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Galina Miazhevich

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Alla Pugacheva: Russian High-Profile Celebrity As a Mediator of Anti-War Sentiment

Galina Miazhevich

JOMEC, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of female macro-celebrity as a mediator of public views during an ongoing full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The focus is on the 75-year-old cult pop-artist Alla Pugacheva—one of the few high-profile Russian celebrities who declared an anti-war stance. By using digital ethnography and multimodal discourse analysis of Pugacheva’s mediated public stance over two years (2022–2024), the study shows that the actress constitutes a unique cultural mediator due to her exceptional socio-cultural capital and particular communication patterns. Pugacheva bridges the realm of celebrities, dissidents and cultural elites becoming a distinct post-Soviet phenomenon or *post-Soviet cultural intermediary*.

Introduction

Russia’s stringent policing of public protests and tightening of media legislation¹ post-February 2022, combined with state-supported misinformation (Tolz and Hutchings 2023), has radically altered the available spaces and modes of public debate. The shrinking public realm with its nearly disabled public protest space and dwindling subversive anti-war (artistic) resistance leaves little space for maneuver. Deliberation is now embodied by the state media’s television shows dishing out various propagandistic narratives, from systemic anti-Westernism to the demonization of Ukrainians. Fear of *donosy* (snitching) stops people from any anti-war pronouncements in the public sphere, including academia, which had managed to withstand this trend for a while. At the same time, increasingly frequent inter-generational rifts and polarization within the family institution prevent so-called “kitchen discussions,” a well-known quasi-public sphere of the late USSR. In this context, several questions emerge: Who are the remaining figures of authority expressing an anti-war stance that the public can relate to, how do they communicate, and what spaces of deliberation might be still available?²

This study argues for the renewed role of cultural elites as one of the key remaining actors informing the public debate and acting as a moral authority in a time of misinformation, dissipation of societal ties, and ruptures within civil society during wartime. It provides a slightly different angle on the ongoing discussion on whether and to what extent celebrities and influencers should serve as role models for their audiences (Haastrup and Marshall 2024). Contesting the definition of who constitutes the elite goes beyond the scope of this paper, as elites can be defined via multiple parameters, such as systemic elites, economic elites, and so on. Anecdotally, the wives of the Russian oligarchs consider themselves to be elites as well.

This study innovatively adopts the *cultural intermediary* notion rather than the concept of *elites* with its implied class divisions.

This paper proposes to focus on (post-Soviet) cultural brokers or cultural intermediaries to bridge the realm of Soviet cultural elites and contemporary macro celebrities. It is hypothesized that the idea of celebrity as a particular type of cultural intermediary (Maguire and Matthews 2012), rather than cultural elite, might provide a more fitting take on the modes and types of resistance in times of military conflict. The paper expands the narrow connotation behind the cultural intermediary “as straddling between economic and socio-cultural roles” (Jones, Perry, and Long 2022, 44) and adapts it for the complex Russian context by fleshing out its socio-cultural component (a moral authority function, the trope of a dissident within a cultural memory regime, etc.), then connecting it with a mode of political resistance.

The case is the 75-year-old Soviet and Russian pop icon Alla Pugacheva who remains immensely popular to date (she left Russia after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine). Pugacheva is an unparalleled celebrity – decorated not only by the Soviet government, but also by Vladimir Putin. Pugacheva’s socio-cultural status and transregional reach stem from her long career in the creative industry of Estrada.³ Without making any statements regarding her stance on feminism, Pugacheva has demonstrated via her personal and professional life her independence, her adherence to gender equality, freedom, and independence from patriarchal structures (Partan 2010). Pugacheva is a self-made woman. At the same time, she also has been married and has children. Moreover, Pugacheva has defied ageist stereotypes, becoming a mother of twins at the age of 64 via surrogacy with her fifth, much younger husband, Maxim Galkin.

Drawing on elements of multisited digital ethnography and multimodal discourse analysis, this paper explores Pugacheva's communication strategies and practices of non-confrontational resistance, as well as the perception of the named celebrity's "moral courage." It is hypothesized that Pugacheva's substantial cultural capital (fame, resources, connections) allows for a certain autonomy and effective resistance devoid of the totalizing appropriation and trivialization of rhetoric by the state and the mainstream state-funded media. The discussion places the data into the broader context of Cold War-informed discursive and emotional regimes (e.g., a revival of such tropes as "traitors") linked to the role of elites (the intelligentsia) and the peculiarity of this new stratum that now is entangled with contemporary mediated celebrity culture. The paper starts with an insight into the feminization of resistance in Russia before introducing the cultural mediators framework and the case itself.

Resistance and Celebrities as Cultural Mediators

Resistance and Its Feminization

Resistance is a contested notion involving some more or less radical strategies including (non)violent resistance, on- and off-line actions, and consistent or sporadic disobedience. As James Scott (1992) argues, depending on the context's limitations (Lilja et al. 2017), the very notion of protest needs to go beyond openly declared activities and can include such covert or hidden tactics as evasion, masking, or disobedience. The idea of hidden resistance is similar to Alexei Yurchak's *stiob* (2006) of the late Soviet period—a form of parody exemplified by such an extreme identification with the regime's ideology that it would be impossible to establish whether it was transgressive mockery or acclaim. In the current climate, the non-conformist practices of cultural resistance are of particular interest, especially as they might feed off their Soviet forebears. Despite the increasingly repressive dynamics, the Russian regime is unable to block every single type of dissent or exercise a cohesive response to various types of resistance (Chen and Moss 2018). The paper argues that (in)direct public statements by prominent cultural figures fall within a gray zone that is difficult for the state—previously known as the "information autocracy" (Guriev and Treisman 2022)—to manage effectively.

