

# “Moskal's,” “Separs,” and “Vatniks”: The Many Faces of the Enemy in the Ukrainian Satirical Songs of the War in the Donbas

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**Abstract:** This article examines representations of the enemy in the Ukrainian satirical songs pertaining to the Russo-Ukrainian war in the Donbas. I focus primarily on the output of Orest Liutyi (the stage persona of Antin Mukhars'kyi) and the semi-anonymous Mirko Sablich (Mirko Sablic) collective. Using the method of multimodal discourse analysis, I examine how the enemy opposing the Ukrainian Army is portrayed in the song lyrics and the accompanying music videos. Considering the complex nature of the conflict and the lack of uniformity in the backgrounds of the warring parties, I am particularly interested in who and why is identified as the enemy in the songs. The enemy appears in several guises: “*moskal's*”—Russian or pro-Russian aggressors from outside Ukraine; “*separs*”—Ukrainian collaborators who support, often through military efforts, the separation of the Donbas from Ukraine; and “*vatniks*”—passive anti-Ukrainian individuals who live in Ukraine and whose inaction is perceived to be harmful to Ukraine’s wartime efforts. Whereas these songs call upon Ukrainians to repel the external enemy (“*moskal's*”) in armed combat, no clear strategy is suggested for how the internal enemies (“*separs*” and “*vatniks*”) should be dealt with or, in some cases, even identified. As a result, Liutyi and Sablic, while positioning themselves as “counterpropaganda” projects, risk labelling as “the enemy,” and thus alienating, the audiences most susceptible to propaganda, who could otherwise benefit most from their myth-debunking efforts.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, popular music, Russo-Ukrainian war, Donbas, war songs.

“HITTING THE OCCUPIERS HARD WITH SATIRE”

**T**he genre of satirical song has blossomed in Ukrainian popular music since the start of the war in the Donbas. This is in contrast to Russia where, despite the popularity of stand-up comedy, there has been limited musical, theatrical, or stand-up critical commentary on the war in the Donbas. The official position of the Russian government is that Russian troops are not deployed in Ukraine. This presents a risk of persecution to anyone who would wish to create satirical material about the war in the Donbas contradicting the official government narrative on the subject. This risk is formidable in view of the lengthy record of political persecutions against

artists over the course of Putin's presidency.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Ukraine's relatively liberal climate in culture and the arts, even under the regimes particularly prone to censorship, such as that of Viktor Ianukovych, has made political satire an essential component of the Ukrainian cultural space, perhaps most prominently in television and popular music.<sup>2</sup>

Songs have become particularly effective tools for producing powerful satirical narratives in the digital space, where musical, visual and linguistic storytelling can be combined. Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is used here to assess the multimedia nature of Ukraine's contemporary satirical songs. MDA is rooted in discourse analysis (DA)—an approach to the study of language that pays particular attention to the contextual framing of individual utterances. DA originated in linguistics, but in the 1960s and the 1970s it was extended into the broader study of society and culture, including Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Also in the 1970s, a branch of DA emphasizing the way social hierarchy and power dynamics were shaping human discourse became known as critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA, which focused primarily on language and its interaction with the broader social context, was the direct precursor of MDA (Wodak and Meyer). In contrast to CDA, MDA turned its attention to extra-lingual means of making meaning, for instance, gesture and image, and to specific manifestations of language, such as writing and speech (O'Halloran). A text is understood as a multimodal phenomenon that extends beyond language. This multimodal approach constitutes an effective tool for the study of popular music—a form of cultural production which in its present shape amalgamates linguistic information (song lyrics), music, visuals, and performative aspects (Machin). Here, the study of songs is broadened beyond their linguistic component to their many other modalities, aiming to uncover the complex socio-political landscapes they emerge from.

When the war in the Donbas broke out in Ukraine, it was both preceded and accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign channeled through the Russian media to which most Ukrainians had easy access.<sup>3</sup> Ukrainian satirical projects that emerged in response to the war often focused on countering that propaganda.<sup>4</sup> This was the case for the two musical projects that emerged on the crest of this wave and gained particular popularity—

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see Jonson.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the key differences in political humour between Russia and Ukraine, see @Radiosvoboda, "Chym vidrizniaiet'sia."

<sup>3</sup> This access has since been restricted significantly through the measures introduced by the Ukrainian state, including through bans on Russian online and offline media resources. For more on this, see Szostek.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the key Russian media narratives about Ukraine, see Fedor; Tolokol'nikova.

the Orest Liutyi project and the Mirko Sablich collective. "Our goal was to wake people up, to awaken their national consciousness," commented Antin Mukhars'kyi, the man behind the Orest Liutyi persona, in 2014. "Ukraine was sleeping, while it was being spat on, trampled under feet, belittled, lied about" (qtd. in Huz'o).<sup>5</sup> Despite the project's satirical nature, Mukhars'kyi says that he takes it very seriously, seeing it as a weapon against Russian infringement upon Ukraine's sovereignty. According to Mukhars'kyi, "Orest Liutyi is an example of how you can communicate serious things to people while wearing a not-so-serious facial expression" (qtd. in Huz'o).

The members of the Mirko Sablich (Mirko Sablic) collective say that it was Mukhars'kyi with his Orest Liutyi alter ego who inspired them to launch their project. Mirko Sablich is a group of volunteers whose names are largely unknown (with the exception of Ievhen Tatarchenko who was interviewed by Radio Svoboda in 2015) (Volchek). Members of the Mirko Sablich collective identify their project as "an ironical-satirical reflection upon the events of the Occupation War [a reference to the war in the Donbas] through song" (@MirkoSabolicSongs). Unlike Mukhars'kyi, who as Orest Liutyi started out largely re-interpreting well-known songs but went on to produce original musical material, the Mirko Sablich group specializes in re-writing popular Soviet and Russian songs, and claims to have no interest in producing original creative products, insisting that "the [Soviet and Russian] ideologemes we have [as a society] should be destroyed by the same means [they were forged through]" (Volchek). Members of the Mirko Sablich collective see their goal as "hitting the *vatniks* and occupiers hard with political humour and satire" and identify their group as a counterpropaganda project (Kostiuk).

