

URBAN YOUTH CULTURES AND CHANGING VALUES IN RUSSIA

editorial	Youth Scenes in Russia: Culture Instead of Politics?	2
analysis	Russian Youth Scenes at the Turn of the 21 st Century, or How the Yobs are Driving out the Informals Elena Omelchenko (Ulyanovsk)	3
portrait	Ritual Battles, or Who are the Yobs? Elena Omelchenko (Ulyanovsk)	8
analysis	A Global Network of Friends: DIY Punk Culture in Russia and its CIS Neighbours Olga Aksyutina (Moscow)	10
portrait	<i>Food Not Bombs</i> in Russia Olga Aksyutina (Moscow)	16

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YOUTH SCENES IN RUSSIA: CULTURE INSTEAD OF POLITICS?

editorial

The changing values, norms, and symbols in post-Soviet Russia are a central issue for *kultura*. Against this background, this issue of *kultura* focuses on the current generation of adolescents and young adults.

One of the main theses advanced by Elena Omelchenko, a specialist on Russian youth and one of our authors, is that young people today acquire their various specific ideals, identities, and conceptions of life through *cultural* means and rarely formulate them *politically*. Outward appearance, symbols, jargon, musical and other preferences, and even meeting places do not, however, constitute stable markers. They are adopted, mixed, and abandoned, and endowed with a changing significance over time. The new consumer industry is actively involved in these processes, picking up styles and symbols, creating fashions, occupying spaces, and thus forming the so-called mainstream.

Criticising consumer culture for levelling diversity and dictating norms is part of the identity of many 'alternative' currents. Since perestroika, the terms 'alternative' and 'informal' have been associated with protest against the old system and its values. At the time, political clubs, free trade unions, and 'national fronts' of all colours were playing a defining role. Today these terms are used more broadly, usually denoting all ideologico-cultural scenes and associations which consciously distance themselves from the mainstream. In this sense, even groups such as Nazi skinheads or young National Bolsheviks are part of the 'informals'.

The most radical refusal of consumer culture is found among the so-called *Do It Yourself* cultures, whose members place themselves categori-

cally outside official and established institutions. Unlike most other youth cultures, they espouse a *political* understanding of the new Russia's society, but their practice is based on blueprints for living life here and now, not on outdated forms of protest. Instead of working towards a 'revolution', they are creating a counter-culture. At the same time, they and others have seen that deliberate deviation from the social norms of the majority can expose a considerable degree of aggression within society (on this, please read the box at the end of the issue).

Another important thesis put forward by Elena Omelchenko is that youth cultures are increasingly determined by geographical, ethnic and social factors. There is a considerable economic and social gap between urban and rural areas, small and big cities, rich and poor regions. Young people's schooling, educational, and recreational prospects are very unequal, as are their opportunities for achieving economic independence.

In order to stress this point, this issue of *kultura* looks beyond Moscow. Our author Elena Omelchenko has undertaken research in the Volga region, including the towns of Ulyanovsk and Saratov. Our author Olga Aksyutina, writing about DIY cultures, highlights the newly strengthening cultural ties between Russia and some former union republics, now dubbed 'the near abroad'. However, she sees herself and her friends from those cultures, across all borders, as fully European – something that still does not come naturally to many young Russians.

*Translated from the German language
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

RUSSIAN YOUTH SCENES AT THE TURN OF THE 21ST CENTURY, OR HOW THE
YOBBS ARE DRIVING OUT THE INFORMALS

Elena Omelchenko

analysis

Youth scenes in the new Russia are divided into so-called alternative milieus on the one hand, and 'normal' youth on the other hand. Young people use these terms both as self-descriptions and to distinguish themselves from others. The gopniki (yobbs), the most extreme wing of the 'normal ones', have recently become prominent as aggressive 'vigilantes' against all that is perceived as being culturally 'alien'. Omelchenko interprets this phenomenon as a reflection of a broader trend in Russian society - whereby the state is trying to tap the mobilising potential of these young people.

"Bugger! The yobbs are like dinosaurs, they have a large body and egg-sized brains, only they're not dying out... time is passing, but my feeling is there's more and more of them! It's not even their aggression that gets me, it's their unwillingness to develop!" (from an anti-yob forum)

"They find it useful for there to be a large quantity of yobbs. Who does? The state. The more yobbs there are, the more problems people have, and the less they will want to think and draw conclusions about what life is like in the Great Country. That's why the state is encouraging them in every way. A crowd of stupid yobbs is better than a bunch of anarchists." (from an anti-yob forum)

INTRODUCTION

Public debate about Russian youth is running high. The state takes an interest in young people, elaborating youth policy after youth policy and one patriotic education programme after another, and searching for new ideologies for the 'spiritual and ethical rebirth of our youth'. Most of these plans focus on the 'political' aspects of youth activity.

The state is not so much interested in the reality in which young people live as in looking for mechanisms to mobilise them as a resource in the current deep crisis in society. It is choosing to ignore the fact that since the mid-1990s so-called youth activism has shifted from the space of politics to the space of culture, and the subcultural potential of the various youth scenes is realised in

the sphere of public cultural practices rather than the political (or ideological) sphere.

The diversity of young Russians' value systems is finding its expression in a strengthening of the symbolic/real barrier between so-called 'advanced' ('informal', 'alternative', 'subcultural') and 'normal' (conventional or, as an extreme case – 'yob', or *gopniki*) youth, between the fundamentally different life/cultural strategies pursued by these groups.

