The Post-Soviet Digital Story of INRUSSIA.com:
Alternativity, Soviet Nostalgia, and Transcultural Belonging in a Moscow Underground's Online Platform

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ABSTRACT

The Post-Soviet Digital Story of INRUSSIA.com:
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Dariya Vzorov

An account of an informal post-Soviet sociality and transcultural group identity of Russian creative youth emerging in and around INRUSSIA.com, an English-language online publication based in Moscow as of 2016. Survey of cultural politics and economic development in contemporary Russia given the conditions of a media platform's production. The complexity of (sub)cultural becoming in a (post)socialist context is addressed given the vexed relationships between creative classes, countercultural forces, and economic elites in the country. New methodologies are used to study online spaces, uncommon to research in Anglophone cultural studies. The textual and visual analysis of an active digital archive is contextualized by ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. The analyses of cultural dynamics, political, and economic conflict (i.e. Euromaidan crisis), posits INRUSSIA.com as a contested political site, constituting a cultural "alternative" crucial to local neoliberalizing and gentrifying processes. Emergent cultural politics of an underground arts scene in Russia, on/offline, express marginal and alternative aspects. A nuanced engagement with Soviet past, genealogy of electronic music, queer performance, and combative geopolitics, fore-front regional arts collectives formed across the class and ethnic lines of the ex-Soviet bloc. An overlooked community's contradictory alignment with the values of mainstream official policies in Russia, such as neo-nationalism post-Crimean referendum, underscores neoliberal ideologies and privatization practices, upheld by the oligarch funding sources leading cultural assemblages in Russia today. INRUSSIA.com, born of informal practices, is a part of the country's economic formalization, attending to the state of amateur creative entrepreneurship in an alternative cultural scene in Moscow. A broad take on cultural transformations in and around Moscow via a specific case tackles pressing concerns in media studies: regional and global approaches, formal and informal cultural economies, creative industries, digital media objects, and methods of analysis in cultural studies – responding to the absence of English-language scholarship on contemporary Russian media and culture.

Dedicated to:

my Moscow friends and family

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Introduction......1-6

Section 1: General Description of "Online Publication" 7

Section 2: Claims – why INRUSSIA.com? 15

Section 3: INRUSSIA.com's Emergent Community 18

Section 4: Pre-history & Context At Large: *Soviet Collapse & Arrival of Neoliberalism* 25

Section 5: INRUSSIA.com's Background & Beginnings......34

Section 6: Euromaidan: *Turning Point in Cultural Becoming* 39

Section 7: INRUSSIA.com with Gosha Rubchinskiy: *Soviet Counterculture & Russian Queerness* 48

Section 8: "Post-Soviet" Ideal & Forging of Transcultural Solidarity 56

Section 9: Electronica as Pillar of Moscow Underground......64

Conclusion:......69

Works Cited: 75-80

Body of Thesis

The Post-Soviet Digital Story:
Alternativity, Soviet Nostalgia, and Transcultural Belonging
In a Moscow Underground's Online Platform

Introduction:

In late 2013, a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest erupted in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, becoming known as the crisis of Euromaidan. The revolt was committed to cutting Ukraine from its entrenched cultural-historical tie to Russia and was exercised through a territorial tug-of-war over the republic of Crimea. These events were an attempt to sever relations between Ukrainian and Russian nation-states, while industries, variances of cultural production, and relationalities between the people of either country had been deeply entangled for centuries. The Crimean referendum marks a time that revived Russia's isolationism in the world due to an expanding domestic authoritarian agenda, in parts a response to the March 2014 sanctions that the U.S., EU, and Canada imposed on the country. This crisis of the Crimean referendum, or Euromaidan, has made a sweeping impact on international political culture. Its capacity, however, in shaping contemporary cultural perceptions among and beyond Russia's informal creative class has rarely been discussed as of yet. How does one study the formation and expression of such culturally specific perceptions?

Destabilized by the crisis and wedged under the pressures of the globalizing West as well as the nationalist hold of Vladimir Putin's Russia, emerges a new informal youth culture in Moscow. While the Soviet Union's precarious post-socialist transition to Russia's free market in the early 1990s was of grave impact on the unofficial creative group, it was after the events of 2014 that underground collectives found it urgent to come together and unite artists disbanded by the geopolitical circumstances through creative new media collaborations that serve the articulation of a new group identity. This thesis stations the overall increase in the West's rejection within the continued influx of Western commercial and cultural imports, and the ex-Soviet bloc's further divide as the drive informing alternative creative production in Moscow, made visible on digital media platforms and imbued with contending ideologies. The resultant alternativity is defined by its means of creating a counter-narrative of Russianness

for the West, embedded in neoliberal formats, and subverting Soviet legacies while operating within a dominantly nationalist climate. How can we better understand informal post-Soviet sociality beyond residual Red Scare mentalities?

By delineating this context, the sets of combatting ideologies apparent within the form and content of the creative class' digital craftwork can be isolated. Studying the creative production of a Moscow-based online platform, presented in the English language and with aims to introduce outsiders to the contemporary Russian underground, becomes a documentary object that reveals the forging of a transcultural group identity, the drive for Western legitimacy, and teetering relationship to state-prompted Soviet nostalgia in a conservative Russia.

Position in Academic Discourse:

To place the following thesis in lieu of the latest discourse in Film Studies, Cultural Studies, and Digital Media — I introduce my theoretical springboard by briefing a selection of foundational works. The compilation of essays in *Asian Video Cultures,* edited by Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar, models the juncture in which my research takes shape: non-Western media practices in conversation with expressions of digital cultures, considered through a range of disciplinary concepts on social movements, market economies, and local popular cultures (Bhashkar and Neves).

The sets of works in the volume confront notions of the Global South's experience of global media as well as Euro-American media's impact on our understanding of Asia, from the unequal technological exchanges of capital flow in Marc Steinberg's study of platform imperialism via Japanese video apparatus Niconico, to Michelle Cho's look at K-pop video/performance culture and its cosmopolitics (global consumption of a cosmopolitan fantasy) (Bhashkar and Neves 2, 240). Similar to the type of examples the volume includes, this thesis addresses a specific case of an emerging informal digital culture that problematizes the precedence of "idealized [...] experiences in northern metropolitan cultures" within the parameters of Anglophone media studies (16).

As the book does, my research picks at the evolving center point of contemporary global media, comparably furthering dialogue around non-Western media beyond static East-West binaries and imaginaries enduring past Cold War dynamics. However, in one aspect, my research punctuates a position outside the examples of new media in the Global South of

Asian video cultures. While it does look at a digital (sub)culture's nuance as caught between the West's globalized media flows and Russia's nationalist ones, it challenges the binary of Global North versus South, a world ordering that overtook the forgone First, Second, versus Third World segmentations in bloc politics, by considering global difference since then (Müller 1-2). This research lands itself in the Global "East," a context that "occupies an interstitial position between the North and South" (Müller 1). The work itself complicates the geopolitics in knowledge production, which excludes a Global East, by articulating its cultural specificity relative to grander notions of globality.

The next instance tackles a similar geopolitical zone to my research – regions marked by a state of post-socialism – as done in media scholar Aniko Imre's work: *Identity Games* (2009). In light of media globalization, Imre looks at the formation of marginal cultural identities within post-socialist states. She examines everything from Roma racial politics on ethnic entertainment platforms and their own DIY media creations, to Balkans masculinity wars in online games, and lesbian video collectives in Hungary. She rightfully upholds the ill-equipped nature of traditional ethnography and other social science methods in adequately considering the political and social role of mediated fantasies for discussing post–Cold War transformations of ethnicity, an interdisciplinary approach of dire importance to my research (Imre 128). While employing a kindred methodology and study of mediums as is the case for this thesis, to examine hybrid media phenomena and their relevant popular versus peripheral cultures, her work takes on a much wider scope of examples, both in media techniques and national cultures, to demonstrate her point. While an indispensable survey, this thesis differentiates itself in the way that it anchors the method into a tighter analytic that delves deeper into a given example, exposing the nuance and detail within a distinct case study and its stakes. Furthermore, as Imre engages with the way Eastern European media plays a role in forming post-communist national cultures along the same timeline I set up (the accelerated transition from late communism to late capitalism), I add the recent crisis of the Crimean Referendum as another transitional moment that bolsters the socio-cultural and political temporality under question. I also reposition Imre's directionality between media and culture by considering how a subculture *redefines* the function of media.

This ties into the next pivotal work worth highlighting, *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States* (Rutten, Ellen, et al.), which tends to a similar relationship between new media and the question of (national) identity building within the same contexts,

yet more relevant to the aftermath of Euromaidan and the Crimean Referendum. This example speaks to the redirection I propose to Imre's angle on media as a means of culture, seeing as these scholars imagine new media platforms as commemorative tools for national identity construction. I develop this point regarding the case study of INRUSSIA.com's platform as a fruitful site upon which political or apolitical stances and their representations are negotiated. My research props up an online publication within comparable parameters: the articulations of group identity and transcultural belonging via platform activity.

Otherwise, recent work in Cultural Studies conducted at the Aleksanteri Institute in the University of Helsinki also takes on a narrower use of examples in methods of media analysis *or* ethnography in order to study either cultural institutions or creative entrepreneurship in Russia. This is perhaps given the shorter format allotted for academic articles, but it is included here due to sparse scholarship on said research topic. Saara Ratilainen's article "Digital media and cultural institutions in Russia" versus Olga Gurova and Daria Morozova's article "Creative precarity? Young fashion designers as entrepreneurs in Russia," respectively, align their research to either media formations or domestic class politics. The following thesis employs *both* methods. Combining the approach used in each article, I study both the specificity of social, creative class policies and local entrepreneurship as done in Gurova and Morozova's piece (through interviews with culturally-specific figures, embedded within larger socio-political discourse) and Ratilainen's use of digital media as an instrument for understanding the formation of contemporary cultural institutions, to regard Russian lifestyle publications and the character of digital media as a cultural platform.

In terms of the distinct subcultural community under question as well as the sets of methods and threads in analysis, the most influential research springs off of comparative cultural anthropologist Alexei Yurchak's works. His research concentrates on the formation of post-socialist identities and their subject positions in line with the forces of globalization (business, mass media communication, transportation), given their place within and response to social processes of local domination/resistance, in the face of shifting national divisions and newfound transcultural unifications. These concerns are substantial to my thesis research, as is Yurchak's survey of agency and its interplay with the expression of power dynamics in varying discourse.

However, I extend the scope of his historical temporality, which centers on the gradual transformation of the Soviet society during late socialism (1960s-1980s). As Yurchak identifies

the conditions produced by perestroika and the transformative impact of the Soviet system's ultimate collapse in 1991, I use these conditions as the starting points from which the contemporary, informal creative class in Moscow comes forth. In an analogous mode of research – based on detailed ethnographic fieldwork, like semi-structured interviews and participant observation – instead of Yurchak's critical analysis of linguistic practices, I regard the symbolic language of digital media, its aesthetic, form, and inherent industrial infrastructure. The digital linguistics of creative production within the new formats of online platforms, and especially in regard to the more recent context of Euromaidan, extends the research grounds under such post-socialist group formations. It also enriches these concepts through contemporary formulations of creative media, by considering the mediums of music, fashion, videography, and rave culture as merged upon the digital. My research speaks directly to the work Yurchak is currently developing on the advent of post-Soviet "entrepreneurial" identity, and the growth of private business spheres in Russia ("Alexei Yurchak").

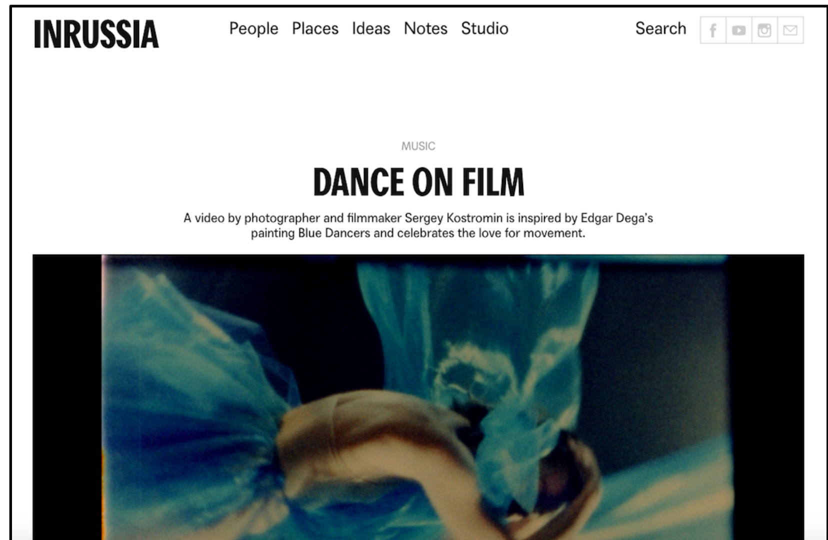
Lastly, recent theory by Neda Atanasoskia and Kalindi Vorab in *Social Identities* (the Journal for the Study of Race, Nation, and Culture), developed for their article "Postsocialist politics and the ends of revolution" (2016), conceptualizes "postsocialism" as an analytic that repositions the legacy of the capitalist-socialist dynamic in order to repair the reductive treatment of political action, in such contexts, which deems that collective action must be militant and wholly resistant in order to be considered politically useful or revolutionary. The following thesis research provides an explicit example of this proposed analytic and takes it further. Atanasoskia and Vorab claim postsocialism must be considered a queer temporality that opens a space in which ongoing experiences of socialist legacies are processed. We will come to see that the case study of INRUSSIA.com's digital platform enacts a queer temporality and queering of socialist legacy through its aesthetic language, organization, content selection, and production practices.

Such theory stresses the need to pluralize postsocialism as a method, which is exactly what this thesis illustrates: current practices, imaginaries, and actions that enact political change on a range of local, state, and transnational scales, even if not in the form of idealized activist work or a standard model of dissidence (that opposes state- and corporate-based military, economic, and cultural expansionism). Given the sets of contextual circumstances surrounding the community, the case study of this thesis disrupts the false historical binary of

“post”-socialism that delimits socialism and capitalism as singular visions amidst monolithic political systems. The geopolitical climate of the informal Moscow scene and the contending ideologies in their digital aesthetics disclose neoliberal influence and nationalist re-imaginings. Furthermore, their creative production performs a queering of Soviet symbology in its reactive counter-narrative to the West. Therefore, even if not explicitly political, the Moscow arts scene’s practices on an online publication can be considered a real case of empowerment in the process of articulating group agency. This thesis presents a new and non-universal form of collective action. Modified through the particular sets of economic and social relations, the collective capitalizes on their Soviet legacy, within a neoliberal paradigm, in the name of Western visibility and domestic differentiation.

Section 1: General Description of the "Online Publication" or the Digital Platform of INRUSSIA.com

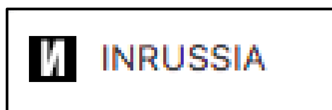
Upon accessing INRUSSIA.com, "an alternative guide to the Russian World," the user meets a plain white interface coded with simple black titles and high-resolution images. Centered on the homepage and under a sequence of descriptors, a wide-scale image takes up the immediate screen, previewing the website's headlining project. Above the vivid, foregrounded image, a "tag" details the piece's general category, that of "Music," under which a bold, capitalized title reads "DANCE ON FILM," and a caption briefing the project:



"a video by photographer and filmmaker Sergey Kostromin is inspired by Edgar Degas' painting Blue Dancers and celebrates the love for movement." The impression of the website's design and tone is sleek, minimal, and digitally-savvy.

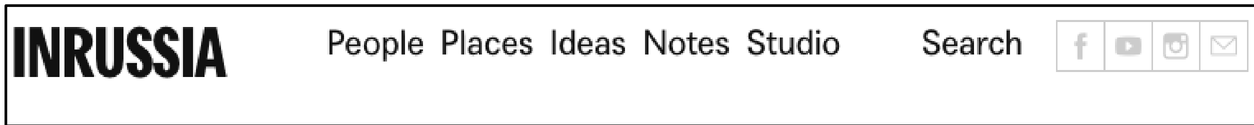
The banner, as a header in the interface, with the publication's title "INRUSSIA" on the far left, bolded and in the largest font. In the website's *logo*, I**И**RUSSIA's English letter N is inverted as the Russian letter И – an aesthetic riddle exoticizing the Cyrillic alphabet, with the Russian letter merging both fluidly and performatively in its English form. While the logo design features the inverse N or Russian letter И, by linguistic standards in internet coding, the URL and proceeding mentions of the website's title are only with the English letter: I**N**RUSSIA.com.

The title on the far left is accompanied by five secondary titles in smaller font,



referencing the website's general categories or sections: *People*, *Places*, *Ideas*, *Notes*, *Studio*. The banner's right corner encases a "Search" function (detailed in the same font and size as the section titles), followed by four boxed symbols or sheer grey buttons linking the user to INRUSSIA.com's other platforms or editions of itself. The recognizable icons connect

the site to its Facebook page, YouTube channel, Instagram profile, and email newsletter subscription.



This is the immediate experience a web user may have navigating INRUSSIA.com – an English language, Russia-based platform and/or online journal, founded in late 2016, which seeks to introduce outsiders to the past and present of Russian culture. Before diving deeper into the inherent discourse and analytics, let's survey the rest of the website's self-presentation.

Scrolling past the headlined project, the user sees two embedded columns with a set of project previews, formatted in half the size and organized in the same "categorical" format: tag, project title, caption, and image, from top to bottom. The title of the project is in the largest, boldest font while the caption features a smaller text, unbolded. The grey "Category" title is semi-transparent and while its font is the smallest, the letters are all capitalized. The tag's symbolic function is both muted and structurally overarching: The lighter font backgrounds the tag's prevalence (permitting its vagueness), yet its top-ranked placement and capitalization affixes proceeding information to its categorical umbrella. Before immersing into the content and its meaning, the varied amounts of art or culture-related classifications stand out. This impels the user to click anywhere their interest leads across the page, through titles and tags they find familiar or enticing enough to pursue.

Such categories are at times hard to decipher. For example, for the month of October 2019, the left column of INRUSSIA.com presents a new project titled "Sounds of Fall" under the *tag* "People" with the brief description: "Nikolay Kozlov is a young musician from Samara. He recorded a mix which includes some of his favorite ambient music," stationed above a high-resolution image of a lone figure traversing the frozen, industrial shore of Samara's Volga river. Strangely, while the project's caption tells of a *musician's electronic mix*, it is *tagged* under "People" rather than "Music." Similarly, while the headlining project describes a *photographer's dance film*, it is tagged under "Music," rather than "Arts" and/or "Cinema."

Furthermore, given the fact that the dance video is made by a popular figure of the Moscow underground, photographer Sergey Kostromin, it could be tagged as "People," but it is not. Later, however, we see that the project is placed *within* the "People" *section*, even if

tagged under the “Music” label. Now, the project adjacent to “Sounds of Fall” is titled “Notes on Childhood” and is tagged under the category of “Fashion,” captioned: “A.D.E.D. celebrates the launch of their new capsule collection with a short film, photographs, and texts by various artists, photographers, and writers” (INRUSSIA.com). The “Notes on Childhood” title and caption is followed by a staged photograph of an elementary school’s annual class picture. Seeing as A.D.E.D. (All Day Every Day) is a lifestyle brand, graffiti collective, and streetwear label, the “Fashion” tag can seem limiting for a project that includes a variety of people and videographic initiatives.

The website does not divide its content explicitly by date, i.e., “the latest” or “archival,” nor by type, i.e., essay, guide, photo-zine, video, nor by a fixed, distinct classification of topics. At first glance, the categories seem to be arranged in either an ad hoc fashion or due to a technical glitch. Navigating the website further, instead of attributing the disarranged categories to a technological lapse, or a method of mislabeling and or inconsistent filing, another digital sense emerges. The adept techno-digital design and videographic functionality of the website elides technological incompetence. The messy yet intricately intersecting streams of data flow across projects, sections, and their types of categorical relevance together shape out to be a more complicated production of screen-content, one imbued in cultural and ideological conflict. While the tagging practice on the site does seem to be a performative labelling mechanism and after-thought, the overarching section segmentations have more concrete functions in meaning.