The Orest Liutyi project and the Mirko Sablich collective are the focus of this article due to the prolific nature of their output, their popularity among the Ukrainian public—particularly in the online environment,<sup>6</sup> and their heavy focus on the Russo-Ukrainian war. Whereas few Ukrainian performers fail to address the issue of the war in Donbas in their songs, Orest Liutyi and Mirko Sablich have remained almost uniformly focused on the conflict for a number of years since its outbreak in 2014 and have gained substantial visibility. Mukhars'kyi, who first came up with his Orest Liutyi stage persona in 2011 and briefly put it on hold in 2017, remains active as a writer, a TV personality, and a performer. The Mirko Sablich group retains only a fraction

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<sup>5</sup> All translations in this study are my own.

<sup>6</sup> Before Orest Liutyi's official YouTube channel was shut down by the platform in August 2019, it had ca. 80,000 subscribers, with many of his music videos clocking over a million views. The Mirko Sablich YouTube channel has close to 40,000 subscribers, with many of their original videos amassing from half a million to over a million views.

of its former visibility, as its creative output has greatly diminished since 2019. Nonetheless, the two remain among the most representative and influential satirical projects of the first five years of the Russo-Ukrainian war, and as such, are examined particularly closely in this paper. In addition to the songs by Orest Liutyi and Mirko Sablic, my corpus includes such performers as Teleri and Pyriatyn bands and Serhii Faifura. All of these acts work prolifically in the genre of musical satire, and as such, constitute the main focus of my analysis.

Despite the popularity of many of the artists and individual songs in my corpus, not all of this material has been universally well-received in Ukraine. Some of the satirical performers and their songs have generated controversy. In the case of the Orest Liutyi, the project earned particular notoriety due to the controversial views and the harsh rhetoric of the man behind it, Mukhars'kyi. Mukhars'kyi has been accused of using hate speech and expressing incitements to violence, including violence against women. His YouTube channel was shut down in 2019, purportedly for promoting hateful content.<sup>7</sup>

As satire is employed as a tool of critique, satirical projects worldwide have generated similar controversies, often providing grounds for heated debate (Declercq). By utilizing parody, exaggeration, and burlesque, satire can pinpoint the deficiencies in a criticized phenomenon, institution, or individual, bringing these deficiencies into the public spotlight. Thus, satire is effective at subverting dominant narratives, including those introduced by elites or other powerful actors. Satirical representations, however, can polarize communities and cause offence, as in the case of the “Charlie Hebdo” cartoons featuring Prophet Muhammad (Ball). Satire can also be used as a socially acceptable façade that masks hate speech and extreme views: a trend often observed on extreme right-wing social media platforms (Schwarzenegger and Wagner). During wartime, satirical expressions, such as those collected in the song corpus reviewed here, can be mapped onto a complex and emotionally charged landscape of identities, allegiances, hopes, and fears, making this material especially contentious.

While references to “the enemy” are a common trope in many popular Ukrainian war songs regardless of the genre, most such mentions beyond the satirical songs are brief and uninformative. Typical popular songs discussing war, whether created by civilians or combatants, tend to place the enemy in the background. Instead, the efforts and struggles of the Ukrainian fighters and the longing experienced by their families and friends at home is placed in the foreground. In such songs the enemy is mostly presented devoid of

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<sup>7</sup> Mukhars'kyi has characterized this step as a political move orchestrated by the team of the then-newly-elected president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelens'kyi.

detail; it plays a largely symbolic role—someone who needs to be defeated to put an end to a war.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, satirical songs dwell extensively on the figure of the enemy, which constitutes their prime object of mockery and ridicule. In these songs, the enemy is often scrutinized in great detail; its behaviour is examined, and its fate is determined by the songwriters. Such fixation on the enemy provides ample material for a scholarly examination of the Other that is constructed and presented in the songs. Due to the nature of the genre, these representations are exaggerated. Nonetheless, a study of this corpus of satirical songs presents an opportunity to identify and map out some of the key strategies of othering applied in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Popular songs, swiftly created and easily accessible to a large audience online, are well-suited to reflect the latest developments in the ongoing conflict, and the public's response to that conflict.<sup>9</sup> Such studies also provide an important addition to the scholarly work addressing the conflict's depictions in the more "high-brow" contexts—especially the war's abundant portrayals in contemporary Ukrainian literature and film.<sup>10</sup>

Because both Orest Liutyi and Mirko Sablic focus closely on the War in Donbas, the enemy is one of the key figures recurring in their songs. The enemy, however, appears in a number of guises. First there is Russia, whose troops are known to be fighting in the Donbas region despite the country's official refusal to recognize this fact.<sup>11</sup> This type of enemy is identified under the umbrella term of "*moskal'*," a term used historically in Ukraine to refer to the people of Muscovy or, later, to signify the soldiers of the Russian imperial army (including those of Ukrainian origin). This term has eventually come to be used as an ethnic slur for Russian nationals. In addition to Russian troops, another enemy group encompasses the local Donbas forces of the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR) and

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<sup>8</sup> Some exceptions to this rule include the song "Vstavai" ("Rise up") published in 2015 by the Ukrainian rap artist Yarmak. The video accompanying this song features an exotic-looking time-travelling enemy figure who is confronted by a heroic Cossack protagonist, first in a historical setting, then in a present-day urban environment. A closer examination of this example, as well as, more broadly, a study of the figure of the enemy in non-satirical war songs, will further contextualize the findings of the present analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Popular music remains a little-studied segment of contemporary Ukrainian culture, with only three book-length studies published in this field to date: Helbig's *Hip Hop Ukraine: Music, Race and African Migration*, Sonevytsky's *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine*, and a volume entitled *War of Songs, Popular Music and Recent Russia-Ukraine Relations* (2019) co-authored by Hansen and others.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the Russo-Ukrainian war as reflected in literature and film, see Ilchuk; Zakharchenko; and Achilli.