This study investigates dissenting practices emanating from the cultural industries. Indeed, domestic creative artistic resistance is becoming riskier (as in the case of the theater director Evgenia Berkovich and the near absence of subversive satire by stand-up comedians) or being coopted by the regime. Artists who were previously silent regarding the war are now forced to publicly align with the country's course or to be seen as unpatriotic, losing their source of income and media presence.⁴ While the complicity of meso-level celebrities lacking leveraging power is predictable, the emblematic macro celebrities, possessing significant social capital and public standing, are to a certain degree insulated from those oppressive recentralizing tendencies.

Another vital aspect of this analysis is nested in the feminization of resistance. The essentialization of gender roles during a military conflict (Yuval-Davis 1997) implies that men

perform one role—as the savior or protector of the nation/women—while women have a bit more room for maneuver. Remarkably, in the early stages of the anti-war street protests in 2022, Russian women "benefited" from the patriarchal system that was still geared toward protecting rather than violently dispersing them. While the state considers disobedient soldiers' mothers and complaining wives to be a nuisance in need of control, it still adopts a more tolerant stance toward such examples of female resistance. Similarly, at the level of celebrities, it demonstrates a more contentious reaction to dissenting high-profile male celebrities (the television presenter Ivan Urgant or outspoken male rock musicians such as Andrey Makarevich) compared to female celebrities.

Celebrities as Cultural Intermediaries

The cultural intermediary (CI) notion departs from the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu on taste, cultural capital, and habitus (1984)⁵ and incorporates recent criticism of the CI's "overly-inclusive, analytically-neutered" (Maguire and Matthews 2012) nature, with its scope being more diffuse and somewhat less coherent or specific (Jones, Perry, and Long 2022, 221). Here, the CI is understood as going beyond the creative and cultural industries and implies the intricacies of in-betweenness, namely, a relatively autonomous mediation—in this case the mediation of war-related sentiment—between different cultures (official and grassroots), the imposed ideology, and common sense and morals.

Following Bourdieu's understanding, the CIs occupy a vital position within the "value chain" by being responsible for the "production of belief" (Kuipers 2012, 581), the cultivation of symbolic aspirations, and the creation of an understanding of what is valuable. This idea of value includes both material goods and symbolic practices within a specific timeframe and context. In the Russian context, the celebrities' statements on the war, be they compliant with or challenging the establishment, foremost transmit certain ethical standards and moral values. Importantly, the celebrities adopting an anti-war stance mediate grassroots views when it is unsafe or impossible to express them in public. They become what Christo Grozev called "opinion leaders" in times of crisis (2022).

Individual stars or celebrities as role models have been considered within different national contexts and socio-political periods (e.g., Babington 2001), including the *temporal angle* of the (post)Soviet celebrities (Goscilo 2024; Goscilo and Strukov 2010; Trimble 2017).⁶ In turn, Mark Lipovetsky (2013) reflected on the Soviet legacy of the intelligentsia—scientific and cultural workers (scientific-technical intelligentsia and creative intelligentsia, correspondingly)—who did not represent a consolidated institution. The post-Soviet ideological and socio-economic landscape led to the diminished role of the intelligentsia, who were replaced by other groups, such as celebrities and a so-called *kreativ* ("creative") class. According to Lipovetsky (2013), the intelligentsia was (conventionally) at the periphery of society, a sort of marginalized layer in a so-called double negation both to the regime and the general public. Interestingly, being part of the polysemic pop-culture of Soviet Estrada, Pugacheva directly spoke to both layers. In other words, she mediated intangible goods and services such

as values, matters of taste, and standards of behavior for the society at large.

In this paper, the notion of the CI includes a tripartite configuration of the context- and time-specific understanding of cultural elites (the intelligentsia), celebrities, and dissidents. Their anti-war mediation primarily pertains to intangible cultural products and values and can be both visible and invisible. Next, this conceptualization of the CI – rather than the elite – avoids the need to counterpose the elites vs. the people and deal with the class constellation, especially in Russia where the class structure is still evolving. Finally, the post-Soviet CIs constitute some sort of continuity with the late Soviet practices of cultural protests, collective memory, and even the nostalgic pleasure of seeking comfort and familiarity via the cult figures of Soviet times.

Significantly, the mediation is not a one-way process; it presupposes a cultured consumer (who can appreciate the CI) but also an interactive intermediation where the public (or consumer) develops as well. In other words, the audience needs to have cultural competence to understand the messages encoded in the subversion or irony. It needs to be able to decipher the dissenting messages (to be in the know, have cultural competence, etc.). Having said that, the intermediaries also need to have credentials to successfully perform their role. In this respect, Pugacheva possesses the required expertise, unlike the scientific intelligentsia of the 1960s, which was devoid of competence commensurate with their level of societal influence (Lipovetsky 2013).