At the bottom of the homepage, before reaching the footer built into the website's overall structural interface, bold grey lettering reads: "*categories*: MUSIC, THINGS, ARCHITECTURE, BOOKS, FASHION, NATURE, TECH, YOUTH, HISTORY CINEMA, TRAVEL, ARTS, SPORTS, VIDEO." The categories are listed in sentence form, one after another, and link to the tags used. While these sub-categories or sub-sections could better specify and correspond to the upper banner's sections, instead they seem to be haphazard tags on a plethora of contemporary cultural topics, and it is unclear as to which broader section title they best fit under. In the browser's footer, a sentence summarizes INRUSSIA.com as composed of "original videos and texts on contemporary culture and life, collected and produced in collaboration with leading media, cultural institutions, partner companies, and creative communities." Perhaps due to the overtness of the website's title, INRUSSIA.com's blanket descriptor does not explicitly specify which cultural geography it refers to nor does it detail where the platform and its workers are based.

CATEGORIES: MUSIC, THINGS, ARCHITECTURE, BOOKS, FASHION, NATURE, TECH, YOUTH, HISTORY, CINEMA, TRAVEL, ARTS, SPORTS, VIDEO

INRUSSIA. Original videos and texts on contemporary culture and life, collected and produced in collaboration with leading media, cultural institutions, partner companies, and creative communities.

Newsletter

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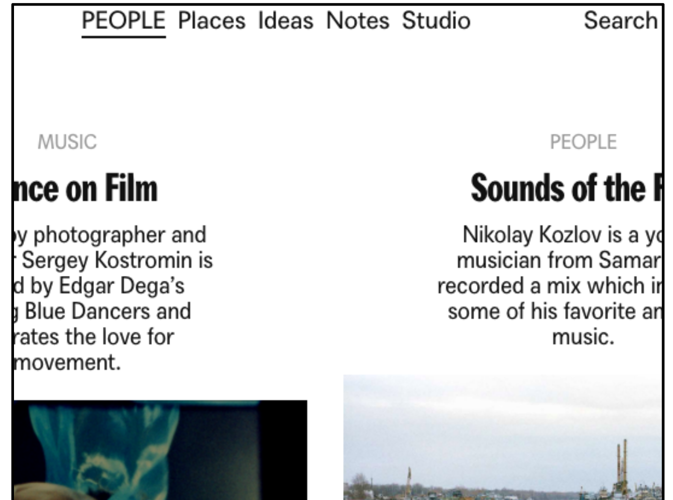
ABOUT CONTRIBUTORS FACEBOOK YOUTUBE

INSTAGRAM VKONTAKTE SOUNDCLOUD TWITTER

PEOPLE PLACES IDEAS NOTES STUDIO

By clicking on the "People" category atop the homepage banner, the user arrives at an interface with two columns of project previews, arranged in a similar method as in the lower half of the introductory interface. Here, the first three projects, now all under the larger umbrella of the "People" category, are the same three we encountered on the homepage. While *in* the "People" section, the "Dance on Film" preview is still tagged under "Music," "Sounds of Fall" under "People," and "Notes on Childhood" under "Fashion." The fourth

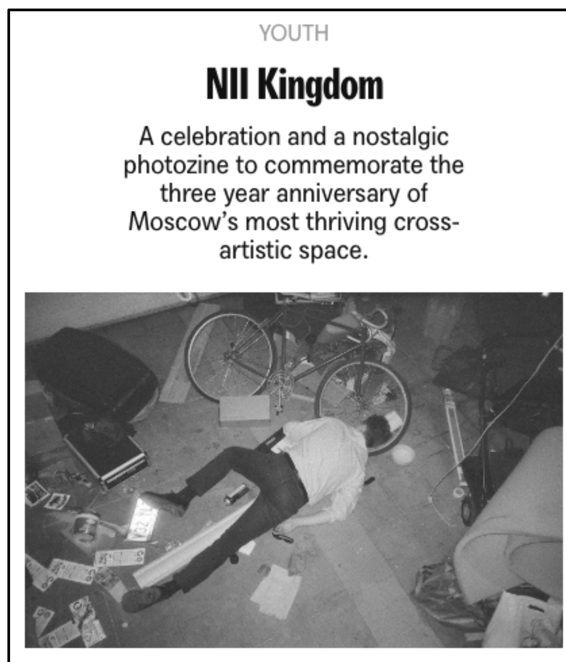
project, on the left side of "Notes on Childhood" upon the "People" page, is titled "Sound Legacy Makeover" and is tagged under "Tech." Like "Music" and "Fashion," "Tech" is another sub-category not listed in the homepage's upper index. In a simple way, this makes sense – there seem to be several subcategories that fit into larger categories in which the most recent projects, irrespective of their category, are ordered first.



However, after clicking the second main categorical section of the website, "Places," the user finds themselves on a page with new projects, not seen in the "People" category. The first project featured, "The Blackout," is tagged under the same title as the overarching category, "Places," with the caption: "Photographer Ilya Batrakov looks back on his journey to the Crimean Peninsula as it plunged into darkness." The following project is tagged under the subcategory of "Sports" and is titled "Skiing in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia." While the sports-tag clearly refers to the project's skiing component, the placement under the "Places" category is also logical as it covers an "ethnographic adventure through the Northern Caucasus." The next two projects stay loyal to the larger category at hand, one featuring a photo-story on Soviet dachas[1] and the other, a meditative hike through Kamchatka's desolate expanses. On the other hand, the preliminary "People" section includes, in its first page of project previews, a photo-zine titled "NII KINGDOM" commemorating the three-year anniversary of a Moscow underground hot-spot and "thriving cross-artistic space" – one integral to this thesis. While explicitly denoting a project on a place, the preview is placed in the "People" category and tagged under the "Youth" subcategory. This, as we will come to see, speaks more to the cultural value of such a place, rather than defining it relative to its apparent, physical denotation.

[1] English phonetics of the Russian word: a country house or cottage in the outskirts of a city, typically used as a second or vacation home.

A few through lines can be deduced: the categories are flexible and cross-connected. This is perhaps more intentional than not, as well as necessary, given the several intersections of figures, institutions, and collectives on the platform. For instance, the units or figures of *NII*, *Dance on Film's* Sergey Kostromin, as well as A.D.E.D. each prominently constitute the subcultural community in question. Regardless of the nature of their subsequent projects, they are bunched into the frontmost category of "People" and are projects to be thought of primarily in that way, as a part of the crowd and or scene surrounding and undergirding INRUSSIA.com. "Places," however, feature more strictly place-related stories, touching upon "exotic" faraway regions and forgotten landscapes from troubled ex-Soviet backgrounds. Otherwise, the third major category of "Ideas" includes projects on a random range of topics: a travelling exhibition on post-Soviet landscape, an interview with a curator from the V-A-C foundation's latest project, a film critic's contextualization of the late iconic filmmaker Aleksei Balabanov, a producer's music research on 20th century immigrant diasporas, a historian tracing the trajectory of Russian cosmism, and a book review on the art of literary translation and the preservation of idiosyncrasies.



Before interpreting further meaning from these projects and their categories, relative to the website as a whole as well as its context, the last two major sections should be regarded: "Notes" and "Studio." Fittingly, the first four project previews on the "Notes" page are sub-categorized under "Music." The first is of a publicity project announcing skate-brand RASSVET's new record drop[2], which is followed by a review of X.Y.R.'s (Xram Yedinennogo Razmuwlenuja) latest mixtape. The third project in "Notes" is of St. Petersburg-based DJ Flaty's reinterpretation of "electronic classics," and the fourth covers *Margenrot,* a solo project of Moscow-based musician and former post-punk keyboardist of Fanny Kaplan, Luisa

[2] a collective founded by Gosha Rubchinskiy, streetwear designer and the most visible figure emerging from the Russian underground, further detailed in *Section 3*

Kazaryan-Topchyan, and her release of a new eclectic personal podcast, meant to be a prelude to a debut album release.

While projects listed on the site are both recycled and updated sporadically, currently the "Notes" section houses mostly music-related projects. Although I argue that the electronica scene is a leading component in shaping the Moscow underground (its aesthetic, technical form, etc.) as is its preceding Soviet influence of post-punk music in the 1980s, *INRUSSIA.com* seems to camouflage or generalize its essential musical underpinning within the "Notes" section. However, the category of "Notes," in its functional representation of the title – its open-ended tag-use and clippings of content – reflects the overall form descriptive of the website's media landscape.

Although INRUSSIA.com's founder, Shakri Amirkhanova, refers to the website as an "online publication" in an interview, one's experience in navigating its interface garners a more nuanced verdict. Through the sociocultural digital-media technique of the "walkthrough method" (Light, Burgess, et. al 1), it becomes apparent that the function and format of the digital platform complicates its classification as an online publication. More than a digital journal with reports on cultural events and editorial stories organized by distinct date and topic, INRUSSIA.com's digital space looks like a nonlinear videographic vault and project database. The website shapes into an image-studded collage of texts and or notes on arts, culture, fashion, music, history, and travel as understood in a contemporary "post-Soviet" and digital sense.

The last main category listed along the menu-strip is "Studio" and it is exemplary of the website's pattern of expansive scope and hodge-podge functionality in topic, with only the post-Soviet geography remaining as a constant amidst the projects. Once one clicks on the "Studio" section, the interface changes for the first time: the background turns black and typeface inverses to white; the user has entered the workshop-styled section of the website. Instead of the sets of project thumbnails, the page leads with the platform's first and only direct address to its user-audience. Breaking the poised fourth wall of curated project previews, revealing both their creative process as well as the urge to collaborate with those interested, the section leads with: "we specialize in creating visual phenomena. We write, direct, film, and edit. For partnership and new business enquiries, please get in touch with hi@inrussia.com." The blurb is followed by the site's regular arrangement of project-based, media-intersected content.

However, all of the project previews presented in the “Studio” section are each, first and foremost, embedded videos. The projects themselves are mostly contemporary design and tech-related. For instance, two immediate previews involve the synthesizer: an iconic late Soviet electronic music instrument that is of major influence on the subculture’s electronic productions today. The two projects are part of a larger series entitled “Synthposium,” which spotlights different electronic technicians. One of the Synthposium editions, for instance, introduces Alexander Pleninger, a “synthesizer-guru” who “combines obsolete technology with an advanced knowledge of electronic music” and another, Vyacheslav Grigoriev, who runs a nightly synth-building workshop. Both are under the “Music” tag.

Another project on the Studio page is titled “Union Shift,” and is about a Moscow-based postdoctoral program, Strelka Institute, and its collaborative video project on a program initiative of theirs “that seeks to preserve labor in the face of automation within the trucking industry.” It is categorized under the “Tech” tag. This section speaks to the website’s tech and design-heavy component, from the actual configuration of the website, to the selection of technology-revealing topics and to the production of the projects themselves, which are usually crossovers between media, video, and platform content-creation.

The INRUSSIA.com “database” accumulates, presents, and curates certain moments of Russian and Soviet cultural history through a contemporary lens regarding current events and initiatives. From retrospective reviews of books or films, to the promotion of new records and the debut of clothing collections, as well as visits to long-forgotten places, INRUSSIA.com straddles a strange temporality that it itself constructs. The non-stringent and miscellaneous organization of media content renders it as fluid and upon a non-linear temporal juncture that queers historicity. INRUSSIA.com devises a space of its own while punctuating its content with common, untethered categories. The methods in content-classification rely on buzzwords and evasive definitions, perhaps pointing to a lack in existing content or to a desire to appeal to a wide public. Not a single article or project post details the date the piece was published on the platform. This both gestures at an apolitical lean we will explore in INRUSSIA.com’s production, while equally speaks to a queering of temporality and historicity that is experienced.

The self-(re)presentation of INRUSSIA.com renders it as a contemporary cultural object that is neither easy to pinpoint nor pigeon-hole in character, intention, and meaning. The curious layout and function, paired with its range of content, complicates a direct intake

and assumption of what contemporary Russian youth culture looks like. It begs us to look further, at the pillars of its creative production process, the history leading up to its manifestation, and the ideologies bidding attention in the current geographical, political, and social climate. It becomes important to consider the implications of positioning a group's expression between the Soviet past and post-Soviet present as well as "the East" and "the West" – what does this mean to a subcultural scene and its implicated audience?

Section 2: Claims – why INRUSSIA.com?

INRUSSIA.com is one of the first digital iterations constituted by a Moscow-based team, publishing distinctly Russian and "post-Soviet" content in English. In other words, this is a rare case of a non-Western publication that presents exclusively non-Western content in English. The platform covers Russian, Soviet, ex-Soviet bloc, and "post"-Soviet trends, regions, and histories in their stories, all in an Anglophone digital and linguistic format.

With the content's regional focus at odds with its legibility (language), INRUSSIA.com seems to station itself towards a Western audience or, by now, a global audience. It could be said that this online publication is a digital narrative of the non-West representing their non-West *to* the West. I characterize INRUSSIA.com as an entity: a digital document (of a community) and a collaborative platform responding to a lack of adequate representation in major streams of media. Through identifying the platform's key players and leading patterns, or the figures involved in the production process as well as the most popular topics and types of stories in the publication, this research demonstrates a Russian subculture's new efforts in producing a representation of itself.

The analysis of the digital representation's inner workings distills the byproducts of wanting to participate in Western globalization, versus those of which are distorted derivatives of Russian nationalism. By identifying the major constituents, this thesis gives way to what's left beneath: an imprint of said influences apparent in a new form of group identity and politics (or lack thereof). By parsing the larger cultural weights, I zoom in on the heart of the digital publication's intent, in the hopes of exposing the collective agency that remains intact, despite the meddling of external powers. This exposes what the Moscow community is able to successfully produce regarding their identity and image, especially given the utopian vision they have projected (a celebrated and countercultural Soviet memory in an accepted Western form). By demarcating the "ideal" that the community aspires to, I decipher the drive propelling

the construction of such an ideal. Overall, this thesis brings together what is produced by a tight-knit community of artistic entrepreneurs and the function of their online platform, both on a micro and macro level. Further on, I pinpoint the conflation of neoliberalism and Russian nationalism present in the online publication and explain why it matters.

Today, the creative youth of Moscow exist under two hegemonic cultural forces: the globalized West versus nationalist Russia. This refers to the subculture's experience of national belonging as well as foreign relatability and representation. The USSR's precarious transition into Russia's free market in the 1990s marked the experience of cultural identity for the unofficial creative group. However, it was after the events of 2014 in particular that recent collectives of underground artists found it urgent to come together in the country's capital of Moscow and, by means of digital media, set up venues, units, and labels that provide a platform for their alternative practices. The emergent Russian arts scene aligns especially in the face of the ex-Soviet bloc's further divide and the increased alienation from and rejection of Western import. The community's alternative character can be defined by their non-mainstream creative practices: obscure genres of music production, non-heteronormative sensibilities, underground rave culture, as well as their conflicting position between pervasive Western influences versus the dominant domestic ones, and lastly by their construction of alliances across ex-Soviet geopolitical lines (with, for instance, Ukraine and Georgia), despite global and local attempts to maintain isolation. The impulse for alternative creative production in Moscow is made visible within digital ventures – online projects constituted by contradictory elements: Soviet nostalgia in a Western prototype.

The contemporary network of Moscow creatives includes youth from lower classes in the regions[3] as well as middle-class families on the periphery of the center. This network harkens back to earlier structures of community that many arts circles in Russia are informally known: a "*tusovka*" or a "loosely interconnected group of youth," underrepresented in major accounts on Russian culture and arts scenes coming from both the West and Russia (Stodolsky 139). The West's historical representation of Russia as a site of political and cultural alterity is positioned in relation to the *tusovka's* uptake and reinterpretation of Western commodity culture, as is inevitable in the post-Soviet transition to capitalism (Yurchak 85). Coupled with the dominant state's insularity, the youth culture developed an even stronger

[3] Impoverished areas, typically with social housing or Soviet-era public housing blocks, on the outskirts of the city center

urge to string together a sense of belonging amidst their post-Soviet counterparts. Across the geopolitical divide, electronic DJs and experimental filmmakers, queer skaters, music producers, and event organizers in Moscow created projects that united figures from across the regions of the capital, as well as from Siberia, Dagestan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and other ex-Soviet states.

Therefore, the digital expressions that characterize this subculture are not "counter-cultural" practices solely in terms of the activity in and of itself. Rather, the conditions from which these practices emerge place the community in a subordinate position, seeing as their digital production resists dominant paradigms. The doubled exclusion from domestic and foreign visibility has prompted a Moscow *tusovka* to communicate their vexed relationship using DIY media production in which Western mode of communication intermingle with conservative Russian socio-cultural values. As a result, their platform activity expresses a subcultural specificity as well as globally attuned production code.

In the footsteps of Euromaidan, a rapid cropping up of creative units arose across Moscow and St. Petersburg, involving creatives from Siberia or ex-Soviet states like Uzbekistan. INRUSSIA.com finally debuted late 2016. By its release, the platform had subsumed several projects that spawned seemingly overnight, like that of: NII (Science & Art), Gost Zvuk, Stereotactic, A.D.E.D., Rassvet, Absurd, to name a few. These varying collectives, record labels, venues began intersecting through events, collaborations, and a range of production projects in which figures from one unit interchanged and/or shared roles with another. From an underground venue, an electronic music label, a streetwear line, an avant-garde skate brand, a documentary collective, and an online grassroots publication, the *tusovka* is interconnected through creative capacities across these units as well as informally through pre-existing interpersonal dynamics. INRUSSIA.com functions as a virtual mothership wherein these units of artists crossover via varied creative functions.

The contending socio-cultural, economic, and political impacts on a subculture in Moscow is observable through their digital media activity. The Russian subculture processes an identity crisis by weaving meaning through videos and photo-essays, sharing digital narratives on media platforms. The media narratives produced by the Moscow *tusovka* disclose a negotiation of cultural influences impinging on the community, exacerbated by the context's geopolitical climate: the domestic populist discourse at a time of a globally revamped "othering" of Russia (Saunders 5). By distilling these aspects in their (platform) story-making,

we come closer to understanding the effect of this phenomena and what's at stake for the community: their collective identity, global visibility and representation, as well as efforts to sustain transcultural belonging.

Section 3: INRUSSIA.com's Emergent Community

The following section outlines the groupings that belong to the unofficial Moscow subculture under question. INRUSSIA.com's content is produced by amateur creative entrepreneurs that belong to an alternative arts scene in Moscow or to a "*tusovka*"[4] scattered across a niche of collectives, interchanging in production roles between projects fast-developing following Euromaidan. INRUSSIA.com serves as a platform that covers their latest projects and creative experiences while also providing means for their intersections. The units of John's Kingdom/Gost Zvuk, NII (Nauka I Iskusstvo or Science and Art), Stereotactic, Absurd/Rassvet, and A.D.E.D. (as well as others) are the pillars of the Moscow *tusovka*. Together with INRUSSIA.com, we see the interconnection of figures, united through projects facilitated by the publication's platform.

John's Kingdom, for instance, is an experimental music collective founded by Pavel Milyakov or the electronic DJ known as "Buttechno" in 2014. The record label functions as an underground community in itself that, under this title, unites young, independent music producers coming from the suburbs. Unknown youth, making electronic music in their homes across the regions of Moscow and parts of the ex-Soviet bloc are invited to mix music, swap samples, and organize sets together. Their creations veer into mostly lo-fi or non-obvious styles, like the genre-bending sounds of drifting pop, ambient techno, and jungle breaks. Their sound base equally echoes genre-defining electronica, made on drum machines, like the Roland TR-808 Rhythm Composer.[5] Gost Zvuk (ГОСТ ЗВУК in Russian) is one of the collective's current labels. Emerging out of John's Kingdom production umbrella, Zvuk accepts demos exclusively from Russian and ex-Soviet bloc producers. In an INRUSSIA.com article titled "Musical Amalgamation by Buttechno," large, digitized film photographs accompany a personal essay by the "multidisciplinary electronic artist" himself, demonstrating his crossover role amidst units. The article introduces Milyakov's work branding and designing posters for the club NII as well as composing soundtracks for designer Gosha Rubchinskiy's shows.

