Maria Konoshenko

NOTES ON LANGUAGE CHOICE AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION DURING THE UKRAINIAN WAR: IN WHAT LANGUAGE SHALL I PERFORM NOW AS AN ÉMIGRÉ MUSICIAN OF RUSSIAN ORIGIN?

Creating and engaging with music are among the most powerful coping strategies in times of crisis, while studying song-making during the war brings us closer to understanding patterns of resistance and the emotional processing of trauma. A song is not only about the sound and the meaning of the words; it transmits a lot more signals and ideologies, which are, for example, revealed through the choice of language(s). Language choice in songwriting can be of course motivated by aesthetic or rhythmical considerations and individual repertoire limitations, but other reasons may be no less important. Indeed, opting for one or another language for the lyrics, or switching between languages, is a statement in its own right. Variation in the songs' language(s) – or dialect(s) / accent(s) / styles – functions as an interplay between the singer's identity projections and the needs or expectations of their audience, which often do not coincide in multilingual environments (Berger 2003; Buschfeld et al. 2023; Coupland 2007; Sharma 2018). Furthermore, one's identity is a complex socially and culturally constructed phenomenon encompassing macro-level demographic categories, temporary and interactionally specific stances (Bucholtz & Hall 2005), cf. also the notion of 'relational self' in Coupland (2007).

During times of conflict and crisis, some identities can get further problematized, and this is clearly the case with one's Russian identity after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (Matyushkina 2023), related to the feeling of collective guilt and self-identification with the aggressor country (Kuznetsov et al. 2023). In this essay, I will reflect on how a trade-off between different identities, and my audience informed my language choices as a song-maker of Russian origin, who left the country after 2022 for political reasons.

BEING A RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ MUSICIAN AFTER 2022

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine accompanied by a worsening political and social climate in Russia, many Russian citizens have left the country; over 40% of them were IT specialists, while over 20% worked in the domain of art, culture, and research (Kamalov et al. 2025: 5). Among them were many acclaimed musicians having built successful careers in Russia, e.g. **Noize MC, Aigel, Monetochka, Bi-2, Nogu Svelo, Zemfira, Boris Grebenshchikov**. Many of them were declared 'foreign agents' in Russia.

I was among those who emigrated from Russia in 2022, moving with my then 6-year-old son first to Cologne, Germany,

and then to Helsinki, Finland, to work in an academic project. Despite having worked as a researcher in linguistics, I was also trained as a classical singer and, somewhat earlier, as a pianist. In April 2022, when taking part in a fundraising concert for Ukraine in Norfolk, UK, I performed several songs in Ukrainian, which is a foreign language to me, as a gesture of support for Ukraine. My usual repertoire and comfort zone as a performer have been Russian art songs from the early twentieth century (such as *Dark eyes*, or *Ochi chernye*), but after the beginning of the war, I felt that this music no longer sounded appropriate on an international stage.

Later, the emigration experience became a creative booster for me. Inspired by **Astrid Joutseno**, a Finnish musician and a researcher with whom I was lucky to work at the same department (Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki), I began transforming modern Russian anti-war poetry written in 2022–2024 (in Russian original and sometimes in English translations) into art songs. I started thinking about the songs in January 2024. From the beginning, my idea was to compose music for those wonderfully strong texts written by **Alja Khaitlina, Vera Polozkova, Zhenya Berkovich** and others, rather than write songs with my own lyrics. Many poems, originally written in Russian, had been translated into English, and the versions in two languages sounded very different. An acute question for me was – should I take the originals or the English translations?

IDENTITIES AND LANGUAGES

This was not my conscious reasoning back then, but here I will try to unpack the implicit assumptions that subconsciously guided my language choices, as I now understand them. Four identities were relevant for my music-making experience: ‘Artist’, ‘Migrant’, ‘Aggressor’, and ‘Activist’. Each of them would have a certain style, a certain level of societal prestige (e.g., the Artist is high-prestige, the Migrant is low-prestige), a particular ideology (Aggressor attacks; Activist fights for justice) and, crucially, be associated with a certain language, a point discussed below. Since in music-making – as in communication more generally – there is an audience (real or imagined), each identity projects a specific role for the audience, and a particular relationship between the ‘Speaker’ – me, the musician – and the ‘Listener’, or the audience. These identities are represented on separate relational axes, each belonging to a different social context – Art, Migration, War and Social justice.