Finally, the case contributes to the discussion on celebrities as role models in an authoritarian context. Western scholarship has established that “[w]ith the ability to manage their own social media accounts and communicate directly with their audience, celebrities can shape the narrative around their activism and position themselves as leaders and advocates for specific causes” (Barojan 2022). However, celebrity politics in mature democracies and recentralizing states has a different character and priorities (Seminar 2023). As, for instance, Funda Gencoglu (2019) observed, Turkish celebrity politics, such as advocacy on policy matters or raising awareness on sensitive issues, has been largely disabled or appropriated by the regime. In turn, Chinese “cultural governance” of celebrities operates in a two-fold manner, namely, “governance of celebrity” and “governance through celebrity” (Xu and Yang 2021). Russia, until recently, employed a more hybrid approach to its mediascape, ranging from more rigid to softer controls such as infotainment and the creation of “safety valves” (Miazhevich 2022). However, in wartime Russia, the governmental control over celebrities is more pronounced. Currently, an orchestrated shaming of exiled celebrities is accompanied by the co-optation of anti-war celebrities remaining in Russia; for instance, a top blogger, Anastasia Ivleeva, is now forced to promote the establishment’s line.

So, Western macro celebrities might act as role models campaigning for various causes (advocacy), commenting on a government’s actions, or providing endorsements in political campaigns (e.g., Taylor Swift urging fans to vote in the 2024 US presidential election). However, in an authoritarian and/or wartime context the role of the celebrities, their agency, and their visibility differ due to the limited range of available

actions. Rather than expecting some form of (revolutionary) change from celebrities’ resistance actions in such a context, the idea is to (re)conceptualize their role as CIs who are there to provide a “moral compass” or act as “agents of moral opposition” (Seminar 2023).

Methodology

The case of Pugacheva is selected based on an extensive monitoring of the top female celebrities, including available public opinion data and information on their war positionality. Other potential vectors of resistance to the official state line need to be acknowledged (even if their influence might be limited). The spectrum ranges from anti-war and anti-regime celebrities to anti-war but pro-government figures to pro-war female groups (Zhaivoronok 2024). Among prominent (and now exiled) female celebrities with a clear anti-war stance are singers Zemfira and Monetchka, actress Chulpan Khamatova, political analyst Ekaterina Schulmann, journalist and presenter Ekaterina Kotrikadze (TV *Rain*), ballerina Olga Smirnova, and numerous sportswomen. The anti-war personalities still in Russia, such as singer Manizha and actress Liya Akhedzhakova, are silenced and ostracized. The pro-war and pro-state female figures based in Russia include singers Larisa Dolina and Polina Gagarina, media personality Olga Buzova, and feminists Maria Arbatova and Anna Fedorova. Journalist and socialite Ksenia Sobchak – who ran for the presidency in 2018 – remains somewhat anti-war but pro-state. Finally, there is substantial set of pro-regime women in Russian politics, from parliamentarians to influencers in various patriotic groups. However, their influence on the society may be marginal (Zhaivoronok 2024).

Pugacheva is a decades-long celebrity, an “institution” and a cult icon (Partan 2007), who bridges both professional and media-made celebrity types. Pugacheva’s stardom is in line with the parameters identified by Marsh, Hart, and Tindall (2010) that enhance the perceived significance of celebrities’ political activities, namely, their level of fame, the meritocracy of the fame, the prestige of the field, the endurance of the fame, and the breadth and width of the fame. Next, she represents a surprisingly clear-cut and straightforward case of a dissenting actor using one media platform (Instagram). Concurrently, she is relatively autonomous from the establishment due to her unparallel socio-cultural capital, which can be expected to prove sufficient to prevent the state from silencing her anti-war positionality. Pugacheva typifies the CI role as she is positioned in a liminal zone: her activity is in between the state and grassroots spheres, the establishment and the opposition; between various cultural industries, several localities with significant Russian-speaking presence (Russia, Israel, Cyprus), and different cultures (mass/elite, urban/rural, past/present, etc.).

The study employs elements of multisite digital ethnography (Caliandro 2018) and multimodal discourse analysis (Ledin and Machin 2019). Multimodality accounts for images, graphics, videos, posts, and public comments contributing to semiotic meaning making and exposing silences. The systematic digital media tracing over a two-year period (2022–2024) includes Pugacheva’s Instagram,⁷ where she has 3.7 mln

followers (the platform was banned in Russia in 2022 but is accessible via VPN), and other mediated traces (experts' opinions, Google analytics to track the popularity of searches using Pugacheva's name, relevant mediated scandals). It is difficult to assess how Pugacheva's stance was received over the course of two years as reliable statistics are not easily available.⁸ Naturally, Pugacheva's relocation abroad led to a shift in her audience's structure and possibly to a reduction in its numbers. However, she retains her popularity (Music analyst 2022) and can access various audiences due to transnational media flows (her new music videos are online). The analysis will focus on close reading of Pugacheva's Instagram posts and other accessible cross-media data.

The analysis starts with three prominent statements from Pugacheva's Instagram and proceeds to the mediations of her stance by the legacy media, online media, and orchestrated performative shaming. But first, a note on Pugacheva's husband – Maxim Galkin – is due. A popular stand-up comedian (and formerly a host of a popular television show in Russia), he is now declared a “foreign agent” by the Russian government. He clearly and emotionally expressed on Instagram his anti-war position on the day of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In Galkin's sold-out concerts abroad, the comedian fearlessly mocks Putin's political establishment and expands on his Instagram posts. This adds another dimension to the context for Pugacheva's public statements and her aura as the “moral compass” of the nation, as younger demographics are drawn (Alexanian 2023) to such positionality.