[4] "Loosely interconnected group of youth" (Stodolsky 139)
[5] Specificities of electronica scene further explored in *Section 7*

INRUSSIA.com has a few other articles that review Gost Zvuk's "pan-Russian ambient sound," always encoding the label's Soundcloud recordings on the page, along with interviews from a Zvuk producer, for instance.

Gosha Rubchinskiy is a streetwear designer that rose out of the late 1980's rave scene in Saint Petersburg, the site of Soviet counterculture popularized by the informal Moscow group today. Although he remains a close, older friend to most of the youth, Rubchinskiy has been the one to gain more visible, worldly notoriety for his tracksuit designs. In the early 2010s, he quickly became the face of the "post-Soviet aesthetic" in the West. Originally Rubchinskiy was not particularly concerned with being a designer ("Inside Gosha Rubchinskiy's Post-Soviet Generation").[6] He identified with the queer partygoers and young skaters from St. Petersburg to Moscow and thought that devising a fashion line could encapsulate the forces he was most interested in: music, style, and identity in an alternative culture and creative community. His runways have become a showcase for the casual streetwear his young friends sport, marked by soundtracks from Moscow's underground electronic DJs. Rubchinskiy's fashion shows are sites upon which the community congregates, mingles, and celebrates this newfound Russianness together. He capitalized on a previously "shameful" look belonging to a bleak, impoverished past: oversized tracksuits or worn hand-me-downs from the youth's Soviet parents who lived in the regions during the 1990s. Figure 1 is a photograph featuring two young men[7] from said scene, spending their downtime in Rubchinskiy's office while he is away on business. The photograph reveals both the "look" of the post-Soviet aesthetic as well as the casual and close relationships the designer maintains with much of the youth despite his fame.

Fig. 1, (above): members of the scene at Gosha Rubchinskiy's Moscow office. Taken by me. Summer 2017.

[6] From the i-D video: *Inside Gosha Rubchinskiy's Post-Soviet Generation*

[7] Siberian skater and model Ivan Schemakin, once Rubchinskiy's muse, interviewed and included throughout.

NII ("Nauka I Iskusstvo" or "Science and Art") was the leading fixture for the Moscow *tusovka* from its opening in 2014, up until its recent demise at the end of 2018. NII is the birthplace of John's Kingdom and has since housed the label of Gost Zvuk. Shortly after John's Kingdom formed, the friends and new creative partners sought out a meeting space where they could debut their sonic experiments, gather the scene, and rave. In its full form, NII functioned as a multimedia exhibition space that doubled as an underground club.

Fig. 2, (above): photograph of NII's courtyard by Masha Demianova (Winter 2016)

Alexander Savier, a post-punk musician and electronic DJ known as "Burago," Marina Verkhovova (of film unit, Stereotactic), Ildar Zaynetdinov (DJ Low808 of Gost Zvuk), as well as other members of John's Kingdom, like "the queen of Russian underground electronica," Kedr Levanskiy (Yana Kedrina), built NII with their own hands from the ground up ("NII Kingdom"). Brought about by the means of "entrepreneurial corruption" or practices of the shadow economy, which is later described as a derivative of the post-socialist economic transition[8] – the crew collected money from elite friends and accepted loans from oligarch acquaintances in order to fund its establishment. Interestingly enough, the space found its home at the periphery of the Moscow center, by the railway station Kurskaya, in a loft-styled complex – looking more like an open-concept, concrete office space straight out of Silicon Valley, rather than a scene from the Moscow underground ("NII Kingdom"). They paid off local police to keep their hours operating through the night and into the morning. By late 2014, NII became a "multifunctional space for cross-cultural experimentation" (Resident Advisor). As a home base for John's Kingdom (and Gost Zvuk), NII served as an alternative space for arts, music, and informal communication – an open loft with "practices aimed towards multilateral development" for the Moscow *tusovka*[9].

[8] *Section 3*

NII allowed for the independent expression and congregation of local artists and young intellectuals outside mainstream cultural spaces and national enterprises. NII hosted several events per week, from raves to art exhibits or record debuts, encouraging multimedia projects to take shape across these collectives (i.e. light installations for events debuting Gost Zvuk/ГОСТ ЗВУК releases, fig. 6 of NII's entrance stamp for said event). While the sheer crossover between creative projects, musicians, and circles of locals earned the space its cult badge of honor, it was the thorough research, specificity of sound, and high-quality DIY work that garnered the space and its creative agents a reputation the alternative arts scene of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Tbsili and even within niche electronic circles across the world (from Atlanta to Montreal). NII's intersecting body of artists, their sincere immersion in the scene and consistent output of creative production, disseminated online, was able to attract foreign artists like the legendary Chicago-based footwork and juke proponent DJ Rashad and German airy-techno master Florian Kupfer, who visited Moscow in order to guest host events at NII. Putting together one of the

Fig. 6, (above): image of an entrance stamp to a "Gost Zvuk" record release party at NII, by me (2017)

Fig. 3-4, (above): iPhone photos taken by me (2017)

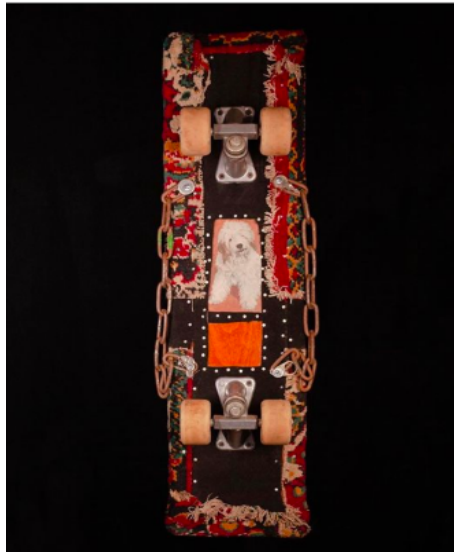
best sound systems in the city, NII ended up hosting the Boiler Rooms[10] that took place in Moscow (Ouzilevski and Demianova, "NII Kingdom"). They kept the place afloat financially on a week-to-week basis, depending on available funds and earnings, until they were squeezed out due to the area's sky-rocketing rent and restrictive local politics (Savier).

Fig. 5, (above): photo of DJ Lorenzo Senni's "angelwave" rave on NII's deck, by me (August '17)

Another important collective is that of *Absurd*, an 'avant-garde' skate unit and brand founded by Kirill Korobkov, Gosha Konyshev, and Pavel Kuznetsov. *Absurd* designs experimental skateboards and funds skate trips to regions in Russia as well as to countries across the ex-Soviet bloc, producing lowbrow videos of these trips and helping build skate parks in areas difficult to reach, like Palestine. *Absurd's* videos were, for instance, often debuted at NII, followed by parties in which artists of John's Kingdom played their latest EPs. Rassvet is a similar skate collective brought together by the now-world-recognized designer Gosha Rubchinskiy. The skate scene is of particular importance to the subculture, seeing as many of the skaters became the chosen muses and models for Rubchinskiy's clothing lines. The skate scene across the regions of Russia became the main source of inspiration informing Rubchinskiy's rise in the fashion world. He found this motley crew of boys, hailing from Siberia to Kazan, to be kindred to the marginal and queer happenings of the post-punk Soviet rave scene that Rubchinskiy himself was a part of in St. Petersburg throughout the 1990s.

Fig. 7, (above): screenshot from Absurd's Instagram profile, of a video at Palestinian skate camp: SkateQilya

[10] Boiler Room is an online music broadcasting platform based in London, commissioning and streaming live music sessions around the world.



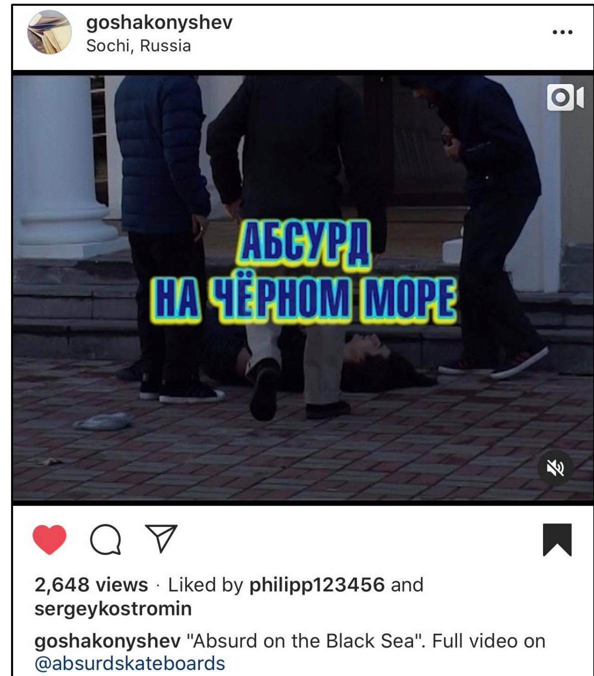


Fig. 8 (above, left): screenshot from Gosha Konyshev's personal Instagram of his hand-made skateboard design.
Fig. 9 (above, right): screenshot of video, skate trip to the Black Sea on *Absurd's* Instagram account.

Furthermore, aforementioned NII member Marina Verkhovova started the collective Stereotactic, an independent film unit that produces documentaries, shorts, and other experimental digital content. Young aspiring filmmakers group together to film skate trips, happenings at NII, and make content for INRUSSIA.com – producing documentary content on the scene they themselves are a part of. Otherwise, another group of the underground is A.D.E.D. (which stands for All Day Every Day), an infamous graffiti collective and lifestyle brand in Moscow. Their street stickers, featuring the tags or nicknames of the members in the crew (themselves being skaters, artists, DJs, clothing designers) – SPACER, NAMER, JUICE, COZEK, and CAPTEK – are seen all over the city of Moscow. A.D.E.D. channels graffiti into an active visual language, a morphing dialogue with urbanity when navigating the relentless renovation in the city center. Members of A.D.E.D. often flaunt their vandalization on their public Instagram accounts. They have also employed homeless people and construction workers of Moscow to sport their designed garments to present their new collections.

Fig. 10 (above): screenshot of logo from A.D.E.D. IG account

Fig 11-13, from left to right): screenshot from A.D.E.D's IG story, screenshot from A.D.E.D's graffiti artist CAPTEK's personal IG story, and A.D.E.D.'s IG photos of ad for new collection

With this spelled out, it is understandable how INRUSSIA.com can be figured in as a unifying platform, a vessel of interpersonal dynamics, transcultural identities, and creative collaborations. It is the digital publication that covers all of these events and developments (that it itself participates in), providing a visible space for the collaborations across the *tusovka* to pan out. For instance, the publishing project "Saint Petersburg," produced with Rubchinskiy for his SS18 fashion show, features skaters from *Absurd* and Rassvet. The fashion show was organized with INRUSSIA.com's former art director and photographer, Sasha Mademoiselle, while the event's soundtrack was devised by aforementioned electronic DJ and John's Kingdom founder Pavel Milyakov, otherwise known as Buttechno. This all was recorded as part of a documentary produced by Stereotactic and then followed by a celebration of the collection's St. Petersburg release in Moscow at NII, in which the video project, *APART,* of the SS18 fashion show premiered – a project more specifically evaluated in Section 6, after laying out the given economic, political, and social context, INRUSSIA.com's creative leaders, and the specific sliver of Soviet history it speaks to.

Section 4: Pre-History and Context at Large:

The following section introduces the overarching economic character of Moscow, Russia relative to its contemporary cultural initiatives. It starts after the country's drastic transition in state governance, in order to delineate the state of affairs for smaller-scale cultural developments, like that of the Moscow subculture. And through this delineation, the grey areas and intrinsic overlap between the formal, elite cultural assemblages versus the smaller, unofficial ones become clearer.

The arrival of neoliberalism in Russia came after the country's dramatic political liberalization and transition to a free market economy as a result of the Soviet Union's dissolution at the end of 1991 (Weimer, Calvert, et al. xv). In order to join the global market economy, Russia moved to reform itself as a single, coherent nation and transition from a system of state ownership as well as centralized administrative organization to one of "a capitalist order based on markets, free enterprise, and private property" following 1991 (Aven 39).

The crumbling Soviet system left state property as an area of contestation by those gaining political and economic power during the nation's transitional moment. Informal deals over said property took place amidst former USSR officials, their relatives, and other close associates (Weimer, Calvert, et al. 152). This enabled oligarchs, or the country's first businessmen and Russia's richest one percent, to take over "30% of the entire population's assets" (Aven 39). Towards the end of the Soviet era and throughout Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, the Russian businessmen who had been importing or smuggling Western goods into the country for a hefty profit near the end of the Soviet era expedited their own access to and major ownership over the means of production in the new Russian realm. Such an insider-dominated privatization process resulted in the Russian economy being dominated by a narrow circle of oligarchs (Weiss par. 4). Therefore, the self-interest of elites dominated the neoliberal policy-making at work, exploiting the newly freed flow of resources (Rutland 332).

The creation of new creative art industries and spaces in the post-Soviet period was a by-product of this process. Motivated by the need to conceal the excess of financial gains and their origins, and inspired by the model of pre-Revolutionary philanthropy, certain oligarchs and their families began opening Western-modeled NGOs and cultural arts spaces in the early 2000s (Kuznets, "The Real Russia Today," Meduza.io). Ventures include art centers like the *Garage Museum of Contemporary Art,* founded by former ballerina and wife of Russian-Israeli

billionaire (Roman Abramovich[11]) Dasha Zhukova, as well as the converted tea-factory of *ARTPLAY* houses architecture firms and privatized art spaces. It is this relationship, between the arts scene and the newly emergent economic elites, that characterizes the state of the creative industry in Russia today, amidst which the Moscow subculture finds itself. Such developments, such as Zhukova's *Garage* facilitated the growth of a new, visible cultural scene of affluent creative professionals, adhering to a market-based logic standardized by global neoliberalism.

Fig. 14 (above): ARTPLAY from, Miliazza, Mathilde. "Multimedia Feast: ARTPLAY Moscow Design Center" July 2016, playlidenz.ru

The creative industry (fashion, art, cinema, music) is of peripheral interest to a government concerned mostly with oil, gas, and large-scale businesses (Gurova and Morozova 709). Therefore, it is specifically large-scale creative enterprises, which correspond to state interest and have lucrative industry potentials, or cultural initiatives led by state-affiliated figures that can have national acceptance, visibility, and security on infrastructural, economic, and social levels. The state's ambivalence to smaller-scale entrepreneurship leaves this sector of the economy to be more invisible, therefore, under the condition of precarity as well as its own agency (Gurova and Morozova 711). In other words, with less attention from the state, young creatives can expand their entrepreneurial scope and the promotion of their own ideas and values, as well as their self-expression.

However, after the undoing of the socialist regime, the state officially shifted its responsibility in the labour market from itself to the citizens, leaving guaranteed employment and benefits deregulated (Gurova and Morozova 709). Therefore, the creative class is largely unprotected and lacks social benefits. Certain unwelcoming policies towards small-scale entrepreneurial projects are part and parcel of the state's ideological differences with its

[11] Oligarch Roman Abramovich Millhouse, senior partner of holding company Sibneft (oil)

creative class. While the creative class emulates and employs certain neoliberal practices as the state does, their "post-materialist values" are considered "self-motivated and [promoting] active and critical positions," which seemingly undermines the nation's dominant ideological agendas, deferring state support from employment and labour issues in said class (Volkov 62-63; Gurova and Morozova 708).

Unavoidably, the state supports new forms of entrepreneurship, given its significant role in the nation's economic growth since its Soviet collapse. Simultaneously, however, the state wields the power to often unexpectedly shut down small businesses for coveted reasons it deems fit (Gurova and Morozova 705). This is because, since reforming into a market economy, Russia's markets have become characterized by an oligopoly, "prone to capricious state intervention" (Rutland 333). A myriad of district-level (raion) agencies dispense property rights, which pinpoints the misalignment around issues in leasing and the host of informal practices leftover from the Soviet period, inherited in the transition to the Russian Federation (Weimer, Calvert, et al. 152). Certain economic reforms are "enforceable ex ante" yet often fail in reasonable implementation for the circumstances lack clearly specified and consistent patterns of interactions between local government agencies and private firms, which money-funneled, state-supported private property contracts can often taken advantage of (Weimer, Calvert, et al. 150).

A recent example of such practices concerns an early fixture of the underground, techno-focused rave space *Rabitza,* which was abruptly shut down in the late summer of 2017. Undercover cops disguised as ravers were paid by local politicians to implant drugs and infiltrate the scene, ending the night in a violent police-raid that used physical force against club staff and partygoers ("RA News"). Speculations are that Moscow authorities were interested in the property that the techno club inhabited. In this way, the sector of small-scale creative entrepreneurship exists in a state of precarity, amidst structural conditions that are distinguished by a lack of social, economic, and emotional security. There is no provision for basic income that could allow financial stability for creative youth at large, nor programs that help consolidate these varying communities and networks, like that of professional unions or groups concerned with labor conditions and the like (Gurova and Morozova 707).

Nonetheless, several production practices of the new, unofficial creative class encompass "a neoliberal model of entrepreneurial self" (Peters 58; Gurova and Morozova 706). With their labor typified by risk-taking and flexibility, this class aligns neatly with the 'new spirit of capitalism' infusing the post-Soviet milieu (Boltanski and Chiapello; Gurova and Morozova 706). The affinity in the state's enlistment of neoliberal measures, since its transition, has not contributed to its acceptance of an independently-minded creative class. Russia's neo-conservative turn resulted in a selective treatment of the creative sector and its conditions overall. This has contributed to the development of a "grey market" wherein illegal or semi-legal employment inflated Russia's new form of shadow economy, growing in the face of increasing economic hardships throughout the 1990s and onwards (Gurova and Morozova 709). Not only does this define the precarity rampant amidst the informal creative sector, it also ties into the conditions underlying the creative production of projects and formation of units in a Moscow subculture (like the financial background of the Moscow site for the underground, NII*)*. Some examples of how the elite creative industry functions in practice is useful to lay out, specifically with the following case studies covering current oligarchs and their projects, like that of: V-A-C arts foundation, Strelka Institute, and Rambler Media.

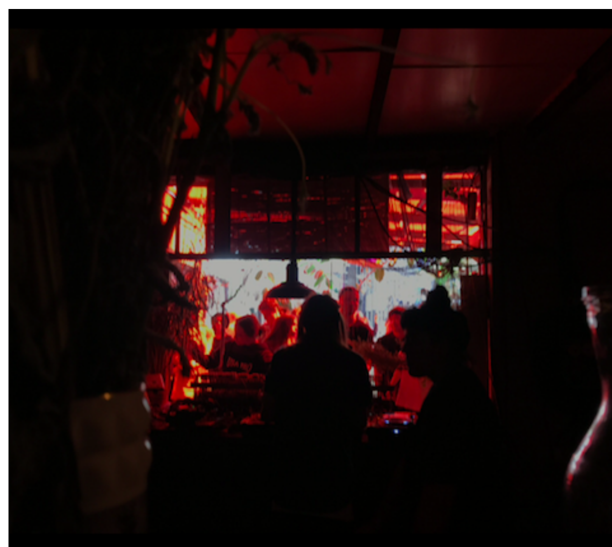


Fig. 15 (above): Club *Rabitza*, taken by me, August 2016

A case of large-scale, state-sanctioned creative entrepreneurship is that of Leonid Mikhelson's V-A-C Foundation. The Russian businessman and philanthropist Mikhelson has a net worth of $14 billion and represents the oligarch-dominated side of Russia's cultural sector today. In 2009, Mikhelson opened the V-A-C foundation, an international "non-profit," private organization "with an emphasis on supporting contemporary art exhibitions and projects emerging from Russia and the former Soviet Union (Judah, "Artworld," Artnet.com). Currently listed as Russia's Richest Man by Forbes, the billionaire's fortune comes from Russian gas company *Novatek,* with an estimated wealth of $16.2-billion deriving from the gas and petrochemicals industries. Gas and its entrepreneurial character is of paramount interest to the state, indicating Mihkelson's close bond with the Kremlin. This relationship – to

gas, to money, and to the state – facilitates the way and the extent to which Mihkelson can sponsor as well as direct the development of the cultural industry in Russia. Naming the V-A-C after his daughter, "Victoria, the Art of being Contemporary" is a detail demonstrating the level to which an oligarch's personal interest in driving such a large creative initiative is unobstructed.

