“Vodka, Beer, Papirosy"

Eastern European Working-class Cultures Mimicry in Contemporary Hardbass

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Abstract: In this chapter, I discuss the contemporary developments of hardbass, a predominantly Eastern European electronic dance music style that emerged at the turn of the first decade of the twenty-first century in Russia and spread to different countries of the region and beyond. Specifically, I focus on de-politicized and commodified hardbass in relation to social class and the mutations it underwent in late postsocialism in Eastern Europe, while paying particular attention to contexts of the Czech Republic and Russia. In terms of transnational circulation, I approach hardbass as an element of cultural transfer. The resulting study is based on a multi-site research project focusing beyond Eastern Europe on the specific relationship of hardbass to the Netherlands. I interpret contemporary hardbass music videos in line with mocking colonization by the “normcore” strategies of the “middle class” hipster youth possessing cultural and to certain extent also social and economic capital.

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On a late summer day in 2016, the Prague central city square of Václavské náměstí witnessed a rather peculiar meeting. The otherwise commercial and touristy center of the Czech capital became a stage for several dozens of young people, dressed mostly in Adidas tracksuits. Despite the warm afternoon, some of them wore furry hats. Many of these youngsters were squatting on their feet, some were drinking water from vodka bottles, and the others drank beer and

maybe even proper vodka. Several packets of sunflower seeds were brought by the mostly local Czech youngsters from one of the many Russian food markets. Some of them were reproducing jump-up electronic rhythms and taking selfies and pictures of others with the help of their smartphones. This carnivalesque flash mob was organized by the Czech Facebook page *Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits* and gathered young people who found their (guilty?) pleasure in the music and dance called hardbass.

I.

In this chapter, I discuss the recent developments in hardbass, a predominantly Eastern European electronic dance music (EDM) style that emerged at the turn of the first decade of the twenty-first century in Russia and spread to different countries in the region and beyond. These developments can be understood as part of a three-stage process in which each phase had a different tone and message: the first phase was satirical, the second was about far-right politics, while contemporary hardbass is increasingly commodified and seemingly depoliticized. The second phase overlapped with the rise of various social movements in the early 2010s and the then-relatively new deployment of Internet memes and viral videos by far-right groups. The masked dancing to hardbass can also be viewed as an East-to-West cultural transfer.[1] My inquiry focuses on hardbass production during the second half of the 2010s and its ties to social class and class mutations in late postsocialist Eastern Europe, with particular attention to the Czech Republic and Russia.[2] I gathered the empirical material for this study in the period between spring 2018 and spring 2020. As part of my research, I followed the YouTube channels and Soundcloud, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts of several hardbass and related EDM musicians, collectives, and labels such as DJ Blyatman, Blyatsquad, Gopnik McBlyat, Life of Boris, Russian Jump Up Mafia, the Russian Village Boys, the Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits, and Tri poloski. Most of these are semi-professionals and a typical contemporary hardbass product is a music video or a DJ set, which differs substantially from the do-it-yourself (DIY) home video spirit of earlier hardbass.

1 Please see a basic Google map here: https://bit.ly/3uzBtoJ.

2 In this chapter, I include under the geographical category of Eastern Europe also postsocialist countries that are otherwise (self-)declared as forming part of Central (Eastern) Europe. The debate about the symbolical geographies of Europe is seemingly endless and goes beyond the scope of this study; see for example Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu, "Where Are We, When We Think in Eastern Europe?" in *Art Always Has Its Consequences*, ed. Ivet Ćurlin et al. (Zagreb: WHW, 2010), 85–92.

I was finishing the first manuscript of this study in late March 2020 during the Covid-19 lockdown, at a time when masks were no longer so shocking but dancing in public was forbidden. Due to the cancellation of many hardbass events in the context of the "stay home" policies of late winter and early spring 2020, it was unfortunately not possible to complement the online research with participant observation as was initially planned. I have therefore tried to integrate some other qualitative material, such as online interviews and comments, to at least partly replace this lack. At the same time, it was also an enriching perspective to approach the topic differently, since many hardbass protagonists reacted to the lockdown with an even more massive posting of videos and memes. On the contrary, no home videos of hardbass performances reminiscent of earlier forms were published by the end of March 2020.