Post-Soviet Cultural Elites as Cultural Brokers or Intermediaries

Pugacheva's Resistance on Instagram: Three Statements

Alla Pugacheva is a singer and cultural icon bridging several historical and cultural eras who managed to embody freedom, creativity, and individuality during the Soviet era and in the decades since. Pugacheva's no-nonsense attitude toward the establishment, coupled with humor, has endeared her to several generations of Russians from the grassroots to the Soviet intelligentsia. This is nicely summed up in the following quip: “Who was Brezhnev? A minor political figure from the times of Pugacheva.” She is a moral authority figure who appealed to the grassroots and to a more educated audience, for instance by following the so-called literary cultural tradition with her subversive multilayered Soviet-era songs and jester performances, complementing her comedic and self-deprecating style (Partan 2007).

Throughout her artistic career, she has mediated different taste cultures, questioning the Soviet regime (the song *Harlequin*), and singing about shared desires, such as romantic love (*A Million Red Roses*), being always in tune with the context (the obscene pop of the early post-Soviet period, such as *My Bunny*). In her unconventional attire, such as oversized or tacky dresses, Pugacheva challenged the conventions of femininity and stood out from the mainstream singers. Her repertoire and demeanor (indirectly) shaped the cultural realm of Soviet society and performed the function of moral leadership.

When her husband was proclaimed a “foreign agent” in 2022, Pugacheva, who had chosen to maintain a more low-profile stance on the war (with some exceptions, such as releasing a song called *War*), suddenly became more vocal, issuing the following statement:

Please include me in the ranks of foreign agents of my beloved country, since I am in solidarity with my husband [...] a true and incorruptible patriot of Russia who wants his homeland to flourish in peace, with freedom of speech, and wants an end to our boys dying for illusory goals, which has turned our country into a pariah state and made life a burden for our citizens. (September 18, 2022)

Almost like a Decembrist wife (*Dekabristka*) following her husband, she announced her stance in a carefully crafted Instagram post by asking the establishment to label her a ‘foreign agent’ too. Shortly after, she left the country with her whole immediate family. In this regard, Pugacheva is a female dissident, voicing her dissent while still in the country and subsequently leaving her homeland (for Israel),⁹ although she has visited Russia on several occasions since.

Remarkably, being a much more prominent (and even archetypal) cultural figure than her husband, Pugacheva decided to link her statement foremost to her position as a wife, gesturing toward Russian society and her audience, for whom it was a more relatable statement. Pugacheva is always in tune with the public and knows how to appeal to her audience – especially those above 40, for whom Pugacheva and the Soviet matrix became the key building blocks of their identity. Pugacheva seems to strategically frame herself in line with a very particular normative perception and understanding of female roles in society. At the same time, it is a double-voiced message: as a wife she subordinates herself to her husband, even as she simultaneously challenges her subordinate position in light of her mega-popularity (her fame and social standing by far surpass those of her husband).

Pugacheva's Instagram statement is peculiar as she opposes the state structures rather than the cult of personality. Her statement questions the militarized masculinity of the state and indicates (without naming anyone or anything) that the establishment is the perpetrator, and the nation is the victim or hostage, as men are sent to perish for “illusory” (*illuzornye*) goals. Pugacheva (re)presents people as being trapped between a rock and a hard place with no room for maneuver and without the option of targeted criticism of the ruling elites.

Pugacheva speaks directly to those in power, as she does not need to create legitimacy for herself and her claims. Indeed, she did not directly engage with the audience in her message – although she was voicing a common public sentiment – but rather with the establishment, and she calculated the timing (as she was leaving the country and severing ties). Although her statement might be mainly directed at the establishment, it proved to be important for the public, as the subsequent reaction indicates. Pugacheva became a mediator in a situation devoid of existing and/or functioning civic society structures. Her post constituted a particular type of social intervention connecting disenfranchised communities (with previously unbridgeable differences) via a pacifist statement.

Indeed, Pugacheva's female engagement is neither a clearly feminist one nor one advancing or rigidly

functioning within the patriarchal agenda. On the one hand, she performs within the patriarchal structures at the level of state institutions and elite groups, including the (liberal) opposition. So, to an extent, her resistance is toward the (state) system or structural inequalities and systemic violence. On the other hand, Pugacheva resists militarization and its consequences. However, this needs to be done in a way that works within the patriarchal structure, utilizing some of its elements to her advantage, in order to reach out to the wider audience (some of whom might be oblivious to or supportive of the existing structures).

The singer's second post stated: "My God! What a blessing that I am hated by those people whom I always could not stand. If they liked me, it would mean that I sang and lived in vain. The reason is clear. Let them gnash their teeth. Those who were serfs became slaves" (October 4, 2023). Pugacheva's third lengthy Instagram statement (October 11, 2023) debunks the viewpoint promulgated since her second post about lackeys and explains that her words "serfs" and "slaves" were addressed to those few who (presumably) were ordered to slander her. The singer resorted to issuing her lengthiest statement, as if to clear things up in this implied discussion with the populist propagandists and to finish it "once and for all."