The V-A-C is currently hammering to erect "a vast new site for contemporary art in the center of Moscow," for Mikhelson (and, perhaps, the Kremlin) is committed to crafting "an entire cultural ecosystem to underpin it" (Judah, "Artworld," Artnet.com). In this way, the V-A-C will infiltrate the country's capital as an artistic epicenter. More so, the foundation's developmental agenda is fixed on creating an entire cultural conglomerate that operates across several points in the city concurrently, by lodging a grid or infrastructure through which cultural enterprises must pass through in order to exist, merging flows of production and capital between its units. Other than this massive arts network, the Foundation already regularly arranges exhibitions at the noteworthy Tretyakov Gallery and the Kremlin Museum in Moscow, runs an elite curatorial school, and funds a series of "community engagement projects" as well as private gallery shows. The V-A-C covers its bases and subsumes the city's most essential creative actors. Now it will do so in a physical respect, as it plans to set up its headquarters across "two hectares of land in Moscow's central Red October district," the grounds of a former Soviet chocolate factory in the city center (Judah, "Artworld," Artnet.com). Red October happens to be nestled in the Ostozhenka-Prechistenka district, an area exemplary of the "neoliberal urban regime in Moscow" or the elite housing redevelopment project that has transformed, for instance, this central residential quarter into the most expensive

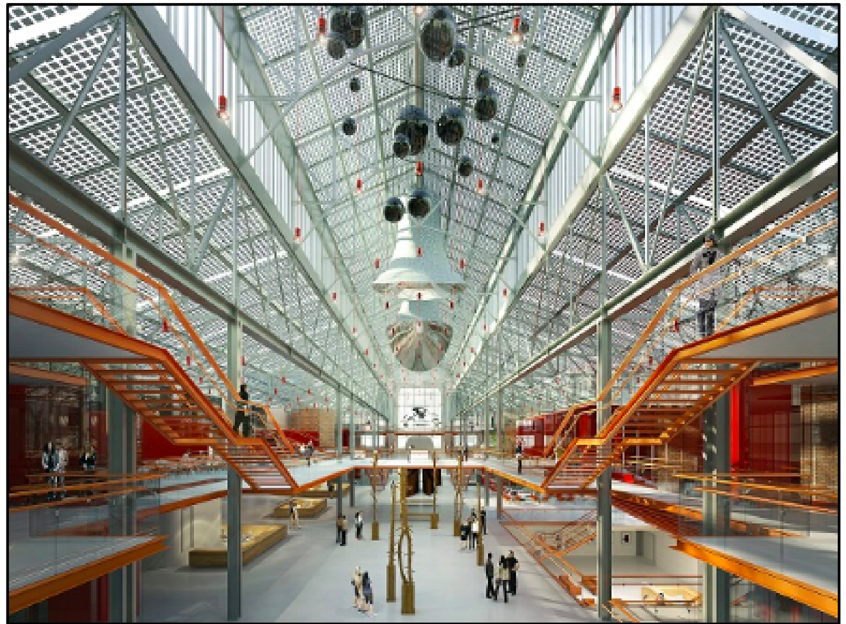


Fig. 16 (above): Architect Renzo Piano's Rendering View of "Centrale Nave," RPBW, 2015. Courtesy of V-A-C Foundation Description: Moscow's GES2 power station and surrounding 2 hectares to be transformed into massive exhibition gallery

neighborhood in the city (Badyina and Golubchik 113). The physical function of this elite cultural endeavour betrays an element of precarity it contributes to in the struggle for urban space, which continues to be one of the most pressing issues structuring the new post-soviet informal culture and its various forms of self-expression.

Therefore we see that after the Soviet dissolution, Moscow underwent and continues to undergo expeditious reconstruction, as the capital adapts to the new socio-economic conditions that “mushrooming” financial and business-related services quickly began to demand. With the historic center accounting for only 6.4 percent of the total city area, a grossly disproportionate 40 per cent of capital investment has been poured into its renovation (Badyina and Golubchik 115). The material upgrade of lower-status regions in cities generates a wide-scale displacement of residents, ones replaced by upper-class newcomers and their new standards. Even as a creative initiative, the V-A-C is a constituent of this post-socialist process of gentrification and is interlinked with city policies as well as business interests that toil to inaugurate Moscow as a global city (Badyina and Golubchik 114).

Fig. 17 (above): Red October District, from myguidemoscow.com, June 2017

Within the Ostozhenka district is a complex interplay of strategies attempting to tackle the market pressure on Moscow, with its large role in the success of the post-Soviet economy, in regard to the government's “entrepreneurial and pro-development” makeover following the transition (Badyina and Golubchik 113). The V-A-C and this elite housing (re)construction project in Moscow together carry out a function of neoliberalism by enabling market forces and, in the meantime, stamping out the needs or visibility of a local population.

This speaks to the housing supply deficit that has persisted in Moscow throughout the 20th century, caused by the continuously spiraling rate of the city’s development and redevelopment (Gunko, Bogacheva, et al. 289). The first stages of Soviet housing policies

following the Russian Revolution of 1917 witnessed an aggressive redistribution of nationalized properties that led to the forced addition of residents to central apartments[12] (known as "squeezing") as well as "intensified in-migration linked to industrialization" (Gunko, Bogacheva, et al. 290). This provoked a massive necessity for cheap and extensive constructions of new residential quarters, resembling social housing in countries of the Global North (Gunko, Bogacheva, et al. 290).

Since the drastic political liberalization following the USSR's demise and the accelerated neoliberal policy takeover, Moscow city government has approved the demolition of more than 4,000 apartment buildings in various locations across the city[13] (Gunko, Bogacheva, et al. 290). From the Soviet "squeezing" to neoliberal reconstruction and gentrification, most members of the scene have little option but to keep residing with their families who cannot afford to live within the incisive central ring of the city limits. Living with their families[14] and scattered across the broad peripheral districts makes it difficult for the youth to find spaces where they can come together. This attributes to the reason and extent to which the digital has played a transformative role for such a community, who use online mediums to unite in cultural dialogue and representation as well as disseminate their creative content more broadly.

Sponsoring both St. Petersburg Manifestas and Venice Biennales since 2014, the V-A-C Foundation opened a Venetian home base at a renovated historic Palazzo in Italy, coining it Zattere in the Spring of 2017 ("Spring"). The V-A-C commissioned local architect Alessandro Pedron to restore the palazzo, believing it can transform the site: "into a new centre for contemporary culture for the city of Venice" ("Exhibition"). The Foundation proclaims that Zattere has the capacity to "accommodate exhibitions, events, and residencies" ("Foundation"). By Spring 2018, Zattere launched a new long-term project "sudest 1401" – a hybrid restaurant initiative described as a "sociocultural project," promoting (cultural) discourse over food ("Foundation"). The V-A-C embeds its version of a local, prosperous Moscow within international, intersecting institutions by spawning ones of its own, abroad. By constructing a venue in the European arts capital of Venice even before the foundation did so

[12] Becoming "communalkas," the Russian word for communal housing.
[13] June 2017
[14] Furthermore, regarded as a resultant reality given cultural dynamics intact since Soviet rule, which promoted a fundamental mistrust of anyone outside the close family unit, leaving individuals dependent on and highly valuing family support (Talia Wagner).

on domestic grounds renders it global and impressive. The absurd grandiosity of V-A-C's projects and budgets, expended over less than a decade, speaks to the insatiable proportions inherent to neoliberal growth potential, especially in a nation shepherded by natural resources and businessmen. V-A-C's growth in creative production is needlessly fixated on prestige and, in equal parts, detrimentally avoidant of a smaller-scale creative class, and furthermore of a local population lacking in resources and representation.

Another huge actor in the neoliberal cultural scene in Russia, displaying many of the same traits pinpointed through the case of V-A-C, ties in directly with the case study of INRUSSA.com: its financier, Alexander Mamut of Strelka Institute and Rambler Media Group. Mamut, trained as a lawyer in the 1980s, jumped to open "Business and Cooperation" bank in 1990 with Andrey Gloriozonov, renaming it Commercial Bank "Imperial" by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, a bank in service of fuel and energy companies[15]. A prominent figure during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, Mamut played an influential role bankrolling Yeltin's successful re-election campaign in 1996, accumulating a succession of holdings throughout the 90s in Russia's emerging financial sector ("Alexander Mamut Profile," Telegraph.co.uk). From being a substantial shareholder in Russia's largest insurance company, Ingosstrakh, to founding the investment company A&NN, his core asset today is an 11 per cent stake in *Polymetal*, a precious metals and mining group in Russia ("#916 Alexander Mamut," Forbes.com). A&NN Investments have since acquired the country's two largest cinema exhibitors, Cinema Park and Formula Kino, the most substantial cinema acquisitions in the Russian film industry thus far and therefore a pivotal player in the distribution of screen content in the country (Zhang, "Market Insight").

Mamut heads the board of trustees at Strelka Institute, a non-profit international education project founded in 2009 and housed in the same hot zone of Red October as V-A-C[16]. While the institute's financial profile claims to not make a profit for its owners, that does not indicate much, as its owners are mostly oligarchs not in need of a salary. Regardless, Strelka in many ways is a product of neoliberal globalization – an initiative presented as a progressive, globally-minded, and innovative program that contributes to the state's urge to

[15] with Gazprom being one of its biggest clients, a corporation detailed in Section 5
[16] Both Strelka and V-A-C have sponsored projects on INRUSSIA.com and across the Moscow scene, who accepted assistance from said oligarch-enterprises because of constant financial lack (Savier).

integrate Russia into the global capitalist economy and garner respectability (Rutland 333). Simply put, the Institute is a post-doctorate program, conducted in English, that presents itself as an "educational project" with aims to "educate the next generation of architects, designers, and media professions." A multidisciplinary scope enables its students to ambitiously "shape the 21st century world" via experimental research methods that explore issues around Russia's urban development. Ironically, the institute stations itself as a critical surveyor of the very uneven urban development regime it plays a part in, both in its physicality as well as in regards to the projects it facilitates.

Fig. 18 (above): image of Strelka Institution in Red October hub, from champ-magazine.com (May 2017)

More recently, Mamut founded the publishing house and media group Rambler&Co, later rebranding it as Rambler Group. Starting out as a media portal, internet service, and search engine in the early 2000s, Rambler Group has since evolved into a branched media group with a news analytics division as well as assets like Afisha.ru, an online entertainment and lifestyle magazine. In 2016, Rambler CEO Alexander Mamut approached the former editor of the Russian Harper's Bazaar, Shakri Amirkhanova with a title "INRUSSIA.com" and a new media idea, proposing she develops an online publication about Russia in English (Amirkhanova). The "online journal" ends up composed of the informal community of Moscow artists or the smaller-scale creative class in Russia. This crossover between the high-profile and exclusive professional cultural scene and the inclusive, unofficial one typifies the status of cultural production in Russia right now (Gurova and Morozova 713)[17].

The mainstream and more uniformly affluent class of cultural actors in the privatized creative scene are in line with the ruling Western economic tendency of neoliberalism that

[17] This relationship will be examined in detail further on. But in order to understand the ideological position this journal came to occupy within this ecosphere we need to address its immediate geopolitical context, beyond the dynamics of post-Soviet economy.

orients itself towards bolstering the new upper-class prosperity in Russia. Hiding behind the facade of V-A-C and Strelka, certain “capitalist elites advance their class interests” (Rutland 334). The scale of these cultural ambitions and extravagance in vision makes this phenomenon distinct. However, the overarching goal lies in making the production and consumption of art a staple of the country’s new post-Soviet affluence. Regardless, the creative industry functions by means of these overlapping classes, actors, and conditions. While young creatives of smaller scale projects make up the unofficial subculture surrounding INRUSSIA.com, many actors in the professionalized art scene are inter-involved in matters of financial backing, logistics, and state-viability. Struggling from precarity, the platform (and its scene) has accepted support from said oligarch-enterprises, ones clearly interested in anchoring their power across any tractable “hip” hubs coming into view. Although the scene is hesitant to collaborate, the overlap is unavoidable and impacts the creative production under question. We will come to see the ways in which the alternative arts community in Moscow is embedded within these imperialist modes of contemporary culture in the country.

Section 5: INRUSSIA.com’s Background & Beginnings

INRUSSIA.com’s pre-production process, recruitment and project development began in late 2016, with the website going live by early 2017. As previously stated, INRUSSIA.com’s inception was possible due to a crossover of creative classes. Former journalist for and later editor of Harper's Bazaar (Russia), Shakri Amirkhanova, at 38 years old was approached by the oligarch Mamut of “the big publishing house” Rambler to do an online publication about Russia in English. The main incentive for taking on the project was the financial backing and “full liberty” in the production of creative content.

Both the founder, Shakri Amirkhanova, and editor-in-chief, Furqat Palvanzade, of this Russian online publication are considered ethnic minorities in Russia, with Amirkhanova being of Dagestani[18] descent and Palvanzade from Tashkent, Uzbekistan – a former Soviet state. At a point of revived Russian nationalism, claims over ethnic homogeneity have clashed with the inherited transcultural reality of Soviet ethnic identity. Therefore, with the two leading figures of this Russian project being ethnic minorities is significant to note. Amirkhanova describes herself as a rightful “product of an “ideal Soviet childhood,” with a well-regarded

[18] Dagestan is a republic in Russia

family and higher education," whereas Palvanzade emigrated from Tashkent to attend the notable Moscow State University. While Amirkhanova inherited her status of respectability and belonged to the Golden Youth[19] of the 1990s, Furqat obtained one through high performance. Nonetheless, both had to garner a status through certain available state-acknowledged means. Their ethnic difference, however, has set them apart from the dominant, official class that they partake in and has led them to occasionally associate with the unofficial, alternative cultural circles of Moscow. Amirkhanova explains that she became affiliated with the community in a particularly informal way, stating that while she "came from a very different generation," she got involved with the Moscow youth through "buying pot[20] off of them" (Amirkhanova).

Shakri Amirkhanova's background is nuanced and relevant given her representative role in regard to the unofficial creative class under question. Amirkhanova is the granddaughter of popular Avar poet Rasul Gazmatov hailing from Dagestan, whose poem *Zhuravli* became a well-known Soviet song. Dagestan is a federal republic of Russia in the North Caucasus region, with Chechnya and Georgia to the west, Azerbaijan to the south and the Caspian Sea to the east. It became an autonomous Soviet republic in the early 1920s. The region boasts one of the country's most heterogeneous republics, while constituting only 30 per cent of the nation's population.

The Avar tribe forms the largest ethnic group, with Islam as the prevailing religion across the Northeastern republic's native group. Gamzatov is one of the country's "most prolific Soviet poets," as posted on RT's (Russia Today's) "russiapedia" ("get to know Russia better" encyclopedia) blog – with *Russia Today* being the mainstream mouthpiece of official state discourse in Russian media, aimed at a Western audience. From this we learn of Gazmatov's cultural legacy: the epitome of Soviet multiethnic mélange and the badge of merit granted especially when merged with Soviet belonging. Gazmatov, having written in his native Avar tongue, a language spoken by only 170,000 people, produced "short love lyrics, long narrative poems, ballads, epigrams, and philosophical octaves" that were translated into Russian as well as 9 of the 36 languages in the North Caucasus region, earning him the Lenin Prize for poetry, "honored with the title of People's Poet of Dagestan" (russiapedia.rt). His

[19] term used in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet countries to describe a generation of children from privileged parents, who are able to take advantage of their social access.
[20] The production/cultivation, sale, and possession of any form of marijuana products and (recreational) cannabis are illegal in Russia.

trajectory is patriotically romanticized by the RT piece when illustrating a scene from his authorial growth:

> With a few books of his own in Avar tucked under his arm he arrived in Moscow in 1945 to enter the Gorky Institute of Literature. His enrolment at the Institute was the turning point of his career. There he studied under the country's leading poets and his poems were translated for the first time into Russian, their quality making them part of present-day Russian poetry. About forty collections of poems by Rasul Gamzatov have been published in Makhachkala (the capital of Dagestan) and Moscow" ("Prominent Russians: Rasul Gamzatov"[21])

The ethnic specificity, Soviet education (its provision of status) as well as the valorization of national literary craft are prominent features to consider here. Amirkhanova, therefore, is of Dagestani descent and more importantly, of an esteemed Soviet family. Given her background, she belongs to the old Soviet elite, a part of those who benefited from the post-Soviet privatization when emerging into the new, emptied vessel of Russian social-cultural milieu. For instance, with a leg up in status, respectability, and privilege in, for instance, the preferential housing redevelopment project. However, her Avar prestige lends her a different inflection to the standard Russian identity that Russia has had and gives itself since – which today, perhaps more than ever, is at odds with the mainstream nationalist image, one presented to be more ethnically homogenous and "purely" Russian. Her aristocratic heritage is starkly juxtaposed with the recognizably problematic ethnic-racial stratification that has become part of many nationalist policies in culture today, emblematic of Soviet intelligentsia and at odds with the white, mainstream Russian majority.

Amirkhanova finished her bachelor's at the country's leading academic institution, Moscow State University, in the foreign language department, later receiving another diploma in Journalism from the London College of Fashion. Her higher education, a fundamental for the Soviet elite, paired with "internationalism,"[22] as well as with her being trained in a Western

[21] Note Russipedia's reference to Rasul Gazmatov as Russian, not Soviet nor Dagestani

[22] For further information on Soviet and post-Soviet concepts around good versus bad forms of internationalism (vs. cosmopolitanism) see A. Yurchak's 2006 book *Everything was Forever, Until it was No more*. Chapter 5 on "zagranitsa" or the Imaginary West, to explicate ideas on the respectable influence of abroad cultures (versus Western imperialist ones) on Soviet reality.

European arts and business institution, imparts Amirkhanova with a duality valuable in Russia's selective neoliberal expansion via cultural industry.

This points to two crucial aspects in Shakri Amirkhanova's leading role behind INRUSSIA.com's creative production: her notable difference to Russian majority, yet access to the privileges and resources of the state-acknowledged creative sector. Before INRUSSIA.com, Amirkhanova was a journalist for Harper Bazaar Russia, later becoming the magazine's editor. Across the more official, elite arts and fashion scene as well as the subcultural one, Amirkhanova has been considered a style icon and lifestyle blogger. Amirkhanova's status in the scene, relationship to the publication and to the Moscow subculture is doubled. Shakri straddles the divide between belonging to the new upper-class end of the creative professional industry while being interested in, involved with, and representing the creative underground. Having been a journalist and being immersed in the upper echelon of the cultural elite, Amirkhanova is well-versed in the global grammar and is knowledgeable of the international industry's functionality. Entrenched in the ecosystem of media outlets, Amirkhanova is trained within the very globalized norms of glamour publications, making her steeped in the culture of the neoliberal media industry in Russia and beyond.

In an interview with Amirkhanova, "[Rambler] had the name, but [they] were struggling with the content" (Amirkhanova). Before accepting, Timur Akhmentov, who later became INRUSSIA.com's head designer, and Furqat Palvanzade, *IR's* other editor-in-chief, convinced Amirkhanova to give it a try. The three of them devised a "crazy editorial proposal" for INRUSSIA.com and sent it to Mamut, who accepted. The rest has supposedly been in their hands and the hands of the team. Like high-profile streetwear designer Gosha Rubchinskiy, Amirkhanova facilitates the creative production of the youth using her higher position of class and status. This exists as an unofficial yet common dynamic undergirding several new projects and startups from the 2000s onwards.