Given the transnational character of its cultural references, it is also tempting to approach hardbass through the lens of the traveling concepts theory. I have argued that the far-right leaning version of the genre was in early 2010s a rare example of East-to-West cultural transfer. In reference to the important monograph, "Looking West,"[3] would it make sense to rethink hardbass as a herald of "No More Looking West"? Could one speak of reverse of from "Culturedness-to-Westerness"[4] trajectory? Even if the references to post-Soviet culture and society are central to the joyously uncultured contemporary hardbass, the replies to these questions will most likely need to remain negative and it is more adequate to conceive of it in the terms of transnational circulation. The resulting study is thus based on a multi-site research project focusing beyond Eastern Europe on the specific relationship of hardbass to the Netherlands.

II.

It has been argued that the period that has been not-unproblematically labeled postsocialism has already become history.[5] Historian Philipp Ther has proposed interpreting the postsocialist change with regard to the simultaneous muta-

3 Hilary Anne Pilkington, Elena Omel'chenko, Moya Flynn, and Uliana Bliudina, *Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Cultures* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

4 Maria Cristache, "From 'Culturedness' to Westernness: Old and New Consumption Practices in Romanian Postsocialist Homes," in *Proceedings of the History of Consumer Culture Conference 2017* (Tokyo: Gakushuin University, 2018).

5 Martin Müller, "Goodbye, Postsocialism!," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 4 (2019): 533–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1578337.

tions of the West.[6] Also, in the last decade, new interpretations are no longer proposed by scholars predominantly coming from the former West, as was the case at least until the mid-2000s. Urban sociologists Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druta argued that the actors of the neoliberal transition in Eastern Europe thoughtfully used the specter of socialism in order to silence the opposition and push forward anti-socialist policies.[7] Even if this statement might be too strong for all the countries of the region, with a generational distance from the changes of 1989–90, such postsocialist legitimization strategies have gradually eroded. Art critique Marta Dzievańska has called for a revision of the post-Soviet paradigm since the early 2010s.[8] For her and her colleagues, the quest in the aftermath of the post-2008 crisis and the establishment of new populist and authoritarian regimes was to analyze the situation that followed the often problematic and painful neoliberal transitions with new settings of legitimacy and power. This was particularly pertinent for Russia but also for other Eastern European countries, many of which have joined the European Union since the mid-2000s.

Beyond the reference to the socioeconomic and political context of contemporary Eastern Europe, any attempt to treat hardbass should also take into account research on local youth.[9] At least since the mid-1990s, it has been argued that the body of knowledge produced by subcultural studies does not fully mirror the reality of contemporary lifestyle and consumption-based communities in the global core or in postsocialist Europe.[10] Lately, the radicalism of such a post-subcultural approach has been partially revised.[11] Produced in the early 2010s, political hardbass may have overlapped with the agendas

6 Philipp Ther, *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014).

7 Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druţă, "Zombie Socialism and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 4–5 (2016): 521–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1266273.

8 Marta Dziewańska, *Post-post-Soviet? Art, Politics & Society in Russia at the Turn of the Decade* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2013).

9 Matthias Schwartz and Heike Winkel, eds., *Eastern European Youth Cultures in a Global Context* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

10 See for example Andy Bennett, "The post-subcultural turn: some reflections 10 years on," *Journal of Youth Studies* 14, no. 5 (2011): 493–506, and Marta Kolářová, "Hudební subkultury mládeže v současné ČR—postsubkulturní či postsocialistické?," in *Populární kultura v českém prostoru*, ed. Ondřej Daniel, Tomáš Kavka, and Jakub Machek (Prague: Karolinum, 2013), 232–48.

11 Sumi Hollingworth "Performances of Social Class, Race and Gender Through Youth Subculture: Putting Structure Back in to Youth Subcultural Studies," *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 10 (2015): 1237–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1039968.

of far-right youth movements in their quest for modernization through the appropriation of different subcultural practices, among which hardbass might be seen alongside football hooliganism, hip hop, graffiti, or skateboarding as one of many. The subcultural dimension of contemporary hardbass should nevertheless be considered in a more nuanced way. In the attempt to problematize the subcultural paradigm, one could try to follow theory of "grey zones" as sketched for the Eastern European context by Alexei Yurchak[12] as well as more recently by the collective of authors led by Ida Harboe Knudsen and Martin Demant Frederiksen.[13] It may be tempting to depict hardbass musicians and fans as not predominantly possessing rigid and die-hard identities. But even playful irony as well as nonsense "eastploitation" aesthetics, both essential qualities of hardbass, have important dimensions of social class.