Context	Speaker (self)		Listener (audience)	Language
Art	Artist	↔	Musical audience	Rus / Eng ?
Migration	Migrant	↔	Local (receiving society)	Eng
War	Aggressor	↔	Observer / Victim	Eng, ~~Rus~~
Social justice	Activist	↔	Society (home country, diaspora)	Rus

I am discussing poetry and songwriting, so the artistic context is, of course, fundamental, hence I put it in the first place. A song should be beautiful and pleasing to the ear, expressive. This is the domain of the biggest creative freedom for an artist revealing his or her individuality and creativity. For existing poetic pieces, the best way to present them would be to preserve the original sounds, structures and imagery as created by the poet. Since we are talking about Russian poetry, the language of the songs would then be Russian. After all, in Spring 2024, **Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s** *Eugene Onegin* was staged in Russian by the Finnish National Opera. So why not give those wonderful modern poets their authentic Russian voices? However, timeless classics are one thing, and, conversely, modern music-makers have a clear urge to reach wider audiences (Berger 2003; Buschfeld et al. 2023), which is why so many songs are performed in English at Eurovision. So maybe English then, provided that the translations are good enough?

Since I was already based in Finland, I expected my local audience to be more international; singing in English would make the songs more accessible to them. And indeed, for the first time I presented my songs at a salon organized by Astrid Joutseno at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, where only a minority would understand Russian.

But there is another – and way more subtle – layer in this migration aspect. When working on the songs, I was a recently arrived Eastern European migrant in Finland, the country leading the world in sustainable development (Sachs et al. 2025) and holding the top position in the world happiness rankings (given that a little more than 100 years ago Finland was a rather modest province of the Russian Empire, the tables have now turned quite significantly;

and I am very proud of Finland). Despite coming from a rather privileged background and having a prestigious position as a researcher at the University of Helsinki, I had lost a lot of social capital – a common story for migrants. Furthermore, as a migrant of Eastern European origin, I felt 'less white' than locals, who would allegedly represent a more 'civilized' Western European society; this is the reason why so many Russians change their names and hide their accents in Finland (Krivonos 2020). In such a context, singing in Russian would make this 'otherness' too visible, and singing in English would mean claiming a comfortably higher social capital, in Bourdieu's (1977) terms.

Moreover, the Ukrainian war context made particularly the Russian identity more problematic, since many Russians outside of the country felt as if they were representing the aggressor country, and were even embarrassed to speak their language (Matyushkina 2023; Vasilyuk 2022). To give you a more concrete example, the first song that inspired my music-making was Alja Khaitlina's poem *Vosemnadtsatyi den* (*The Eighteenth Day*) picturing the bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol, where babies were born in the cellar during the attack. Even before the Russian occupation, Mariupol was largely a Russian-speaking city (Gentile 2020); and most likely, the pregnant women portrayed by Khaitlina were Russian speakers. Alja, an accomplished Russian-speaking poet based in Germany, wrote her poem in Russian, and it was quite soon translated into English by **Dmitri Manin.** Yet, to me, narrating the war experience of a Ukrainian hospital bombed by Russians in Russian felt quite wrong; it was a major reason why I chose English over Russian for that poem.

And yet, after uploading some home recordings on YouTube, it became clear that my main audience was Russian-speaking; those texts resonated with the listeners from both sides, in Russia and in Ukraine. A visitor of my YouTube channel once left a comment saying that she was coping with solitude and despair by listening to my songs. There was also a no less important activist dimension. Some texts written by Alja Khaitlina were dedicated to the death and the burial of **Alexey Navalny**; some poems by Zhenia Berkovich were a clear anti-war protest. I wanted to sing them in Russian, to share them with my Russian-speaking transnational online audiences and the offline listeners from the Russian-speaking diaspora in Finland, to foster the spirit of solidarity, strength and resilience. Only we Russians are responsible for the future of our country, and we must talk about these things in our own language.