Therefore, Amirkhanova's relationship to and role within INRUSSIA.com reflects the overlap between the professionalized art scene and the unofficial one. As a participant in the Moscow subculture, from attending events and working with Rubchinskiy, she has befriended many young creatives and knows that through them she can access underground goods, considered normative in the West, such as marijuana, yet deemed highly illegal by official

state measures. Amirkhanova was selected by Alexander Mamut to spearhead INRUSSIA.com seeing as she represents the ideal crossover between cultural scenes.

Amirkhanova claims her acceptance of the project was contingent on being offered “complete freedom to do it in any way they liked” (Amirkhanova). Initially, she notes that their biggest challenge was laying down the groundwork explicitly enough to present this new project as “not another pro-Russian publication aimed at a Western audience, largely influenced by a political discourse,” when recruiting a team (Amirkhanova). In the recruitment process, Amirkhanova wanted to proclaim that the online journal was “in no way a part of a political agenda, but rather driven by the idea of using this space to talk about the things close to us,” in order to gather their preferred working team. In many ways this is evident in comparison to other existing “political” “youth” cultural enterprises in Russia today that are either purely pro-state (like that of RBTH.com) or a part of a more “traditional” model of political resistance – one more “legible” to the West, like the more sensationalizing media work of Pussy Riot.[23] The creative work produced by Pussy Riot can be considered a model embraced by the Western media culture precisely in that it fits the “dissident” model spawned by the Cold War bloc politic’s representation of Russia. Nonetheless, what INRUSSIA.com performs is different.

Shakri Amirkhanova reveals that their vision for INRUSSIA.com was to create “a world with no borders,” and to “find common minds like us around the world” in order to “come out of our shells into collaborative projects” (Amirkhanova). Amirkhanova wanted to build “new ways of communication” and to create their “own narrative for the future.” Already, a few very strong through-lines emerge, reflecting the motivations of interest to this thesis. Perhaps unknowingly, Amirkhanova sketches out INRUSSIA.com’s vision as infused with neoliberalism: a digital realm that depicts a seamless, borderless world without any outright political underpinnings. While she claims INRUSSIA.com separates itself from distinctly pro-Russian platforms (like that of RBTH), the next section will go in-depth regarding the layers of influence discernible in their negotiation of Soviet legacy, especially the alternative one, in content and of Western legibility in form.

The platform, its creative administrators, and the respective unofficial arts circle demonstrate an assertion to create their own narrative and to communicate as well as

[23] Russian feminist protest punk rock group based in Moscow founded in August 2011

collaborate across borders, particularly those of the ex-Soviet bloc. Given Amirkhanova's stance on narrativizing their world and "coming out of their shells," it is clear that the urge to represent their identity is ardent and self-conscious. The publication's overseers, Shakri Amirhanova and Furqat Palvandzade, have a non-Russianness that plays into the drive for representation at stake. While in grand parts disassociating from contemporary Russian nationalism, the platform works both within and relative to its dominating climate, which can be read as a political incentive to create a counter-narrative of Russia. In this way, although INRUSSIA.com diffuses association with any strict politics in their stance as well as with those of Russian nationalists, this geopolitical mélange and circumstance affects the subculture's need to come to terms with their articulations of identity relative to it. With the lack of visibility this scene has in both Western and dominant Russian discourse and media, the platform enacts a visibility of subcultural agency and representation. Within a structure of private ownership, an oligarch's relation to the national apparatus is entrenched. Therefore, while funded by the oligarch Mamut, INRUSSIA.com has become the most visible and coherent "mouthpiece" of the underground. With dominant Russian culture allotted official space, funds, and respectability, the subculture's ambivalent relationship to the mainstream is observable through INRUSSIA.com's projects, a platform urged to take shape especially following the events of the so-called Euromaidan. In order to understand the ideological position this journal came to occupy within this ecosphere we need to address its immediate geopolitical context, beyond the dynamics of post-Soviet economy.

Section 6: Euromaidan, *Turning Point in Cultural Becoming*

The impact of Euromaidan, as it's been known in Russia, on international political culture cannot be underestimated. Its role, however, in shaping contemporary cultural perceptions among Russia's youth has rarely been discussed as of yet. In late 2013, a wave of demonstrations and rise of civil unrest in Ukraine's capital Kiev came to be referred to as Euromaidan, a revolt committed to cutting Ukraine from its fraught cultural-historical connection to Russia. Exercised through a territorial tug-of-war over the republic of Crimea, Euromaidan resulted in the republic's annexation by Russia. The Crimean referendum, leading to its annexation, marks a moment that significantly furthered Russia's isolated geopolitical state, enhanced by the March 2014 economic sanctions the U.S., EU, and Canada imposed on Russia. These events were both triggered and greatly reinforced by the

current authoritarian regime, one characterized by a dominantly conservative and nationalist socio-cultural discourse in the country.

The geopolitical crisis of Euromaidan is therefore a decisive moment in the process of self-*re*definition in Russian cultural becoming. In attempts to narrativize the post-soviet youth culture, Euromaidan functions as a turning point in that the repercussion of its events amplified many of the forces characterizing the authoritarian and nostalgic rhetoric rampant in Russia today. And while this tendency has been visible on the level of the mainstream, state-sanctioned culture, it nonetheless had significant impact on the expression of informal cultures. It is worth unpacking the events that took place in greater detail to see how they have affected the post-Soviet cultural scene more generally, and its newly emerging subcultures, in particular.

Near the end of 2013, civic protests began taking place in Ukraine's capital of Kiev against the Yanukovych government's decision to "withhold from association with the European Union," becoming the revolution of Euromaidan (Grabowicz qtd. in Minakov, "Focus Ukraine," Wilsoncenter.org). Russia's response resulted in "the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in the Donbas," which caps off the trajectory of "hybrid post-Soviet existence" since independence in 1991 (Grabowicz qtd. in Minakov, "Focus Ukraine," Wilsoncenter.org). These events attempted to geopolitically sever relations between Ukrainian and Russian nation-states, while industries, variances of cultural production, histories, and relationalities between the people of either country had been deeply entangled for centuries. Ukraine's shift from "unaligned" to pro-European, and "hence a pro-democratic official self-designation (including ongoing efforts to join the EU and NATO)" then provoked a major crisis or "ideological contention" in the Russian nationalist movement with "competing claims of imperialism and ethnic homogeneity," over Soviet nationalism and Russian traditionalism, coming to the fore (Horvath 819).

The sanctions from the US and the EU as well as the "West's policies of enlarging both NATO and the EU eastward" have since contributed to Russia's sense of insecurity (Krastev and Holmes par. 10). At this stage in Russia's entrance into late capitalism, many of the country's leading enterprises, such as energy company Gazprom and its subsidiaries, had been globalized and lodged into (and therefore reliant on) the economy of the Western world. As foreign cooperation nullified following Euromaidan, Russian President Vladimir Putin focused on insulating the nation on economic, political, and cultural levels. As a result, a whole

series of culturally and politically repressive policies became markers of an ever-increasing authoritarianism, guided by nationalist ideologies and measures bent on isolationism. From the tightening of media censorship, the political repression and murder of dissident journalists, to the passing of an anti-gay legislature, as well as the open display of anti-European and anti-U.S. propaganda, Putin a drastically traditionalist stance in order to distinguish the nation on its own terms and separate it from any ideals of and affiliations with the progressive, liberal democracies of the West. Another one of these measures is the historical and cultural revisionism of Russia's Soviet past.

Steadily throughout Putin's reign in the late 1990s onwards, and particularly after the events of Euromaidan, Russian popular culture and mass media employed their Soviet roots to craft new tales of what "authentic" "Russianness" looks and sounds like (Lee 166). A blatant re-glorification of the country's Soviet legacy spread through popular culture, from national TV programming to political rhetoric in media. A range of TV shows, movies, and telefilms spawned myths about the past. The festive annual programming of *Old Songs about the Main Thing,* is an example of this early commercialized Soviet nostalgia. Airing in 1995 on ORT, or Channel One,[24] as a New Year's special, the show consisted of contemporary pop artists restaging classic Soviet songs. Having garnered high ratings, the show went on to become a part of ORT's routine programming. When cinema "suffered public apathy" in the mid-1990s, as Russia's de-nationalizing industry played catch-up in replacing the previous predominance of Hollywood imports, TV became the most popular mass media, with six nationally owned channels making up most of the primetime schedule by the 2000s (Lee 167-168).

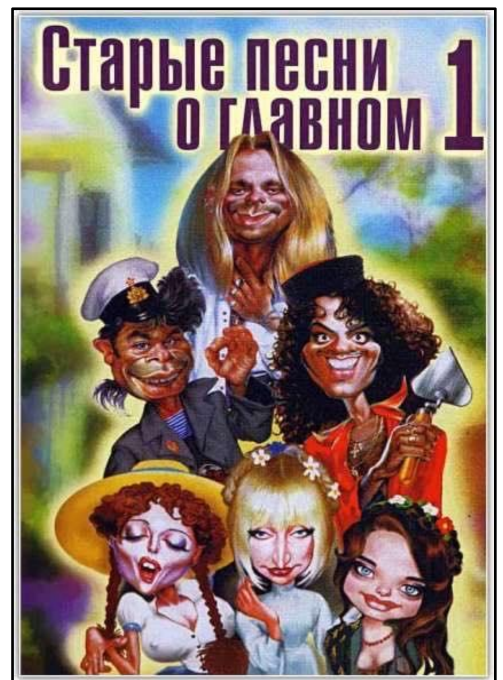


Fig. 19, (above): poster for *Old Songs about the Main Thing*

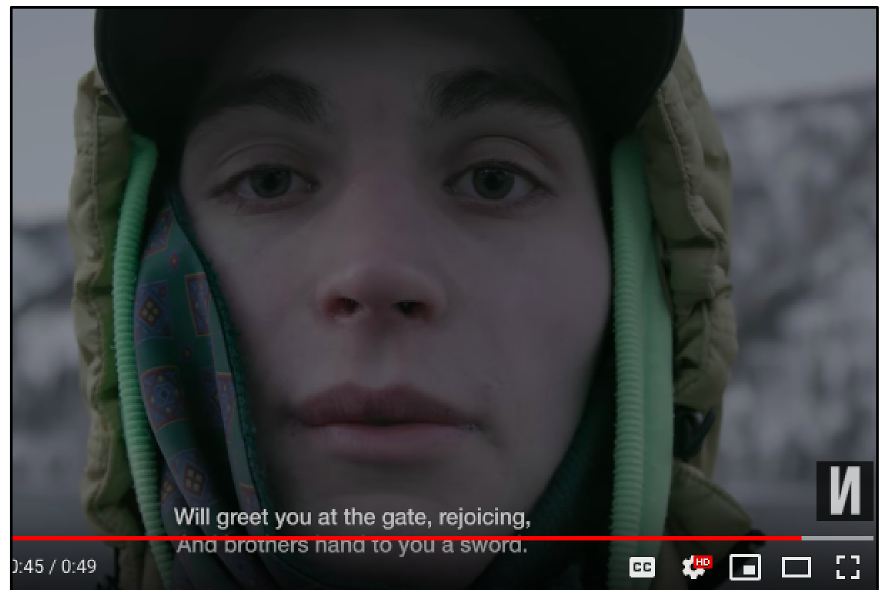
Songs from Soviet times became more pervasive in the milieu of Russia's general public, making otherwise outdated releases more accessible to the youth growing up with such TV programming. Certain Soviet songs have since been incorporated as samples in contemporary electronic mixes devised by the Moscow subculture. INRUSSIA.com itself

[24]The first television channel to broadcast in the Russian Federation

commissioned the scene’s DJs to compile said sets for their Soundcloud page (their profile on a free digital music platform). Russian pop music of the late 1990s and early 2000s has also been re-tooled by people in the scene, taken on in a parodical way. The mainstream tracks of Alyona Apina, Filip Kirkorov and more, singers who performed Soviet classics on *Old Songs,* are often stripped down to their high-paced backbone and familiar beat and then used in low-bro sets, characterized by an absurdist flare. For instance, a mix compiled by Moscow underground artist Galia Chikiss for INRUSSIA.com’s Soundcloud page is titled tellingly “80s Soviet Time Machine”. Chikiss samples songs by, for instance, beloved 1980s Soviet composer Yury Chernavsky, like *Belaya Dver* (White Door), which is from the comedic musical *Sezon Chudes* (1985, Season of Miracles), a song performed by Russian singer Alla Pugacheva, a pop music icon who has starred in the aforementioned rerun on ORT. Chikiss also includes soundtracks from Soviet animations, such as Vladimir Martynov who composed for master animator Valery Ugarov’s playful grade-school anecdotes in the mini-series Na Zadney Parte (On the Back Desk, 1978-85).

Interestingly enough, one of the counter-cultural figures in the late Soviet scene of Leningrad, a scene of major influence on today’s underground, is a drag queen who used the name Alla Pugacheva as his pseudonym (Amirkhanova and Palvanzade 11). Given Russia’s aggressive institutionalized anti-gay policies and homophobic attitudes, the appropriation of this Soviet-Russian musician, who reigns as one of the most financially successful Soviet performers, demonstrates the very duality that INRUSSIA.com and the Moscow underground respond to or work with. An officially-endorsed Soviet repertoire, subverted in the late alternative Soviet arts scene, and has since been taken up by the Moscow subculture, celebrated unabashedly in its queer form, both in musical citations as well as in creative projects (11). For later we will see INRUSSIA.com’s collaborative project with Gosha Rubchinskiy “Saint Petersburg” includes a zine that details all such queer figures from the late Soviet alternative arts and rave scene.

A film contributing to the stage of dominant Russian ideologies for decades to come is that of Russia's highest-grossing film in 2000, Nikita Mikhalkov's *Siberian Barber.* Set amidst the backdrop of Czarist Russia and modeled after a Hollywood epic, the film paints an exhaustive portrait of a Russian national hero. Director Mikhalkov's mission was to animate a myth of national heroism in order "to regain a spirit of [imperialist] patriotism that bonded the Soviet Union in the past" (Beumers 875; Lee 166). The film has since been re-aired regularly on leading TV channels, like NTV (a channel owned by Gazprom, Russia's top oil corporation). Several young Moscow creatives, like former Gosha Rubchinskiy model and Siberian skateboarder Ivan Schemakin, report having grown up watching such programming and cites *Siberian Barber* to be one of his favorite films, calling it an "old Russian classic in its depiction of love and honor" (Schemakin). In a short INRUSSIA.com documentary[25] on a behind-the-scenes casting call for Gosha Rubchinskiy's A/W17 fashion show, opens with the same model Schemakin reciting the poem "Deep in Siberian Mines" by beloved national poet Alexander Pushkin, as he meanders through his hometown in Krasnoyarsk (Siberia). Here the Russian imperial past intermingles with the post-Soviet present, as



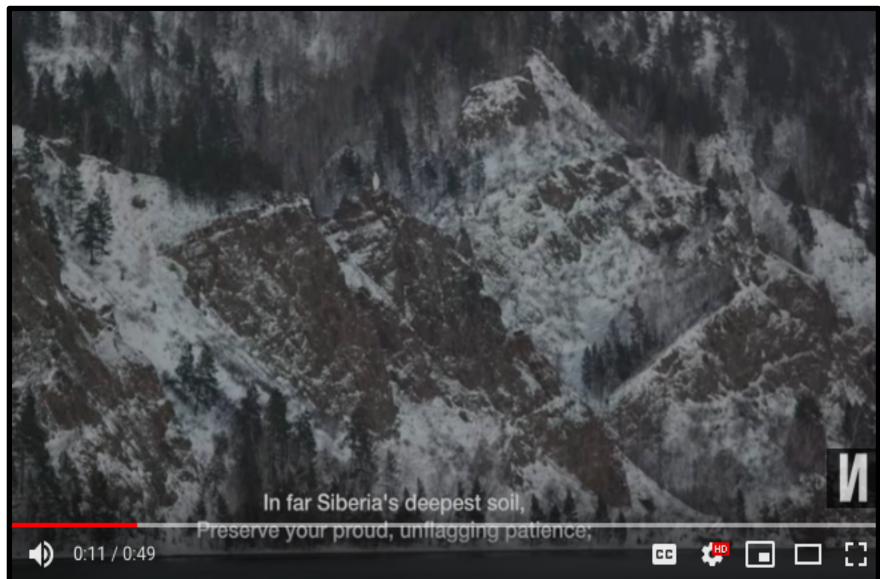


Fig. 20-21 (top-bottom): screenshots from IR's YouTube teaser: "Journey to Kaliningrad" (Jan 2017)

[25]INRUSSIA.com's "Journey to Kaliningrad w/ Gosha Rubchinskiy" teaser to *APART*: https://youtu.be/McUkz6EwmuE

Rubchinskiy's streetwear line is enriched in its presentation with nostalgic odes to worn-torn, heroic masculinity through prolific poets of Russia's past.

On a macro level, Euromaidan demarcates another transitional period in Russia in which the nation had to reorganize its institutional ties with Ukraine as well as its positionality to the West, and therefore to itself, reviving strategies that facilitate the construction of a new national identity and serve the defensive agenda or reactionary impulse of isolationism for Russia. The history of the past two decades for Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union can be conceived as undergoing an accelerated transition from the former kind of totalitarianism, of Soviet Russia, to the latter, of Putin's Russia (Imre 2). It is important to consider how this transitional period, which included the rise of new authoritarian structures, played out and was instigated by globalized digital media landscape. I argue that within this continuous transformation of Russian culture towards greater cultural and political isolationism along with its unabashed celebration of nationalism, nostalgia comes to play a crucial organizing role. At the same time, when it comes to cultural practices, this isolation in many ways remains merely an ideological position in an environment otherwise characterized by a global flow of digital culture.

Specifically, public culture in certain postcommunist regions underwent a "partial privatization and globalization of formerly state-owned television" in which there was a "corporate transformation" of the overall media landscape (Imre 2-3). This means that on an official level, in terms of ownership, it may appear as if media is privately owned and, therefore, not under the government's control, or that the "state," the nation's governing, political system is no longer as involved in the production or distribution of information and entertainment in the country. However, the disintegration of the socialist apparatus, its nationalized enterprises, and state-ruled institutions left a vacuum that the country's fast-rising "businessmen" foisted themselves into by the mid 90s. Now that capital has become the ruling principle of the nation, as is "welcomed by nation-states aspiring to share in the economic and ideological profits," the richest men and their corporations have become Putin's governing party (Imre 3).

Moreover the major Russian TV channel NTV broadcasts across the entire territory of the Russian Federation as well as on specialty channels in the US, producing news, drama, and entertainment programming. Initially, in the 1990s, NTV was owned by oligarchs. Today, NTV is a subsidiary of the oil company Gazprom, or, in other words, it has the indirect and direct supervision of Putin's government (Lee 173). Gazprom is Russia's largest corporation

with revenues of $97.6-billion (Chepkemoi, "Economics"). Based in Moscow, Gazprom is responsible for the extraction, production, transportation, and sale of natural gas as well as the generation and marketing of heat and electric power. The company's full name is *Gazovaya Promyshlennost,* meaning gas industry in Russian. Although Gazprom is a private, global company, the government of Russia is the majority stakeholder. Gazprom also holds majority stakes in other companies and has subsidiaries in the industrial sectors of media, aviation, and finance (Chepkemoi, "Economics").

Therefore, in this way, corporatized media and communication channels have remained a state function of Putin's Russia. With the world more broadly at a stage of late "technocapitalism," in which capital and technology as well as the information and entertainment industries merge, spectacle culture overhauled the integral domains in society, from the Internet to politics, wherein the "spread of commercial television; and the infusion of education, politics, and other public spheres with entertainment and consumerism" resulted in the ability for Russia's proliferation of Soviet legacy and conservative nationalism through popular culture, which is equally packed with consumerist trends and tendencies, led by the West's standards as a leader in capitalist fields (Kellner; Imre 2013).

