

From Kolomyjka to Ukra-Ska-Pung

Recontextualizing Ukrainian folklore in Ukrainian and Russian popular music

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1. Introduction

I would like to start with an excerpt from an interview with Armin Siebert, one of the directors of the Berlin label *Eastblok Music* specialized in music from Eastern Europe. **[click]**

HB 1: Armin on folklore and Russian/Ukrainian popular music (0:41)

Armin: "A lot of Russian and - even stronger in the Ukraine - Ukrainian groups try to use their culture in the depths in their modern rock music. Especially within rock, but there are also bands and projects in the electronic area which consciously use folklore as samples. And yeah, that's of course something which especially we think is very exiting, because we think that the slavic culture, roughly said, is very deep and that one should not negate that, because it is really something special, which is not existent in the West."¹

Mixing elements of folk music (or what is perceived as folk music) is nothing new within the discourse of popular music. Groups like *Hubert von Goisern* (Austria), *Gaate* (Norway) or *Hoven Droven* (Sweden) are only three examples of groups active within the last decade. However, the interest in music from Eastern Europe with folk elements seems to be rising in cities like Berlin. In Berlin this search for exotic sounds is facilitated by Wladimir Kaminer and Yuriy Gurzhy's popular event *Russendisko* and the just mentioned record label *Eastblok Music*.

While a band's use of folk elements can have different purposes, the perception of this identity can vary and does not necessarily reflect the intended use. One of music's characteristics is its ability to take on new meanings and perceived identities not necessarily intended by its creator. These new meanings are enhanced today through the growing recontextualizations of musics in new locations.

In this paper I want to examine aspects of what can be perceived as Ukrainian band identities in bands from the Ukraine (*Ruslana*, *Haydamaky*) and Russia (*Svoboda*). My aim is to demonstrate the shift from a very local identity in the Ukraine (*Ruslana*, *Haydamaky*) to a stylized other identity in Russia (*Svoboda*) to a Pan-Slavic identity in Berlin.

Before starting I would like to say that this talk is not about Ukrainian folk music *per se*, but on what is perceived as folk music mainly outside the Ukraine.

2. Ukraine - Ruslana and Haydamaky

One thing that struck me when listening to Ukrainian bands known outside the Ukraine (like *Haydamaky*, *Ruslana*, *VV* and *Perkalaba*) was the incorporation of material which is normally associated with folk music (harmonies, instruments, visual elements).² I would like to show a short example demonstrating this: **[click]**

HB 2: Ruslana: Kolomyjka (1:15)³

Placing Ruslana firmly within a (West)Ukrainian context is the use of the Ukrainian language. For the more informed viewer this is emphasized by the use of different instruments linked to folk music (accordion, horns, fiddle, cimbalom), the clothes worn, tapestries and the rural setting. Finally, also melodic fragments in *Ruslana's* song, which seems to be based on a *kolomyjka* - a dance/music genre from the Carpathians - plays a role in the identity construction. Similar strategies are employed by *Haydamaky*.

This Ukrainian identity is not only present within the audio-visual material, but also in how both bands portrays themselves. Talking about *Ruslana* and her creative process Aleksandr Kasparov, one of the directors of *Eastblok Music*, said the following: **[click]**

HB 3: Aleks on Ruslana (@11:54 - 0:28)

Aleks: "For example Ruslana, is another example as a pop-singer. But she regularly does these folkloristic expeditions to the Carpathians, regularly. And she researches that, she goes with the whole team and she finds new beats, the new, I don't know, structures, musical structures, she always

comes back with a lot of luggage, musical luggage and is always very satisfied and told, told me, that is very influential."⁴

The focus on Ukrainian music is also described on *Ruslana's* and *Haydamaky's* homepage (the Ukrainian text seems to be identical with the English one): **[click]**