The issue of class in postsocialism, particularly in relation to popular culture, is not a novel research topic. Scholars have already focused attention on the "new rich" and in particular "new Russians," economic elites who fully profited off of the period during and after the fall of state socialism.[14] Incomparably less has been written about the "middle classes," which in the 1990s were often conceived as a stabilizing factor for local "new democracies."[15] An overview of the local debates about class is presented by Jan Drahokoupil for the case of the Czech Republic in a special issue edited by David Ost, who has also discussed a particular set of approaches to class in the postsocialist Polish academia.[16] Relatively new research tools focusing on the intersection of culture and class have been presented by Dražen Cepić discussing the case of Croatia.[17] Lifestyle, consumption and "culture" have often been distinct markers of the "middle classes."[18] Stephen Crowley, while presenting his account of the

12 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

13 Ida Harboe Knudsen and Martin Demant Frederiksen, *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, Borders and Invisibilities* (London: Anthem, 2015).

14 For recent summing up of the debate, see Elisabeth Schimpfössl, *Rich Russians: From Oligarchs to Bourgeoisie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

15 See for example Harley Balzer, "Russia's Middle Classes," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 14, no. 2 (1998): 165–86.

16 Jan Drahokoupil, "Class in Czechia: The Legacy of Stratification Research," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29, no. 3 (2015): 577–587, and David Ost, "Stuck in the Past and the Future: Class Analysis in Postcommunist Poland," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29, no. 3 (2015): 610–24.

17 Dražen Cepić, *Class Cultures in Postsocialist Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2019).

18 Simon Stewart, *Culture and the Middle Classes* (Farnham: Routledge, 2016). When writing about the "middle class" in my own research, I use quotation

more self-confident "middle classes" in early 2010s Russia, took vital examples of popular beliefs of class relations and struggles from popular culture, in particular from movies.[19] My own research considers popular music as a distinct social class marker, following in the footsteps of Pierre Bourdieu and his notions of cultural and social capital fueling these "distinctions."[20] Consumption and lifestyle can thus be considered as strategies of increasing these forms of capital. Ben Malbon presented a Bourdieu-based concept of "coolness" when treating the EDM "club cultures."[21] So did the already mentioned Maria Cristache[22] and Judit Bodnár,[23] when writing about home decoration as reflections of the shifting class structures in postsocialist Romania and Hungary, respectively. The account of contemporary hardbass at hand aims to merge these scattered debates in discussing a particular social practice mirroring the concepts of youth and class.

III.

In analyzing hardbass as a phenomenon linked with a particular social class, I feel the need to recall the history of the Saint Petersburg rave scene that flourished in the early 1990s due to the relative openness of the late perestroika period and the following decade of changes.[24] Simultaneously, in the Czech

marks. Similar to Marxist thinking about the "bourgeoisie," "middle classes" are conceived as an unstable and transitory category, uneasy to describe in a scientific discourse. I therefore follow an emic perspective of the postsocialist Eastern European "middle classes," mostly formed by a neoliberal paradigm and often by self-glorification. On the contrary, I use the reference to lower-income social classes which could be synonymous to Marxist thinking on the "working class" and "lumpenproletariat" without quotation marks.

19 Stephen Crowley, "Russia: The Reemergence of Class in the Wake of the First "Classless" Society," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29, no. 3 (2015): 698–710.

20 Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979) and "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58.

21 Ben Malbon, *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy and Vitality* (London: Routledge 1999.

22 Cristache, "From 'Culturedness.'"

23 Judit Bodnár, "Becoming Bourgeois. (Postsocialist) Utopias of Isolation and Civilization," in *Evil Paradises. Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*, ed. Michael Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk (New York: New Press, 2009), 140–51.

24 Андрей Владимирович Хаас, *Корпорация счастья. История русского рейва*. Санкт-Петербург: Амфора, 2011 and Алексей Юрчак, "Ночные танцы с ангелом истории. Критические культуральные исследования пост-социализма." In *Культуралные исследования*, ed. Александра Эткинда (Санкт-Петербург: Европейский университет, 2005).

Republic, contact with the United Kingdom's "freetechno" scene was enabled since 1994 through British sound systems exiled in Berlin and profiting off of the Czech Republic's liberal legislation and the unpreparedness of the state security apparatus for the issues that "freeparties" increasingly meant.[25] In the first case, the rave parties were frequented in particular by the university students as well as other parts of the late Soviet intelligentsia. In the second case, "freeparties" were also initially a pastime reserved to the students and other youngsters with ties to the local elites, but they gradually turned into a more trans-class phenomenon.