The workings of state-promulgated nostalgia started in the mid-1990s, redefining the meaning of the country's Soviet past. Since then, the effect of the nostalgia-apparatus has soaked through the tiers of Russia's cultural fabric, trickling down to the experience of culture for the youth, who appropriate the Soviet revision in their own way and for different ends. While the community does not overtly align with the mainstream ideals of the nation, the comprehensive scope and cohesive property of nostalgia has evidently reached the underground. INRUSSIA.com's digital stories, music productions, and fashion promotions demonstrate the *tusovka's* mangled Soviet undertaking, with sometimes firm intentions to subvert the legacy, while at other times celebrating its tropes. More common is the attention to select aspects of this history. Most cases appear to be foiled re-appropriations of the nation's mainstream depiction of Soviet nostalgia or appropriations of specifically countercultural Soviet elements (like of the avant-garde arts movements of Timur Novikov or the post-punk music scene more broadly). The subculture's Soviet uptake, in this way, is an inextricable byproduct of growing up in a nostalgia-ridden popular culture.

As detailed before, an evident example of this is the underground's sampling of Soviet music. Another mix commissioned by INRUSSIA.com, by artist MuJuice, is affectionately titled

“Motherland” (*Rodina*) and opens with a sample from a composer awarded “For Merit to the Fatherland,” Eduard Artemyev’s song “Recollections” that bleeds into a post-punk track “Electric Bird” by Soviet avant-garde band Terrarium (or Aquarium). Founder of John’s Kingdom and leading DJ in the Moscow subculture Buttechno (or Pavel Milyakov) who has collaborated plenty with designer Rubchinskiy, uses late Soviet artist Vasily Shumov’s (Center’s frontman) song “Electricity Meter” (*Elektricheskiy Schetchik* in Russian) in his major track *Super Siziy King*. Perhaps given Milyakov’s Rubchinskiy connection, Buttechno has since been acknowledged by a global techno audience, by being featured in London-based music magazine and global community platform Resident Advisor. Although RA is considered a mouthpiece of a transnational underground and speaks to a scattered, niche following of electronica fans, it is through this platform that Buttechno penetrated small music scenes in the West.

Therefore, in respect to the impact of Euromaidan as a turning point for Russian cultural belonging, the youth, formerly enthusiastic about imitating Western culture, is now more compelled to focus inwards and towards Russia’s past. As a market, steadily throughout the last 5 years, Russian consumers have turned more substantially to domestically produced clothing (Gurova and Morozova 705). This is novel seeing as in Russia, imported clothes have had a “long history of being symbolically more valuable than domestically produced goods” (Gurova and Morozova 705). The subculture represents this trend, in their own way, prominently.

Gosha Rubchinskiy, who arose from the St. Petersburg rave scene of the late 1990s, has since become the most visible and profiting figure of this Moscow underground, has designed T-shirts with slogans stylized after, for instance, Soviet conceptual artist Erik Bulatov’s sots-art paintings. Copying the lettering and original formatting of Bulatov’s paintings, the word *vrag* (the Russian word “enemy”) is posted across Rubchinskiy’s high-end T-shirts. Otherwise, late Soviet counter-cultural icon and pioneer of the radical rave scene in St. Petersburg, leader of the *Novije Hudojniki* (New Artists) movement, Timur Novikov and his *eternal sun* motif notable across his oeuvre of paintings, is included upon an array of designer items devised and manufactured by Rubchinskiy. The film title of the 1987 cult classic of the

Soviet avant-garde, ACCA (ASSA) is also featured on one of Rubchinskiy's short-sleeve designs.

Kedr Livanskiy (Russian for "Lebanese Cedar") is the moniker of the singer and producer Yana Kedrina, who hails from the Maryino district of Moscow. Kedr is considered the most prominent lo-fi electronic pop artist of this *tusovka.* Kedr's music and her awareness of its cultural influences encapsulates the dialectical relationship to 1980s Soviet culture within the underground today. While the cultural production and artistic practices of this *tusovka* are skirted off from major venues in Russia, the community is attuned to the socio-cultural specificity of their context. In an interview with the online Russian edition of *The Village,* Kedr notes that her break-beat, neo-folk electro sound is informed majorly by the kraut-rock, ambient Soviet bands of the 1980s. This includes the shoegaze, post-punk rock of Bravo, Kino, Aquarium, Televizor, and more. Kedr hints at the Western to Soviet dualism of the 1980s that speaks to the state of unofficial cultural production today by claiming her craft had long been saturated with Russian facsimiles of American and European rock music, for whether "it was The Cure, David Bowie, or Joy Division, there was a Russian counterpart" that she followed fanatically (Nilov, "Favorite Place," village.ru).

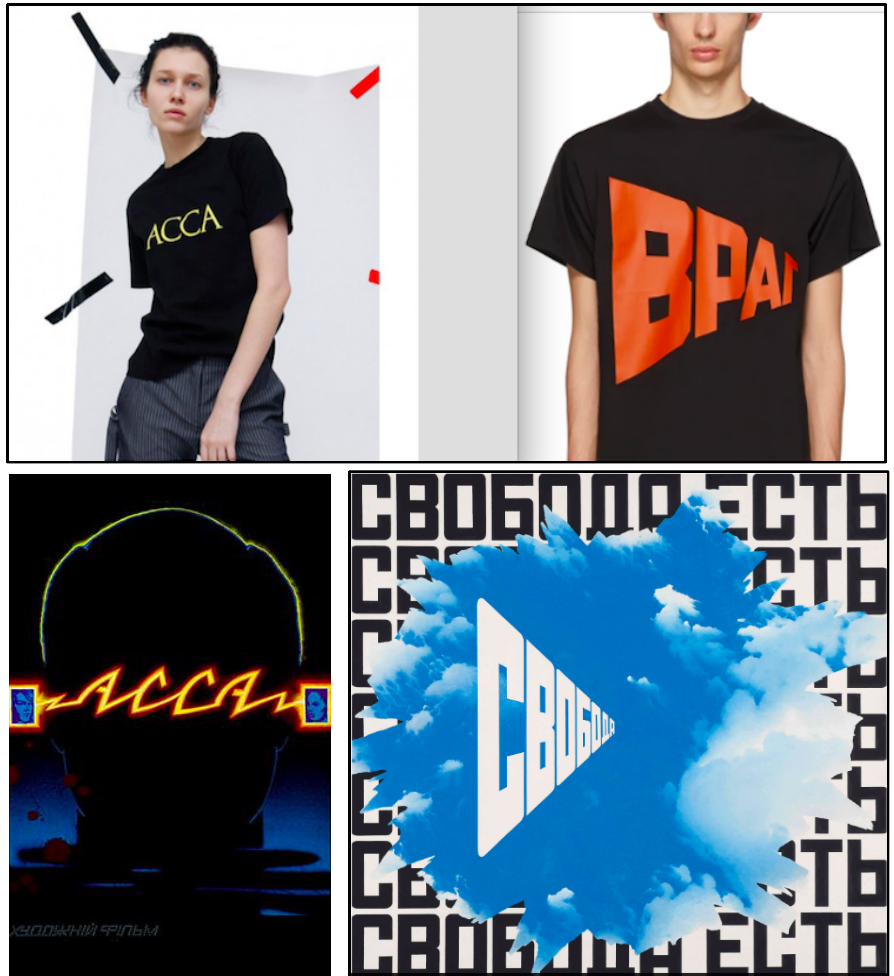


Fig. 22 (top): Rubchinskiy's clothing line
Fig. 23 (bottom, left): ASSA film poster (1987)
Fig. 24 (bottom, right): Bulatov's painting (1975)

By regarding INRUSSIA.com and its actors, one sees new media's potential in providing a "pivotal discursive space" wherein political and national identity building is tested

(Rutten et al.). Similar to how scholars Rutten, Fedor, and Zvereva frame the transcultural scope of "post-socialist memory" inherent in varying digital mediations seen in "web wars" (online forum debates), it is the transnational transportability of new media that underlines the significance of creating digital narratives for an underrepresented group of young creatives (Kuntsman; Rutten et al. 26). National boundaries and identity are "re-imagined online," seeing as cyberspace excavates an open-ended site where national feelings are projected and ideals are played out (Kuntsman; Rutten et al. 26).

INRUSSIA.com does not proclaim the construction of a political or national identity as part of the intent undergirding the unit's digital production. However, their web space is not entirely de-politicized (Rutten et al. 26). The political resonance of INRUSSIA.com's projects or online narratives arises from contextual conditions as well as an impulse to discover their group agency when crafting a subcultural representation of themselves. The role of Soviet memory in the digital mediations of an informal post-soviet group elucidates the commemorative power of the digital as well as certain shortcomings in actualizing collective agency across the ex-Soviet bloc. While capitalizing on the medium's transnational capacities, INRUSSIA.com incorporates culturally-specific tropes and avant-garde aesthetics of the Soviet 1980s in the process of making themselves, the non-West, visible to the West. This is detectable seeing as INRUSSIA.com's mode of address is in English, although it features distinctly "post-Soviet" content. This co-mingling of opposing forces is a particularity in the context of a young Russian arts circle. A Russian subculture taking on elements of their Soviet past is a new phenomenon that was dismissed by the young generation even in the recent past.

Section 7: INRUSSIA.com with Gosha Rubchinskiy:

Soviet Counterculture and Russian Queerness at the crux of the East and West

For a group of young creatives in Russia, managing the long-lasting flood of Western cultural and commercial influence along with recent, state-level isolationist measures, have now had to stare at the heart of their Soviet past to find themselves and to mark their identity. As argued before, the state-prompted reinsertion of Soviet culture into contemporary Russian popular culture has made this nearly unavoidable. However, I argue that the underground scene is more mindful in their uptake of this state publicity, for means of reclaiming their history in the name of owning their cultural specificity. The events following the Crimean referendum

did indeed propel a more inward look at the available sources of inspiration for the informal creative class, however not on a wholly nationalist impulse. This is evident in the nuanced way their creative production reflects the Soviet nostalgia as well as the intent behind many of the collaborations — to unite young creators scattered across fraught ex-Soviet geographies.

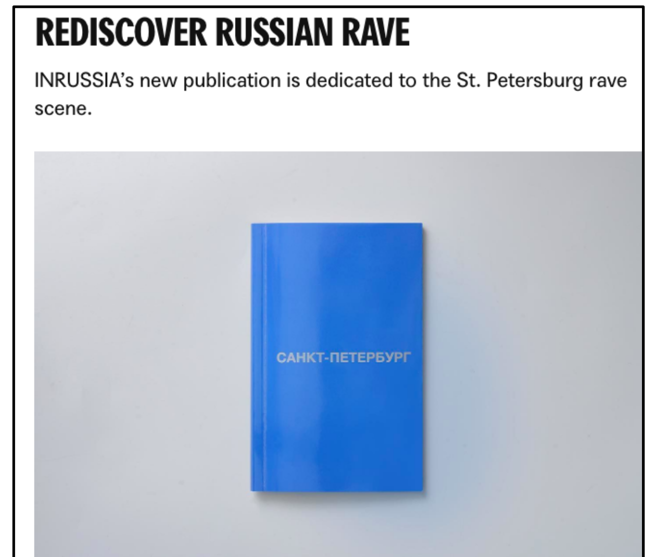
While certain practices end up more as attempts to bridge a transcultural solidarity, the agency and desire is palpable and separates the group from the dominant temperament in the nation. Furthermore, the Soviet inflections profuse in the creative production, of INRUSSIA.com for instance, are of the alternative aspects of the former regime: its queer history and countercultural practices. The following section primarily looks at INRUSSIA.com's largest collaborative project to bring these above aspects to the fore, particularly those of Soviet alternativity and queerness. The section following continues with a selection of smaller projects that demonstrate a range of attempts at an ex-Soviet transcultural solidarity, following the Crimean referendum. The last section touches upon the more technological aspect of Soviet history that has informed the infrastructure and aesthetic of the scene, in its materiality, more than in thought —a less contentious influence pillaring the group's reclaimed identity.

In the summer of 2017, INRUSSIA.com released an article "Rediscover Russian Rave" introducing their second ever publishing project: *САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГ* or Saint Petersburg. The project was a collaboration between the online platform and designer Gosha Rubchinskiy, and took the form of online articles, a print and digitized zine, as well as a short documentary film titled *APART*. This collaboration paralleled the designer's SS18 fashion show in St. Petersburg at "DK Svyazi," otherwise known as the Palace of Culture for Communication Workers. DK Svyazi was formerly a Soviet concert hall that hosted underground rock shows throughout the 1980s and was the site of Russia's first rave, organized by cult artist Timur Novikov in 1989 (Amirkhanova and Palvanzade 10-11). During the time of the Soviet Union, the building was a movie theatre and library that in its later life served as a performance venue and recording studio during the formative years of Leningrad's rock bands, such as Kino, becoming a regular spot for Novikov's parties (10-11). Already, the ode to the Soviet past is prominent – not only in the reference or symbolic appropriation of Soviet iconography, but physically, infrastructurally.

Rubchinskiy's fashion show took place in the Western-most port and what has historically been the cultural hub of the country, St. Petersburg. Considered the "gateway to

the West” around the fall of the Iron Curtain, this geographic feature of St. Petersburg is what facilitated the development of the avant-garde arts scene towards the end of the era (Amirkhanova and Palvanzade 10-11). This is before the state capital of Moscow became the epicenter of today’s underground, given its unifying power that it gained by becoming the country’s global business hub.

Tied in thematically, the show debuted Rubchinskiy’s collection inspired by early Russian rave aesthetics. Vintage tracksuits and football gear, layered hoodies and wide-legged jeans, as well as sportswear such as fluorescent jerseys, were eclectically matched, foreshadowing the FIFA World Cup scheduled in Moscow for the following summer of 2018. Moscow underground’s electronica king Buttechno devised the show’s lo-fi, trance-like soundtrack and together with Rubchinskiy they created a smoke-filled light show. Like a futuristic tunnel, the installation of music and lighting took their guests into their version of an experiential past. The print zine INRUSSA.com published was distributed at the show. It featured original photographs of 1990’s iconic drag queen Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe performing as Marilyn Monroe at the same Palace of Culture.



Together, the collection and zine narrativize the onset of Soviet Russia’s underground rave culture of the late 80s and 90s. Through a compilation of archival images and essays, the limited-run zine traces the advent of “the underground cultural revolution” that rose “from the ashes of Soviet Russia” (Yurchak qtd. “The Rise of the St. Petersburg Rave”). It serves as “a contextual guide” to this rave history, through translated testimonies and exclusive interviews with some of the movement’s key figures (DJs, artists, club promoters). The zine contains original photos from nights at the legendary clubs of Tunnel and Planetarium in St. Petersburg – breeding grounds for the late Soviet arts scene.

The zine opens with the first-ever translation of countercultural icon Novikov’s essay “How I Created the Russian Rave,” an artist christened as the catalyst of the movement and founder of the *New Academy of Fine Arts,* an academy and artist studio that functioned as a

self-organized alternative to state-funded institutions in the USSR (Amirkhanova and Palvanzade 10-11). The assemblage of written extracts mapping the scene's development also features writing from an expert on post-Soviet history in the Western context, comparative cultural anthropologist Dr. Alexei Yurchak.

INRUSSIA.com's *САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГ* (Saint Petersburg) publishing project encapsulates the impulses detectable in the unofficial Moscow subculture: to find a part of their nation's history they can relate to and capitalize on. This re-emergence of 1980s Soviet arts influence in contemporary underground projects shares an affinity with the clashing cultural influences present in the "non-aligned" culture of a late Soviet avant-garde movement (Stodolsky 141). The radical rave scene in St. Petersburg and Timur Novikov's "New Academy" movement of *Novije Hudojniki* or New Artists has come to play an important role in the imaginary of the contemporary youth subculture and was characterized by a similar "double distinction from the mainstream currents of the time" (Stodolsky 141). In the late 1980s, as Soviet borders grew porous due to Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms,[26] both political and symbolic contexts of nonofficial cultural production began to shift drastically (Yurchak qtd. "The Rise of the St. Petersburg Rave"). Throughout the decade, *Novije Hudojniki* (New Artists) evolved from an apolitical radicalism, which negotiated the "stratified field" of *official* Soviet culture, to being in "official unofficial *opposition*" (Stodolsky 141). With the gradual exposure to the West, at first the unofficial youth culture of the New Artists' Leningrad[27] milieu popularized the latest Western trends, demonstrating an affinity for Pop Art, Western conceptualism, and postmodern practices (Stodolsky 139). However, by the 1990s, the circle found the "Western

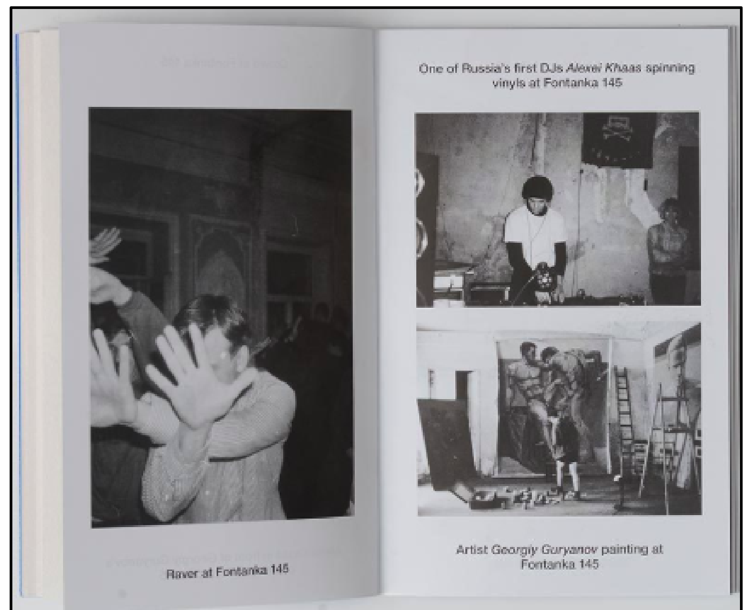


Fig. 25 (page prior): screenshot of INRUSSIA.com's article
Fig. 26 (above) scan from St. P zine

[26] *perestroika*: Soviet leader Gorbachev's political movement of reformation within the Communist Party of the USSR throughout the 1980s, which promoted the glasnost ("openness") policy reform.
[27] St. Petersburg was known as Leningrad before Soviet collapse in 1991

ideology of political correctness" to be unfitting to their moment of transition and to the type of radical discourse the New Artists believed was necessary and specific to the marginalized populations in the USSR at the time (139).

Dismissing Western modern and postmodern aesthetics while steeped in the heat of the Soviet party's undoing in state institutions and ideology, the circle of New Artists inhabited the "prime intermediary between the East and West" (Stodolsky 143). Refusing the ideological confinement of belonging to the "anarchistic underground or politically correct liberalism" dominant at the time, the movement complicated its own international and apolitical legacies while also invigorating nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary Silver Age through, for instance, reclaiming Djagilev's *World of Art* in their radical creative experiments (Stodolsky 141).

Fig. 27 (above): youth from Novikov's New Artists circle partying at Planetarium in Leningrad, scan of INRUSSIA.com's zine САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГ, 2017

INRUSSIA.com and its surrounding community also situates itself at the crux of the East and West. The scene appropriates their alternative Soviet heritage in the name of their Western visibility, and in many ways within Western form: language of address, "choice" of technological mediums (i.e. Instagram), overarching musical influence (rock and now trap), as well as relationship to Western goods (i.e. clothing brands, foods). However, now is the first time this generation prefers their cultural and historical specificity to that of the West.

In the opening pages of INRUSSIA.com and Rubchinskiy's zine "Saint Petersburg" is the infamous Novikov essay, in which the inception of the rave scene is told through a personal account. It was when in Riga for a musical festival around 1985-86, with Sergei

Kuryokhin of the new wave Soviet band *Pop Mechanics* and Georgiy Guryanov of legendary post-punk band *Kino* that Novikov met a festival performer, Berlin DJ Westbam (Maximilian Lenz), who was "creating new music out of old music, more commonly referred to as "remixing" (Amirkhanova and Palvanzade 16). Novikov claims to have been grappling with this practice himself throughout the 1980s, having thought of it as "recomposition," a practice with which he produced closely aligning sound with his group *New Composers.* It was around 1988, as the curtain steadily dropped throughout perestroika and Soviets were first admitted to go abroad, that Novikov visited several hubs of club culture, in New York, Paris, Berlin, and London (16). Upon noting the music, fashion, and behavior he was adamant in bringing this experience back home. It was then that Novikov and Guryanov decided to host the first party in the country featuring a DJ, inviting their acquaintance Westbam's friend Röttger and DJ Janis Krauklis from Riga, and renting out the aforementioned Palace of Cultural Communication Workers in St. Petersburg.

