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All the Things They Said Were a Lie

On t.A.T.u.'s Eurovision 2003 Entry

Abstract

The Russian duo t.A.T.u. is undoubtedly a huge pop culture phenomenon. They are the only Russian band to have achieved international success after 1991, and their hits are remembered to this day. The peak of the singers' career was their performance as the Russian representatives at the Eurovision Song Contest in 2003 with the song *Ne Ver', Ne Boysia, Ne Prosi*. The girls were expected by many to win, but they placed third. The aim of the article is, firstly, to briefly summarize the history of the duo, highlighting the role of Ivan Shapovalov, the producer and author of the scandalous concept: the stage image of *faux* lesbians was created purely for publicity purposes. This is followed by a discussion of the circumstances of the duo's performance at the Eurovision Song Contest, the significance of the song, and possible reasons for its failure. In addition, the topic of AI as a tool that allowed the "creation" of a never-released English version of the song is mentioned.

Keywords

t.A.T.u., Lena Katina, Julia Volkova, Ivan Shapovalov, Eurovision Song Contest, sexual abuse, showbusiness, prison slang

Abstrakt

All the Things They Said Were a Lie: O występie zespołu t.A.T.u. w Konkursie Eurowizji w 2003

Rosyjski duet t.A.T.u. jest niewątpliwie wielkim fenomenem popkulturowym, to jedyny od roku 1991 rosyjski zespół, który osiągnął międzynarodowy sukces i jest pamiętany do tej pory. Szczyt kariery piosenkarek nastąpił w 2003, gdy zostały wybrane na reprezentantki Rosji w Konkursie Piosenki Eurowizji z piosenką *Nie wier', nie bojsia, nie prosi*. Spodziewano się, że dziewczyny wygrają, lecz zajęły trzecie miejsce. Artykuł przypomina historię zespołu z podkreśleniem roli Iwana Szapowałowa, menadżera i autora skandalicznego konceptu, w którym wizerunek sceniczny oparty na fikcyjnej miłości między dziewczętami został wykreowany wyłącznie w celach marketingowych. Następnie przedstawiono okoliczności występu w Konkursie Piosenki Eurowizji, analizę tekstu piosenki oraz potencjalne przyczyny porażki zespołu w rywalizacji. Pokazana została też rola si jako narzędzia pozwalającego „stworzyć” angielską wersję eurowizyjnej piosenki, która nigdy nie ukazała się oficjalnie.

Słowa kluczowe

t.A.T.u., Lena Katina, Julija Wołkowa, Iwan Szapowałow, Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, molestowanie seksualne, show biznes, slang więzienny

Introduction

The Russian duo t.A.T.u. is undoubtedly a huge pop culture phenomenon. For people from my generation (born circa 1995), the music video for *Nas Ne Dogonyat* song broadcast on Viva Polska was probably one of the very first pop culture memories. Their hits such as *Ya soshla s uma* and *All about us* are remembered by us and many others to this day. What is more, Lena Katina and Julia Volkova are recognised even by older generations as “the fake lesbians”. However, only few in Western Europe know the tragic story behind the image of the two pretty, teenage girls and are aware of producer Ivan Shapovalov’s role as director of this ghastly spectacle. In this paper I will present the inspirations for t.A.T.u.’s scandalous image, analyse their Eurovision performance, and reflect on using AI as a tool that allowed for the “creation” of a never-released English version of the song.

All You Wanna See Is Like Pornography...—The Story of Mystification

On 8 July, 2021, the YouTube channel of Russian journalist Ksenia Sobchak published an interview with Julia Volkova and Lena Katina. In this lengthy video (actually a documentary), the singers, their relatives, and also ex-producer Ivan Shapovalov revealed the whole story of t.A.T.u.¹ These statements will be our starting point to reflect on their image and the presence of minor girls in the media.

