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## The politics and the music mainstream in Central and Eastern Europe: introduction

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### Introduction

While in Western Europe and the USA the intersection between politics and music mainstream has been studied from theoretical and empirical perspectives for decades, in Central and Eastern Europe this kind of research has been very limited. So far much has been written about how protest, resistance, and the counterculture generated by popular music undermined communist dictatorships (Rybak 1990; Klaniczay and Trencsényi 2011). No less attention has been paid to the spread and adoption of Western popular music in the Soviet Bloc through which East Europeans culturally and politically colonized themselves before and after the fall of communism (Yurchak 2006; Mazierska and Gregory 2015). Popular music also found an important place in the political transformation and transition to democracy (Ramet 1994; Buchanan 2006). The nuanced approach was offered by the concept of aesthetic cosmopolitanism that understands popular music in Eastern Europe as an autonomous product that was developing according to its own logic in the global context (Mazierska 2016).

In these works, scholars reflected just partially on the intersection of the political and music mainstream. Following in the steps of Ewa Mazierska, this thematic issue attempts to challenge the Iron Curtain paradigm in popular music studies and more importantly to look at how popular music was produced, distributed, and consumed in the entangled web of political powers that goes well beyond the East-West divide and the capitalism-communism dichotomy.<sup>1</sup> The issue seeks to analyse the role of popular music in a broader scope concerning genres and scenes. Apart from rock labelled as the soundtrack to communism's demise, the issue tries to cover disco and electro-dance ("disco polo"). Moreover, the issue traces long-term legacies across the political changes in the region. It strives to cover the period from the 1960s when popular music became a key factor in building a mass consumerist youth culture (Shuker 2001) and it seeks to look at dis/continuities up to the present wave of populism and re-nationalization in Central and Eastern Europe.

The approach combining politics and music mainstream has been already acknowledged. With a strong starting reference in Theodor W. Adorno and the Frankfurt school, music has been analysed as an artistic expression that both represents and undermines social, political and economic order. Along this line Jacques Attali, a political advisor who congenially coupled political and economic expertise with aesthetic theory, saw the role of the political economy in

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revealing the complex relation between music and society (Attali 1985). According to him, music is not just a part of the ideology of the system, i.e., a superstructure determined by the means of production of particular social-economic formation, but rather a reflection of the societal change that precedes its political enforcement. In this sense, music is always prophetic because it “heralds the times to come” (Attali 1985: 4). Attali poses the dualistic nature of music that can conform to the political system on the one hand and subvert it on the other. Thus, music as an organized structure of noise always includes potential subversive power that anticipates the future socio-economic system.

From an historical perspective, Attali argues that there were three regimes of political power in music in human history. First, in ritualistic societies music played a role in forgetting the general violence and was a part of the sacrifice. Second, in early modern societies, music began to offer people belief in order and harmony, which culminated in its role as a representation of middle class culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Third, with the radical technological changes that enabled the mass reproduction of music, it became an instrument for silencing the masses by normalized repetition during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Attali emphasizes the role of radio, the record industry and star system that enabled music to be fully integrated into the global political order.

The articles in this thematic issue reflect the period starting at the peak of Attali’s third stage and ending in the new rapid technological change towards the digitalization of the popular music industry. From the 1960s to the 1990s, popular music underwent an intensification of the trend towards massification and globalization of production and commodification of music in general, after the consolidation of the popular music industry in the early-1970s, when major record companies gained an almost oligopolistic position which the market cycle accelerated. As in the case of disco and punk, the majors succeeded in the quick incorporation of innovative (partly subcultural) musical trends into the mainstream pop industry (Shuker 2001: 44). In the 1990s, the music industry gained a new shift towards economic and cultural globalization and the Western media conglomeration could reach new markets. In this takeover, marketing activities achieved a new momentum in developing demand for the existing cultural products in the post-communist world.

Analysing the mainstream popular music of Central and Eastern Europe in the last six decades, the role of political authorities in cultural production and consumption has to be particularly considered. Cultural policies were in general based on the enhancement of the cultural process as a universal, enlightening and liberating endeavour that should bring high humanistic values to the wider population. However, the cultural hegemony that the political authorities tried to retain until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century meant also systematic efforts to control, discipline and orient cultural production and consumption in the interests of the political elite. At this point, the political and music mainstream in the capitalist West and communist East started to significantly diverge. While Western political authorities tended to subsidize “high culture” in opposition to the inauthentic, commercial pop culture (Shuker 2001: 68–69), in the communist countries the political authorities saw its role as a dominant actor in all cultural production including pop music (Nebřenský 2011: 34–35).

Explorations into the popular music in the communist dictatorships mostly emphasize that popular music was subordinated to ideology. Instead of self-sufficiency and autonomy, the music had to be politically accountable. Party and state authorities decided about the approval of a particular artist’s record and state planners then determined the

number of copies in which such a record could be released (Wicke 1987: 41–44). The production of gramophone and tape recordings were generally limited. The recordings of Western musicians were scarce due to the economic constraints and the high price of Western currency. Besides the duties and fees, imported Western goods, including music records, were subject to political control by customs officers at border crossings.

However, with the 1960s' political reforms, and ideological and cultural loosening, Western influence and the rise of consumerism had an impact on the popular music industry (Klaniczay and Trencsényi 2011: *passim*). Artistic necessities eroded ideological ones. Popular music was beginning to materialize "mass culture", represented by new shopping centres and self-service stores, fashion, furniture, household goods, and shiny consumer goods of all varieties. Popular music developed into a Western-like business sector, which emulated market characteristics with its managers, agencies, record companies, etc. Due to the commercial success of some of the alternative and experimental musical performers, domestic as well as foreign, professionals of music labels managed to negotiate increased allocations of resources for the production of records through unofficial means and thus push for the release of more records (Rybak 1990: 46–48; Tshipursky 2016: 172–203).