<sup>11</sup> For detailed information on the Russian troops in Donbas, see *InformNapalm* and Sutyagin.

the “Luhansk People's Republic” (LNR).<sup>12</sup> These individuals are commonly identified in the songs as “*separs*”—a term coined by the Ukrainian combatants after the war's outbreak. It is derived from the word “separatist” and, similar to the “*moskal*” term, carries a largely derogatory meaning. In the satirical songs, the use of the term is somewhat haphazard, as it is occasionally applied to the Russian soldiers or used interchangeably with the term “*vatnik*,” which refers to the passive anti-Ukrainian public. Even in songs written by the combatants, the use of the term “*vatnik*” can be ambivalent. The situation is further complicated by the fact that numerous militias comprised both of local Ukrainians and foreign nationals are active in the region; some have formal military training, some are volunteers fighting on ideological grounds, and many are simply attempting to earn a living. Thus, it is often difficult to distinguish the military from the civilians, the perpetrators from the innocent bystanders, all of whom might in various contexts be identified as “*separs*.” The third category of enemy, the “*vatniks*,” are most commonly understood as people who live in Ukraine but who either display indifference to the struggle or who are susceptible to Russian propaganda, and hence hold an explicitly or overtly pro-Russian position. The term “*vatnik*” is derived from the Russian and Ukrainian word for “cotton wool” and is based on a popular Internet meme that targeted avid Sovietophiles and Russophiles portrayed as wearing typical Soviet jackets with cotton-wool padding (Sharhov's'ka). In the songs, the precise set of traits that qualifies a member of the Ukrainian population to be labelled a “*vatnik*,” and hence an enemy, is often unclear, as is the fate that might await this type of enemy in the course of the war.

#### “*MOSKAL*”: THE ENEMY AT THE THRESHOLD

Songs from the Mirko Sablic collective describe the external enemy as being forged by the power of Russian propaganda and tricked into helping to advance Russia's war efforts in the Donbas. The underlying assumption in the songs is largely that mass support of this war on the ground, both within and without Russia, can be generated only by the means of disinformation coming from the top of the Russian state apparatus. Indeed, in Russia, the war in the Donbas has been given prominent coverage in media outlets and is actively instrumentalized in state propaganda narratives. Whereas Russia formally denies any involvement of its troops in the Donbas, the prominence of the Donbas narratives on the country's television, in the printed media,

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<sup>12</sup> The abbreviations DNR and LNR stand for “Donetskaia Narodnaia Respublika” (“Donetsk People's Republic”) and “Luganskaia Narodnaia Respublika” (“Luhansk People's Republic”).

and in online news outlets has been justified by an alleged discrimination against the Russian-speaking people of Ukraine on behalf of the Ukrainian "nationalist" regime, frequently described as a "fascist junta." The war in the Donbas is commonly portrayed as a civil war, and Russia's role in the conflict is represented as that of a compassionate observer ready to lend a helping hand to the people of the Donbas who supposedly declare strong cultural affinity with Russia. A parallel is often drawn between this "brown [fascist] plague"<sup>13</sup> encroaching on the Donbas from "the West" and the narrative of the Russian people's victory over fascism in the "Great Patriotic War," which serves as a pillar of contemporary Russian state ideology.<sup>14</sup>

The Mirko Sablic collective summarizes the key narratives of the Russian propaganda in their songs, including the idea that *Russkii Mir* ("The Russian World") ties together Russia's Soviet and imperial heritage. *Russkii Mir* includes the seemingly contradictory elements of this heritage, such as Russian Orthodox religious fervour and nostalgia for the power of the Soviet state which denounced religion as "opium for the masses" (Marx 131). "The Russian Patriarch [Kirill of Moscow] has blessed us to kill off *benderas*"<sup>15</sup>.<sup>16</sup> sing Mirko Sablic from the imaginary perspective of Russians fighting in Donbas ("Lobuteny, Krym i sanktsii"). Another song describes "a killer" (presumably a Russian soldier) admitting during a confession to Patriarch Kirill to having slaughtered many people in the DNR. To this the fictional Kirill replies: "To kill for the glory of Russia means to love; [hence] you are the Messiah!"<sup>17</sup> (Sabolic, "Pesenka pro Russkii Mir"). The perceived syntheses of Soviet imperial narratives are reflected in lines like "Our imperial flag will flutter in the wind [just like the flag of] USSR"<sup>18</sup> (Sabolic, "Lobuteny, Krym i sanktsii").

These songs are characteristic in that they mock and repurpose Soviet and Russian popular tunes and visual motives. This is a typical strategy used to label the enemy, both musically and visually, in Ukrainian satirical songs. Two examples are "Lobuteny," which mimics a song by the popular Russian rock band Leningrad, that racked up over 170 million views since its release in 2016 (Leningrad), and "Pesenka," which is based on a song from the 1989

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the interpretation of the concept of "fascism" in contemporary Russia and on the fascist tendencies inside the Russian political establishment, see Umland ("Alexander Dugin," "Concepts of Fascism"); Umland and Eichstaett; and Zhurzhenko.

<sup>14</sup> For more on this, see Oushakine.

<sup>15</sup> Here, "*bendera*" is a distorted form of "*bandera*," a slur used by Russians to refer to Ukrainians in general or to Ukrainians who harbour (or are implied to harbour) nationalist views.

<sup>16</sup> "Мочить бендеров нах благословил нас Патриарх."

<sup>17</sup> "Во славу России 'убить' означает 'любить': Вы—Мессия!"

<sup>18</sup> "СССР-ом нах зареет наш имперский флаг."

Soviet film “Don Cezar de Bazan” originally performed by the popular Soviet actor and singer-songwriter Mikhail Boiarskii (Boiarskii).

At the same time, Mirko Sablic is equally eager to combine certain Russian and Soviet sounds with heroic images of the Ukrainian Army and with songs aimed at honouring Ukrainian fighters. This is unusual, as it is Ukrainian folk sound and traditional imagery that are typically linked with the Ukrainian Army. Other common references connect present-day Ukrainian soldiers with the UPA (“Ukrains'ka Povstans'ka Armiia,” the Ukrainian Insurgent Army)—a volunteer paramilitary resistance organization that fought for the creation of an independent Ukrainian state during World War II and in the post-war period.<sup>19</sup> Contrary to these trends, Mirko Sablic bases one of their most popular (nearly two million views on YouTube) songs, “Pobratym” (“Brother in Arms”), on a 1997 Russian rock hymn “Prosvistela” (“Swished by”) performed by the band DDT. Similarly, a cult Soviet-Russian singer, Vladimir Vysotskii, is voiced over in another Mirko Sablic video as condemning the occupation of Crimea (“Balada pro pamiat’”). However, it is worth noting that DDT’s lead singer, Iurii Shevchuk, is widely known to be critical of Putin’s regime and its involvement in the war in the Donbas. Likewise, Vysotskii, while never a political dissident, is hardly seen as a pro-regime figure in the USSR; for many he embodies an independent, freedom-loving spirit. These multi-layered, non-linear associations complicate the seemingly straightforward trend of linking everything Soviet and Russian exclusively with enemy figures.

