

**An Anthem to Evoke the “Serious Strong Feeling”
It Should: Kasta’s Rap Provocative Alternative
to the Russian National Anthem**

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Abstract

In November 2019 the Russian rap group Kasta released the song *Our Russian Anthem (Naš gimn Rossii)*. The song was introduced by a direct invitation to President Putin to consider the song as an alternative to the current national anthem. The analysis, summarizing the «national anthem crisis» Russia went through in the year 2000, indicates that Kasta’s song, similarly to other unofficial anthems, questions the traditional didactic structure of anthems, and carves out agency in the self-imagining of the nation.

Keywords: Russian Rap Music, Kasta, National Anthem, Jurij Lotman

Abstract

Nel novembre del 2019 è uscito il brano intitolato *Il nostro inno russo (Naš gimn Rossii)* del gruppo rap russo Kasta. Nell’introdurre alla canzone, nel video pubblicato su YouTube, i membri della band si rivolgono direttamente al presidente Putin proponendogli di considerare il brano come un’alternativa all’attuale inno della Federazione Russa. La presente analisi, soffermandosi innanzitutto sulla “crisi” apertasi negli anni Duemila attorno al nuovo inno nazionale post-sovietico e sui suoi esiti, evidenzia come la canzone dei Kasta – al pari di altri inni non ufficiali – metta in discussione la tradizionale struttura degli inni nazionali, rivendicando uno spazio di *agency* nell’auto-rappresentazione della nazione.

Parole chiave: musica rap russa, Kasta, inno nazionale, Jurij Lotman

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Итак, перед вами «Ханаанский бальзам» (его в просторечье называют «чернобуркой») — жидкость в самом деле черно-бурого цвета, с умеренной крепостью и стойким ароматом. Это уже даже не аромат, а гимн. Гимн демократической молодежи. Именно так, потому что в выпившем этот коктейль вызревают вульгарность и темные силы.

Я сколько раз наблюдал!

Венедикт Ерофеев, *Москва – Петушки*¹

In November 2019, the successful Russian rap group Kasta released a new song, titled *Our Russian Anthem (Naš gimn Rossii)*. The music video, published on the group's YouTube official channel (where it gathered more than 1.6 million views), is opened by the four members' direct and apparently bizarre appellation to President Vladimir Putin:

Господин Президент, мы группа Каста и у нас радостное событие: мы справились с очень сложной творческой задачей, [задачей] государственной важности. Мы написали гимн, мы написали наш гимн России. Мы много раз слышали государственный гимн России, как и все, но он не вызывал в нас серьезного сильного чувства, которое, по идее, должен. И мы написали свой, который такое чувство вызывает. Просим обратить внимание на наш гимн России и рассмотреть его в качестве альтернатива (Kasta 2019).²

¹ «And so you have before you 'Balsam of Canaan'. In plain speech is called a Black Fox and the liquid is a blackish brown, of moderate strength and a staunch aroma that is really not an aroma, but a hymn. A hymn of democratic youth, because this cocktail fosters vulgarity and dark forces in the drinker. I've observed this many times!» (Erofeev 1994, 67-68).

² «Mr. President, we are the Kasta group and we have a joyful event to announce: we have accomplished a very difficult creative task, [a task] of national importance. We have written an anthem, we have written our Russian anthem. We have heard the Russian national anthem many times, like everyone else, but it did not evoke in us the serious strong feeling that it is supposed to. So we have written our own, which evokes

Although such a speech directly addressing the Russian President may seem an eccentric and unexpected idea, Russia boasts a tradition in this sense.

In the summer of 2000, a similar initiative was launched by some members of the Spartak soccer team, and their open letter invited the government to find as soon as possible a “proper anthem” to sing at matches. However, the situation was back then rather different: domestic conjunctures had caused a «national anthem crisis» (Daughtry 2003, 42) that the Putin administration, inaugurated that year and looking forward to the creation and consolidation of a unifying “national idea” (Jonson 2019), felt the urge to hastily solve. Having quickly dismissed the *Unbreakable Union* (*Sojuz nerušimyy*) anthem (its 1977 version)³ with the collapse of the USSR, in 1993 the Russian State Duma had ratified Michail Glinka’s *Patriotic Song* (*Patriotičeskaja pesnja*) as the official national anthem.⁴

Apart from representing a major shift in the melodic model (from an «anthem-as-march»⁵ to an «anthem-as-hymn» model, the archetypes of

that feeling. Please pay attention to our Russian anthem and consider it as an alternative». Here and elsewhere in this article translations are mine. The full text of the song is available online: e.g., <https://1-hit.com/ru/127000> [20/06/2021].

³ The text was revised after Chruščëv’s destalinization process in order to expunge references to Stalin.