But the UK rave scene, often understood as a side-product of Thatcherism[26] with its individualism, psychedelic drugs, and corresponding mystical reveries of "temporary autonomous zones,"[27] was neither a unique nor the most important historical predecessor of hardbass. A more direct link can be seen in an already distorted version of rave: a Dutch hardcore techno genre called gabber.[28] In a mid-1990s documentary about gabber,[29] the drugs were also an important reference, but it was not always the same ones as the MDMA-fueled "second summer of love" UK rave scene. Instead, leaning towards the psychedelic trance, a more aggressive and faster rhythms, together with synthetic drugs such as "speed" and an overall dystopic atmosphere fed the seemingly chaotic jump-up *hakken* dancers. Since the early 2010s, hardbass was not alone in the re-appropriation of the long-time démodé gabber. In Poland, Italy, France, and Indonesia, artists and collectives such as Wixapol, Gabber Eleganza, Casual Gabberz, and Gabber Modus Operandi reinvented the gabber influences simultaneously.[30]

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25 Ondřej Slačálek, "České freetekno–pohyblivé prostory autonomie?," in *Revolta stylem: Hudební subkultury mládeže v České republice*, ed. Marta Kolářová (Prague: Slon, 2011), 83–122, and Rozálie Kohoutová, *CzechTek*, Czech television documentary, 2017.

26 Andrew Hill, "Acid House and Thatcherism: Contesting Spaces in Late 1980s Britain," *Space and Polity* 7, no. 3 (2003): 219–32, and Henry John, "UK Rave Culture and the Thatcherite Hegemony, 1988–94," *Cultural History* 4, no. 2 (2015): 162–86.

27 Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991).

28 Hillegonda C. Rietveld, "Gabber Overdrive—Noise, Horror, and Acceleration," *Turmoil—CTM Magazine* (January 2018), https://openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/item/869q7.

29 Ari Versluis, "Gabber," *Lola da musica*, season 2, episode 5, aired November 13, 1995 (Vrijzinnig Protestantse Radio Omroep).

30 Joe Muggs, "Gift of the Gabber: The Return of Dance Music's Gloriously Tasteless Subgenre," *Guardian*, January 10, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jan/10/gift-of-the-gabber-the-return-of-dance-musics-gloriously-tasteless-subgenre.

Similarly to the first ravers, gabbers were also recruited in the football terraces and many of them shaved their heads. An important reference common to gabber and hardbass is also the link to the far right. One of the skinheads in the documentary greets other visitors of a Dutch gabber party with a Nazi salute,[31] a reference that will be often evoked some seventeen years later when referring to political hardbass. Another common link for gabber and hardbass will also be the shirtless male bodies and sportswear. In the Dutch case, *hakken* dancers were predominantly skinny, while the Eastern European hardbass bodies often foregrounded their carefully built physiques and hardbass verbally rejected drugs.

Exaggerated masculinity is one of the key ingredients of hardbass. In contrast to "freetechno" and similarly to gabber, it is a predominantly male enterprise. Some similarities can also be found with male-dominated spaces in heavy metal concerts, where Jonathan Gruzelier has analyzed the homosociality of moshpits, places that are reserved for hardcore dancers.[32] Interestingly, some of the hardbass performers, such as Gopnik McBlyat, also express their sympathies to metal and hardcore punk.[33] It would surely be tempting to approach hardbass in light of the theory of hegemonic masculinity. The re-traditionalization of gender roles after the fall of state socialism[34] as well as some openly homophobic, sexist,[35] and even misogynist[36] references in its lyrics, could be of importance for such an approach.

On the contrary, the parodic dimension of hardbass, particularly that of détournement of the street (gopnik) culture of lower-income social classes, is a key to the puzzle. Certain specific body techniques, such as squatting, refer to Eastern European street culture[37] and make hardbass undoubtedly part of this reservoir of playful performance. Some similarities in the importance of shock

31 Versluis, "Gabber."

32 Jonathan Gruzelier, "Moshpit Menace and Masculine Mayhem," in *Oh Boy! Making Masculinity in Popular Music*, ed. Ian Biddle and Freya Jarman-Ivens (London: Routledge, 2007), 59–76.