A fundamental shift in values has taken place in the minds of young people and, more generally, in those of most of the Russian population. The main strategic reference point is not an ethical imperative but the value of material well-being or, for a large proportion of the population, the mere cost of living. 'Classical' ideological meanings have undergone radical changes, turning into situational sub-cultural consumer garb. Thus, skinhead gear is now also used by yobbs whose extreme wing is known as the *otmorozki* (which can mean either 'imbeciles' or 'cold-blooded killers'), and informals (not just radical national-chauvinist youth groups but also 'red skins'), while the so-called glamour style comes in both a Bohemian-elitist and a popular yob version.

The gender regimes maintained and shared by group members, with their corresponding roles and individual and group practices and outward style, have a special significance in the symbolic and real differentiation between yob and advanced cultural strategies. Images of a 'normal' masculinity and femininity fitting the group's

analysis

standards are significant elements of one's 'own' and 'alien' group identities. Thus, for example, in a study of homophobic attitudes, 'advanced' (informal) young people distinguished themselves from the jobs on the basis of their sexual open-mindedness and tolerance of 'different' types of sexual desire, their openness to knowledge about sexual issues and their rejection of the ideal of 'normal' or 'real' men and women.

The state's strong interest in the 'youth factor' is partly linked to the so-called velvet/orange/pink revolutions taking place in the former Soviet republics/current CIS countries. In many ways, the real or ascribed active involvement of young people in these events determined both their intensity and outcome. The state and political authorities display a heightened interest in young people whenever a new generation (or its most active/extremist part) actually or supposedly threatens to escape state control; this makes it impossible for the state to govern, manipulate or use the powerful resource that is young people's energy. Finding mechanisms for the 'correct and necessary' mobilisation of this energy is the obvious objective of the rapt and not at all disinterested attention that the state is lavishing upon contemporary youth scenes.

THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN INFORMALS AND JOBS

In the late 1990s, the 'advanced' youth were in a minority in the Russian youth scenes¹. Most young people called themselves normal or ordinary, which did not mean that they weren't culturally active. What set them off from the 'advanced' ones was chiefly the indeterminacy of their musical and stylistic identity. The 'normal' youth were heterogeneous, including ordinary young people who spend their time in cliques around their block of flats, as well as anti-informal jobs. The jobs considered themselves spokesmen for the 'moral majority': their aggressive behaviour towards the

informals was a way of maintaining order.

The term 'job' was used by the informals and 'progressives' to designate a 'grey, closed-minded mass' of young people who would start fights over trifling matters: for example, because of someone's appearance (hairdo or clothes) or because someone 'is shooting off'. It was said that they would go to discos in cheap tracksuits, and were aggressive, ill-mannered, and intolerant.

The rappers and ravers were situated between the 'normal' and 'advanced' strategies, which indicates the permeability of the border between them. The distinction between 'advanced' and 'normal' youth was in itself an important element of all groups' individual and group identities. The territorial principle that was characteristic of their predecessors – the 'party-goers' (*tusovshchiki*) and 'gang youth' – was no longer dominant; the symbolic struggle between the two groups was now for cultural scenes (clubs, discos, cafes) and was fought out via music, prices, and atmosphere. These were life strategies built not only upon style and musical taste, but also upon a broad spectrum of attitudes to life.

These strategies were ways of coping with the world, new resources of social and cultural mobility. Those young people who adopted the 'advanced' strategy were aiming to individualise their style rather than follow fashion. They used their experience as well as the products of Western culture that were available to them in order to tap into the wider world and advance their personal growth. Their urge towards the 'centre' was an escape from local communities and provincialism, they were conquering clubs, cafes and bars rather than streets, parks and metro stations (the preferred meeting-places of the late Soviet *tusovshchiki*). Their cliques were circles of individuals who were freely choosing their lifestyle and assuming personal responsibility for their decisions, e.g. concerning the consumption

¹ Research project "Looking West?" in the cities of Ulyanovsk, Samara and Moscow.

analysis

of drugs and alcohol.

The 'normal' strategy was often based on a rejection of, and hostility towards those who stand out by appearance or abandon traditional gender markers (e.g. by wearing unisex clothes). The 'normal' young people's musical tastes were limited to Russian pop or 'chanson'²; they used music not as cultural capital but as a background for parties and 'hanging out' with people of the same age. Their cliques were usually stable and included people who went to school together or were living in the same block of flats or neighbourhood. Concerning the consumption of drugs and alcohol, they followed group norms rather than personal choices. 'Normal' youth were focused on the local territories they controlled, rather than the city centre, where they would go to 'carouse'. They valued stability, their immediate surroundings, and security.

The 'alternatives' distinguished themselves from the majority of 'normal' young people, whom they accused of emulating and even 'copying' the West, which was increasingly associated with the production of commercial and therefore inauthentic culture. The 'advanced' youth were directing their attention towards the outside world and seeking new opportunities. The West served as a source of information and a reference point on the global horizon, but they were also the ones who were the most critical of the West.

The outlook of 'normal' youth was limited to their immediate environment; their cultural strategy consisted of maintaining their local contacts, but they also became involved in 'global' consumption in their own way. The cultural strategies of 'advanced' and 'normal' youth reflected social differentiation in the access to and participation in the 'global'. Since the late 1990s, the real or virtual struggle between these strategies has become even more marked.