"For her Wild Dances Project Ruslana conducted expeditions to the Carpathian mountains discovering rhythms, dances and costumes of the ancient culture of the mountains which were on the brink to being forgotten and integrated them into a modern show, thus preserving the cultural heritage."⁵ **[click]**

"Haydamaky's hope is to forge an inherently Ukrainian popular music style, which looks back on its own heritage and traditions as a source for inspiration. [...] The music of Haydamaky is inspired by various ethnic musics from around the world, especially from various regions of Ukraine, such as Polissya, Bukovyna, and Zakarpathia."⁶

In other words, *Haydamaky* and *Ruslana* clearly stress the influence of local traditional Ukrainian material on the music they plays. In both statements "cultural heritage" can be seen a central element in the bands' identities and musical style. This is reflected in the played music and in the use of Ukrainian as a language to sing in. This choice clearly stakes their position in the Ukrainian language debate and also political debate. Both groups supported the Orange revolution and were featured on the compilation *Ukraina - Songs of the Orange Revolution*⁷ released by *Eastblok Music*: **[click]**

"Ruslana actively supported the democratic processes in Ukraine in winter 2004/2005 and in in spring 2006 she was elected Member of Ukrainian Parliament. The main issues she intends to push in politics are cultural issues, the Euro-integration of Ukraine and youth politics."⁸ **[click]**

"In late 2004 those not indifferent to the future of their country and appreciating democratic values, were engaged in Orange Revolution. And, for sure, Hadamaky were among the artists

performing at Independence Square (Maidan Nezaleznosti) [...] with their out bursting energy and infinite love to Motherland. [...] Democracy is worth fighting for it and the pure warriors of light – Haydamaky- did everything possible through their music to give it the way in Ukraine."⁹

While I do not want to reproduce the binary of the Orange Revolution propagandized in European and Russian media, one issue seems to have been staked around Ukrainian national identities and language politics. The use of Ukrainian can be perceived as a signal of exclusion for the Russian speaking population of the Ukraine, some who have relocated to Russia in part because of a feeling of alienation.

The aim of this very brief analysis of *Ruslana* and *Haydamaky* is to point out that they very consciously promotes themselves as Ukrainian groups drawing on (perceived) Ukrainian traditions and singing in Ukrainian. In other words, a very local identity. This identity is also intended for use outside the Ukraine in order to emphasize being from the Ukraine. That this identity is constructed goes without saying, e.g. *Ruslana* is born and raised in Lvov, not the Carpathian mountains.

3. St. Petersburg - Svoboda

Let us move to St. Petersburg and the local band *Svoboda* in which I was active playing the trumpet during my fieldwork. *Svoboda* describes its style as *Ukra-Ska-Pung*, short for Ukrainian Ska Punk. Aleksandr "Sasha" Rudenko, the vocalist and band leader, was born and grew up in Eastern Ukraine with Russian as his native language. However, he moved to Moscow in the 1990s and later became a Russian citizen. His move was partially fueled by a desire to continue his studies, but also by the increasing Ukrainization which alienated him. He describes the band style as following: **[click]**

HB 4: Sasha on Svoboda's style (@4:07 - 0:20)

Sasha: "Punk, Ska with elements of grunge [...] With Ukrainian lyrics, Ukrainian Russian, more not pure Ukrainian, but a mixture, so it's understandable in Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia. And mostly happy songs, serious songs are in Russian."¹⁰

Let us listen to an excerpt of the song La-la. Its from a festival we played at in 2005. **[click]**

HB 5: Svoboda: La-la (1:17)

When I asked two of *Svoboda's* fans, Denis and Anton, if it was normal for a band in St. Petersburg to sing in Ukrainian, Denis answered the following: **[click]**

HB 6: Denis on Svoboda singing in Ukrainian (0:30)

Denis: "Absolutely, because everybody sings in the language they want to [...] It's a kind of originality/peculiarity that he sings half in Russian and half in Ukrainian. If you take VV, they only sing in Ukrainian, Okean El'zi only sing in their language. And here he somehow... The group Svoboda tries to please both."¹¹