⁴ It was no surprise that the choice fell on Michail Glinka, since he is generally considered «the father of Russian musical nationalism» (Frolova-Walker 1998, 350). However, it «was not the most obvious candidate among Glinka’s works», since the «epilogue to his opera *A Life for the Tsar* (*Zhizn’ za tsarya*) had long been regarded as ‘Russia’s second national anthem’ (Rezunkov 2000) and had been proposed as a possible successor to *God Save the Tsar* back in 1917» (Daughtry 2003, 51). On the formation of a national conscience and on the role of Russian musical theater in this elaboration, see also Giust (2014).

⁵ Indeed, the *Unbreakable Union* anthem was written during wartime, as in 1943 «Stalin voiced his desire to replace the existing national anthem, the *Internationale*, with a new anthem to inspire and invigorate the war-weary country and, presumably, to celebrate the pivotal Soviet victories at Stalingrad, Kursk, and on the Dniepr river» (Daughtry 2003, 46).

which are respectively the English and the French ones; Boyd 2001, 655), Glinka's piece had a major flaw: it lacked lyrics, a characteristic that allegedly affected the morale of athletes in particular, who were unable to sing anything at awards ceremonies (hence the Spartak team's complaint). A government commission was thus established with the purpose of examining alternatives to solve the "crisis"⁶ – yet President Putin made it also clear that «he personally preferred Aleksandrov's *Unbreakable Union* melody over all others» (Daughtry 2003, 51). It is no surprise that the choice, ratified already in December, fell indeed on the President-fave old Soviet melody with a new set of lyrics, the author of which was again Sergej Michalkov (the author of the original lyrics – both of the original and the post-Stalinist revised versions –, in 2000 aged 87).⁷ As we may expect, the choice was not appreciated unanimously, and for example Boris Nemcov's SPS Party back then reacted by submitting an overtly satirical alternative of the lyrics.⁸ Anyway, the ratification was not annulled nor modified to date, and the updated version of the Soviet anthem, now known as *Russia, our holy power* (*Rossija – svjaščennaja naša deržava*) is still the official one.

⁶ These alternatives included the elaboration of a brand-new anthem, the writing of lyrics to accompany Glinka's piece, or a reshuffling of old anthems.

⁷ Though with some editing from the governmental committee's part (Daughtry 2003, 52).

⁸ The text portrays a political environment completely devoted to the global market, capitalism, business, finance, private property, and which brandishes liberal instances just for show: ironically, Russia has turned into a country for active businessmen («страна деловых и активных людей»), ready for investment («для инвестиций широкий проход»), in friendly accord with labor and capital («в согласии дружном труда с капиталом»). Instead of the Fatherland, here is the peoples' private property to be glorified («Славься, народная собственность частная»). This country will finally provide the world with the ultimate lesson in liberalism («Миру урок либеральный дает»). The lyrics are quoted in Daughtry (2003, 56).

In the Russian language, as well as in many other Indo-European languages,⁹ the origin of the term *gimn* is linked to the Latin term *hymnus* which suggests its high and holy, or quasi-holy, character. It is an *hymnus* collectively and ritually sung to a projected godlike representation of the nation. The anthem at once creates (Stokes 1994) and embodies the «collective voice» of this represented nation (Eyck 1995, XX), its «selfless unisonance» fused in an «imagined sound» (Anderson 1991, 133), and for this reason it became an institutionalized attribute in Europe in the wake of Romanticism (Bohlman 2010).

However, national identities as «collective self-images» (Daughtry 2003, 42) of «imagined communities» (Anderson 1991) are subject to modifications and negotiations over time, and so anthems are occasionally required to be modified when a negotiated compromise is not reached: in the case of Russia, this happened after the 1917 Revolution, after the Chruščëv's inauguration of the destalinization process, and again after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, since the images of the Tsar, of Stalin, and of the Soviet epoch could find no more place after these paradigmatic shifts, and therefore had to be expunged.

Being the embodiment of an imagined construct that generically aims at portraying a 'national identity', in the end «national anthems sound a great deal alike»: they «are musically ambiguous, even if we imagine that their nationalist cultural work is potentially of great significance» (Bohlman 2010, 115). The reasons for that, according to Bohlman, have to do with the fact that national anthems move around (while their themes «migrate»), deliberately stick to the requirements of a specific subgenre («either strophic or repetitive in form») and tempo, and avoid «melodies and

⁹ The English term *anthem* derives instead from the Greek *antiphōnos*, literally meaning 'sounding in answer' (*anti-phōnē*), as in origin it described devotional verses sung as a response during rituals (etymology according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary).

styles that would exoticize their nations» (Bohlman 2010, 115). The national anthem becomes such not by virtue of its concrete appropriateness to define and identify a nation (since even key motifs and recurring words are much always the same), but, in a sense, by decree. As much as nations need symbols to be constructed, so anthems exist as long as national identities define themselves through them. This direct interaction is also witnessed by the «legally enforced ritual dimension of anthems» (Daughtry 2003, 46), as there are often laws regulating how citizens shall listen to the national anthem (in the Russian case: standing, without headgear, face to the flag if raised).