YOBS AND INFORMALS: HISTORY OF THE TERMS AND THE PHENOMENA

The late 1980s witnessed an explosion of the informal youth movement, which distinctly divided a whole generation into inveterate Komsomol members and 'advanced' informals. The term 'informals' was introduced by Komsomol bureaucrats during perestroika to designate the self-organised youth groups that were created as alternatives to formal structures such as the Pioneers, the Komsomol, and the Communist Party. Paradoxically, although this term was introduced 'from above', it is now used by the young people themselves as well as the media. There was a multitude of informals, who varied in terms of political views, subcultural affiliation, and economic activities.

The spring of 1987 was marked by a demonstrative attack by the Moscow police on an informal young people's club/meeting place on Gogol Boulevard. By that time there had already been first press articles about bandit youth gangs. This was a special type of youth group, whose activity consisted in protecting their own local territory – usually new, outlying residential areas of the growing provincial cities populated by rural migrants, or the suburbs of the Russian capital and big cities (Moscow, Samara, Kazan).

The 1990s saw the informal movement plummet. The Komsomol finally disintegrated, which meant that public opposition against formal structures became meaningless. The new market economy reoriented the gangs towards criminal and semi-criminal activities. The growing grey economy created a fertile soil for the so-called 'roofs': racketeers, mostly veterans of the Afghan war who found it hard to integrate into the new system. They mobilised teenage gangs to protect their 'front line', i.e. to control markets, petrol stations, and the growing network of private

² 'Chanson' is the collective term applied in Russia today to the music of popular singer-songwriters, ballads and songs about the life of gangsters and convicts in and out of prison camps (= blatnye pesni).

analysis

restaurants and kiosks. Subcultural youth groups began actively to occupy clubs and discos. In the mid-1990s, Russia experienced a genuine club scene boom.

IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

The strategic confrontation between yobs and informals is directly linked with more fundamental traits of youth life in contemporary Russia – the search for identity in a time when society as a whole lacks socially approved norms, which provide the foundation for social solidarity. The choice of a cultural, rather than a political or economic, strategy then becomes the space where young people can shape their identity more or less freely. They are more and more alienated from the political and economic space, and most of them do not feel like subjects who enjoy full rights and whose actions really change anything. Our research has shown that young people today distrust both state bodies and civic organisations, the only exceptions being president Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The choice of a cultural strategy is not entirely free. In many ways it is determined by a person's place of residence (capital vs. provinces, centre vs. periphery), social or ethnic origin, gender, and the material well-being of his or her family. However, the boundaries of cultural confrontation are mobile.

Young men and women characterise the others' community rather than their own: the informals define themselves through their opposition against the yobs, while the yobs in turn identify themselves through their rejection of the informals. The term 'yobs' is not usually used as a self-designation; the term 'informals' is only used by the informals themselves in situations of open conflict with the yobs and in ritual disputes inside the scenes (e.g. rappers against skinheads).

The mutual designations are characterised by extreme aggressiveness. While the informals' hostility is usually verbal, the yobs (at least if we are to believe the informals) are openly violent, ready for physical 'purges'. Among the youth scenes, the words 'informals' and 'yobs' are labels, socio-cultural markers which help to shut off the 'others' and identify with 'one's own people' in situations of indeterminacy.

Informals' web sites, especially extremist ones, are interesting in this respect. Here, the yobs are described as "raw, cynical and highly unpleasant guys, never averse to starting a fight or 'sorting out' any informal. They act exclusively in large teams and never engage a strong adversary... they wear jogging trousers, have a low IQ and a highly vulgar vocabulary and accent... They don't accept any music that is more complex than blatant pop." Their common, everyday practices: they hassle strangers, brawl with each other and interact with each other according to criminal norms. The meaning of these norms is linked to the laws of the prison camps, a kind of specific 'moral code' which helps sustain community and hierarchy in the criminal world. Interestingly, radical and pro-fascist youth groups display the most aggressive attitude towards the yobs. This is probably linked to the fact that the Russian skinheads are often confused with the yobs both in the media and by other, 'normal' youth, making it very important for them to dissociate themselves from that label.

This image of the yobs is both primitive and demonising. It seems, however, that their culture is growing stronger and spreading in Russian society well beyond the youth scenes.

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

What nourishes and sustains the cultural confrontation between 'informals' and 'yobs' in

analysis

the Russian youth milieu? Russian society as a whole, not just young people, are experiencing an increase in aggressiveness and a wide spread of xenophobia and homophobia. The population is rapidly stratifying in terms of living standards, social status, access to significant resources, but also in terms of cultural strategies. The difference between the normal/yob and advanced/informal strategy lies not just in outward style, but also in the values at the basis of people's lives as a whole. A yob-like psychological outlook is not just characteristic of the marginalised, deprived, criminal or pathogenic portion of Russian youth. That section of conventionally-minded young people also expresses the interests of the adult majority, who radically reject cultural innovation and are determined to hold on to 'traditional' values under conditions where the direction of social change seems uncertain. Their auto-definition and practices feed not so much on the popularisation of criminal images and values as on the expansion of a narrow-minded economic and cultural psychology which is fostered by the advancement of the market, 'barbaric' capitalism and the lack of a 'big idea'.

The danger lies not just in the expansion of the skinheads and other extremist youth movements in Russia (as the Russian media would have it), but in the fact that a certain part of normal/yob youth are beginning to use their rhetoric. Nationalism and xenophobia as well as sympathy for the

use of brutal force, aggression, and 'simple joys' are spreading among mainstream youth.

The state's youth policies are mainly aimed at looking for new scapegoats. This diverts attention from young people's real problems: growing poverty, insecurity, exclusion from all areas of public life. In contemporary Russia, the authorities are still considering young people as a resource, while young people themselves are striving to be recognised as subjects.