33 Tri poloski, Interview with Gopnik McBlyat, posted March 8, 2020, https://tri-poloski.com/media.

34 Aleksandar Štulhofer and Theo Sandfort, *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: Haworth Press, 2006).

35 To quote one of the many, it seems sufficient to find a correct translation of the Russian word *blyat* used by many of the contemporary hardbass protagonists even as a nickname.

36 Cmh x Gspd x Russian Village Boys "Anti Girl," posted October 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntxihekLfuM.

37 Asta Vonderau,*Leben im "neuen Europa" Konsum, Lebensstile und Körpertechniken im Postsozialismus* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010).

can also be found with horrorcore hip hop;[38] others may derive from *chernukha*, a typically perestroika and post-Soviet exploitation genre of cinematography.[39] Such references can also be linked with the aestheticization and de-politicization of earlier hardbass. Images of violent groups teasing other travelers in a post-Soviet metro train,[40] or a general propagation of hate,[41] may come from this aesthetic reservoir. However, hardbass is much more eclectic and beyond the influences discussed above, one can also identify inspirations from trap music,[42] darkwave,[43] Russian *popsa* and *estrada*,[44] as well as from predominantly Dutch happy hardcore rave and continent-wide Eurodance.[45]

IV.

The modernist approach that defined the social class through its production has been distinguished, at least since the global 1960s, by the placement of consumption at the center of understanding social relations.[46] Building upon this argument, I propose to conceive contemporary hardbass through its mocking of the consumption of lower-income social classes. I also propose an interpretation that this rhetorical operation may result from the unachieved ambitions of the Eastern European "middle classes" themselves. This interpretation relates to the strategy of global millennials re-appropriating forgotten lifestyles through so-called "normcore."[47] Simon Reynolds, in his Retromania, conceived

38 Mikko O. Koivisto, "'I Know You Think I'm Crazy': Post-Horrorcore Rap Approaches to Disability, Violence, and Psychotherapy," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2018), https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/6231/4910.

39 Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

40 Russian Village Boys, "Suckcess (prod. Dizelkraft)," posted March 12, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5JxFkcVQAM.

41 DJ Blyatman & Нвкн, "Eastern Bloc," posted February 12, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MqS263kA84.

42 DJ Blyatman & Russian Village Boys, "Razjebasser," posted june 19, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWt3Ko2R1Vg.

43 Russian Village Boys, "Работа," posted September 11, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUndsLpVx70.

44 Смн & Russian Village Boys, "Диски Вписки," posted January 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TPN0x9NPuM.

45 Gspd, "Евродэнс," posted May 19, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hV3vaO8W5M.

46 Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

47 Cecilia Winterhalter, "Normcore or a New Desire for Normality: To be Crazy, Be Normal," *Catwalk: The Journal of Fashion, Beauty and Style* 5, no. 1 (2016): 21–42.

such a hipster "back-to-the-future spirit"[48] in terms of a quasi-bohemia present "in any city in the developed world that is large and affluent enough to support a decent-sized upper middle class."[49] "Normsters," as a particular hipster practice, mockingly colonize the particular music and fashion of older generations.

Olga Gurova recently underlined the importance of fashion in the contemporary Russian political debate framed through lifestyle.[50] The key reference in relation to the ready-to-wear brands fetishized by almost all contemporary hardbass protagonists is Adidas. Its "three stripes" (*tri poloski*) have been the subject of many postsocialist jokes and the importance of the brand in the popular imagination must not be underestimated.[51] In hardbass, the centrality of the reference to Adidas may also be due to the recurring rhyme of the words "hardbass" and "Adidas" in many of the genre's rather rudimentary lyrics. Beyond fashion and Adidas, alcohol and in particular vodka is often referred to. This may be a strategy of (self-)exoticization when communicating with the wider non-Eastern European audience, but it may also function well when communicating among insiders. "Vodka, beer, *papirosy*," referring to Russian unfiltered cigarettes, in the words of one hardbass lyric, could thus read as a rather ironic "normster" substitution for one's own unachieved ambitions of "Hennessy, champagne, and cigars."

