humanity of those who live on the edge. But his gesture is more than this. He also acknowledges that a language other than Russian might express their version of love, and this is included as well. Shevchuk’s version of democracy might be peculiarly Russian, but it will never be nationalist.

As if to point out the song’s implications, but with a tongue-in-cheek sentimentality, the video now shows what people on the bus are looking at on their phones. There are videos of people helping each other, saving stranded puppies, and finding lost children. It is as if all of these people, who on the surface look so stern and so disconnected, are in fact sharing the same dream in which love hasn’t vanished. One might even say it is a democratic dream of shared purpose and mutual care—a different democracy than the one of cheap capitalism, political chaos, and kleptocracy that has plagued Russia since the end of the Soviet Union, the reason people like my professor lost faith in it.

At the end of the video, as people file off the bus, we see Shevchuk—who has, we can imagine, been sitting on the bus the whole time. Unlike all of the people who have filed off, he is not holding a phone. He has been reading a book. He is a completely ordinary middle-aged man, balding and a little gray in the beard. He is no celebrity, and whatever he is looking for, it isn’t fame and fortune. At first he looks at the camera incredulously, like he doesn’t think the audience is going to get it and he can’t believe the camera has followed him here. He rolls his eyes. Then he breaks into a magnetic, mischievous, and utterly kind smile, a smile that breaks down generational, cultural, and political barriers, a smile that beckons the future.

His smile seems to say, “Let’s keep this simple. Look at who you are. Look at your humanity and the humanity of those around you. That’s what love is. That’s what the future is and where democracy lies. It belongs to you. I might be a little tired, but you are going to keep dancing.”

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