*Translated from the Russian language
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

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READING HINTS AND LINKS:

- „Looking West?“ Cultural Globalisation and Russian Youth Cultures. Hilary Pilkington/ Elena Omelchenko (eds). University Park, Pa: PennStateUniv Press, 2002 (Results of a joint Anglo-Russian project carried out in the late 1990s)
- Gopniki. Kto oni i kak s nimi borot'sya? (Traktat v 6 aktakh) [Who are the yobs and how to fight them? (treatise in 6 acts)] (in Russian)

<http://diabler.narod.ru/gop.html>



RITUAL BATTLES, OR WHO ARE THE YOBS?

Elena Omelchenko

portrait

According to Alexander Khanunnov, professor at the Samara Academy of Economics, the yobs are one of the oldest youth subcultures; they have been given different names at different times without really changing. In the 1970s, they were called 'peakies' (*furagi* or *furgaplany*) for wearing a small peaked cap, a blue trainer jacket, and scruffy black trousers all year round.

Today a political subtext is always implied in the ideology of the younger, more exotic and energetic groups, says Khanunnov. He includes, for example, skinheads in this category. From his description of the 'skins', however, it becomes clear that he means relatively broad groups of youth who display a heightened intolerance towards migrants.

There are different views on the origins of the 'yobs'. Some describe them as petty criminals who have returned from prison or taken on a 'convict' image: "...where does the vast yob movement in Russia come from? Every ninth inhabitant of Russia has served time in places of detention (prisons and prison camps)... there are quite intelligent people in prison who need new blood, and who's best suited for that? The yobs, of course" (<http://diabler.narod.ru/gop.html>). The yobs come from destitute milieus and poor families; they learn the lessons of life out in the street. The collective designation *gopota* is originally derived from *gop-stop*, which means 'street robbery' in prison jargon.

There is another frequently cited explanation: before the war, so-called State Proletarian Dormitories (abbreviated GOP in Russian) were created for orphans who were toiling to help build the socialist Motherland. We know the exact locations of two of them. One was in Lyubertsy near Moscow. In 1987, an aggressive group of

youths from Lyubertsy started travelling to Moscow to 'cleanse' the capital. They were mostly attracted by the central streets, such as the Old Arbat. These groups of young men would beat up 'informals' and homosexuals, attack the emerging private sales booths, bully homeless people, migrants, Caucasians and Central Asians. They called themselves 'orderlies of the Russian capital'. The second GOP was on Ligoivsky Prospekt in Saint-Petersburg (then Leningrad). Both areas were soon to become crime hubs.

Yet another account of the origins of the yobs has to do with the so-called organised criminal gangs, which is where the yobs are trained. These groups are created by adult ex-convicts and other criminals who recruit local youths. A member of such a group automatically becomes a 'lad', while all the others are considered 'losers'. In this context, the formation of yob (or gang) cultural strategies is often viewed as a reaction against the widening of the informal (non-politicised) youth movement.

Here is how the yobs' value system is described on anti-yob sites created by informals. The yobs like: 1) stupid American films, 2) pop discos, where instead of dancing they 'pull chicks' for sexual intercourse, 3) drugs, 4) 'prison music', which they also call 'chanson', 5) putting their oar into other people's conversations and finding out who is right and who has 'cocked up', who is a 'sensible lad' and who is a 'loser', who is who 'in life' and who follows which (criminal) code. The boom of the 'informal' movement was linked to grunge¹ style, whose different forms increasingly came into fashion, especially in provincial towns. The popularity of Nirvana and Kurt Cobain's cult status prompted a reciprocal cultural reaction. Here is how this conflict is described

¹ Grunge, also called 'Seattle sound': music with roots in the underground movement in the USA and which reverts to a large degree to elements of traditional rock, punk and hardrock. – Editors' note

portrait

on an anti-yob web site:

THE EXAMPLE OF KAZAN

“...everybody was wearing loose garments, bandanas and other similar gear then. A lot of informals were socialising in the city centre, on the campus, in the central streets and elsewhere, until one night one of the gangs clamped down on this ‘last bulwark’ of the informals by carrying out something like a Bartholomew’s Night’s massacre. After this deterrent, the informals virtually died out in Kazan, and in 1998 the yobs simply went berserk.

As a result everyone started to look like the yobs, and by the summer one had the impression that the entire male population had been through the enlistment office, because 95% of all young men were bald, I mean had shaved their heads. The yob epidemic had mutated into a shaved-head epidemic. All young people looked like criminals. Although in 1997 a bald-head like that would have been made a laughing-stock. In the space of one year young people’s world view had changed radically; on the street you couldn’t meet a single long-haired fellow: he’d simply have been slaughtered; and being an informal was simply life-threatening. ...

When a long-haired DJ made a remark to a yob at a disco, the yob walked up to him and simply killed him with a shiv. At the interrogation that mongrel declared he simply hated informals. Just like all the other boys from Kazan, I’d had my head

shaven, was dressing like a typical yob, looked like a criminal and, outwardly, didn’t differ from the general grey mass of youngsters.

But I came to despise the yobs more with every year, and when I grew older, to spite reality, I became what I had hated and disdained, a bloke with long hair... I like all non-traditional styles, especially unisex, I like to colour my fingernails, tie kerchiefs and gaiters around my arms, wear earrings, hang little chains around my neck and try out different hairdos.