Besides alcohol and fashion, one of the most important references hardbass shares with other EDM and hip hop genres relates to cars. In some of the music videos, we can see hardbass artists driving Mercedes, BMWs, or even Bentleys, but the most referenced and depicted autos are different models of the Soviet and Russian working-class vehicle Lada, which are often refurbished and modified. Most of the vehicles depicted in Russian hardbass music videos have Saint Petersburg or Moscow license plates. Apart from such indirect references to the "two Russian capitals" (and an open one to Amsterdam, as we will see later), other direct geographical references are quite rare in these music videos. What is, on the contrary, not missing is the depiction of different and anonymous working-class neighborhoods, housing estates, and courtyards, often in very

48 Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2011), 174.

49 Reynolds, *Retromania:* 169.

50 Olga Gurova, *Fashion and the Consumer Revolution in Contemporary Russia* (London, New York: Routledge, 2015).

51 Caroline Humphrey, "Traders, 'Disorder,' and Citizenship Regimes in Provincial Russia," in *Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, ed. Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 19–52; Liisi Laineste, "Post-Socialist Jokelore: Preliminary Findings and Further Research Suggestions," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 54, no. 1 (2009): 31–45.

desolate states. Khrushchyovki, as most of these estates are often labelled in the post-Soviet space, were recently brought into the public debate in particular conjunction with the "top-down" gentrification attempts in Moscow.[52] References to such neighborhoods in hardbass music videos should be understood in line with a strategy of mocking the colonization of these spaces by the "normcore," "middle-class" youth.

Similarly, the dilapidated workplaces, such as vast factory halls that constitute the environment for many of these music videos, are all but places where the hardbass protagonists and their audience earn their living. Moreover, the depiction of abandoned infrastructure, such the "no man's land" under bridges, but also deserted streets and roads as well as the desolate public transport where some of these music videos take place, can be seen as an appropriation of the "horrorcore" aesthetics discussed above. While the hardbass far-right football hooligans and activists merrily posed with baseball bats, fighting chains, and iron bars under such concrete structures alongside graffiti of Celtic crosses and "Anti-Antifa" inscriptions in order to frighten their enemies, contemporary hardbass music videos use such surroundings ironically in an attempt to colonize what they perceive as an authentic culture of the lower-income social classes. The problematic dimensions of such seemingly ironically depoliticized approaches to whiteness is something that has been discussed since the beginning of the scholarly debate about hipsters.[53] What is relatively new for hardbass is a dimension of dystopia, with its links to the hedonist and nihilist, synthetic-drug-fueled gabber.

V.

The circle of gabber/hardbass is closed by explicit reference to the Dutch model not only in music but also in visuals, such as Dutch flags worn on the jean jackets of the Russian Village Boys in several of their music videos.[54] The

52 See for example Tom Balmforth, "Moscow's Plan To Raze 'Khrushchyovki' Sparks Anger, Confusion Ahead Of Elections," *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, May 6, 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-moscow-khrushchyovki-demolition-housing-controversy-elections/28471341.html.

53 Mark Greif, "What Was the Hipster?" *New York*, October 24, 2010, http://nymag.com/news/features/69129/.

54 Russian Village Boys & Mr. Polska "Lost In Amsterdam (Official Music Video)," posted May 24, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DidEz_Tkgo0; DJ Blyatman & Russian Village Boys "Instababe (Official Music Video)," posted November 22, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7114Ojew1ZM; Russian Village Boys & Rät N FrikK "Putindabass," posted January 18, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLaOStTmRkw.

touristy slogan "Welcome to Netherlands" in one of these music videos also reveals an important dimension of social class, linking contemporary hardbass with those Eastern Europeans affluent enough to travel for pleasure to Western Europe. The feeling of generational dependence on the distribution of wealth is reinforced, however, in one of these music videos by the staged home call (in English) of one of the protagonists, during which his mother advises him by phone to be careful. But the Russian-Dutch trajectory in hardbass should not be seen as a unique vector. To a certain extent, it is also possible to observe "the message delivered back." The professional promoter Tri poloski ("three stripes," referring to Adidas) is based in the Netherlands and acts as a "leading agency for Hardbass artists,"[55] organizing successful and widely visited hardbass parties in the country as well as in neighboring Flanders, according to the audio-visual material presented on the website. At the same time, many East-East collaborations flourish in contemporary hardbass, such as with Mr. Polska in the case of the Russian Village Boys.

