

Domestic Product: How MTV Russia Shaped a Whole Generation

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August 16, 2015



Screen shot from the 1999 show "Party at Detsl's Home," which helped to globalize Russia's untraveled kids.

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MTV Russia in the early Noughties was more than just a TV channel: it was a pop culture hub that brought Western shows onto the country's screens, helping to globalize the first post-Soviet generation. Sasha Raspopina was among them.

MTV Russia appeared at an opportune moment in 1998, when musical TV in Russia was limited to MuzTV, which at the time was a young and not very successful network. Other channels, like ORT, offered music shows too — but they were only a small part of the programming and never specifically addressed teenagers as the target audience. That's why when MTV Russia burst onto almost every TV set in the country it caused a true pop culture storm. With their music videos, goofy American shows, cartoons like "Beavis and Butt-head,"

and show business news with young, edgy anchors, the channel knew how to get kids to like it. No dead-faced people in suits, no soap operas that your gran follows, but plenty of Backstreet Boys and Spice Girls videos, top-10 music charts, and fart jokes from two of the most annoying cartoon characters in the world. If there was a more ingenious plan to take over a generation of 13-year-olds in a turbulent country less than 10 years old, it hadn't been invented yet.

Celebrity culture and pop music were finally here after years of perestroika-fuelled cravings for all things shimmering and Western. Some older people had an issue with this — how could we ignore 70 years of communism for songs about sex and money? Did the history mean nothing at all? But while they may have had a point, they were wrong to think the new pop culture a successor to the traditional Soviet *kultura*, an exalted sphere that favored education and ideology over entertainment. This was about entertainment for its own sake, something we had never really experienced before. Because it was new, we imported it just like we imported chocolate bars at the time. The language difference in the song lyrics wasn't a problem — if anything, it helped us learn English faster than our parents could ever have dreamed. And later, when we started to produce our own versions, the original American product, be it Mars bars or Justin Timberlake, served as a handy guide that could be either copied completely or rearranged to look and sound more Russia-appropriate.

Video for 1999 track "Party at Detsl's Home"/"Vecherinka u Detsla"

In 2002 the channel started 24-hour broadcast, pouring tunes and visuals straight into the minds of the fresh post-Soviet teenagers, who had grown up eating Snickers bars in the bleak school yards of the '90s. The country was busy rebuilding itself and MTV was there to babysit the kids procrastinating from doing their math homework. The videos and music we saw then stuck with us for a long time — as many first experiences do. Go out on the street of Moscow now, grab a twenty-something and read them the first line of the chorus of Detsl's '99 hit Vecherinka (Party) and they will be able to continue: "Party's at full swing at Detsl's house; All the boys and girls from the district are here."

At the time MTV acted as an incubator for young talent. We had our first rappers and hip-hop artists: Detsl (real name Kirill Tolmachev), Master Cheff (Vlad Valov) and the band Malchishnik — all of them white and painfully awkward, trying out a kitschy post-Soviet Eminem persona. We got Strelki, Blestyashchiye, VIA Gra and other girl groups, as well as a legion of boy bands. Then came Russian X Factor graduates, Black Eyed Peas-style bands, Madonna-wannabes — we've seen them all. Half of the time the quality of these freshly manufactured acts was questionable, so most kids naturally preferred to see an Avril Lavigne video instead of one by Yulia Savicheva, a pop singer similarly longing for a rock-pop princess aesthetic. Sometimes this preference for the imported and foreign became automatic, but a clever rotation schedule on the channel meant that we got to have our imported desserts while our homegrown greens were sneaked in as well. A true triumph was the swift rise to fame of the pretend-lesbian duo t.A.T.u., whose videos were rotated heavily on MTV and paired with clever marketing from the band's team, resulting in the holy grail of all Russian musicians — mild worldwide success. In fact the band still has a sizable fanbase all over the world, despite one member's recent [homophobic claims](#).

Video for 2002 track "Hottie"/"Krasavchik" by Strelki

The lack of quality of our domestic pop product compared to the foreign artists wasn't even important. As long as we got our own stuff, we were moving forward. Detsl's 2001 song and video "Pismo" (Letter) copies Eminem's "Stan" visually and conceptually, as Tolmachev raps that he received a letter from a depressed suicidal fan in a small town on the Volga river. In Vecherinka, the video uses all the typical wild teenager party tropes — but instead of the parents going out of town as they would in a similar American song, Detsl specifies that the parents went to the dacha, prompting a party with all the cool kids from the rayon (region in Russian). These local details and other cultural signifiers, although seemingly tiny, meant a great deal in the end, identifying small Russian towns and suburbs together with their American analogues, both romanticizing them and creating a new context, where, suddenly, we were on the map. "Petersburg, I'm Yours" by Bad Balance, a hip-hop band formerly known as Bad B. Alliance and connected to Detsl, is one of those songs where a rapper confesses love to his home city. Suddenly, St. Petersburg was no longer mundane, imperial, post-Soviet: it had street cred, like Los Angeles and New York. Easy.

Video for 2000 track "Hope for Tomorrow"/"Nadezhda na zavtra" by Bad B. Alliance

These artists found a way into the hearts of teenagers, who still hold them dear even as they've grown up and lost interest in music. A tweet comparing Detsl to Eminem provokes a whole queue of replies favoring the former, despite the fact that an independent critic would conclude that the American rapper has better songwriting and production. The recent death of Zhanna Friske, an ex-member of the girl group Blestyashchiye, was met with a mourning reserved only for childhood heroes, as Facebook filled up with tearful emotional posts, even from people who now boast elitist tastes in trendy electronica.

Video for 1997 track "Clouds"/"Oblaka" by Blestyashchiye, the year Zhanna Friske joined

Sadly the phenomenon didn't last: In May 2013 MTV Russia left the airwaves and moved to cable, ending an era. As the change was announced, media burst into a TV obituary frenzy, publishing lengthy op-eds about the channel's departure and legacy. Many authors pointed out the symbolic coincidence: The channel closed just when Russia was starting its transition into newly conservative times with strong state influence on culture, where MTV's fun and riskiness had no place. Alexandra Garmazhapova, a St. Petersburg-based political journalist for Novaya Gazeta wrote: "Every time I read the news with the words 'banned,' 'prohibited,' 'outlawed,' I'm happy my childhood was in the '90s and '00s. My generation was lucky — we grew up in a free country. Poor but free. We listened to trashy music (thanks to MTV and MuzTV) ..., girls from my class wore tartan skirts and skinny neckties to school imitating t.A.T.u. ... They even took part in the school contest signing the band's song 'Gay Boy.' They didn't win because the teachers said the song was inappropriate and the class was outraged — what was inappropriate about that song? ... Back then it felt like our submarine was in trouble but we knew we'd resurface. Now it feels like we're stationed on the very bottom of the ocean ... knowing we won't breath fresh air any time soon."

t.A.T.u. performing their 2002 hit "Gay Boy"/"Malchik Gay"

MTV Russia's disappearance from public TV is not so much a cultural loss (no one watches TV on actual TV sets now anyway) as a moral and psychological one. New times call not only for new heroes but also for new means, as the old ones depart. Perhaps teenagers now will find their equivalent of MTV Russia online. But the generation of us that grew up with the channel used it as a metaphorical window to look out on the wonderful and screwed up world of pop stars. At least we learned our fair share of Britney lyrics and the perfect pitch for the "Beavis and Butt-head" laugh — and if people tell you this wasn't important, don't believe them.

This article first appeared in [The Calvert Journal](#), a guide to the new east.

Original url:

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