But can you go out like this in our town? If a punk shows up in Kazan, he’ll simply get killed, because the only young people out in the streets are yobs, as if all normal blokes had died out... and the girls have gotten into this crap as well. They create girl gangs and bully informals and simple girls. And so, in the schools, even the beautiful half of humanity is divided into yobs and losers.

And as long as the adult criminals recruit young people for their organised criminal gangs, this phenomenon will not go anywhere in our city, because these adult ex-convicts are those who spread the disease. They are the ones who turn the young generation into this yob riff-raff by imposing their prison/thug rules on them, which our young people are only too ready to accept.”

(from a web discussion thread called “The Kazan yobs and their gangs”, 03 August 2004)

*Translated from the Russian language
by Mischa Gabowitsch*



A GLOBAL NETWORK OF FRIENDS: DIY PUNK CULTURE IN RUSSIA
AND ITS CIS NEIGHBOURS

analysis

Olga Aksyutina

Beyond the realm of home improvement, the term Do It Yourself has a special meaning for the hardcore punk movement in the European CIS countries and worldwide. This meaning is based on a rejection of the capitalist economic system with its specific values, its culture of consumption, and its social contradictions. However, the hardcore punks' resistance is practised in everyday life rather than politics, as an emphatically 'different' way of life and artistic self-expression. They are giving a creative meaning to the concept of 'struggle', and set a global network of DIY friends against capitalist globalisation and the antagonisms it engenders.

DIY HARDCORE PUNK CULTURE:

AN INTRODUCTION

DIY (*Do It Yourself*) is the basic principle shared by many contemporary grassroots protest initiatives that are organised as horizontal networks, are based on co-operation and mutual support, and practice intuitive anarchism. The self-chosen acronym DIY was initially introduced into the protest movements from punk culture, where the DIY principle had come to embody underground punk. In punk culture, DIY means that band members organise the production, distribution and consumption of audio and video records, self-published magazines (fanzines) and paraphernalia autonomously and independently, for their own friends. This way the barrier between performers and listeners/spectators is removed, while the consumerism characteristic of pop music fans is replaced with creativity, and enthusiastic activity takes the place of passivity. In the words of Jack Rabid, editor of the early 1980s US fanzine *The Big Takeover*: "I was expected to get involved. It wasn't a matter of 'Come smoke pot and hang out and watch' – everybody I met was doing something."

In the USSR, rock music was prohibited in many different ways, and its creators were subjected to repressions. Therefore any activities linked to rock had of necessity to be carried out independently, as indicated by the terms of samizdat and magnitizdat [private copies of privately-produced books and records, respectively – *Translator's*

note]. After perestroika, when rock emerged out of the underground, even becoming fashionable, and rock bands were filling stadiums, it became clear that rock had outlived itself and lost its 'social role'. This was the origin of punk, "which rejected not just the system, but also that part of rock music which had by then grown and spread far and wide" (Seva Gakkel)¹. When asked 'When did you get into punk, and how did that happen?', Sergei Voloshin, the organiser of the Moscow-based *Old Skool Kids* distro/label (www.oskrecords.com) replied: "Punk as such – probably in the early 1990s or late 1980s, but before that I had always been interested in some kind of underground music. When I was a teenager, I listened to underground rock; then, when rock ceased to be underground, I began listening to punk." DIY punk became a logical and effective means of resistance against both the dominant capitalist culture and the existing rules and norms in the world of popular rock music.

With the new capitalist, market-oriented, neo-liberal value system in Russia came new methods of resistance based on values that were alternative to the dominant ones. The DIY punks' protest was directed, on the one hand, against the dominant culture of consumption and the capitalist values behind it, and, on the other hand, against the state and neo-totalitarian tendencies, especially since the Russian secret services became seriously interested in DIY punk culture. However, the punks' protest and politics were not about

¹ Interview with Seva Gakkel in: Aksyutina O. *Punk virus v Russii (sbornik intervju)* [The punk virus in Russia: Interviews] Moscow: Lean, 1999. All other quotations are taken from – so far unpublished – interviews by the author in 2001.

analysis

defeating Leviathan, but about living in accordance with their principles and creating 'alternative' projects here and now, thus undermining the system.

THE FORMATION OF A DIY PUNK CULTURE IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

The links between the people who were to become the backbone of the local scenes in the post-Soviet space began to take shape in the first half of the 1990s. Thus, for example, the future editors of the Kirov-based *Play Hooky* fanzine had contacts with Mitrich from the town of Baranovichi in Belarus, the future editor of the *Left Hand* zine, and with activists from the emerging Latvian scene in the town of Kuldiga. All these people are actively involved in the DIY punk hardcore scene to this day. They corresponded, exchanged information, records, fliers and fanzines. Thus the foundations of this culture were laid long before the appearance of DIY punk/hardcore scenes properly speaking. As local scenes developed and local zines, bands, distros and labels emerged, these links evolved to a new level: people started exchanging zines, inviting bands from other regions to concerts, and releasing records with local labels.

This is especially characteristic of Baltic bands, who release their music on Russian DIY labels. There are virtually no borders between Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, but bureaucratic procedures and expensive visas constitute serious barriers between those countries and the Baltic states. Nevertheless Baltic bands often go on concert tours to Russia and Belarus. Thus, when the Lithuanian ska punk band *Dr. Green* first performed abroad, it was in Saint-Petersburg in April 1997, although it was much more difficult for them to travel to Russia than to any other European country. Russian and Belarusian bands have also got acquainted with the Baltic

countries' DIY punk scenes. The Ukrainian DIY punk/hardcore scene is somewhat lagging behind the Russian and Belarusian scenes, and there are no scenes to speak of in the other former Soviet countries, only individual expressions of this culture.

