

Pro-Kremlin Pop Star's Concert a Microcosm of Russia's Wartime 'Patriotism'

By [Moscow Times Reporter](#)

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ST. PETERSBURG — A mixed crowd of families, youngsters and pensioners filed into Gazprom Arena, St. Petersburg's main stadium, waiting for Shaman to arrive.

Some had the Russian flag painted on their cheeks, while others wore the yellow, black and white flag of the Russian Empire and the words "Ya Russky" ("I Am Russian"), the title of the artist's most popular song.

Yaroslav Dronov, 31, better known by his stage name, Shaman, has become one of Russia's most well-known pop stars amid the invasion of Ukraine.

Critics say the singer is acting as part of the Kremlin's propaganda machine with his "patriotic" songs, which have been used to rally Russians around the flag and bolster support

for the invasion.

Meanwhile, his fans appreciate his lyrics for conveying a sense of national pride at a time when their country faces unprecedented political and cultural isolation from the West.

After a delay, Shaman suddenly appeared on Gazprom Arena's video screen, wearing tight black pants and a silver leather jacket with a Russian tricolor band on his right arm. In the opening video footage, he was shown arriving at the stadium by helicopter. A few seconds later, the artist entered the arena on a motorcycle surrounded by smoke and flames.

Kicking off the concert with "Dai Zharu" ("Give the heat"), the artist shouted: "Everything will burst like a volcano, people, meet the Shaman!"

This was followed by "Da" ("Yes"), a song with a military-march beat during which the artist was backed by a group of dancers in khaki costumes and balaclavas.

The energy in the stadium was tepid at the start of the concert except for in the fan zone in front of the stage, where the most passionate fans were waving Russian flags.

Shaman's concert had been heavily promoted for months, with banners placed in St. Petersburg's metro and main streets. Local media reported that a number of [St. Petersburg's municipalities](#) bought up large amounts of tickets and gave them out for free in order to help fill the 80,000-seat stadium.

Despite these efforts, dozens of seats in the stadium were empty when the concert started.

After competing on the Russian versions of The X Factor and The Voice in 2013 and 2014, Shaman remained relatively little known in Russia until last year, when he released the single "Vstanem" (Rise Up) on Feb. 23, 2022.

The song, dedicated to the Russian soldiers who fought and died in World War II, quickly gained attention due to the invasion of Ukraine one day later.

Since then, Shaman's popularity has skyrocketed, with the artist becoming a symbol of Russia's wartime propaganda. According to [state-owned pollster VTsIOM](#), he was voted Russia's second-best artist in 2022.

At the same time, Shaman's music, which was previously mostly apolitical, has shifted to patriotic hits such as "Ya Russky," "Moya Rossiya" ("My Russia") and "Miy" ("We"). These songs' lyrics touch upon traditional tropes of Russian culture such as the vastness of Russia's land and faith in God.

Russian artists who oppose the war, meanwhile, face being [blacklisted](#) or prosecuted amid the country's crackdown on dissent. Many have been forced into exile.

Shaman has not publicly explained the reason for moving toward patriotic themes, only [saying](#) that when he wrote the song "Vstanem," it was "as if someone dictated it from above."

"His songs hit very deeply in the Russian soul," said concertgoer Andrey, 22, who had the

Russian flag painted on his cheeks.

“I don’t consider it to be propaganda,” added his mother Irina, 51. “Our kids have been brainwashed for years — finally some values are appearing again.”

Since the invasion of Ukraine, Shaman has been regularly invited to perform at high-profile state-sponsored events. He appeared at a concert rally marking the annexation of Ukraine’s occupied territories on Red Square in September 2022 as well as at an event marking the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea in the capital’s Luzhniki Stadium, both of which were attended by President Vladimir Putin.

Earlier this year, Shaman [visited](#) Ukraine’s Moscow-occupied territories, including the cities of Luhansk, Mariupol and Henichesk, to perform for Russian soldiers.

“I appreciate him for his decision to visit the zone of the special military operation,” Tatyana, 37, told *The Moscow Times*, using the Kremlin’s preferred term for the invasion. “We need to support our guys who are fighting there.”

Tatyana, who said this was her 10th Shaman concert, carried on her shoulders a Russian flag with a Z, one of the symbols of Russia’s military campaign.

The singer also performed his latest single “Moi Boy” (My Battle), released in July and whose music video [shows](#) cities in ruin and footage of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine.

Since invading last year, Russian forces have nearly completely destroyed Ukrainian cities like Mariupol and Bakhmut, and have carried out [deadly strikes](#) on civilian areas in a number of other cities.

“I won’t give up ...Only forward and not a single step back,” the lyrics of “Moi Boy” say.

Despite the clear pro-invasion messaging in Shaman’s songs and music videos, some fans attending the concert said they felt the artist’s lyrics carry a more universal meaning.

“It is not necessarily about someone fighting in the special military operation,” said Lyudmila, 72, when asked about her favorite song.

“‘My Fight’ is about every person’s fight,” continued Lyudmila, who had come to St. Petersburg from the neighboring Pskov region and described herself as a big Shaman fan.

During a break between songs, Shaman read a letter from a young fan, Nikita, who supposedly wrote him from the Ukrainian city of Makiivka, in the Russia-controlled Donetsk region — “From Russia,” Shaman declared.

After Shaman read the letter, his press secretary came up to the stage and announced that Nikita and his family were attending the concert. “These are the moments we artists live for,” Shaman said.

During the song “Ty Moya” (“You are mine”), a girl appeared to faint after being invited to dance with Shaman on stage.

“All good,” the singer said as security guards carried the girl away. “That happens when love is filling the heart,” he added, leaving the audience wondering whether the incident was staged.

The crowd’s energy picked up toward the end of the concert, when Shaman sang his most popular hits, “Vstanem” and “Ya Russky.”

“I am Russian, I go until the end ... I am Russian, in spite of the whole world,” Shaman sang.

Shaman closed the concert with a performance of the Russian national anthem, which saw most attendees stand up and sing along, some with their eyes closed and their hands on their hearts.

One of them, Vitaly, 45, said he doesn’t usually listen to Shaman’s music.

When asked why he came to the concert, he said: “I am just Russian.”

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