The Mirko Sablic collective often emphasizes the confusion inflicted on the Russians by the onslaught of propaganda. For example, a Russian character muses in their song: “I am defending the Donbas people. No idea from whom, perhaps from myself”<sup>20</sup> (Sabolic, “Vezhlivaia diktatura”). This sense of confusion is highlighted in “Gumkonvoi” (“Humanitarian Motorcade”), created in response to the song “Donbass” by the Russian singer Stas P'ekha (Piekha). Piekha’s “Donbass” praised the Russian motorcades supposedly delivering aid to the Donbas. “Gumkonvoi” is written in the first person and sung (voice over) from the point of view of a (imaginary) driver of one of the trucks in the motorcade. According to Mirko Sablic, the driver is paid triple to deliver Russian weapons and to drive back with a load of the corpses of Russian soldiers killed in combat in the Donbas. The driver is described as gradually realizing his mistake: “Why the hell,

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<sup>19</sup> The UPA was founded on the Ukrainian nationalist agenda and was active between 1942 and 1949, with a number of units active until as late as 1956, largely in the western regions of Ukraine. At various stages of its existence, the UPA fought against the German, the Polish, and the Soviet forces.

<sup>20</sup> “...защищаю донбасский народ. Сам не знаю от кого. Может быть, от себя самого?”



brother, am I endangering my life for the sake of a big Kremlin lie?"<sup>21</sup> He feels remorse, predicting that "one day we will realize that the taking of the Crimea was the act [worthy] of bandits and that we have ruined the Donbas" (Sablic, "Gumkonvoi").<sup>22</sup>

Works of Mirko Sablic and Orest Liutyi emphasize the sense of paranoia created by the Russian media, that portray Russia as surrounded by enemies on the global stage. "There are enemies all around, gay people and *banderas* everywhere, Vova [short for 'Vladimir'] Putin, help us,"<sup>23</sup> sings the Mirko Sablic group, enumerating, as if on behalf of the people of Russia, the evils commonly linked by Russian propaganda to the symbolic "West" ("Vezhlivaia diktatura"). Orest Liutyi, in his own take on the song "Kombat" by the conservative Russian band Liube, portrays Russia as having gone mad: "All around you are enemies, total darkness, only you [Russia] are without sin."<sup>24</sup> In the same song, Liutyi, who typically displays a highly aggressive stance against Russia, expresses some compassion for the enemy (singing, unusually, in Russian): "[Fighting] in a war is hard toil: first they [the authorities] deceive you, then you get killed . . . What are you fighting for, [my] tricked brother? Yesterday you were a hero, and now—a member of the occupying force"<sup>25</sup> ("Idet na Pskov 'Gruz 200'").

There is no compassion, however, in "Rosiiian v Donbase net," a song performed by Liutyi in which the premise is built around Putin's famous statements denying the presence of Russian troops in Donbas. The song describes an imaginary encounter between a group of Russian soldiers and a group of Ukrainian fighters from the "Dnipro-1" Regiment of Ukraine's Special Tasks Police Force who capture them in the Donbas. The Russian captives admit to being from various (non-European) parts of Russia; the Dnipro-1 fighters reply that, according to Putin, there are no Russian nationals in Donbas; hence, the prisoners are just "some vagabond scum that we fire upon"<sup>26</sup> (Liutyi, "Rosiiian v Donbase net"). Indeed, the song grimly ends with a command to execute the captives.

The aggressive stance in the Liutyi performance is by no means universally accepted or supported in Ukraine. His persona and the views espoused and promoted through it remain controversial. In "Rosiiian v

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<sup>21</sup> "Какого хрена, брат, скажи, на кон я ставлю свою жизнь ради большой кремлёвской лжи?"

<sup>22</sup> "Настанет день, дойдёт до нас, что по-бандитски взят был Крым, что загубили мы Донбасс."

<sup>23</sup> "все кругом враги, всюду геи и бандеры, Вова Путин помоги!"

<sup>24</sup> "Вокруг—враги, смертельная тьма... И только ты безгрешна одна."

<sup>25</sup> "А на войне—тяжелый труд: сперва обманут, потом убьют . . . За что ты воюешь, обманутый брат? Вчера ты—герой, а сейчас—оккупант."

<sup>26</sup> "То якісь безродні тварі, по яких ми робим 'fire!'"

Donbase net,” Liutyi seems to claim that the Russian captives are beyond redemption due to the very fact that they are Russian: “To hell with them, with those *moskal's*, they twist [everything], they lie—and what did you expect? They are the sell-out bastards of the Moscow horde.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, in an earlier song, Liutyi makes a distinction between a “*moskal'*” and a “Russian.” In his 2013 “Ubyi u sobi moskalia” (“Kill a *Moskal'* Inside Yourself”), a remake of a popular Soviet song (Leshchenko, “Proshchai”), Liutyi unequivocally states that “*moskal'*” is not a Russian, but an “aphid” or “dirt” of the Russian land. In the video of the song, a female presenter of one of the Soviet televised concerts is voiced over when explaining the meaning of the term “*moskal'*” to the audience. The voice-over explains: “*moskal'* is a usurper and an invader, disgusting imperial rubble and scum who lives in the Russian soul and causes a lot of trouble for the neighbouring nations”<sup>28</sup> (Liutyi, “Ubyi u sobi moskalia”). The song ends with a plea to “brother Russian” to kill a “*moskal'*” living inside them.

The way the enemy “occupiers” are characterized by Mirko Sablic and Orest Liutyi is in line with their representations by other Ukrainian satirical artists. Serhii Faifura, a veteran singer with a trademark moustache dyed in the blue and yellow of the Ukrainian flag, similarly makes a distinction between the “*moskal'*” or “*katsap*” identity (the latter being another ethnic slur used in Ukraine to refer to Russians) and Russianness as such. Faifura further complicates Liutyi’s understanding of “*moskal'-ness*” by insisting that “*moskal'*” is not simply a particularly unpleasant type of a Russian person, but a sub-identity separate from the rest of a person’s identity that can co-exist with it. In this sense, Faifura represents “*moskal'-ness*” as something like a malignant virus infecting the population of the neighbouring state. According to Faifura, it is the host’s responsibility to battle the disease. In “Russkii Ivan,” he calls upon the eponymous character to “kill inside yourself the beast ‘*katsap*’ and resurrect . . . a human being and a brother”<sup>29</sup> (Faifura).