Here Pugacheva persuasively articulates that she is with the people and against the systemic elites (who are the "lackeys") and confirms her principled position where freedom is more important than money. The singer succinctly and discourteously rebuffs the attempts to "devalue her career" and reputation: She calls those perpetuating it indecent "envious slanderers [...] trying to push people away from her" and states that their attempts to "destroy" her or "to devalue her life and artistic legacy" are "useless." Pugacheva speaks from a position of power: She states that it is both "amusing and sad to observe those slanderous persons," thus signaling her authority in the hierarchy of (moral) authority figures.

Another group whom she addresses are the envious haters who "are counting her money." Pugacheva asserts that she worked hard to earn what she has, "unlike those who [...] drank away their finest hour and claim without evidence that Alla Pugacheva cut off their oxygen." This alleged rivalry within the creative industries also includes some intergenerational struggle. Moreover, it resembles the bourgeois or class hatred cultivated by the Soviet regime where the wealthy represented a threat to classless society structures. In the same post, the singer speaks at length about her devotion to and love of the Russian people and her audience, calling them "a multi-million army of fans," thus placing militarist rhetoric in a peaceful context, promising to live "until the victory of light over darkness, the victory of good over evil, the victory of truth over slander."

Pugacheva's Distinctive Communication Patterns

While Pugacheva always positioned herself "outside" of the regime and displayed her free-spirited personality via dress sense and songs conveying personal stance, in this case she

also demonstrated a type of resistance, which is novel for her. In addition to using ballads to allude to the subject (the song "War," 2022; the song "Do not worry about me," 2024), she has used emotive Instagram posts where she moves beyond private life visual updates and articulates a citizen's position. By doing this, Pugacheva manages her media presence slightly differently when compared with the conventional celebrity's communication strategies.

Instead of using a diverse range of means from the influencer's digital toolkit, Pugacheva uses only Instagram (now outlawed in Russia). By selecting this media approach Pugacheva reinforces her positionality and adds a further hue of dissent. Her messaging is strategic, measured, comprehensive, and infrequent. Pugacheva can afford infrequent communication on the subject and use her fame to carry her through the smear campaigns launched by the state media and other entities. In this respect her activity is like that of Andrei Sakharov, whose fame protected him from persecution by the Soviet, as Remnik (1994) notes.

Pugacheva has become a *celebrity advocate* campaigning for the cause. In contrast, the pro-state Russian celebrities supporting the war frequently act as *celebrity endorsers* (Marsh, Hart, and Tindall 2010). Having said that, Pugacheva is only partially proactive in her advocacy: she did not proactively use Instagram for anti-war messaging but rather reacted to events affecting her husband. On the one hand, she defined their own messaging and advocacy style, on the other hand, her messages are reactive, as she reacts to the events on the ground.

Remarkably, the singer's statements are a straightforward address to the audience, each following up on her previous post in a fairly linear manner, providing a simple sequence within a hierarchical register, in the style of a more conventional letter or email. She addresses the nation and the regime in very down-to-earth, relatable language with the use of colloquial and old-fashioned expressions ("serfs"). The communication pattern is less visually performative and more driven by the vernacular aspect. It makes her messaging not as performative and pervasive as Western celebrity advocacy (Barojan 2022). Nevertheless, it does not limit her visibility, due to the subsequent re-mediation as explained in the subsection below.

Pugacheva's communication is distinctive, especially when compared with that of pro-regime women in Russia who are likely to refrain from using Instagram and opt for the VK and other domestic platforms.¹⁰ She still advocates for an anti-war stance, unlike some formerly anti-war influencers now outside of Russia who have resorted to mere lifestyle blogging such as Tatyana Mingalimova.¹¹ Pugacheva's pronouncement signals her power and authority, as she is in a position of agency, rebelling, exposing the current ideological regime and delegitimizing its claims. Thus, Pugacheva uses one media platform and articulates her position in a few media messages, unlike mainstream celebrities with their incessant cross-media communication to boost their ratings and curated media presence to convey authenticity (Haastrup and Marshall 2024).

Pugacheva: Mediation of the Mediator

In addition to acting as a domestic mediating *agency*, the singer represents a transregional mediator "talking" to

a significant audience residing in the former Soviet Union. By symbolically bridging the late Soviet and post-Soviet period, Pugacheva mediates for different demographic groups within the Russian-language diaspora in the near abroad and transnationally via her online presence and performances (anti-war songs), which are unified by the same stance.

The legacy media drew public attention to Pugacheva's Instagram presence (both its Russian-speaking and foreign language segments) and, inadvertently, amplified her message across social strata, including those demographic groups that do not use social media or that habitually prefer getting the news from the state media. Her statement evoked comments from high-profile politicians and cultural elites in Russia and the near abroad (e.g. by Oleksii Arestovych, an advisor to the Ukrainian president at that time). Various global media outlets ran stories with strongly worded headlines (Table 1).

Contrary to experts' expectations forecasting the beginning of the "end of the existing socio-cultural matrix," Pugacheva's statement did not result in any significant repercussions. However, what is more important here is the implied public weight and the very expectation of the momentous consequences associated with it based on the assumption of her substantial intangible social capital (Partan 2022). This reaction to her single Instagram post can also be linked to the search for certainty in a highly uncertain environment or a partial nostalgia for cultural elites able to exert a disproportionately large influence on cultural-political life.