But the band's Ukrainian identity is not limited to the lyrics being sung in Ukrainian, Sasha is also inspired by Ukrainian folk motives. The music critic Andrei Burlaka describes *Svoboda* in this way: **[click]**

HB 7: Andrei Burlaka on Svoboda (0:19)

Andrei Burlaka: "There as well so to say is a new topic - such Ukro pop [...] Of course the Ukrainian language doesn't play such an important role there because, understandably, it's, well, cool. And so the music, so it really touches something there. There are similar playing [groups] from Piter there, yes, but [it] is [...] an added exotic, such a folkloric [one]."¹²

Talking about folklore and *La-la* Sasha said the following: **[click]**

HB 8: Sasha on Lala and folklore - (@24:22 - 0:39)

DEW: *Marusia* and *Choboti*, which...

SR: ...which are closer to folklore, yes - or even LaLa - it is such based on the lyrics. [...] Villages are very connected with exactly folklore. And *Selo moi pustie, na nochi vimerlo* [my village is empty, in the night there's nobody] that also already has some kind of Ukrainian folklore, because folklore is most of all in the Ukrainian villages. It is those *khaty* [peasant houses] *mazanki* [clay-

walled huts] with those... [...] *saló* [slabs of pork underskin fat] *horilka* [Ukrainian vodka] - well, I try not to use those kind of clichés, *saló horilka*, because it is the main cliché [...] Yes, you can say that also La-La relates to that [folklore]."¹³

In other words the band also draws on what is perceived as Ukrainian folkloric material. Sasha¹⁴ said that in some ways he is like an ethnographer writing down interesting motives to use in songs.

3.1. Perception of Ukraine in Russia

But what is the perception of the Ukraine in St. Petersburg? Russia and the Ukraine, especially the eastern part, have due to their partially common history been close. A lot of people I talked to in St. Petersburg referred to the Ukrainians as a brother people or even as a part of Russia. When I asked Vítia Kultashov, *Svoboda's* former guitarist, about his attitude towards the Ukraine he answered: **[click]**

HB 9: Vítia on Ukraine really part of Russia (37:52 - 0:24)

Vítia: "They were at one time part of Russia. I think, that because they separated from us, they didn't become an other, from us differing country - I think they remained a part of us, but don't want to admit that."¹⁵

This attitude is also reflected in the Russian music station *Nashe radio's* music policy: **[click]**

HB 10: Nashe Radio jingle (0:13)

"The most complete collection of Rock'n Roll and everything stylish in our music today. Our music! Our radio - made in Russia!"

Their definition of music made in Russia includes Moldovian, Belorussian and Ukrainian groups (*VV*, *Okean El'zi*). When I asked the stations general director in St. Petersburg, Elena Danilova,¹⁶ about that she replied that in the Soviet Union it used to all be the same.

This view of the Ukraine as really part of Russia did not make the Orange Revolution too popular in Russia, especially in the media coverage. People I talked to said the Ukrainians should blame themselves for the problems they got after the revolution (e.g. inflation). The negative coverage of the Ukraine continued during the gas crisis winter 2005/06. Replying to that, the Ukrainian group *Okean El'zi's* vocalist said both on *Nashe radio* and during a concert the same day (January 31st, 2006) in St. Petersburg that listeners could learn more about the Ukraine visiting their concerts than watching Russian TV...

However, there is also another element present here. I want to return to a detail Andrei Burlaka mentioned: the element of "exotic" which adds "coolness" to the band. *Svoboda's* use of perceived elements of Ukrainian folklore gives the group an exotic coloring, distancing them from Russia. Sasha adds to this exotization during concerts with announcement like "We just arrived from the Ukraine", "The next song is a Ukrainian folksong" etc. and addressing the audience in Ukrainian. This strategy, which Sasha uses for pure marketing reasons is also a clear marker of difference and it seems to work. Sasha is referred to as *khokhol*, slang for a Ukrainian, by the group's fans. The fans also seems to think that some of *Svoboda's* songs are actually Ukrainian folk songs (which is mostly not the case). Here the question of the exact origin of the music is not important. It is perceived as a generic Ukrainian influence which fulfills the requirements to be considered an exotic *other* by the fans.