When left untreated, the “*moskal'*” virus seems to have a profound deteriorating effect on the people. Faifura’s song “Bandera,” which has gone viral with more than 2.7 million YouTube views, presents a stereotypical picture of a polite and peaceful angelic-looking Ukrainian futilely trying to reason with an aggressive, dishevelled, and foul-mouthed Russian neighbour, both impersonated by Faifura himself. The pathological nature of

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<sup>27</sup> “Та ну їх до біса, отих москалів... Викручують, брешуть, а шо ти хотів? Продажні тварюки московської орди.”

<sup>28</sup> “Москаль, по их мнению,—это захватчик, оккупант, мерзкая имперская сволочь и тварь, которая живет в русской душе и приносит много горя окружающим народам.”

<sup>29</sup> “Ты убей в себе зверя-кацапа . . . воскреси в себе человека и брата.”

the "moskal'" neighbour's uncontrollable and aggressive behaviour is further highlighted by the Ukrainian character's white attire, suggestive of the clothes typically worn by medical personnel.

This view of "moskal'-ness" as a medical pathology or an infectious disease serves the purpose of dehumanizing the enemy and making violent treatment of the latter ethically permissive. Like the figure of a zombie in popular culture, often used to represent a dangerous other who merits being disposed of in the cruelest manner imaginable, the "moskal'" creates an ideal enemy whose extermination does not present moral challenges for Ukrainian fighters. In a song "Komaryk," originally written during the post-World War II struggle of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and widely performed in the contemporary war in the Donbas, the enemy's non-human nature is made clear: "The 'moskal'" has been buried by the roadside. You could see his arms, you could see his legs and you could see his horns"<sup>30</sup> ("Pisni z zony ATO. Pokhovaly moskalia" 01:23–01:34). The phrase "bezrodni tvari" in "Komaryk" literally means "kinless beasts." When combined, these two notions—of the enemies' animal rather than human nature and of their lack of identifiable connection with other human beings ("kinless")—serve to condemn them to death.

In other satirical songs, the dehumanizing effect of the "moskal'" label leads to fixation on the enemy's physical extermination rather than simply defeat. In the Pyriatyn band's "Arta," each of the song's four verses focuses on the death of a particular enemy or enemy group, invariably characterized through the prism of a "moskal'" or a "katsap" identity. Despite the song's initial subtitle: "The hymn of Ukrainian artillery" (later removed), artillery fighters are mentioned only in a single line—the refrain: "The artillery is working, the guys are hitting hard ["ibashat"]." In fact, any agency of Ukrainian soldiers appears absent from the rest of the song. In the first verse, an artillery shell described as coming out of nowhere serves as an agent of destruction in place of the fighters shooting: "Suddenly, . . . an artillery shell flew into the young moskal'."<sup>31</sup> Such neutralization of the act of killing is further emphasized throughout the song by the use of impersonal verbs—the form expressed in Ukrainian through third person singular with a neuter ending. Through a series of verbs such as "zasvystilo" ("[something] whistled"), "pryletilo" ("[something] flew in"), "ibanulo" ("[something] exploded"), "zatremtilo" ("[something] shook"), the killing force is presented as acting independently from human agents. Hence, the acts of violence in the song are neutralized not only through the dehumanizing of the enemy

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<sup>30</sup> "Поховали москаля край дороги. Видно руки, видно ноги, видно роги."

<sup>31</sup> "Аж раптом . . . болванка прилетіла в молодого москаля."

and the removal of human agency from the act of killing, but through the very use of language itself.

“SEPARS” AND “VATNIKS”: THE ENEMY WITHIN

Satirical songs that target supporters of Russia inside Ukraine and passive members of Ukrainian society who are deemed to be jeopardizing the wartime efforts of the active pro-Ukrainian community are as numerous as songs targeting the enemy invader. The internal enemies are commonly identified as “vata”/“vatniks” or as “separs” (“separatists”)—indeed, the dividing line between the two is blurred, and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. The term “separ” in songs tends to be applied to the enemy fighters, while “vatnik” is used more frequently to label civilians. This distinction is made most clearly in the works created by the combatants themselves—the soldier singers-songwriters. In their songs, the term “separ” is largely used as a synonym for “enemy” or “enemy fighter.” Outside the subgenre—including in the satirical songs—the use of the term becomes more ambivalent. One example of this is “Pis'mo separatista Putinu” (“The Letter of a Separatist to Putin”), also known as “Zaberi menia iz Novorossii” (“Take Me away from Novorossia”) by the band Teleri. The song is a rewritten version of the Russian band Liube’s “Pozovi menia tikho po imeni” (“Call Me Quietly by My Name”). Although in “Take Me away” Teleri uses the word “separatist,” in the song it is, in fact, used to indicate a Russian soldier. The latter is portrayed, rather typically for the genre, as attracted to the war in the Donbas by the promise of the money and glory, but then finds himself disappointed and is asking his president to organize his return to Russia. Despite such instances of confusion, the two terms, technically, do differ semantically. While a “vatnik” indicates someone who harbours anti-Ukrainian and/or pro-Russian sentiments which might not be expressed through actions, a “separ” is understood as someone who, more concretely, favours the separation of the Donbas region from Ukraine and, in most cases, is also a collaborator taking specific, sometimes violent actions to achieve this goal. In this sense, a “separ” is almost invariably a “vatnik,” but not every “vatnik” is a “separ.”