Key elements of contemporary hardbass refer to (self-)exoticization strategies, which have long been analyzed in Eastern European and in particular Southeastern European cinema by Dina Iordanova,[56] Tomislav Longinović,[57] or more recently by Andrea Matošević.[58] At this point, it may be particularly fruitful to divert attention to hardbass fans in the Czech Republic, where the fragmented identities deriving from the dominant Czech culture, based on its constant negotiation of allegiance to the West, result in mockingly joyous orientalism of Life of Boris[59] or Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits.[60] Most of the memes posted by these two online projects would be considered xenophobic (and particularly Russophobic) if they had resulted directly from a canon of Czech majority culture. Their central point is the ironic foregrounding of the "unculturedness" of Eastern European societies, and examples from the Czech

55 Tri poloski, agency webpage, accessed March 17, 2020, https://tri-poloski.com/agency.

56 Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

57 Tomislav Z. Longinović, "Playing the western eye: Balkan masculinity and post-Yugoslav war cinema," in *East European Cinemas*, ed. Aniko Imre (New York: Routledge, 2005), 35–48.

58 Andrea Matošević, "(Auto)egzotizacija Balkana i etnografija nositelja značenja u tri primjera sedme umjetnosti," *Narodna umjetnost: hrvatski časopis za etnologiju i folkloristiku* 48, no. 2 (2011): 31–49.

59 Life of Boris, YouTube channel, accessed March 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCS5tt2z_DFvG7-39J3aE-bQ.

60 Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits, Facebook page, accessed March 17, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/SquattingSlavs/.

Republic itself are extremely rarely displayed. Instead, a stereotypical meme of Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits could be the body of a Dacia car pulled by horses, i.e., something that would be considered "from the outside" to be just as humorous as a fan of Sasha Baron Cohen's Borat or the French early 2000s humoristic music project, Bratisla Boys.

Given the overall aesthetics of contemporary hardbass, these Czech social media projects mimic the Russian and other Eastern European-based collectives that communicate their class-based "internal orientalism."[61] The East is conceived as somewhere else by the Czech hardbass fans. If it is not somewhere else, it is somebody else who is its bearer, whom Russian and other Eastern European hardbass mimics. Hardbass Czech social media projects at the same time reinforce the aforementioned xenophobic feelings. Beyond their ideological framing of anti-Communism and anti-Russian imperialism, these are often fueled by feelings of endangerment on the part of the Czech urban "middle classes" vis-à-vis the capital of Russia's "middle classes," particularly in the real estate sector.

VI.

Hardbass partly derives from diasporic and global identities. It was argued that emigration from Eastern Europe is particularly pertinent for young people from the "middle classes"[62] who overlap with the population cohort that forms contemporary hardbass fandom. It is a task for the further research to identify the proportion of hardbass fans and performers from Russian and other Eastern European origins in the Netherlands and possibly also in the Czech Republic. Presumably, this is an important but possibly not a central point for explaining hardbass class relations. A lead could also be found in a recurring English-language comment that has been posted under several YouTube hardbass video clips, which runs along the lines of "[that] looks like my babushka's place." The comparison may refer to the villages of traditional Russian wooden houses or the shabby city intersections with their chaotic mix of street signs and

61 Michał Buchowski, "The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother," *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (2006): 463–82.

62 Anna Amelina, "Hierarchies and Categorical Power in Cross-Border Science: Analysing Scientists' Transnational Mobility between Ukraine and Germany." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 141–55; Sergei Riazantsev, "The New Concept of the Migration Policy of the Russian Federation: Revolution or Evolution?," in *The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood: Migration, Borders and Regional Stability*, ed. Ilkka Liikanen, James W. Scott, and Tiina Sotkasiira (London: Routledge, 2016), 153–68.

advertising, including homemade posters. Contemporary hardbass's mix and switch between English and predominantly Russian and other Eastern European languages has two key consequences: first, the target audience masters the different languages and is drawn from both the East and the West. Second, the mastery of English, albeit an often deliberately broken and heavily accented version, is a sign of social status and a hallmark of young "middle-class" fans.

This analysis of the social complexities that surround contemporary hardbass is refined through a focus on class relations and conflicts. Hardbass's predominantly male fans and song protagonists ironically mimic the cultures of the lower-income social strata in their home countries (predominantly "working class" but also "lumpenproletariat" gopnik cultures) while reinforcing their own positions within the privileged "middle class." While they may lack economic capital in relative comparison to their "middle-class" parents, contemporary hardbass fans and protagonists do have cultural and to some extent also social capital. Their exaggerated "Slavic unculturedness" should be understood as (self-)exoticizing marketing that brings a certain regional specificity to the arena of global EDM club cultures.

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