Other considerations also undoubtedly influenced my language choices. For example, in one poem, the English translation sounded better than the Russian original. Yet, the Russian text had some very acute intonations, so I decided to make a bilingual song, repeating the same verses in two languages. Another aspect is that English and Russian sound very different to my ears; English lyrics push me towards the bluesy sound with harsh voice quality and juicy harmonies, while Russian often invokes the late Soviet tradition of singing poets known as 'bards' with three basic chords, a quiet voice and all attention to the lyrics.

CONCLUSION

The Nobel Prize winner **Ivan Bunin** once wrote about the so-called White Russian emigration (1917–1920) fleeing the Soviet regime:

> 'The Russian emigration, which has demonstrated by its exodus from Russia and by its struggle, by its marching on ice, that it does not accept not only out of fear but also out of conscience **Lenin's** cities, Lenin's commandments, has a mission which consists in the continuation of <…> non-acceptance' (Bunin 2000, 150-153; translation from Macinanti 2021: 293).

Substituting Lenin with **Putin** in this quote precisely captures the protest spirit of this most recent wave of Russian emigration. Clearly, the Ukrainians have their own traumatizing story, which I am in no position to discuss here. But the Russian opposition experiences also deserve to be voiced. The war, emigration and protest have profoundly impacted the Russian community affecting the way we behave and even the way we speak. Many things are still beyond our control, but reflecting on our actions helps keep our agency, stay sane and spread the word.

Maria Konoshenko is a grant-funded researcher at the University of Helsinki and a musician (mezzo soprano, pianist and composer) releasing her music on the Rezzonator Music label in the UK. Link to YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/@mariakonoshenko_mezzo

Sources

Berger, H. M. (2003) Introduction. In H. M. Berger & M. T. Carroll (eds.) Global pop, local language. University Press of Mississippi, ix–xxvi.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) The economics of linguistic exchanges. Social Science Information 16 (6), 645–668.

Bunin, I. A. (2000) Missija russkoi emigratsii [The mission of Russian emigration]. In O. N. Mihailov (ed.) Publitsistika 1918–1953 godov. Moscow: Nasledie, 150–153.

Buschfeld, S., Ronan, P. & Vida-Mannl, M. (2023) Multilingual pop music. In S. Buschfeld, P. Ronan & M. Vida-Mannl (eds.) Multilingualism: A sociolinguistic and acquisitional approach. Springer International Publishing, 235–251. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28405-2_11.

Coupland, N. (2007) Style: Language variation and identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gentile, M. (2020) The "Elephant" in Mariupol: What Geopolitical Moods Prevail in the City. Vox Ukraine. Available: https://voxukraine.org/en/the-elephant-in-mariupol.

Kamalov, E., Nugumanova, K. & Sergeeva, I. (2025) On the Move: Mobility, Integration, and Dynamics of Russian Emigration in 2022-2024. SSRN. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5204018.

Krivonos, D. (2020) Swedish Surnames, British Accents: Passing among Post-Soviet Migrants in Helsinki. Ethnic and Racial Studies 43 (16), 388–406. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1813319.

Kuznetsov, G., Sokolova E. & Stupko, M. (2023) O krizise povestki kollektivnoi viny [On the crisis of the collective guilt agenda]. Soci-digger. Available: https://sociodigger.ru/articles/articles-page/o-krizisepovestki-kollektivnoi-viny (Accessed 11.9.2024).

Macinanti, M. (2021) Music in exile: Russian émigré composers in interwar Paris and the mission of Russia Abroad's musical creativity after the 1917 revolution. Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge 6 (2), 289–309. DOI: 10.26409/2021JMK6.2.07.

Matyushkina, A. (2023) Constructing National Identity: A Study on Russian Migrants' Mothering Practices in Finland. MA thesis, University of Helsinki.

Sachs, J. D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. & Iablonovski, G. (2025) Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century. Sustainable Development Report 2025. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press. https://doi.org/10.25546/111909.

Sharma, D. (2018) Style dominance: Attention, audience, and the 'real me'. Language in Society 47, 1–31.

Vasilyuk, S. (2022) Putin's war on Ukraine has forced me to confront my Russian identity. Think: Opinion, Analysis, Essays. Available: https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/russian-war-ukraine-made-confront-russian-identity-rcna22312.