4. Outside the slavic market

While Ukrainian and Belorussian can be differentiated within the Russian market (and vice versa), once the music leaves Eastern Europe and is aimed at an audience not speaking the language this exotic element becomes important. One such market is Berlin, Germany.

The main promoter of popular music from the Post-Soviet sphere in Berlin is the *Russendisko* which opened music from a Post-Soviet imagined community to a new, non-emigrant audience. This enormously popular event has been around since 1999. It received a boost of popularity through the

books by Wladimir Kaminer, one of the DJs who moved to Germany from Russia in the early 1990s. His books, written in German and aimed at a German audience, consists of stories linked to his life as an emigrant in Berlin. Both the books and the event *Russendisko* play on German stereotypes of Russia.

Playing the music that they like (thus filtering the music), the DJs mix different groups disregarding origin. Since the audience themselves are mainly Germans and tourists without knowledge of Russian, Ukrainian or Belorussian the bands lose their local / national identities. In other words, the national boundaries are removed and the folklore elements loose their local origin. Instead a Pan-slavic *Russendisko* identity is created. This also applies to *Svoboda*, *Haydamaky* and *Ruslana*¹⁷, which are played at the *Russendisko*.

This has opened a market for bands from the Ukraine and Russia to tour Europe playing for a non-emigrant audience and to market these groups. Both the *Russendisko* DJs and *Eastblok Music* release CDs (both albums and compilations) of music played at the *Russendisko*. *Haydamaky* is featured on *Russendisko Hits 2* and their album *Ukraine calling* was released by *Eastblok Music*. As mentioned earlier both *Haydamaky* and *Ruslana* are featured on the compilation *Ukraina - Songs of the Orange Revolution* (also released by *Eastblok Music*).

As I touched upon earlier the *Russendisko* DJs filter the music based on their taste and there are some common traits to what they like and play. These are, to be very superficial, the use of horns and influences from Ska and folkmusic. Talking about the specificity of the music played at the *Russendisko* Armin said the following (Russian is here used in reference to the music played at the *Russendisko* thus including groups from outside Russia): **[click]**

HB 11: Armin on Russian popular music style (@31:45 - 00:35)

Armin: "Yes, otherwise a lot of own coloring and that I think is something special in a worldwide comparison, I mean for me there is something very special Russian, just out of my feeling and if somebody could position that [on the market], just like Latino music managed to do in the last

20 year, then I see a chance that Russian music will become a synonym for a certain sound and it would be good, I mean if that is achieved."¹⁸

This sound would encompass both Ukrainian and Russian popular music and thus iron out the regional differences.

5. Conclusion

The aim of my paper has been to present how the notion of a Ukrainian band identity can shift by being relocated. I started with a very local notion, where the band is located in the Ukraine and draws on a specific region (*Ruslana, Haydamaky*). I then continued to Russia and demonstrated how a stereotypical or exotic identity is constructed (*Svoboda*). The last example recontextualized both bands within the *Russendisko* in Berlin where the Ukrainian element through the relocation was transformed into a Pan-Slavic identity. In other words, through the disjunctures of global flows a band's intended identity is not necessarily preserved when it is relocated to a new context.