Designing the space in bizarre colliding fashions of discotheques, they organized sets of house music with components of techno. Additionally, Novikov and Guryanov devised a show for the opening night titled "The Voice of Alternative Female Singers," in which (male) performance artist Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, drag queen Alla Pugacheva, and an unknown performer under the pseudonym "Sandra" led the night's main programming, weaving in and out of DJ sets. Novikov also specifies the rave's "preferential treatment of sexual minorities," claiming the admission prices were half off for any queer individual (Amirkhanova and Palvanzade 16). It is this story that is on the first pages of INRUSSIA.com and Rubchinskiy's САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГ (Saint Petersburg) zine.

Fig. 28 (above): scan of artist Maryshev-Monroe in drag, from *САНКТ* zine, p. 56, 2017

At the time that the publishing project was developed (2017), only a few years had passed since Russia's "gay propaganda law" was enacted in 2013. To lead a project with such overt queer sensibilities in the context of a dominantly homophobic climate was radical

and perhaps was another plea for recognition from the dismisive West, seeing as the project itself (in English) was geared towards their Western counterparts. On grounds, in Russia, Gosha Rubchinskiy's homosexual orientation is not lauded, even amidst the scene, though it is widely accepted by the creatives. Furthermore, the scene has neither taken part in the protests that gay activists in Russia have organized nor taken a stance to preach for gay rights in any explicit form or fight for the state's acceptance of homosexuality. Instead, within the country, it has been a hushed inclusion of queerness, while in interviews for Western media channels, like Vice's i-D, the scene is more vocal in acknowledging homosexuality.

Many of Gosha Rubchinskiy's muses are skateboarders from the regions. Several have been drafted to serve in the Russian military, such as the previously mentioned Siberian skater Ivan Schemakin, and on a surface level, they demonstrate more traditionally masculine expressions of Russianness. However, below the surface, there is a delicate pervasiveness of queerness, in the scene[28]. Even the "straight" skateboarders that belong to the subculture, *queer* their appearances, riding it off as style: sporting their mom's cut bell-bottom jeans and painting their nails. The founder of aforementioned skate collective *ABSURD*, Pavel Kuznetsov, identifies as straight, yet has arrived to an event at NII riding his skateboard in a skirt.

Fig. 29 (on right): scanned polaroid of Ivan Schemakin queering his appearance, taken by me, summer 2017.

[28] Photograph of Ivan Schemakin queering his appearance, taken by me.

Kuznetsov has also designed the skate label's stickers with drawings of an androgynous, high-heeled figure on a skateboard. The subculture's choice to not be vocally political on matters of queerness should not be posited as homophobic. More so, it relates to the question of what it means to be political in Russia. Similar to what founder Shakri Amhirkhanova stressed in the recruitment process of INRUSSIA.com's team, the scene does not take on loud political stances. Perhaps this is a derivative of being over-politicized following the country's socialist emergence, or of being discouraged by the grip and length of Putin's regime, and in hopes of keeping a low-profile in the conservative nation. Furthermore, the scene separates themselves from the activists that do exist in Russia, who are often shamed and at risk on a public level. There are no projects on INRUSSIA.com that touch upon gay rights.

Fig. 30 (above): screenshot from *Absurd's* Instagram profile.

While the scene does not announce nor parade their alternativity in the country, instead they exist in it together fully, although, more or less, under the radar. They practice queer sensibilities amidst each other and then present that sensibility to the West. Despite the scene's return to their Soviet roots, and their diminished admiration for the West, they still seem to desire a visible recognition from the West, but one that is not sensationalized. As Russia's authoritarianism grows, so does the overall demonization of the nation from the West (Krastev and Holmes, "Russia's Aggressive Isolationism"). Perhaps not wanting to belong to the extreme and pitied portrayals of Russian homosexual sufferance, the people in the scene practice queerness and inclusivity between themselves as well as a style or fashion sense to the West, rather than overtly and politically in the country. The queer proclivity that does emerge is packaged as the new "post-Soviet" look.

One of the only instances in the media that speaks to Gosha Rubchinskiy's queerness is a I-D Vice interview in 2015 with some of Rubchinskiy's models who do articulate how the Russian "media imposes patriarchal and homophobic installations" and "how the conservative society plays into it," with model Vladimir Vanenkov admitting, "gay people are seen as

destroying the traditional belief in the eyes of Russians" (Vice[29] as fetishizing extremes of Russianness). With Vanenkov himself being gay, he is one of the few who more actively discuss the topic. However, even a straight (now Instagram famous) model from the regions, Sever, in the same interview claims that if he were to wear a skirt he would be considered crazy and believes that attitude is wrong. For the sake of style, at the least, many members of the scene vouch for openness in outlook.

Section 7: "Post-Soviet" Ideal and Forging of Transcultural Solidarity

The next set of projects by INRUSSIA.com reflect the community's insecure drive to create a diverse, yet culturally specific representation of themselves. In attempts to display their legitimacy, the topics are wishfully set across ex-Soviet bloc lines, however, betray an imperialistic approach to and treatment of Russianness. Or, otherwise, present a displaced focus, in which the set point of reference across projects is towards the West. While I do not define INRUSSIA.com's work to be wholly as such, these examples demonstrate the complicated process of reclaiming heritage and cultivating belonging. Perhaps grieving the loss in transcultural alliance, INRUSSIA.com's projects spawn a novel group identity.

In the bright photo-essay titled "Crossing Generations Through Theater," a team of leading Muscovite actors and directors head to Lake Cirma, near the Latvian town of Rezekne, for a ten-day workshop, to "relive the youths of their parents in the Latvian wilderness." The piece tells of Laboratory ABC collective's first theatrical experiment. The online article's high-resolution photographs depict the lush terrain of this ex-Soviet state, while the writing is marked by sweeping statements about Russia's cultural prestige in regards to its theatre history, opening with a quote from the lab's curator:

[29] Vice: one of the sole, main Western (founded in Montreal, based in NYC) platforms that covers and excessively exoticizes the Moscow subculture, producing sensationalized depictions of ongoings (e.g. a series extremes cases of homophobia, selecting exclusively a gay protest on Russia's military day as a way in, which further alienates post-Soviet communities and queer efforts.)

"Every theater in the world works in accordance to the Stanislavsky method, whether they know it or not."

Right off the bat, the article brings attention to the whereabouts of director Ilya Bocharnikov's professional life: stationed between Russia, Latvia, the U.S., and teaching at Harvard University's theater department. Given his work in the West, the article announces his legitimacy and valuable cross-cultural belonging. Bocharnikov goes on to claim "Russia is a theatre nation" and posits this perspective in line with its Western counterpart, explaining that while Russian theatre places more value on "repertoire," in the U.S., "commercial theatre takes the spotlight" (Novikova par. 1, "Crossing Generations").

Fig. 31 (page prior) + Fig. 32 (above): screenshots of Yulia Novikova's photographs in her "Crossing Generations" article on INRUSSIA.com

The residency staged a piece based on a woman's labor experience in the Soviet 1980s. All in all, set upon a present-day site of an ex-Soviet state, the article does not expand on nor engage more concretely with the geography nor politics nor history, focusing more on the acting exercises and briefly referencing the Soviet Era of Stagnation. The article integrates a contemporary reimagining of Soviet experience, valorizing the motherland's cultural craft, without confronting the critical reality of said location and its historical implications, instead, focusing on delineating its value in accordance to the US.

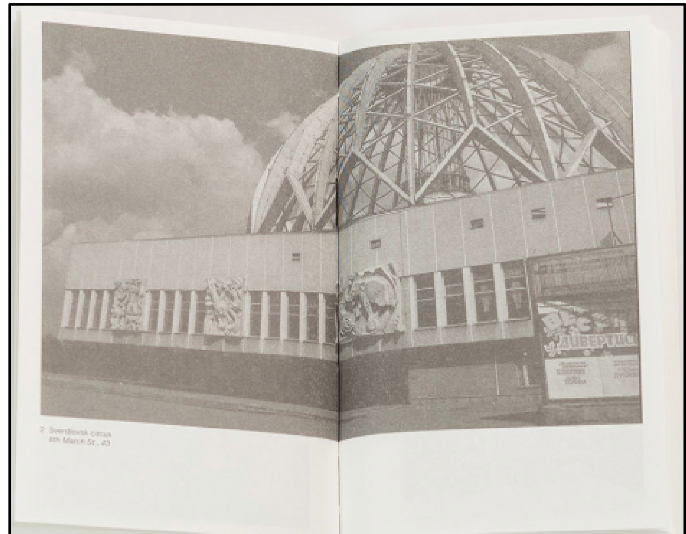
Another photo-heavy article titled, "Story-telling From the Mountains," covers Nishan Hagop Paparia's "return" to Yerevan. Russian journalist Grigor Atanesian covers Paparia's story. Born in America and of Armenian and Syrian descent, Paparia moved to Armenia in 2011 when *Tumo* opened, otherwise known as the *Center for Creative Technologies* in Yerevan, to teach young Armenian creatives game development, robotics, and web-design. The transcultural mix is foregrounded. The article illustrates *Tumo* as set against a "backdrop of Transcaucasian favelas," as looking like the "Soviet pioneers' palaces" if the USSR "had survived into the 21st century and its Minister of Economic Affairs was Elon Musk." The

Fig. 33 (above): Alexey Ponomarchuk's photo of the zine from "Echoes from the Ural Capital" online article, (title is Cyrillic for Yekaterinburg).
Fig. 34 (below): scan from zine of Yeltsin center

reference points that this article assumes are revealing; they range from Soviet shrines to popular figures of the contemporary Western world. That is how meaning is connoted and value is attributed in the context of their creative production.

Furthering prior themes of alternative Soviet nostalgia, "Echoes From the Ural Capital" is a short essay and a digitized zine that introduces the platform's second collaborative publishing project (2018), again with Gosha Rubchinskiy, about the "long-forgotten gems of Yekaterinburg – from its 1980s rock movement to Boris Yeltsin." The essay begins by describing the symbolic importance of Yekaterinburg in the name of Rubchinskiy's latest fashion show:

> Yekaterinburg occupies a nodal point in Russia's history. Here, the execution of the Romanov family put an end to the Russian Empire; and here, the early political successes of Boris Yeltsin helped give rise to the Russian Federation. Designer Gosha Rubchinskiy, inspired by the city's symbolic role, chose it as the stage for his FW 18 Collection release (2018).



The project introduces another Russian city – one not familiar to a Western audience. This time, however, the rave and queer elements are not foregrounded. Instead, a more nostalgic ode to early Russian rock, Yeltsin, and Yekaterinburg – where the country's cultural history is of focus, rather than its alternativity. The blurb is followed by scanned images from a zine published by INRUSSIA.com that chronicles Yekaterinburg's "1980s subcultures that inspired the designer's latest collection" ("Echoes From the Ural Capital"). The brief online article reports the event, summarizes the context, and debuts the interrelated projects: Gosha's new collection, the event of the fashion show itself, and INRUSSIA.com's latest publishing project.

The piece specifies that Rubchinskiy's FW18 took place at another national heritage site: the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center. Opened in 2015, the Yeltsin Center is as a social, cultural, and educational center that commemorates the "contemporary political history of Russia," with a museum on Yeltsin that is presented as a public study "of the heritage of the first President of the Russian Federation" in the context of the "recent history of the Fatherland, the development of democratic institutions and the rule of law" ("Yeltsin Center"). Like Gosha's first collaborative project with INRUSSIA.com, a fixture of the project is a physical, patriotic site.

The zine published alongside Rubchinskiy's FW18 collection and runaway debut includes an essay on the iconic Yekaterinburg-born filmmaker Aleksei Balabanov (of the *Brother* sequels) as well as the Sverdlovsk underground rock movement. The book also features an interview with the conceptual sots[30] artist Eric Bulatov and ends with an "intimate memoir [on] Yekaterinburg's most influential politician Boris Yeltsin," set amidst archival images. INRUSSIA.com grooms through the sets of cultural references, pointing out the threads of historical influence that infuse Gosha's work. This lands the content in rooted historical significance. Now, cities like Yekaterinburg are no longer as exotic, unknown, or irrelevant. With this cultural accompaniment, such cities grow in contemporary significance (FW18) and develop iconic cultural backbone (the *Brother* films). Rubchinskiy's high-profile and now globally regarded collections give his Soviet references respected attention, while INRUSSIA.com and its units make sense of the varying patrimonial elements that anchor their background.

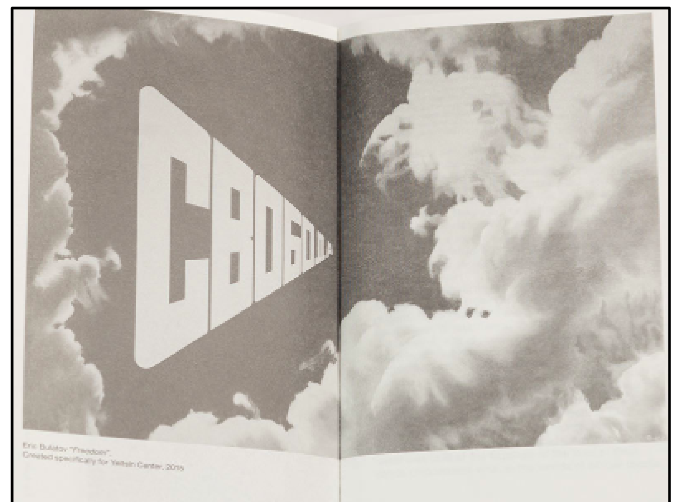


Fig. 35 (upper left): scan from zine, pictured: Balabanov
Fig. 36 (lower left): scan of Bulatov's painting in the zine "Yekaterinburg"

[30] Soviet Pop Art, originated in 1970s in the USSR

By celebrating the national enterprise and aiding in the rehabilitation of both Soviet and Russian (media) images, this creative production partakes in a sort of nationalist re-imagining. Made legible and recognizable to non-Russians, yet particularly telling in the geography dealt with, INRUSSIA.com trades in “Russianness” to create a sense of belonging and capitalize on its uniqueness in a global media pool. The self-conscious representation of history and identity (ideology and image) is mapped out through the performativity in the platform’s creative production. While being forward-looking in its cutting-edge models of communication, a backwards tendency persists perhaps in the fanatic employment of past culture.

There are several pieces by INRUSSIA.com that venture to and around the very contentious hotspot that, I argue, prompted the fruition of this online platform: Crimea. “Eaglet’s Nest” follows photographer Olya Ivanova as she revisits her “timeless youth camp on the shores of the Black Sea,” at the Russian Children’s Center of “Orlyonok,” initially a Soviet Pioneer camp that remains the “largest federal camp for children’s recreation” and located in Krasnodarskiy Krai.

Fig.(s) 37-38 (left, right): Olya Ivanova’s photographs for “Eaglets Nest”

In “The Rejuvenating Waters of Staryi Krym,” a similarly sentimental ode to the Eastern shores of Russia is told by craftsman Petya Prokhorov about his “formative summers on the Crimean seaside,” in the town of Staryi Krym.

Fig.(s) 39 (above): photographs by Petya Prokhorov from IR article “Rejuvenating Waters of Staryi Krym”

Fig.(s) 40 (left): photographs by Ilya Batrakov from IR article “The Blackout”

Another photo-essay, titled “The Blackout” has a darker tone to it, yet the romantic flare, attributing the peninsula’s symbolic value, persists. The photographs depict a solitary venture throughout the island’s landscapes. These articles on INRUSSIA.com contribute to the platform’s construction of a strange and sentimental temporality, staging their contemporary experience in the light of a nostalgic Soviet past.

The contested symbolism of Crimea as a special vacation spot is presented unabashedly, and not at all politically. Despite the underground’s indeterminate stance on the annexation, other components complicate the assumption of an apolitical or pro-Russian stance. The collaborative projects and their themes on INRUSSIA.com are based in the gap between Russia and Ukraine, propped open more decisively since the referendum. However, having grown up with Crimea as the staple familial getaway, today the Moscow youth regularly coordinate trips to the seaside without speaking to the crisis of Crimea’s historical, territorial belonging.

The narratives about Crimea do not take on an exclusively pro-Russian stance that is in accord with the annexation. The intent is more nuanced. Instead, there seems to be a rather naive nostalgia and a hopeful gesture towards solidarity despite the divide (of the bloc and of Ukraine and Russia). The articles harken back to the golden years of the USSR in which an annual Crimean trip was standard. They offer up a connection to the experiential aspect of the land, “despite” the political turmoil. Irrespective of its sovereignty or lack thereof, the narratives set themselves in a rich place of the past that today’s youth culture seem to want to be a part of. Also, the visual narratives on INRUSSIA.com that are set in Crimea have a more affective and poetic tone. This is reminiscent of what Amirkhanova declared INRUSSIA.com is informed by: “a space to talk about the things close to us.” In a simple way, this demonstrates a longing for security, intimacy, and belonging in the platform’s meaning-making. On the other hand, the personal stories, vacant of political specificity and based on a host of lyrical memories telling of an individual’s journey, are kindred to capitalist notions of individual identity, marking another juxtaposition between Western formulation and national Russian content.

“A Land of Volcanoes and Empty Spaces” is a meditative hike through Kamchatka’s desolate expanses. Through the words and photographs of Alexey Nazarov, the piece deals with Kamchatka, otherwise known as “the land of volcanoes,” — “an isolated peninsula in Russia's Far East, and a part of the so-called “Pacific ring of fire,” a largely uninhabited region.

As is the trend across several articles, the narrator positions this story, the region, and its experience relative to the end of the Soviet Union, Nazarov writes: “since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the local population has been steadily decreasing, and driving through its capital Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky you often see billboards advertising property in more hospitable regions of Russia.” From this, one can extrapolate how the grandiosity of the Soviet era, its goings-on, and legacy hangs over the (national) consciousness of the many Moscow youth working in alternative fields of creative production. In an affectionate voice, the stories produced by INRUSSIA.com often position the contemporary state of things in respect to its Soviet times – an indispensable reference point. Therefore, this makes the content of INRUSSIA.com precisely *post*-Soviet, not simply Russian.

The wistful comparisons to abandoned Soviet infrastructure and despair at dwindling populations post-collapse, signal to a far-gone world that is safe to dream about and novel to overcome and emerge from. These works exemplify the way the community is making sense of its past, as they speak to its unsteady moment in national belonging today. INRUSSIA.com’s constant embrace of their founding Soviet springboard points to an instinct to capitalize on their unique predicament in the world, given Russia’s political particularity and state spectacle: the crisis of a near century-long system of governance turning obsolete, leaving precarious conditions of nation-state building that the youth culture enter into.

Beyond Crimea, the more remote regions of Russia, and ex-Soviet states with close relations to Russia (i.e. Kazakhstan), *INRUSSIA.com* covers ex-Soviet geographies that have since sustained strained relations with the state, as is the case for Georgia and Russia. This points at an ideal in transcultural belonging that I claim the publication bids for. One of the more recent articles informs of the Tbilisi Art Fair (TAF): a festival in the Georgian capital that aims to consolidate emerging art scenes across Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Hosted at the “modernist Expo-Georgia pavilion,” TAF focuses on contemporary art works of artists from various Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Caucasian countries including Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, Poland, Ukraine, Iran and Russia. Despite the dissonance between Georgia and Russia, on a political level, INRUSSIA.com offers cultural exchanges between the nations. Furthermore, following his work at INRUSSIA.com, one of the former editors-in-chief of the publication, Furqat Palvanzade, has since gone on to open an alternative communal space in Tbilisi called Budka. Run by a group of friends, Palvanzade explains that it is a collective experiment in creating an independent and sustainable cultural venue in Georgia

that encourages collaborations between local and international artists, organizing informal lectures, music sessions, art performances, and film screenings.