Out of the two, the term “vatnik” remains overwhelmingly more popular in satirical songs. At least two of songs ascribed to Liutyi are dedicated to “vatniks” directly, while many more address “vatniks” implicitly. In the songs, “vatniks” are understood to be susceptible to Russian propaganda, harbouring nostalgia for the Soviet past, and driven largely by their own pragmatic interests instead of considerations for the common cause or greater good. Recorded in 2016, “Katia-vatnitsa” (“Katia the *Vatnik*”) draws a hyperbolized caricature image of a “vatnik” woman. In the music video,

Katia is impersonated by an ugly doll. The doll appears naked throughout the video, its body modelled on a body of a young child—a particularly disturbing presentation given that the doll is shown imitating sexual acts, drinking alcohol, and using strong language—but the doll's face appears older and aggressive. The video is played out in the medium of puppet theatre. The back of the stage features a bizarre child-like drawing that represents a number of Russian propaganda narratives and is splattered with slogans: "Crimea is Russian forever," "Ukro-fascists, sod off," "Putin rules." The drawing also hints at the prevalence of Soviet narratives by featuring the Russian cruiser *Aurora*, a shot from which is thought to have started the Russian Revolution in October 1917.

The song centres around Katia's acceptance of the annexation of Crimea by Russia. She appears on stage surrounded by plastic soldiers representing the Russian troops in Crimea. Katia is described as having fallen in with Putin and with "a little green man"—a common reference to the Russian troops that invaded Crimea to provide military support for its illegal annexation (Shevchenko). This narrative is visually reflected in a scene of the doll fornicating with a plastic soldier. Katia is portrayed as being stupid; the song in the video begins with Orest Liutyi acting as a storyteller and asking: "Where do vatniks come from? . . . Who are those vampires who suck out their brains and shit in the vacated space?"<sup>32</sup> ("Katia-vatnitsa"). Katia is then shown drinking vodka and stomping her feet on the Ukrainian flag. A new character appears: a traditional Ukrainian doll "*motanka*" (literally, "a wrapped doll") that—in line, perhaps, with its traditional role as a symbolic household protector—gently scolds Katia for her inappropriate behaviour but gets told off and cursed. Katia, instead, proclaims her fondness of the USSR, where vodka and sausage were so cheap. The *motanka* doll's arguments about the USSR being a totalitarian state ("the prison of the nations [that killed] 50 million of its own people"<sup>33</sup>) are persistently ignored and scoffed at by Katia, and the conversation ends with the storyteller (Liutyi/Mukhars'kyi) biting off Katia's head.

An earlier 2016 video of Liutyi's song "A tielo pielo" ("The Body<sup>34</sup> Was Singing") describes "*vatnik*" behaviour in a more concrete setting. Both the song and the video narrate a story of a group of young men who are fond of Russian popular culture and susceptible to Russian propaganda. They experience a dramatic encounter in a Lviv bar with a group of former Anti-

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<sup>32</sup> "Звідки беруться ватники? . . . Що за вампіри такі мозок у них висмоктують, і в звільнене місце сруть?"

<sup>33</sup> "Тюрма народів [що] вбила 50 мільйонів своїх громадян."

<sup>34</sup> "The body" ("*tielo*") in this context is used in its slang meaning of "someone," often carrying slightly derogatory or dismissive meaning.

Terrorist Operation (ATO<sup>35</sup>) fighters. The conflict starts when a pro-Russian young man demands that Soviet and Russian songs should be played for him and his friends on the karaoke machine. The whole group is drunk and is celebrating the 9th of May (the Soviet “Victory Day” marking the surrender of Nazi Germany in World War II). The singing of Soviet songs and complaints about “*banderas*” get the “*vatniks*” into a fight with the group of men who just returned from the ATO (the latter, of course, end up winning in the skirmish). The ATO group is described in the song as “cultured people, practically intelligentsia” (Liutyi, “A tielo pielo”). In what is meant to be a contrast with the aggressive and presumably poorly educated “*vatniks*,” the ATO group is portrayed as comprising intelligent and artistic people, including someone who “studied to be a painter” and someone else who “attended a polytechnic university.” Written from the point of view of an ATO group member, the song insists they did not even pick a fight, but simply approached the “*vatniks*” to “ask some questions.” When explaining the reason for the conflict, the narrator in the song points to the importance of cultural products, particularly songs, in the political struggle: “Today [we listen to] Grisha Lieps, Liube, Stas Mikhailov [popular Russian performers with a conservative political stance], and tomorrow [Igor’ ‘Strelkov’] Girkin<sup>36</sup> comes to us with a machine gun and says: ‘This is our land, they are singing Russian songs here.’”<sup>37</sup>

Liutyi proceeds to claim that Ukraine’s music business has been similarly infiltrated by “*vatniks*,” whose position he voices like this: “We don’t deal with *khokhols* [an ethnic slur for Ukrainians used in Russia]. Your stupid . . . songs are of no interest to the glamorous public. We are oriented towards Moscow, guys”<sup>38</sup> (“A tielo pielo”). It is through the words of a Russian character, however, that the need to change this situation is articulated. Liutyi’s narrator recalls serving with a Russian<sup>39</sup> man in the Donbas who told him to “clean up the broadcasting, shake up the

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<sup>35</sup> The term Anti-Terrorist Operation was commonly used to denote the war in the Donbas until February 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Igor’ “Strelkov” Girkin—Russian citizen and GRU colonel involved in the annexation of the Crimea and the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014; one of the key instigators of the separatist movement in the Donbas in its early phases.

<sup>37</sup> “Бо сьогодні Гріша Лепс, ‘Любе,’ Стас Михайлов, а завтра к нам [*sic*] приходять Гіркін з автоматом і каже: ‘Это наша земля, тут русские песни поют.’”

<sup>38</sup> “Не формат! Дела не имеем с хохлами. Ваши тупые шароварные песни гламурной публике совсем не интересны. Мы ориентированы на Москву, ребята.”

<sup>39</sup> Russian citizens and ethnic Russian Ukrainians are known to fight also on the side of the Ukrainian Army.

ministries"<sup>40</sup> ("A tielo pielo"). The latter phrase is given in the Russian language in a song that is otherwise sung in Ukrainian, perhaps indicating the fact that the Russian language should be excluded when imposed as an invasive enemy language but can be treated with some level of neutrality when spoken by pro-Ukrainian Russians.<sup>41</sup>

In "Hrobky na Donechchyni" ("Hrobky in the Donetsk region"), a song from his 2019 album "Hibrydni viiny" ("Hybrid Wars"), Orest Liutyi creates a soundscape almost entirely crafted from the voices of implied "vatniks." The voices we hear (impersonated, not recorded in the field) are meant to reflect conversations taking place around the time of "hrobky," the second week after Easter when people in Ukraine traditionally visit their family graves. When combined with the conversations of the "vatniki," the choice of geographical setting for the song, as signalled in its title, implies that Mukhars'kyi sees the Donetsk region as the true "vatnik" territory. It is not specified whether the conversations in the song are taking place in territories controlled by the DNR or in Ukrainian-controlled territories; after all, people move across the dividing line in large numbers (according to 2019 data, up to 30,000 people cross the zone checkpoints daily) (Kolodiazhna).