6. Discography

Div: "Pomaranchevi pisni", Comp Music 2004

Div: "Russendisko Hits 2", Russendisko Records 2004

Div: "Ukraina - Songs of the Orange Revolution", Eastblok Music 2005

Haydamaky: "Ukraine calling", Eastblok Music 2006

Ruslana: "Diki Tantsi", Comp Music 2003

Svoboda: "Demo", St. Petersburg 2005

7. Interviews (by author unless otherwise noted)

Burlaka, Andrei. 22.03.2005, St. Petersburg

Danilova, Elena. 21.06.2006, St. Petersburg

Kasparov, Aleksandr. 19.07.2006, Berlin

Kultashov, Viktor. 12.02.2006, St. Petersburg

Rudenko, Aleksandr. 09.01.2006, St. Petersburg

Siebert, Armin. 11.10.2005, Berlin

Siebert, Armin. 19.07.2006, Berlin

Vashkevich, Denis. 30.01.2006, St. Petersburg

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1. Siebert (2006). *Viele Russische und - auch noch stärker in der Ukraine - Ukrainische bands bemühen sich, ihre Kultur in der Tiefe zu verwenden in ihre modernen Rockmusik. Vor allem im Rockbereich, es gibt's aber auch im elektronischen Bereich Bands und Projekte, die bewusst Folklore als Sample einsetzen. Und ja, das ist natürliche 'ne Sache, die gerade wir besonders spannend finden, weil wir finden, dass die, wenn man so grob, sagt, slawische Kultur sehr tief ist und dass man das nicht verleugnen sollte, weil das gerade was besondere ist, was es im Westen nicht gibt.*
 2. I am aware of the fact that this only represents a small selection of Ukrainian bands and that other bands e.g *Okean El'zi* do not incorporate folk elements.
 3. The clip can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3sTkRHziKI> (accessed on 20.06.2007)
 4. Kasparov (2006). *Zum Beispiel Ruslana, ist ein anderer Beispiel als Popsängerin. Aber sie regelmässig macht diese folklorische Expeditionen nach Karpathen, regelmässig. Und sie recherchiert das, sie geht mit dem ganzen Team und sie findet die neuen Beats, die neue, weiss ich nicht, Strukturen, musikalische Strukturen, sie kommt immer zurück mit grossen Gepäck, musikalische Gepäck und ist immer sehr zufrieden und hat gesagt, hat mir gesagt, das macht grosse Einflüsse.*
 5. http://www.ruslana.com.ua/main_eng.html, accessed on 12.06.2007
 6. <http://www.haydamaky.com/eng/history/index.htm>, accessed on 14.06.2007
 7. This album is a reissue of the compilation *Pomaranchevi pisni* released by Comp Music 2004.
 8. http://www.ruslana.com.ua/main_eng.html, accessed on 12.06.2007
 9. <http://www.haydamaky.com/eng/history/index.htm>, accessed on 12.06.2007
 10. Rudenko (2006)
 11. Vashkevich (2006)
 12. Burlaka (2005). *Vot tozhe [...] novaia tak skazat' tema - takoi [...] Ukro pop [...] Ukrainskii iazyk tam konechno ne igraet takoi vazhnoi roli potomu chto, poniatno, nu prikol. A tak muzyka tak ona dostatochno tam ukladyvaetsia v kakie-to. Est' peterskie pokhozhie igraiushchie tam da no [...] dopolnitel'naia ekzotika, takaia fol'klornaia.*
 13. Rudenko (2006)
 14. Rudenko (2006) - @ 24:11
 15. Kultashov (2006)
 16. Danilova (2006)
 17. Although *Ruslana* is quite known as Ukrainian due to the fact that she won the Eurovision Song Contest 2004.
 18. Siebert (2005). *Ja, ansonsten viel eigen Kolorit und das find ich ist was besonderes im weltweiten Vergleich, also es gibt was ganz eigen russisches für mich so vom Gefühl her und wenn man das entsprechend halt positionieren kann, so wie auch Latino musik das in letzten 20 Jahren geschafft hat, dann sehe ich ne Chance das da russische Musik quasi auch ein Synonym wird für 'n bestimmten*

Klang und das wär gut, also wenn man das hinbekommt.