Subsequently, this (un)expected display of a clear citizenship position brought her to the attention of layers of society that were previously oblivious to her persona. For instance, the younger generation generally unfamiliar with her track record got interested in her personality: "some word of mouth began [...] I was shocked when my daughter at the age of 10 came and said that we need to find a new song by Pugacheva, they will shoot a video. The children had no idea how old she was."¹² The appeal to the younger generation challenges the argument of their seeking the refuge and comfort of the Soviet utopia or nostalgia and works in favor of a striving for "moral authority figures" in a highly uncertain environment devoid of clear-cut narratives.

The commentary under her YouTube videos and analytical programs are overwhelmingly supportive of Pugacheva: people admire her courage and positionality (even if disagreeing with her). Due to increasing (self)censorship, members of the public have resorted to covert ways of expressing their solidarity with Pugacheva's anti-war stance: for instance, numerous messages on her birthday in 2023 focused on her bravery and integrity,

admiration of her positionality. Two years down the line in 2024, Pugacheva is still an "epoch," "legend," "genius," "the scale of her personality [...] unsurpassed," "wise, brave and fair," "cool," "the one who managed to unify people," and so forth.¹³ The online comments are overwhelmingly positive and supportive, indicating that she represents "the voice of the oppressed" and has enormous emotive appeal.

These grassroots reactions and the power attributed to her by experts confirm the parallel with the intelligentsia and dissidents. Pugacheva was likened to a "lighthouse" guiding and providing/correcting the moral compass, which symbolically emphasizes her authority and moral leadership associated with the intelligentsia during Soviet times. She is considered as an alternative institution of sorts, one of a kind. The ascribed messianic and utopian role (Lipovetsky 2013) of Pugacheva's statement and the expectation of significant ripple effects resembles the role expected of the intelligentsia in shaping nationhood and/or the critical consciousness of society. Even though it has not happened, Pugacheva's sustained anti-war mediation could potentially lead an atomized and silent public to realize the similarity of their stance and values (as the comments under her post confirm, such as "Thank you for your priceless words. I almost thought the world went mad. Thanks to God, we have someone with a healthy mind [*zdravomyslie*] and courage").

Decisively, the in-country mediation of Pugacheva includes a sanctioned smear campaign, such as a light projection at the main TV Ostankino building of negative personalized messages ("Alla, it is good that you ran away") and sporadic orchestrated shaming on television. The state media have resorted to maximizing propagandistic gains from the exit of high-profile citizens such as Pugacheva. They evoke the trope of the "traitor," resembling the Soviet approach of associating the intelligentsia with danger and disloyalty (via cosmopolitanism). By appropriating the binary Cold War narrative, they strive to downplay the prominence of symbolic figures of authority.¹⁴ The very fact that a propaganda machine was set up to target the singer indicates that her anti-war communication is important (Zotova 2024). The sustained ostracism and desecration of Pugacheva's authority continued in 2024, as her jubilee in April was ignored by the state media. At the same time, various productions celebrating her anniversary (e.g. Sobchak's documentary film, a BBC feature article by Zotova 2024) demonstrate her sustained importance.

Lastly, the establishment itself overlooks the state media propaganda directed at Pugacheva. For instance, the officials did not issue a statement condemning or ostracizing the singer. The press secretary to Putin, Dmitry Peskov, was

Table 1. Top Global Media Outlets on Pugacheva's first anti-war Pronouncement

	Headline	Outlet	Date
1	Russia's biggest pop star slams Putin's war in Ukraine	DW	September 20, 2022
2	Russian pop star Alla Pugacheva speaks out against war in Ukraine	The Guardian	September 18, 2022
3	Russian pop star's war criticism stirs vigorous debate	The Independent	September 19, 2022
4	Russian pop star Alla Pugacheva condemns Putin's war on Ukraine	Al Jazeera	September 19, 2022
5	Russian Pop Music Icon Comes Out Against the War in Ukraine	The New York Times	September 18, 2022
6	Russian pop legend speaks out against war in Ukraine	The CNN	September 19, 2022
7	Alla Pugacheva: Russian pop star denounces Ukraine war and asks to be named a foreign agent in solidarity with anti-war husband	Sky news	September 19, 2022
8	Ukraine war: Russian pop megastar Alla Pugacheva condemns conflict	BBC	September 18, 2022

pictured chivalrously kissing Pugacheva's hand at the funeral of top Russian fashion designer Valentin Yudashkin, which the singer had flown in to attend in person in May 2023. When Pugacheva issued a brief statement after the bombing of the children's hospital in Kiev in June 2024, a member of the Russian Duma called for her to be added to the "foreign agent" list. However, the establishment did not follow up on that request. An ongoing tolerance of Pugacheva's statements, unwillingness to control Pugacheva's dissent from abroad (e.g., her Instagram posts and the comments under the messages are available) might be compared to Yevgeny Yevtushenko's and Andrei Voznesensky's trips to the West, which were supposed to reflect Soviet tolerance of "dissent."

Post-Soviet Cultural Intermediaries as a Fusion of Dissidents, Intelligentsia, and Celebrities

This case demonstrates a convergence of cultural, social, political, and intellectual mediation indicating parallels with the intelligentsia/dissidents. To start, there are some similarities with the dissidents who disagreed with certain features of the state ideology and were willing to speak out against them. Pugacheva is a non-conformist and articulates her stance for the benefit of society and in line with human rights (the preservation of life). Similarly to other dissidents, she left the country because of her principled positionality (but then traveled back on several occasions). Although (self)exiled abroad, the singer experienced no revocation of her citizenship or alienation from her audience. At the same time, Pugacheva has faced (sporadic) shaming campaigns on state media.