The conversations of implied "vatniks" cover everyday topics but unavoidably display the markers of "vata" behaviour: "You, gypsy, get out of here!"<sup>42</sup> (engaging in discrimination against ethnic minorities); "They say, Pugacheva [a veteran Russian pop singer] gave birth to twins again"<sup>43</sup> (showing an obsession with the life of Russian celebrities and a media dependence); "They say, the brew from pine needles helps liver diseases"<sup>44</sup> (displaying readiness to trust unreliable information sources); "Look at this priest's face? Might this jerk be from the Kyiv Patriarchate?"<sup>45</sup> (projecting religion on the surface but revealing hate inside, disliking everything Ukrainian); "In the Soviet Union everything was as it should be"<sup>46</sup> (performing Soviet nostalgia) (Liutyi, "Hrobky na Donechchyni"). The conclusion gives the whole song a sinister overtone, where a single phrase in Ukrainian (in contrast to the rest of the song, which is mostly in Russian) is repeated over and over: "Bakh, a mozhe, nu ikh nakh?" which can be loosely translated as "Boom, or, perhaps, to hell with them?" It gives the

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40 "Зачищайте эфир, трясите министерства!"

41 For more on the use of multiple languages in the songs depicting the war in the Donbas, see Shuvalova.

42 "Цыган, давай отсюда гребни!"

43 "Говорят, у Пугачевой опять родилась двойня..."

44 "От печени помогает отвар хвойный."

45 "Ну у попа и рожана... Этот пидер точно не киевского патриархата?"

46 "В Советском Союзе всё было как положено."

impression that someone, likely a Ukrainian fighter, is watching these people and listening to their conversations, and deciding whether to dispose of them using weapons or to let them be.

Compared to Liutyi' radicalism, Mirko Sablic's vision of the internal enemy is more balanced. This balance might be linked to a desire to reach a broad audience, or it might reflect more moderate views held by members of the collective. In a 2015 interview, Tatarchenko, the only public member of the Mirko Sablic group, mentioned that the members of the collective have "differences in opinion," although he did not specify further (Volchek). In the songs of the Mirko Sablic collective, "*vatniks*" appear selfish and mercantile: "Put some money in . . . our foreign currency bank account, and '*vata*' will go to fight for Russia"<sup>47</sup> ("*Bremenskie muzykanty v ATO*"). They want a comfortable life and eschew any discomfort, even if the latter is required for the greater good of Ukraine as a whole.

The song "*Na iukh s pliazha*" (a meme and a pun that can be loosely translated as "Get out of Here") refers to the ban placed by the Ukrainian government on several popular Russian social networks, such as VK and Odnoklassniki, in May 2017. The reasoning behind this step was to prevent the Russian security services from surveying Ukrainian citizens, spreading propaganda, and collecting strategic information. This controversial decision displeased some of the Ukrainian population, as the banned websites were among the top-5 most popular online resources in Ukraine. "*Na iukh s pliazha*" describes contradictions between the rhetoric and the behaviour of some Ukrainian Internet users, and is summed up in the phrase "Yes, Russia is my greatest foe, but I'm so used to freebies"<sup>48</sup> (Sabolic, "*Na iukh s pliazha*"). The song presents several different voices and patterns of reasoning among those who disagree with the bans. Following a confession of a lover of "freebies," a voice in Ukrainian emerges. This "simple Vit'ok, a chav from the housing estate [*iz raiona*—which could be alternatively understood as 'from the rural area'],"<sup>49</sup> complains about being no longer able to download free content" (Sabolic, "*Na iukh s pliazha*"). The next voice belongs to the older generation and claims that they are used to Soviet attempts to forbid things and will learn how to use proxy servers to access favourite websites. The next set of voices comes from the world of pro-Ukrainian online discussion boards, mocking users who criticize whoever happens to be in power and their policies. A woman then interjects, stating

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<sup>47</sup> "Деньжата положите нам на . . . валютный счет—и вата за Россию в бой пойдет."

<sup>48</sup> "Да, Россия—мой лютый враг, но к халяве привык я очень!"

<sup>49</sup> "Простий Вітьок, із району рагульок."



that Russian online resources give her access to her "sunny [Soviet] past." The last voice is meant to be a voice of reason:

Yes, I'm glued to VK,<sup>50</sup>  
Yes, my car [GPS] uses Yandex Maps [another banned resource],  
Yes, I have plenty of friends on Odnoklassniki.<sup>51</sup>  
But, on the other hand,  
Russian online communities are also  
part of the hybrid war,  
So hit them, Petro [Poroshenko]<sup>52</sup>: I forgive you.<sup>53</sup>

On the surface, the song demonstrates a degree of understanding that there is a diverse group at odds with Poroshenko's policies. Yet, in the song this understanding is obviated by a lack of depth and a refusal to treat the concerns of these various voices seriously. The Mirko Sablic group dismisses these complaints, as signalled in the song's description on YouTube. The official description announces that the song is dedicated to "the reaction of some *idiots* [italics are mine] to the blocking of the Russian social networks" (Sabolic, "Na iukh s pliazha"). This dismissive description points to a gap between the declared intention of many satirical projects to serve the purpose of counterpropaganda, and the sceptical attitudes of their originators toward the very people who could benefit from their counterpropaganda efforts.

Indeed, in Mirko Sablic's "Ne vinovatye my" ("It's Not Our Fault")—variously titled "The Aria of Traitors and Parasites" and "The Little Song [*pesenka*] of the Donetsk Separatists"—one of the key messages seems to be that "vatniks" ultimately cannot be forgiven for their anti-Ukrainian positions. In the song, the Mirko Sablic group imagines a monologue of the Ukrainian victims of Russian propaganda: "We have been implanted with the chip of war, we have been zombified . . . It's not our fault . . . that we have been brainwashed with imperial 'vata' [here, meaning propaganda]. It's not the Donbas's or the Crimea's fault, it's all the fault of the CIA and the FSB"<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> VK is a popular Russian social network with over 600 million users.