In a sense, the communicative model enacted through the national anthem is only apparently self-communicative ('SELF-SELF model', *Ja-Ja*, according to Juri Lotman's theory): instead of embodying the concrete collective voice of the nation speaking for itself, the national anthem is institutionalized from above and presented as part of the "natural", "genetic" national identity every citizen should assimilate since birth. The anthem thus responds to the other possible communicative model described by Lotman, the 'SELF-OTHER' one (*Ja-On*): the addressee is in this case deprived of agency and put into a didactic hierarchical structure generally characterized by a certain degree of «immanence», that the 'SELF-SELF model' instead lacks (Lotman 2000, 164-165).

Kasta's song, but also Boris Nemcov's satirical alternative for example, as well as numerous existing «unofficial anthems» elsewhere in the world (Bohlman 2010, 111),¹⁰ all reject the 'SELF-OTHER model', questioning the didactic approach and carving out agency in the self-imagining

¹⁰ «Unofficial national anthems serve all the functions of a national anthem, but they do not have the top-down sanction to represent the nation beyond its borders. The unofficial anthem enjoys a specific, usually also a wide, range of ritual functions,

of their nation. It is symptomatic that both in the above quoted appellation to President Putin, as well as in the song lyrics, a most recurrent word is the pronoun “we” (“*мы*”). Moreover, «this is us» («это – мы») is the leit-motif closing every sung couplet, thus being repeated nineteen times. The last couplet, insisting on the word «Russia» («Россия это больше, Россия снова и снова / Россия это навсегда, Россия — доброе слово / Это мы»),¹¹ stresses the identification of the country with that “us” depicted throughout the song.

The already mentioned Martin Daughtry, drawing a parallel between the Soviet and Russian (post-2000) national anthems, observes that the lyrics of the latter evoke the former:

All of the central terms that are present two or more times (and thus emphasized) in *Unbreakable Union* can be found in the new lyrics: ‘union’ (soyuz), ‘freedom’ (svoboda), ‘fatherland’ (otechestvo/otchizna), and the ubiquitous ‘nation/folk/people’ (narod). [...] Additionally, the way the new lyrics align with the melodic contour of Aleksandrov’s composition contributes to the evocation of the old anthem. This problem is best illustrated at the climax of the refrain, the moment when the old lyrics seem to adhere the most stubbornly to Aleksandrov’s notes (Daughtry 2003, 60).

stretching from performance at the beginning of athletic events (for example, in England, where *Three Lions* rather than *God Save the Queen* is often sung at soccer matches) to the marking of national crises (for example, in the United States after September 11, 2001, when *God Bless America* was more widely sung than *The Star-Spangled Banner*). Unofficial anthems also may demonstrate even greater national unisonance than their official cousins, perhaps because they have more immediate historical or modern relevance, or even because they are easier to sing as a collective. Sanctioned to represent the nation or not, unofficial anthems usually contain particularly powerful historical narratives, which invests them with a common narrative of nationalism» (Bohlman 2010, 111).

¹¹ «Russia is more, Russia again and again / Russia is forever, Russia is a good word / This is us».

Kasta's song, although slightly different from the group's traditional rap style since voices are here accompanied by the piano playing and a slower tempo, is definitively other than the Soviet-Russian anthem both at the melodic and lexical levels. The structure resembles a ballad, based on two alternating chords with little changes in the instrumental part. If defined through Boyd's categories, Kasta's *Our Russian Anthem* adheres to the «anthem-as-hymn» model, while Aleksandrov's score makes up an «anthem-as-march» (Daughtry 2003, 47).

Instead of referring to those generic terms found in the majority of national anthems, such as freedom, greatness, or holiness, Kasta's lyrics contain specific references to the present situation lived by Russian citizens, stressing in particular the problems and flaws of the status quo:¹² lack of freedom and political representation («Говорить не запрещено / Но молчим, как бы не сказать лишнего чего / [...] И вот уже в колонны строит нас очередной вождь»),¹³ unjust legal charges («Могут к каждому прийти и забрать, даже щас»),¹⁴ prison conditions and tortures («Друг друга голодом морить, гноить по зонам»),¹⁵ hypocrisy («принимаем ложь»),¹⁶ emigration («Кто не уехал, тот расстрелян был или замучен / Народ, оставшийся без своих лучших»),¹⁷ invasion of and interference in other countries' domestic affairs («Не вторгаемся в соседние княжества»).¹⁸ The rappers make also clear that current Russians are in this sense the truly worthy inheritors of their Soviet

¹² For a further exposition of the complex socio-political issues that are simply suggested in Kasta's lyrics, see Bernsand-Törnquist-Plewa (2019).