Thus, she embodies dissidence but in a slightly different way as compared to the marginalized (mostly male) Soviet intellectuals. Although the pop star has been outspoken in her opposition to the authorities, her strategic inclination is unclear. She may be a "reluctant" dissenter, as she did not express her stance clearly immediately after the start of the war. However, once she declared her stance, Pugacheva became one of the handful of mature celebrities who are anti-war (Zotova 2024). Her first Instagram message about the "illusory" goals of this war is striving to both inform society and reform it, which falls within dissidents' rationale. Yet, her later Instagram posts are predominantly motivated by the need to clarify her stance and clear up any misunderstanding.

In addition to the parallels with Soviet dissidents, the singer is ascribed a special role – namely that of a member of the intelligentsia occupying an exceptional place, or an agent of modernization. This is in line with the idea of progress associated with the Soviet technological intelligentsia (Lipovetsky 2013). Pugacheva happens to connect a clear-cut ideological past (the Communist party system, Cold War narratives, etc.) with an uncertain present devoid of a stable ideology and moral standpoints. Her anti-war pronouncements are made from the position of authority, age, power, and reputation, evoking more didactic (Soviet) hierarchical rhetoric. In the context of ongoing homogenization, massification, and marketization, Pugacheva remains a distinctive figure (primarily enabled by her late Soviet legacy) with a particular social standing of unique value. This makes her an exceptional case, an outlier placed in the context of the contemporary celebrity

culture. Indeed, her phenomenon will hardly be replicable due to the uniqueness of time/space topoi and her ability to stay away from market forces and state structures.

Decisively, Pugacheva was able to carve herself a space where she can sufficiently dis/engage herself from the politico-economic system. This celebrity is freer than most other examples in Russia. Pugacheva has significantly more leeway due to her cult status, financial situation, and her current residency outside of Russia. The popstar is uniquely positioned, as she does not directly depend on a current income and can afford such pronouncements and other types of artistic re-mediation (such as music videos). For instance, when Manizha – a popular singer and Russian Eurovision contestant of 2021 – released an anti-war song, she was subjected to a targeted smear campaign and considerable career disruption. Here, one can register a different degree or hierarchy of visibility interlinked with acquired social capital.

Pugacheva clearly stated in one of her recent interviews (linked to her 75th birthday) that the state can confiscate her property or material possessions in Russia (which she almost derogatorily calls belongings or "*veshchichki*"), but it is her life story that they cannot take away. This brings her stance closer to that of the dissidents rather than the celebrities driven by the neoliberal system with its reward culture (Rojek 2001),¹⁵ as it is not about the economic ends and profitability. Remarkably, in the same interview Pugacheva adds that those ostracizing her create a terrific ("*potriasaiuchshiu*") biography, as "*this is a drama in real life – waiting to be documented in cinematic form*" (April 24, 2024). This irrelevance of the material possessions strengthens her moral authority stance and messianic status (as she has even implied herself) and blurs the boundaries between celebrity and intelligentsia. Further, the fact that negative publicity manufactured by the state media can be transformed into productive social capital boosting her legacy and fame (Dyer 1979) adds a new angle to the dynamic between power and fame in authoritarian states.

Conclusion

Since February 2022, prominent public figures remaining in Russia have mainly resorted to complicity and conformism, unwilling or unable to capitalize on their mediated influence and sustain their cultural authority status. This study draws attention to the mediated curated stance of a prominent Russian macro-celebrity, Alla Pugacheva, and treats her as the cultural intermediary of Russian-speaking public anti-war sentiment. The paper demonstrated that Pugacheva constitutes a unique case of cultural mediator due to her positionality and communication patterns. She bridges the realm of celebrities, dissidents, and cultural elites, becoming a distinctive post-Soviet phenomenon as well as highlighting the feminization of resistance in wartime Russia.

The "cult" status of Pugacheva makes her messages resonate with various previously disjointed strata of society that become unified when facing a powerful grievance, such as a threat to or a loss of life. Hence, the singer speaks to the population without a need to bridge the chasm of the multiple (sub)cultures and strata. In part, Pugacheva's appeal stems from the public's search for clarity, certainty, and predictability amid the prolonged uncertainty, crisis, and unprecedented restrictions on the freedom of expression. The monitoring of comments after Pugacheva's

Instagram posts confirms that she is a widely respected aspirational ideal, symbol of freedom, personality (*lichnost'*), and a recognizable and trusted type of authority within, what this study calls, an *intelligentsia-celebrity-dissident* nexus.

Pugacheva – as a dissenting agent – is straightforward, uncompromising, and unidirectional in her messaging. Her communication strategy is dramatically different from the standard celebrities' communicative toolkit. The singer employs one idea, uses one platform, and is hardly interested in monetization. She prominently disrupts the status quo, as she is voicing a clear anti-war message in a totalizing pro-war media environment. Pugacheva acts as a seemingly non-collective agent (an individualized celebrity and a wife), but implicitly draws on public support and enters into a strategic implied dialogic interaction (with the regime and the public) via infrequent messages on Instagram. Despite being hierarchical in her statements, Pugacheva remains closely connected to the public and embodies a principled citizen position.