Section 9: Electronica as a pillar of the Moscow Underground

Like the aforementioned piece on Nishan Hagop Paparia's "return" to Yerevan to teach at *Creative Technologies*, the piece links to another trend across the platform: the consistent involvement of technology and design, somewhat relative to a historical genealogy, but more so in contemporary techno-capacity.

Other than employing alternative Soviet cultural symbolism to substantiate their group identity, taking on certain aspects of their Soviet past in the new Russian present, this section demonstrates how the scene is concretely informed by its Soviet technological history in its distinct production of sound, aesthetic of industry, and overall infrastructure, which I argue is a more empowering feature for the subculture to spring off of, rather than historic cultural prestige, in its more viable, physical utility. However, while tech, electronica, and design-related projects are scattered across the platform, it is an assumed aspect of the subculture's specificity and one least explicitly celebrated as such. Undoubtedly, the electronic rave scene (occurring at spots such as NII) is the leading site through which the subculture exists.

Fig. 41 (on left): still from Calvert Journal's video *In Search of John's Kingdom* (2016). Soviet tape recorder used by artists of the label to record and reproduce varying sounds with such quality.

From the electronic manipulations of artists like Buttechno, to the site's digital studio section and its promotion of Coding Circles and synth workshops, to the subculture's re-appropriation of the "Gagarin" rave aesthetics, Soviet cybernetics and the related technological developments - this together ostensibly informs the shape and look of the scene and its interests. Before the fall of the Soviet state and access to equipment pervasive in the West, the Leningrad 1980s post-punk scene re-strung their guitars, recorded the radio waves that caught faint frequencies of Lou Reed or Joy Division,

and incorporated unexpected sound techniques with the existing technologies in the Soviet Union, like that of the synthesizer, drum machine, audio modules of various formats, and effect processors.

The alternative Soviet rock band “Night Prospect” (*Nochnoi Prospekt*) feature makeshift instruments in a dungeon in their music video “Acid” (*Kislota*). The video is intercut with shots of a ticking electricity meter, echoing the sample in Buttechno’s big aforementioned release titled Super Siziy King, in which a chanting voiceover references an electricity meter on repeat.

Fig.(s) 42 (above): stills from Nochnoi Prospekt’s (Ночной Проспект) music video *Acid* (Кислоты) on YouTube.com.

The heavy material use of synthesizers and manipulation of their stylistic sound in today’s mixes is in line with the varying aesthetic references to Soviet astronaut Gagarin and the 1980s rave scene’s inclusion of his cosmic image (as seen across Rubchinskiy’s clothing line) again interconnects a select aspect of the Soviet (techno) industry to the scene’s specificity today, speaking to the urge in this community to define something that is *theirs.* While modeling itself after Western sounds *then*, or Western models *now*, the scene somehow still employs a mix of Soviet infrastructure and global derivatives to make a case for itself.

Fig. 43 (on the right): archival image of the “Gagarin Party at the Cosmos Pavilion” in 1991 (p. 341)
Fig. 44 (below): DJ Ruben and a Gagarin poster (p. 67)
Both images are from Alexei Khaas’ book *Corporation of Happiness: History of the Russian Rave* (2006)

The materiality and developmental history of electronic technology in the USSR elucidates how the role and sound of the synth can be conceived of as an indigenous Russian origination. Drum machines and synths in the Soviet Union were unlike the sound heard on any modern pop or dance record in the West – emitting distinct, gritty tones (Price, Andy, et al. “Soviet Synths”). By 1957, young engineer Evgeny Murzin finished developing a photo-electronic musical instrument that he patented the ANS synthesizer (Smirnov, “ANS Synthesizer,” par. 1). Named ANS, in honor of Russian composer Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin, is arguably the world’s very first synth (Price, Andy, et al. “Soviet Synths”).

The ANS was entirely polyphonic, generating its tones through graphical sound, or by means of color and light (see image on the right) (Smirnov par. 1 “Graphical Sound”). The *graphical* (drawn) aspect of the ANS was a technology derived in 1929 by means of sound-on-film systems, emerging parallel in the USSR, Germany, and the US (Smirnov par. 1 “Graphical Sound”). The invention synthesized sound from light, which translated sound into a trace of image (Smirnov par. 1 “Graphical Sound”). Now sound could be isolated and manipulated in pictorial form. The ability to systematically analyze the tracings of sonic light

allowed for the production of any sound. Such is the case for the first Soviet sound film, Abram Room's *The 5-year Plan* (*Piatiletka*) as well as for the score in Tarkovsky's space epic *Solaris,* famed for its ghostly sound (Smirnov par. 2 "Graphical Sound"). The mechanism of these sound creations elicits an irreproducible, eerie tunnel of ambient noise. These are the same tones audibly characteristic of underground electronic music coming from Moscow today. With the invention of the legendary *Moogs* in 1960s US, along with the UK's *Synthi,* the USSR began actively welcoming electronic synthesis "in a bid to catch up with the West's technological and stylistic advances," by late 1970s and early 1980s (Price, Andy, et al. "Soviet Synths").

At some point between 1982 and 1990, one of the greatest Russian synths was manufactured: the Polivoks, otherwise called "the Russian Moog" (Reid, "Formanta Polivoks Synthesizer"). The electronic engineer Vladimir and wife, graphic designer Olympiada Kuzmin devised the equipment across factories in Ekaterinburg and Katchanar (Reid, "Formanta"). The plant in Katchanar produced organs, amplifiers, and speakers – where Kuzmin knew he could develop a "spring reverberator" that enacts modern sound effects like "filtering" (Reid par. 2 "Birth of Polivoks"). With no existing musical industry in Russia at the time, military and semi-military factories considered it advantageous to also manufacture non-military products such as radios, tape recorders, and TVs (Reid par. 4 "Birth of Polivoks"). Once electronic mediation became popular, so did the urge to emulate the sounds of Western models. Unable to afford synths like the Rolands and Korgs, the USSR produced their own versions, simple remodelings of Western technologies, which had two voices of polyphony and two oscillators, each set with a triangle, two types of pulse waveforms, and one noise generator ("Reid par. 4-5 "Birth of Polivoks"). Therefore, the Kuzmins used the equipment available in either plant in order to assemble a 49-key duophonic, analog synthesizer (Price, Andy, et al. "Soviet Synths"). Since then, the

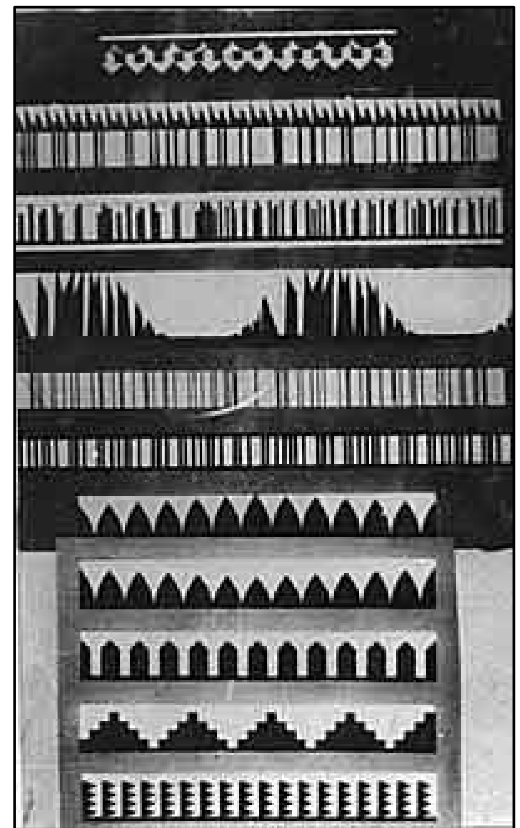


Fig. 45 (above): graphical sound techniques or the pictorial depiction of sonic traces (patterns of sound through light and image), from Andrey Smirnov's web page asmir.info

Polivoks has been well-known for its cutting exertion of harsh, resonant sound that is unlike any other.

The theme of retooling, whether due to a lack of resources or an industry's infrastructure, is inherent in the youth's post-Soviet electronic productions and is what makes their sound singular. Marked by resourcefulness, emulation, persistence, and jarring inventiveness – I argue that the scene is thoroughly permeated by the indigeneity that is the history of Soviet electronic technology. Even if not consciously, for the creative production we witness on INRUSSIA.com does not necessarily forefront such concerns, the electronic music is the starting point, the major pillar, and most pervasive medium characterizing the Moscow alternative arts community today.

This historical specificity is apparent in a theme of projects and articles on INRUSSIA.com. Furthermore, the form of these projects reflects the mystifying relationship between technology (form), aesthetic (visual), and output (substance) inherent in many early Soviet sonic inventions. To better imagine this relation, we can simply select a few tech-related projects on INRUSSIA.com. A review on media artist self-titled ::vtol::, presents a tech-art piece that is composed of robotics, experimental musical instruments, and science in the project "Instrument of Sound." Another project titled "From Radio to Nuclear" is a cultural write-up and institutional history commemorating Moscow's Polytechnic Museum and its contribution to technology and science. Or, an institution marked by historicity, both an infrastructure and a fixture involved in the production of sonic science and technological creations.

More prominently speaking to the *form* of projects, emulating the influence of early technologies, are within INRUSSIA.com's "studio" projects. The projects in this section are typically technologically-mediated in their presentation format, including a videographic component to introduce the series "Synthposium" (for example), covering the work of different synth designers like Vyacheslav Grigoriev's synth-building workshop that operates at night or Alexander Pleninger's synth-guru practices, in which he combines obsolete technology with an advanced knowledge of electronic music. Other tech-centered projects take on the same experimental impulse that the 1980s post-punk scene did in their use of electronic instruments. In the project, "Sound Legacy Makeover" new efforts in microphone manufacturing are put forth. Then, in the multimedia project "Coding Circle," we meet a traveling coding school. A group of young, self-taught programmers visit far-flung and

desolate villages in Russia to teach local school kids to design their own website. The coders lend the students the tools they have learned themselves in order to digitally articulate their identity, empower the specificity of their story, and craft agency amidst each other. This is one of the most comprehensive and impactful features of both the platform as well as its alternative, creative Soviet history, which finds itself at the heart of the Moscow underground today is the electronic scene. It seeps through the creative production studied in this thesis and in the midst of the contradictions, miscellany, and performativity, I argue represents one of the most unique and natural aspects of the Moscow collective's cultural specificity in creative production.

The electronic music scene is a unifying platform for the Moscow subculture in the same way that INRUSSIA.com is in its presentation and accumulation of creative projects that foreground technological mediation within a digital approach. The technological capacity of the recording apparatus is a guiding function in the production, exhibition, and dissemination of alternative cultural intel – from the mixing, recording of music, and to the means of their creative expression. Moreover, the physical sites upon which the scene is able to come together, spaces like NII, as well as the projects, under labels of John's Kingdom of Gost Zvuk, epitomize this in shape and practice, given their relationality to music, production practices, and aesthetics. This figures in as an attempt to re-inscribe a more organic Russianness into the context of global.

Conclusion:

This thesis explores whether the platform of INRUSSIA.com can be studied as a digital document of today's Moscow underground, in that it can elucidate the broader socio-political stakes impacting their cultural experience. Evaluating the platform's creative production acts as a critical method that can help track other emerging tendencies in digital media initiatives, globally. The leading concerns center around group alternativity, renewed Soviet nostalgia at a time of predominant neoliberal Western media, and the forging of transcultural belonging across a New East.

The platform proves to be an exemplary new media object given its cross-linked format. The sets of crossovers, in terms of the site's multimedia aspect and collaborative form of production, are a defining media feature, providing sufficient screen content to decipher. The digital material of INRUSSIA.com's platform is embedded with music, pictures, moving

images, and other webpages. The image-based narratives, video projects, and consistent cross-platform links lead to other media forms and databases, such as, a brand or record label's own site, tracks on a Soundcloud profile, videos on different Youtube channels (whether INRUSSIA.com's or Stereotactics, for instance), and images or promotions on different interinvolved Instagram accounts. It is a digital media document in that it houses many forms of aesthetic expression and cultural meaning via (moving) image. Through regarding these sets of media materials, the actual relations undergirding the production of media also become overt: the crossover between figures, units, and formats (i.e. digitized analogue forms of media like zines and archival film photographs). Furthermore, the platform is a (sub)cultural crossroads wherein music, events, fashion, graffiti, skateboarding all become mediums of creative expression as well. The words, data, and simulations in this electronic network impart a fabricated world (Kirschenbaum 34). Instead of defining the community's "reality" based on the digital document, the thesis research delineates the form and impetus inherent in the data and image fabrication (Manovich 42).

While the web-world of INRUSSIA.com appears as an unstructured collection of images, texts, and media forms across a flexible temporality, navigating the interface and considering the contextual elements informing the organization of electronic material, imparts a narrative about the creative class and the meaning of their digital stories (Manovich 42). The platform's inter-crossing character yields it to be a fertile digital documentary object and speaks further than form. It speaks to the very substance of the alternative arts scene's production, exposing the components active in their ideological crisis and cultural becoming.

The hodgepodge logic in categorization on INRUSSIA.com corresponds to the tendencies apparent in their creative content. The fashion and music produced on the site by the informal creative class, has a similar constitution. The music production of Gost Zvuk, for instance, is also marked by miscellany. The compilations are typically jarring, incongruous breaks and layers of sonic reference, both in the mode of cutting and remixing of sound, as well as in the contrasting origins of genre used in the samples. Gost's low-fi sound-base loops in high-paced British drum n' bass, that then bleeds into hollow to heavy oscillations of Detroit house. Chopped and slowed R&B, stripped-down African dub is layered on, fading into minimalist trance that buttresses recordings of Slavic Orthodox chanting, and is intercepted by sharp video game sound effects or a sonic trace of a post-punk Soviet track. The mangle of style and influence in the tone and form of the creative content also emerges in the clothing

collections of designer Gosha Rubchinskiy. Faded Soviet-styled tracksuits are paired with bright, contemporary sportswear that mix-match in size and connotation: an Adidas jersey with a logo-design based on alternative Soviet conceptual artist Bulatov's paintings.

This is furthered in the juxtaposition of topics, infused with Soviet nostalgia and presented with a Western mode of address, inherent in the series of INRUSSIA.com projects analyzed. The hyper-collage quality renders itself in the very form the community finds itself as well: a scattered formulation of collectives, ranging in the types of units and, again, crossing-over in roles and practices of creative production. Through assessing the platform, I identified the overlaps in the economic backbone of the cultural industry in Russia, one defined by an existing crossover between creative classes: the official, exclusive professional culture and the inclusive, unofficial one. Therefore, the platform analysis informs us of the class organization typifying the status of cultural production in Russia today. This aesthetic analysis of the media form picks at the state in which the Moscow group finds itself.

This is a moment of socio-cultural becoming that the unofficial creatives are coming to terms with for the first time in such a performative and personal (culturally specific) manner. This is in the midst of Russia's own doubled transitional state: still stabilizing an economy that entered neoliberal capitalism after 69 years of a socialist regime as well as within the recent isolationist turn of geopolitical measures following the Crimean referendum, global sanctions, and increased authoritarianism and conservatism in the ruling United Russian political party. With the founder's vision for INRUSSIA.com in mind, to create an apolitical "world with no borders," we came to see the contradicting ideologies butting heads in the Moscow scene's digital craftwork.

While the borderless world without political underpinnings exemplifies an ideal neoliberal realm, the research demonstrates this to be more of a response to the over-politicized domestic climate as well as sensationalized political representations from abroad. And, while the subculture largely disassociates from contemporary Russian nationalism, the platform works both within and relative to its dominating climate, and therefore, even if not standardly political, the tiring creative production's culturally-specific sign system, directed as a message to their Western audience, can actually be considered a political incentive to create a counter-narrative of Russia. By valorizing certain aspects of the national enterprise in their projects, INRUSSIA.com aids in the rehabilitation of both Soviet and Russian (media) images, and in this way, participates in a(n) (alternative) nationalist re-imagining. Made legible and

recognizable to non-Russians, yet particularly telling in the geography dealt with, INRUSSIA.com trades in “Russianness” to create a sense of belonging and or capitalize on their uniqueness in a global media pool.

If older forms of mass media furnished a “basis on which groups and classes construct an image of the lives, meanings, practices, and values” of themselves relative to others, global digital media transports this meaning-making even further from the group and its local context (Hall qtd. In Hebdige 85). The intersectional digital media practices of INRUSSIA.com are crucial in defining the community’s experience as well as lending methods for classifying their domestic and foreign social worlds (Hebdige 85). While the consumption of Soviet symbology alongside Western commodities is overturned and distorted, the presence and mix of ideologies is defining. In an ambivalent treatment of influences, the digital documents display a collage of references that the scene is sifting through as it collectively discovers what can solidly pillar their newly emerging, standalone identity, as it comes into more definitive form now. The research here positions itself in the early stage of communal self-actualization along their path in socio-cultural development.

The transcultural ex-Soviet relationships that the journal speaks to perhaps fall short in campaigning for concrete solidarity. However, these events, images, and write-ups do bring light to the circuits of cultural exchange that are desired and developing. While the articles that dwell over landscapes in ex-Soviet satellite states, Crimean summers, and comparability to the US are limiting and, in large parts, naive in enacting this solidarity (without speaking to specificity of political predicaments, for instance, in these contentious geographies), what the platform and its creative production practices have generated in reality (rather than image), does break ground in this direction.

Rather than politically pronounced methods, actual relationships have been made through the subculture’s creative work. Music collectives, like John’s Kingdom and Gost Zvuk, events at NII as well as collaborations across the board, between Absurd and A.D.E.D., have each played a crucial role in narrowing the divide between young creatives separated by regions and ex-Soviet lines. John’s Kingdom in linking creatives from the outskirts of the capital, to Gost Zvuk consistently collaborating with DJs, artists, and coordinators in Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, to *Absurd* traveling to remote republics to build skate parks — the Moscow subculture’s actions, much more than their Western-oriented image-making, is empowering disenfranchised youth, forging transcultural alliance, and introducing queer

practices to honor. Their image-making, however, is not separate from the materiality of their projects. While the image they end up constructing on the platform does not adequately "prove" my claims, the work put in to build these images does contribute to the empowerment of a new group identity and forging transcultural belonging, through their subversive appropriation of Soviet nostalgia, its infrastructural history, communicated in novel digital codes and layered language. The creative production facilitated across ex-Soviet lines perhaps lacks political fortitude in the most obvious aspect of their exchanges. However, the establishment of sincere, interpersonal relations are, in and of themselves, gradually and solidly concretizing a New East frontline of creative youth.

Furthermore, the process of gathering intel for this thesis took on the same collectivist measures inherent in the creative production processes of INRUSSIA.com's platforms: informal contributions from a crossover of friends and figures from both the West and this New East, engaging with varying forms of media, and collecting resources by means of the institution and personal experience on grounds in Moscow. I would say, despite the camaraderie felt and new image of cooperative identity created, it is crucial for this Moscow scene to be wary of the elitist influence coming from the oligarch-dominated cultural sphere in the country, the neoliberal and Western demand marking their formulations, as well as the nationalist temperament in their environment and its impact on their own mentality and creations, in terms of what profit-focus or imperialist impulse it standardizes. The alternative scene and workings of such a platform should acknowledge the precarity that differentiates their class and production. They should specify the impetus in their creative work to at least be able to track the difference in ideological influence and gauge its effect on their form and message further on.

The contemporary cultural object of INRUSSIA.com reveals the many tiers that a Moscow subculture confronts when it comes to constructing a media representation or digital narrative of their identity: from recalibrating the expanse of socialist history and influence, to finding agency under a restraining, conservative present, to inflating certain cultural specificities to perform in and be acknowledged by global standards – the meaning-making on the platform demonstrates a longing for security, intimacy, and belonging. As the country continues to struggle to stabilize post-transition and post-referendum, the creative class exists under heightened precarious conditions. While the representation itself remains variable, the group's creations and work amidst each other, in their understanding and representing

nationhood, produces something singular and potent in the process of their (sub)cultural becoming.

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