¹³ «It is not forbidden to talk / But we keep silent, not to say what we shouldn't / [...] And now a new leader has made us form a marching column».

¹⁴ «They can come and take anyone away, even now».

¹⁵ «We make each other starve and fester in prisons».

¹⁶ «We accept lies».

¹⁷ «Who hasn't left has been killed or tortured / a population left without its best people».

¹⁸ «We don't invade neighbouring kingdoms».

predecessors, from whose errors and crimes (e.g. Stalin's repressions) they seem to have learnt nothing:

Мы нашим предкам подобны
Истреблять способны неудобных и невинных
[...]
Внуки тех, кто забирал на допрос, на расстрел
Внуки тех, кто на каторге истлел, чей пропал в архиве след.¹⁹

These lines are a clear critical response to the current refrain of the Russian anthem, which runs «the wisdom of the nation given [to us] by our ancestors» («предками данная мудрость народна»).

The «serious strong feeling» that a national anthem is supposed to evoke, to quote Kasta's appellation, is thus conveyed, if we coherently follow the group's suggestion, through a down-to-earth but truthful representation of that «us» to which they feel belonging. Indeed, there is nothing of the kind in the national anthem, which generically talks about the holiness («священная держава»), mighty will («могучая воля»), glory («слава»), freedom («свободное отечество»), territorial width («широкий простор»), uniqueness («одна ты на свете») of Russia, to which Russian people are genetically faithful, from that allegedly receiving strength («нам силу дают наша верность отчизне»). The very protagonist of the national anthem is Russia, addressed through the second person («ты»), thus personified in substitution to the citizens taken neither as single individuals nor as a group. Kasta's choice to stress instead the use of the pronoun «we» is also a critical response to this.

Kasta's song does not however entirely depict a negative framework: the last six couplets, introduced by a noticeable melodic change (creating a climax, the piano plays while singing pauses for a moment), host a more

¹⁹ «We are like our ancestors / we are able to exterminate the undesirable and the innocent / [...] grandchildren of those interrogated and executed / grandchildren of those rotten in deportation, whose traces were lost in archives».

positive and almost confidential tone. Here, the singers imagine what Russia could and can be in the near future, and invite to «exhale the past, stick the chest out, straighten our backs» (Выдохнем прошлое, грудь вперёд, выпрямим спины). Since «the future grants the most stable assurance», now those «people who remember mistakes» will know how to avoid repeating them (У будущего есть самый стабильный гарант / Люди, которые помнят ошибки, их не повторят). From this radiant and hopeful ending of the song stems the «serious strong feeling» of Kasta’s “Russian anthem”, as it is not simply a critical depiction of the *status quo*, but reassures a faithful creed in the capability of their fellow citizens to make Russia a «good word» («доброе слово») again – a possible reference to the international stigmatization of Russia due to its illiberal domestic and aggressive geopolitical policies. This pragmatic, proactive “patriotism” is the one that the Kasta group proposes as an alternative to the current “national idea” propagandized by the ruling elite and, by metonymy, the national anthem.

Developed only in recent years (in contrast to the group’s original “suburban” rap style),²⁰ Kasta’s “musical activism”, possibly best known for the song *Come Out for a Walk* (*Vychodi guljat*) which turned into a symbol of the Belarusian protests last year (although written well before these upheavals), takes part in that “politicized rap” tendency (Frolova 2015) that in the last decade has not only given rappers a prominent role in oppositional culture, but has also demonstrated how they ever more often

²⁰ The group, formed in 1995 in Rostov na Donu (Rostov on Don), did not show a “musical activism” at the very beginning of their career: «Initially, these artists were influenced by the New York rap community the Wu-Tang Clan. Some of Kasta’s best-known songs were written from the viewpoint of poor, socially alienated, but highly reflective young men from the suburbs of non-capital Russian cities. [...] Kasta was oriented not only towards self-expression, but also towards social and financial success, and thus was relatively moderate in its ‘fighting performances’» (Kukulin 2020, 84-85).

«engage in a dialogue with high-brow culture» (Kukulin 2020, 81). The consolidation of power and consequently of a specific “national idea” projected on society by the ruling elite have urged some cultural actors to react and counterbalance «cynicism» (Lipovetsky 2018) and conformism in recent years, questioning notions of nationhood, patriotism, pluralism, normativity – yet being in many ways ostracized by authorities in acting so. Kasta’s *Our Russian Anthem* perfectly serves this critical, oppositional purpose, resisting the state-projected image of their own nation, and advocating for agency and legitimacy in the act of self-identification and self-representation.

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