<sup>51</sup> Odnoklassniki (identified in the original lyrics by its dismissive colloquial nickname, "Odnoglaziki") is an early Russian social network; it is similar to Facebook and popular among the older generation.

<sup>52</sup> Ukraine's President between 2014 and 2019.

<sup>53</sup> "Да, на ВК залип, да на Яндекс-картах джип, да, в 'Одноглазиках' друзяк я повно маю, но з другої сторони, часть гібридної війни—це й російські 'пабліки.' Смали, Петро. Прощаю!"

<sup>54</sup> "В нас вживили чип войны, зазомбированы мы . . . . Поймите, что невиноватые мы . . . , что задурили нам мозги имперской ватюю. Не виноватый Донбасс, не виноватый Крым, а виновато ЦРУ и ФСБ."

(“Ne vinovatye my”). However, despite these pleas, the fault in the song is ultimately laid at the feet of the “*vatniks*.” Similarly, in another Mirko Sablic song “Ballada pro pamiat” (“The Ballad about Memory”), their pleas for forgiveness are resolutely ignored:

And when the time of hangover will come  
 The [*vatniks*] eyes are being raised pleadingly to the sky:  
 “We did not know! We were being lied to! We are ashamed of ourselves!  
 Take [us] back! Forgive us!”—a tear [is welling in the eye] . . .  
 But we will sincerely not give a damn about this whining.<sup>55</sup>

Such indifference does compare favourably with the more violent solutions suggested by Orest Liutyi. Yet it still leaves many questions unanswered, particularly, what will happen to this putatively “unforgivable” portion of the Ukrainian population when the war concludes, and Ukraine presumably finds more social and economic success?

The question of who will be labelled as the “internal enemy” and on what basis, is particularly pertinent for the population of the occupied Ukrainian territories. This is the group whose members have been portrayed in the songs in strikingly disparate ways. Occasionally, they are the courageous resistance fighters. In their heroic aspect, Donbasites are featured in the Mirko Sablic group’s “A v DNR, kak v DNR” (“And in the DNR, Things Are Like in the DNR”), also known as “The Hymn of the Ukrainian Donbas.” In the song, they express readiness to resist the Russian invasion: “Donbas will rebel! . . . You won’t get even an inch of our land. Bug off to Moscow, *moskal’s!*”<sup>56</sup> At the same time, we see this very populace increasingly labelled as “*separs*” or “*vatniks*.” Who of these people will be cast as “*vata*” and perhaps left alone? Who will be considered to be an aggressive “*separ*” and judged accordingly? Who will be deemed to deserve forgiveness? At present, the songs provide no clear answer in this regard. The job of axiological mapping of the Donbas’s diverse and complex landscape remains to be undertaken. It is important that, under the current constraints of the region’s partial occupation and the resulting cultural isolation from the rest of Ukraine, this effort does not become one-sided and that the categories and typologies are not only imposed onto the region’s population from the outside but are also suggested and mediated from inside the region.

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<sup>55</sup> “А когда наступает похмелья час, поднимаются к небу невинно глаза. ‘Мы не знали!’, ‘Нам ввали!’, ‘Нам стыдно за нас!’, ‘Забирайте!’, ‘Простите!’. Скупая слеза. . . Тільки нам на цей скрегіт буде щиро плювати.”

<sup>56</sup> “Востанет Донбасс! . . . Ни пяди не будет вам нашей земли. Валите в Москву, москали!”

## CONCLUSION

None of the three most prominent categories of enemies in the Ukrainian satirical songs are delineated particularly clearly. The most straightforward category appears to be the *"moskal's,"* as it largely refers to the Russian troops. However, partly due to its very name being an ethnonym, this notion is sometimes interpreted as encompassing not only the Russian troops active in the Donbas, but also the pro-war Russian civilians, or even all of the Russian nationals, who are seen as carrying collective responsibility for their government's role in the war. The category of *"separs"* is similarly problematic. Whereas in the soldiers' songs the term *"separ"* is primarily used to address the enemy fighters, in the satirical songs its semantic context is often vague. Even the combatant singers-songwriters sometimes struggle to make a clear distinction between the military troops and the civilian population in this respect. Finally, the term *"vatniks,"* while being more semantically clear-cut (in the context of Ukrainian satirical war songs, it almost uniformly refers solely to the Ukrainian population), it is no less problematic than *"moskal's"* and *"separs."* *"Vatniks"* are broadly identified as being anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian; however, these attitudes are described as expressed in a great variety of ways—from using the banned Russian social networks to actively undermining Ukraine's wartime efforts from inside the community. Nonetheless, through the use of a single umbrella term *"vatniks,"* these various types of behaviour are being lumped together as the attributes of the enemy.

In the songs, a typical *"vatnik"* is portrayed as a person nostalgic for the former Soviet state, who lacks knowledge or education, consumes low-quality cultural products, and spends excessive time online or in front of the television. It would be reasonable to assume that, since such people are underinformed and susceptible to propaganda, they ought to be a target audience for the "Ukrainization" and "counterpropaganda" efforts of Liutyi and Mirko Sablic. However, these artists make little effort to connect with or express sympathy for the dilemmas and difficulties of the *"vatniks."* Instead, their songs channel anger against *"vatniks"* and caricaturize them in order to entertain the more "conscious" and pro-active parts of Ukrainian society. Such an approach can diminish the ability of satirical songs to counteract Russian propaganda. Worse, as citizens with less education and lower income are particularly vulnerable to pro-Russian propaganda, such mocking can potentially widen political, economic, and class-based divisions within Ukrainian communities. While the songs characterize the internal enemy (or the Ukrainian community's internal Other) as a complex group with varying motivations, they perform no cultural outreach to convert the individuals in these groups. Still, despite Orest Liutyi's more radical suggestions regarding the *"vatniks'"* future fate, most of the songs seem to

suggest that the treatment of “*vatniks*” should not be the same as the treatment of the “occupiers” fighting in the Donbas. The songs imply that while the “*vatniks*” should not be forgiven, they might still have a place in Ukrainian society—even if the precise configuration of such a place remains highly uncertain.

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