The formation of the post-Soviet punk scene is reminiscent of the early 1980s in the US. In one town after another, one or two people somehow learned about the existence of the DIY punk network and the ideas it was based on – ideas which, on the whole, aren't typical of mainstream punk in Russia: the struggle against fascism and other kinds of prejudice and forms of violence, vegetarianism, an active social position etc. These people began actively to disseminate music and ideas by word of mouth – by giving tapes and fanzines to their friends and acquaintances or simply in the process of socialising. Rather slowly, a DIY punk/hardcore culture begins to take shape.

THE MEMBERS OF THE SCENE

The average age of members of the scene is 22; most of them are students and usually live with their parents. The past five to seven years have shown that after graduating and finding employment most do not leave the scene but stay actively involved.

Scene members' places of employment range from music shops to research institutes and from computer clubs to corporate offices. The most frequent occupations are those of journalist (especially in Saint-Petersburg), designer (especially in Moscow) and student of cultural studies (in Kirov). The biggest distro/label, *Old Skool Kids*, is flourishing due to the fact that its modest revenue doesn't flow into the owner's private pocket but is immediately invested back into the music. At the same time, the owner works in an office in order to make a living and earn the money he puts into the distro/label.

analysis

Most members of the punk/hardcore scene avoid garish outfits: they wear comfortable, casual-looking garments, running shoes (often skater shoes), sweat shirts and T-shirts displaying band names or political slogans. Buttons and patches (often self-made) may also indicate an affiliation with this culture, as can piercings and tattoos. (Hardcore) punk in general has abandoned the shock effects of so-called “77 punk”, which has been compromised by the major mass media: mohawks, coloured hair, safety pins etc.

THE VALUES OF DIY PUNK CULTURE AND THEIR REALISATION

Members of the Russian DIY punk culture adopt a broad definition of the principle of *Do It Yourself* that is at the heart of this culture: “to do everything autonomously, without depending on any large commercial organisations, by one’s own strength, to maintain a musical scene of one’s own that is alternative to those commercial organisations, with all that this implies: clubs, distros, fanzines, books, everything” (Denis Gradov, Moscow). DIY is also understood more widely – as “human self-expression, independently of any directives from above” (Yegor, Saint-Petersburg). Ed Kireev from Kirov, editor of the first Russian fanzine, elaborated on this understanding of the principle of DIY: “Do everything yourself, from A to Z, completely. Well, for example, I have a fanzine of my own – *Play Hooky*. I do the layout myself, I print it myself, I select the articles. In other words, I write what I want. In other words, there aren’t any limitations on my work. In other words, nobody gives me instructions or orders. I do what I want, what I like, what I want to tell people.”

As to the gist of the concept of DIY, members of the scene mentioned the following main principles/values/traits of DIY punk culture:

autonomous production, independence, protest against commercialisation/avoidance of consumption, creativity, self-realisation, creating one’s own culture, social intercourse, enthusiasm, mutual support, the pleasure and joy of creation, honesty, interest/passion. The main types of values expressed in their protest are anti-consumerism and the struggle against prejudice.

1. *Anti-Consumerism*

Consumerism is understood as the basis of the dominant capitalist culture, which is what DIY punk protests against. This may be illustrated by the following excerpt from the song “Hardcore Resistance” by the Krasnodar band *Zasrali solnce* (“They Have Fouled the Sun”). The lyrics are about punk/hardcore bands who cross from underground to the major labels.

*they assure us they have not sold out –
of course not – they have simply been bought,
hardcore is now a profitable commodity:
demand for it runs high,
for everybody wants to be involved in
radical opposition against the system
they have forgotten that hardcore is
insubordination to the profiteers
they don’t remember that hardcore is
resistance against the show industry
you may think everything is like yesterday –
that you are free and in control of everything,
but that’s not the case, you are simply a
commodity,
you are outside hardcore, you are profaning it*

*hardcore – no to commerce
hardcore means a firm position
hardcore is d.i.y.,
opposition to the show merchants!*

analysis

How does the protest against commercialisation and consumerism express itself practically? For example, the Lithuanian band “SC” has published all its albums and covers on its website for people to download, listen to and distribute for free. Here is their rationale: “Being a hardcore band we can’t expect to earn any money from the music we play; on the contrary, we think that music should be distributed all over the world freely. So if you like, just download mp3, download album covers, print them, burn CDs and distribute freely!” (<http://hardcore.lt/sc>). This is not just a radical questioning of the crucial capitalist law of copyright, but also a challenge to the principle of profit, gain, and revenue.

2. Protest against Racism and Prejudice

The protest against racism and any forms of prejudice includes opposition to discrimination based on nationality, gender, age, and species. Many songs express hatred of nazi skinheads, for example “Lazybones” by the Kirov-based *Klowns*: “Our cities are getting dirtier and dirtier / Juvenile fashs are roaming the streets / They don’t know how to use their noddle / I hate the curs, oi-oi-oi!!!”, or “Empty the Stage!” by *Proverochnaya lineika* (Straight Edge), a band from Moscow: “White power order, Arian dictate / The ruthless stupidity of the trade school soldiers! / The soul doesn’t matter, only race does / Someone is making a bundle on this shit!”