In the 1970s, a steady influx of market trends can be observed within the state-run economies. Depending on the political power of individual countries, the number of pop-cultural emissaries, business entrepreneurs, and disc-jockeys increased. They established and stabilized various hierarchies and prestige scales within Eastern European popular music. There was still a hunger for records by popular, banned or Western musicians. Tape recorders brought a small revolution in the distribution of records. The grey economy emerged which included a black market and the smuggling of music records. At swap meets Western and rare records were exchanged or sold at multiply higher prices (Mazierska and Győri 2019a: 27–47). Instead of political engagement, many pop and rock artists invested their energy in close relations to local party heads, music journalists, and promoters. At the same time, when record labels turned down dissenting or alternative musicians, they officially referred to economic rather than political arguments (Szemere 2001: 12).

With his insight into the genre structure of popular music in Czechoslovakia from 1960s and 1980s, Jan Blüml shows how the core of the mainstream popular music did not change significantly even during and after the political turmoil of the Prague Spring in 1968. Based on a corpus analysis of official and representative vinyl records, he argues that the state recording company retained for the whole period both its focus on easy-going music with lyrics primarily about emotions and relationships between individuals and its continuous "domestication" of Western hits, mostly from the USA.

In 1980s' Poland and Hungary, despite both general and political crises, the music industry blossomed. Social and economic insecurity together with disillusionment with politics led some people to retreat into the private sphere and pursue activities they could enjoy, like listening to music (Ramet 1994. Ewa 2016: *passim*). Consequently, the popular music business shifted from an economy of shortages to the balance of supply and demand. The political monopoly of record production was broken because the official music companies almost collapsed. The popular music market was liberalized and small private producers could release records of the most popular artists (Ewa 2016: *passim*; Mazierska and Győri 2019: 90). The popular music industry quickly commercialized

domestic pop and rock music that was once part of alternative and avant-garde scenes. The status of the greatest stars on the one hand and less popular musicians and independent artists on the other varied considerably.

In this issue, Jakub Machek offers detailed analysis of the change of Czechoslovak music venues during 1980s and 1990s, i.e., across the political change. He points out that disco music was perceived by the communist regime as a suitable genre for the education and entertainment of socialist youth, but the trend towards the loosening of political control over cultural production in the 1980s enabled broad bottom-up activities of young people fulfilling their social and cultural needs. Thus, discotheques retained their role across the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989, even if the new wave of rave music and club culture in the 1990s opened new spaces for the entertainment of young people who distanced themselves from the then mainstream cultural production.

The post-communist transformation brought the freedom to consume Western popular music (Klaniczay and Trencsényi 2011: 199–220). The perceived differentiation between the “authentic” creativity of alternative rock music (i.e., punk) and the “commercial” production of popular music existed long before the political change, but during the 1990s these borders were crossed in both directions by some of the musicians and artists. Some of the bands and artists who were “underground” or were associated with the grey zone entered the mainstream music industry in 1990s. On the other hand, there were prominent stars supported by the state socialist regimes who almost went “underground” themselves in this period as they were excluded from the public as well as commercial media due to their past (Šima 2021).

In the chronicle of the Slovenian music and art group Laibach, Irena Šentevska follows not only the route of this exceptional group across the Iron Curtain but also across the alternative/mainstream cultural spheres. This example provides an understanding of how the Western music industry helped to establish some of the Eastern music performers in the Western music industry, which gained them a status of official export product. Laibach represents a very good example of co-habitation with the institutional framework and cultural mainstream of their home country and at the same time the global contemporary art scene and music industry.

In the communist model of music production artists earned much more from live performance and subsidiary rights than from selling records which paradoxically corresponds to the trend in the current popular music industry, including centralization into a few main record labels that dominate the market (Mazierska and Győri 2019a: 7). Step by step, managers who joined and gained senior positions within major international record companies had little economic incentive to support representatives of alternative music. They mostly focused on popular, superficial, and non-political artists. However, mainstream popular music still expressed something of the political charge accumulated during communism that has been demonstrated since its fall (Mazierska and Győri 2019a).

Using the category of irony, Anna Svetlova and Dawid Kaszuba describe in their article how critical dance music and disco polo relate to post-communist identities and how the irony negotiates between the critical approach and comedic embracing of the disclosed identities. Considering that performances are aimed at the specific socio-cultural strata that share similar collective understanding, Svetlova and Kaszuba argue that even though the irony contains a self-critical potential, this potential is not always decoded. The audience understands the humour as ludic rather than critical. Even though Verka and Sławomir represent different countries and political dilemmas, their respective

performances remain grounded in the troubled post-communist heritage (and complexes) of Ukraine and Poland. Both artists and their songs wrestle with East Central European inferiority and a complicated position between the West and the East.

At the beginning of new millennium, popular music festivals founded on cultural openness, social tolerance, and cosmopolitanism were challenged by the politicized and paternalist approaches. These features were accompanied by increasing commercialization and marketization. People were enjoying new freedoms and possibilities and no longer needed rock groups to serve as mouthpieces of discontent. The worsening economic situation no doubt also contributed to a decline in ticket sales for rock concerts (Ramet 1994). In these circumstances, the alternative scenes had to be re-established in a new way (Szemere 2001).

In the case of Hungary, Emília Barna and Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják extensively analysed the politicization of a rock song that gained the unofficial status of patriotic anthem in Orbán's present-day Hungary. They examined the radicalization of the band in a subcultural context parallel to the development of the so-called national rock genre and showed how the song was popularized and folklorized, whereby it became at least partly detached from the original performing artists and embedded into the popular culture of broader population segments. In the end, it was used for political legitimization.

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