An expectation of fundamental changes brought about by her messianic figure misses the point that her role is to act as a cultural symbol and mediate views and values rather than to act – for instance, by running for the presidency. Indeed, the assessment of celebrities' activism is problematic even in democratic settings. As Donara Barojan (2022) establishes, a single celebrity cannot lead to a momentous change, as there are other actors and networks present. And in the long run, it might not necessarily be a policy change, but an enhanced awareness, which might then lead to increased public pressure and then to shifts in policy. In the wartime context, where advocacy campaigns are impossible, the celebrities' mere presence as figures of moral authority might be sufficient, as that presence anchors and mediates a highly polarized society. It remains to be seen whether Pugacheva might become an icon of sustained resistance for the Russian and/or the Russian-speaking diasporic public.

Finally, the case of Pugacheva adds to our understanding of the mechanisms, spaces, and modes of the macrocelebrity's non-confrontational resistance within nondemocratic states. It explicates the complex nature of post-Soviet celebrity, a hierarchy of celebrities' visibility in seemingly monolith authoritarian regimes (Chen and Moss 2018), and the potentiality of the contentious public sphere (Lei 2017). Although the expectations of significant changes present in 2022 have now shifted and the public has adapted to or grown tired of the war, the experts agree that Pugacheva's sustained anti-war stance is important for the population (Zotova 2024). Further research is needed to establish (a) in what way the CI's cultural resistance post-February 2022 shapes the mainstream discourse and (b) how Pugacheva's horizontal, cross-border, and transnational entanglements play into the development of (new) cultural forms of diasporic resistance.

Notes

1. The relevant media legislation includes a ban on the use of the term “war,” the blocking of such platforms as Instagram and Facebook, and amendments to the “foreign agent” law (2012), which concerns any individual/organization viewed to be “under foreign influence” whose activities “contradict Russia's national interests.” Foreign support entails everything from direct funding and informational and technical

assistance to “other means,” suggesting that almost any activity may fall under this bill.

2. This discussion inevitably simplifies the current “resistance” landscape. Indeed, there are other anti-war initiatives, such as the feminist anti-war resistance (FAS in Russian) formed immediately after the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine. FAS has proved to be a sustainable initiative of loosely connected individuals who utilize the available “mediation opportunity structure” (Cammaerts 2012) and successfully adopt a broad-ranging “action repertoire” mainly involving hybrid (on- and offline) mediation opportunities contingent on the current political authoritarian structures. Nevertheless, their visibility and recognizability across Russia varies, and this is in part due to their strategic choice to act locally, on a small scale, and anonymously to ensure their safety and sustainability.
3. (Soviet) Estrada embraces a diverse group of artists performing within a set of various genres of theatrical art, mixing low- and high-brow culture (pop songs, dance, circus colloquial genre, parody, etc.).
4. See Yakovenko (2023) on the compliance of Estrada and stand-up comedians vouching their support to remain financially sustainable, and Meduza (2024) on the expansion of the performers' blacklist.
5. Bourdieu's division on high, middlebrow, and low culture is applicable to the Estrada thriving in various genres from different layers of culture.
6. For a historical parallel with nineteenth-century Russia and domestic (“*otechestvennyi*”) celebrity types, see Randolph (2021, 27); for insight on celebrities during the Stalinist times, see Trimble (2017).
7. Pugacheva's three Instagram statements: September 18, 2022 Russia: Pop Diva Alla Pugacheva Comes Out Against the War – CPNN (cpnn-world.org); October 5, 2022 about people turning from lackeys into slaves Алла Пугачёва в резкой форме ответила на нападки хейтеров. Певица считает, что россияне превратились из холопов в рабов. Примадонна ... | Instagram; and October 11, 2023 Алла Пугачева ответила на критику в посте Instagram* – Газета.Ru | Новости (gazeta.ru)
8. It is nearly impossible to obtain representative statistics on audience perception and attitudes in wartime. A few sociological surveys provide data that is partial or deemed to be unreliable. Online data (likes, reposts, and comments) is transient and can be generated by bots. Finally, the communication on the social platforms banned in Russia can trigger the users' self-censorship.
9. Pugacheva, who initially moved to Israel with her family, relocated to Cyprus for the safety of their children after the Israeli–Palestinian conflict intensified in late 2023.
10. Interestingly, the survey of female pro-war groups shows their artificial nature, unsupported by public interest online (Zhaivoronok 2024).
11. <https://www.instagram.com/tatyanacosmos/> and <https://www.youtube.com/@mingalimova>
12. (646). Как Пугачева испугала Кремль, что случилось с Ромой Зверем и зачем воскрешать Цоя. Артемий Троицкий – YouTube. See the comment by @makarova_ad
13. The comments under the 2024 clip Алла Пугачёва – Цветок Огня (Премьера Клипа 2024) Unofficial Clip Remastered (youtube.com)
14. This strategy is slightly paradoxical as the media strive to channel disinformation and create a highly disordered information environment. At the same time, the media – primarily state television – utilize *fixed* ideas such as the *rigid* Cold War–informed discursive and emotional regimes by reviving such tropes as “traitors” and shaming (those artists leaving the country).
15. Chris Rojek sees celebrities as agents of the neoliberal system, perpetuating its values and the reward culture in which one can be distinguished through financial or social status (2001, 198).

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