At the same time, people are reconsidering their understanding of their own identity, based on the slogan ‘All different, all equal!’. In their song “Skinhead Reggae”, the Moscow band *Squat tag banda* sing: “We differ in colour / The time has come to abandon meanings / Best friends we shall be.” *Basta Basta* (Grodno, Belarus) sing: “People differ / And there is no point in looking at skin colour.”

Some songs are about empathy with the victims

of fascism and nationalist crimes. “Khursheda” by the Moscow-based band *Marschak* is dedicated to a nine-year old Tajik girl by the name of Khursheda Sultonova who was killed in a racist attack in Saint-Petersburg in February 2004. On her way back from a skating ring with her father and cousin, they were attacked by a group of 10 young men. By the time an ambulance arrived, the girl had died of numerous knife wounds and other injuries.

*Blind heaven remains silent
it knows who must perish
not of painted wounds but of knife stabs
and the scream of rusty chains that take away
your childhood
Inside the bloodless veins of empty streets
where those who have left their home are not
needed
so joyous the swarthy girl’s look
and it can no longer be saved
To understand everything without words, once
I know there is pain inside of me – my lies
Trying to hit the face with their feet
Not one of our faces but hers.
Still they pass by
the shadows of those who hide their eyes
So who am I?
He who takes vengeance or begs
to be taken instead of her.
In dream’s delusion
you shout that you are not the murderer
The younger brother repeats
- Wake up, sister!
One can see this blood on the life lines
of the fascists’ wormy hands
Where there are no grey walls
you are not
she lives
but you are not there*

analysis

Very important for DIY punk culture are values such as mutual support and solidarity, which mainly finds musical expressions in the form of benefit concerts and compilations. Thus when in March 2005 there was a brutal attack on members of several punk bands by a paramilitary group of nazi skinheads in a suburban train near Moscow, concerts were staged across Russia to raise money for the victims' medical treatment. Concerts are also frequently organised to support initiatives such as *Food Not Bombs* (see the portrait in this issue of *kultura*), the Anarchist Black Cross as well as the production of compilations against fascism and racism. However, mutual support is not limited to the musical sphere. Thus when people learn about a nazi skinhead attack on a punk/hardcore concert, they immediately gather at the venue to repulse the assailants and help the victims.

POLITICS-BY-EXAMPLE: DIY ETHICS

Politics-by-example is an important trait of DIY punk culture. In order to spread one's views, ideas, convictions, and values, people chiefly use their own personal example. For instance, many DIY hardcore punks are vegetarians or vegans for ethical reasons, out of protest against the murder and exploitation of animals. How do these ideas spread? To quote an excerpt from an interview with the Lithuanian band *Dr. Green*:

Olga: Are there many vegans in the Lithuanian scene?

Domas: Perhaps not many vegans, but more and more vegetarians. People are getting interested.

Verbaitis: And what's nice, nobody is telling them to. They follow other people's example. They see that you're vegetarian and you're all healthy and smiling...

Thus the punks are not just using the DIY principle in order to render the production and distribution of records as cheaply as possible, but

also to spread their ideas as widely as possible, beyond the fanzines, which are mainly aimed at the 'initiated'.

Here's a passage from an interview with the Belarusian band *Contra la Contra*:

Olga: What other DIY projects are you pursuing?

Zhenya: We're distributing T-shirts, patches... we're planning to release tapes – *Harum Scarum* [hardcore punk, USA], *Paragraf 119* [anarcho-punk, Denmark], *Sin Dios* [anarcho-punk/hardcore, Spain]... The idea is to distribute all of this here on cheap tapes. Simply because Western tapes are too expensive for our punks. We take cheap tapes, make a decent recording and photocopy the cover. It's all arranged with the bands and labels. It will cost half a dollar or a bit more – everybody can afford that.

Olga: Will they get any money out of it?

Zhenya: No, none at all. Neither us nor them.

Sanya: It's practically the tapes' cost price.

Olga: Tell me about the patches and T-shirts.

Zhenya: The patches and T-shirts are mainly anti-fascist.

Olga: Can T-shirts and patches serve to change the situation?

Zhenya: Yes, they can. When people walk around standing out from the crowd and their T-shirt displays a hand smashing a swastika, and there are more and more such people in Grodno, that makes the movement grow. That's an enormous advantage of the patches and T-shirts.

Sanya: Even if people do this without thinking, sooner or later they will want to learn about it or will be confronted with the problem. Moreover this is a means of telling the rest of society about the problem, which it ignores.

Thus DIY punk culture represents a network of friends – a network that is non-hierarchical, disperse, simultaneously global and local. The

portrait

FOOD NOT BOMBS IN RUSSIA

Olga Aksyutina

“As long as the world is a battlefield,
 as long as people are made part of the global machinery of terror and destruction
 for the sake of illusory ‘geopolitical interests’,
 as long as there is state control in the world,
 we shall conduct *Food Not Bombs* actions
 to attract public attention to the problems of hunger,
 poverty, total militarization and the threat of state violence.
 Because what we need is society, not control, and food is a right, not a privilege!”
 (from a Russian *Food Not Bombs* brochure)

Food Not Bombs is an international network of independent groups who cook vegetarian food and distribute it to the needy for free in order to protest against militarism and poverty. They share a commitment to the principles of non-violence, vegetarianism, anti-commercialism, the recycling of food, anti-authoritarianism, consensual decision-making, and tolerating a diversity of convictions. *Food Not Bombs* (FNB) first emerged in the USA in 1980 in the anti-military and anti-nuclear movement. The main idea of this initiative was to protest against the colossal amounts spent on the military industry and nuclear power while millions of people lacked food and shelter. The actions later became regular events, and the ideas behind them spread across the entire world.

THE BEGINNING OF FNB IN RUSSIA

Food Not Bombs first appeared in Russia at a concert organised by the B’67 straight edge* hardcore band at the Jerry Rubin underground club in Moscow in 1998. The organisers distributed vegetarian pasties filled with mushrooms or cabbage as well as *Food Not Bombs* leaflets and “Resist the Power of the Corporations” brochures. The idea next surfaced in early 2004, again in the DIY punk/hardcore scene, when the first benefit concert to raise money for *Food*

Not Bombs actions took place in the 7 Club. It was logical for the *Food Not Bombs* initiative to develop within the punk milieu. The conception of politics as grassroots-based, not-for-profit, anti-authoritarian and anti-disciplinarian that is prevalent in this scene in many ways concurs with the principles of *Food Not Bombs*.

The first *Food Not Bombs* group took up regular activities in Moscow in the autumn of 2004, and consisted exclusively of people from the punk/hardcore scene. Afterwards, other groups, also mainly linked to DIY punk culture, sprang up like mushrooms. Several more groups formed in Moscow; from early 2005, FNB groups emerged in Saint-Petersburg, Perm, Kirov, Togliatti, Krasnodar, Volzhsky, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, and Rostov. Members of one city’s punk scene would often help or inspire the creation of a group in another city. It has become a wide-spread practice for people to travel to another town to attend a concert and/or take part in a *Food Not Bombs* action. Virtually all the groups function on a regular basis. While their composition might change, the place and time of distribution as well as the frequency of the actions remain fixed.

PEOPLE AID PEOPLE

Some participants join *Food Not Bombs* simply because they enjoy cooking and distributing food

* Straight Edge is a movement within the hardcore punk scene that advocates a healthy life style, initially mainly drug abstinence, now increasingly also a meat-free diet, and the rejection of tobacco, alcohol, and promiscuous sex. – *Translator’s note.*

portrait

together with others. Many genuinely want to aid people by working on the principle ‘Think globally, act locally’. Some are trying to understand the reasons why, for example, so many people find themselves living on the street. *Food Not Bombs* varies from city to city. In some places people buy the food out of their own pocket; in others money is raised at benefit concerts; sometimes funds are collected during the actions;



elsewhere the organisers manage to obtain food for free. Almost everywhere, however, they hand out leaflets explaining the point of the initiative to passers-by. Participants in Moscow have also printed special leaflets for the needy, entitled ‘Free Help’, telling them where to get advice, replace lost passports, obtain free legal aid for refugees and migrants, find free shelter for the night, have a shower, get food and clothes, etc.

Food Not Bombs is not simply about nice boys and girls performing charitable deeds. This initiative tries to direct society’s attention towards the problems of the homeless, the least protected stratum of the population. The punks are ‘voluntary outcasts’ who refuse to become part of the ‘system’ and submit to rules imposed by a consumer society led by corporations and a society of control managed by a repressive state. They help the forcibly and brutally marginalised, who are not able or not allowed to blend in with society.

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

At the same time this initiative raises questions about war, militarism, and security spending. Thus, in the summer of 2004 members of a *Food Not Bombs* group carried out a *Food Not Rockets* action in the framework of an ecological protest camp in Perm in order to support a campaign against the incineration of ballistic missiles. Their leaflet said:

“Money used to be spent on creating RS-22 ballistic missiles [NATO code SS-24. - *Editors’ note*], now money is spent on scrapping them. Plans are to spend 6.7 billion roubles on the incineration programme in Perm. How many people could buy decent meals all their lives for so much money? According to the official data (of the Federal State Statistics Service), over 45 million Russians (over a third of the population) live below the poverty line. ‘70% of Russia’s inhabitants live in poverty or on the brink of poverty,’ says the Russian Federation’s State Ombudsman for Human Rights, Oleg Mironov.”

The Moscow-based *Food Not Bombs* groups declare in their leaflet that despite a significant increase in spending on the police and armed forces, the number of terrorist attacks in Russia has not decreased. And since this budget item (known as ‘military and police spending’ to experts) is classified, it is entirely unclear where this money goes to.

Thus the *Food Not Bombs* initiative has naturally become part of the DIY punk/hardcore scene’s sphere of action. The purpose of FNB matches the main tenet of this culture, the principle of *Do It Yourself*. This is based on a non-commercial approach to any type of activity, be it setting up bands, organising concerts, publishing fanzines, distributing records etc. All the people who cook and distribute the food are volunteers, there are no paid workers, schedules, or remuneration.

portrait

People simply help other people, and they do it without asking for grants or striving for fame; indeed they often endeavour to escape media attention. They do not merely dream that ‘another world is possible’, they try to realise it here and now, together with their friends.

*Translated from the Russian language
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

Illustration courtesy of Olga Akxyutina

While working on this issue we learned that Timur Kacharava, a *Food Not Bomb* activist, was murdered on 13 November on Ligovsky Prospekt in Saint-Petersburg, and a friend was badly injured. After participating in a food distribution action, they were assaulted by ten young skinheads, whom the media describe as Fascists (*Polit.ru*, 14 November 2005). We are deeply concerned about this incident, which highlights the topics discussed in this issue in a terrible way.

Timur Kacharava was 20 years old and played the guitar in the punk bands *Sandinista!* and *Distress*. He considered himself an anarchist and anti-fascist.

<http://ru.indymedia.org/newswire/display/13937/index.php>

THE EDITORS