The history of t.A.T.u. began in the late 1990’s, when both Katina and Volkova were members of the children’s vocal ensemble Neposedy. In 1999, Shapovalov (a child psychologist by profession) and Alexandr Voitynsky organised a casting for a teenage vocalist. Fifteen-year-old Lena Katina interested them, so they recorded together a song called *Yugoslavia* about the American bombing of the country. The piece turned out to be quite emotional, but not what Shapovalov was looking for; even though he tried to describe war to Katina, the girl as an ordinary teenager living in peace was not able to understand the horror of the bombing and the song did not sound as authentic as he demanded. Shapovalov abandoned the early thought based on the concept of an innocent girl singing

¹ Kseniya Sobchak, “TATU: 20 let spustya! Glavnaya rossiyskaya gruppa v mire,” interview with Julia Volkova, Lena Katina, and Ivan Shapovalov, video 2 hours 39 min. 50 sec., YouTube, June 8, 2022., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-lvhkc8_gk.

songs about the cruelty of armed conflict. He changed his idea and invited fourteen-year-old Julia Volkova to make a duo. A duo that could be an international phenomenon... but to spark one, he needed a huge scandal.

The music video for *Ya Soshla s Uma*² debuted in 2000 on MTV Russia and immediately became a colossal hit. Viewers saw two schoolgirls in recognizable uniforms with white shirts and checkered skirts. They were kissing passionately in the pouring rain in front of disgusted people. They were singing, actually screaming, a song about their forbidden love for which they were condemned by society. There are two main inspirations for the girls' new image. Firstly, Shapovalov showed girls the Swedish movie *Fucking Åmål* (alternative title: *Show Me Love*). The plot revolved around a story of two girls falling in love with each other. He told Katina and Volkova: "Act like them." Secondly, Elena Kiper, Shapovalov's friend, had a dream under anesthesia about kissing a woman. After that, she had kept in her mind the phrase "Ya Soshla s Uma," which means "I have lost my mind."³ This became her main inspiration for the future hit, which she co-wrote with Valeriy Polenko. The composer was Sergio Galoyan.

It should also be remembered that in Britney Spears' famous clip for *Baby One More Time* from 1999, she also was portrayed as a "sexy schoolgirl." Taking into account the moment of the clip's release and the massive popularity of the track, it seems that it must have also been a huge inspiration for Shapovalov. Moreover, in an interview, he admitted he knew that pornography showing schoolgirls is the most popular all over the world, so it influenced Katina's and Volkova's stage image.⁴ The choice of school uniforms as a key element of the visual presentation of the young vocalists was considerably more significant. As Mirja Lecke has noted, the school uniform not only evokes the Soviet requirement for pupils to wear uniforms but also serves as a link to Anglo-American cultural traditions. The uniform limits clothing as a means of individual self-expression, reducing the individual to the socially defined role of a student. For this reason, school uniforms have also been employed in pornography as a visual device that more strongly assigns performers to specific social roles and identities.⁵

We should highlight that the singers were 14 and 15 years old at the time. The idea of forcing underage girls to pretend to be lesbians in an oversexualised way was controversial, to say the least. However, thanks to this scandalous appearance,

² t.A.T.u., "Ya Soshla s Uma," YouTube, February 17, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-JfWQmG6g>.

³ Sobchak, "ТАТУ: 20 лет спустыа!," at 15:51–18:42.

⁴ Dana Heller, "t.A.T.u. You! Russia, the Global Politics of Eurovision, and Lesbian Pop," *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 196, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001237>.

⁵ Mirja Lecke, "Exportschlager! Die russische Mädchenband tATu," *Osteuropa* 57, no. 5 (2007): 129.

the band was a huge success. Shapovalov as producer was working hard to show his project in the media, and taught the girls how to act in front of the public. Their behaviour was supposed to be obscene, full of sexual overtones. Success became international: in 2002, an English version of the song called *All the things she said* was released. We should remember that all love declared by girls and especially by Shapovalov was a lie—knowing that, the phrase “Don’t trust the voices” used at Eurovision performances acquires an especially ironic meaning.

As horrible as it is, Shapovalov’s sexual harassment of the girls did not stop at that point. In 2002, Shapovalov forced Volkova to film herself masturbating for the music video *Prostye dvizheniya* (English translation: *Simple Motions*). She agreed, because she knew that any objections made no sense: he would not stop asking her until she did what he expected her to do.⁶ In the video, we see her face and half-naked body. Shapovalov repeated this action in December 2003: at a concert in Japan, he commanded Volkova to simulate masturbation in front of the audience; she did it by his demand.⁷ This is an obvious example of sexual harassment.

It is possible that Sobchak’s entire interview with Volkova constitutes another performance and an attempt to absolve herself of the transgressions of her youth, a gesture that is particularly significant in the context of Russian legislation on the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations.” It should be noted, however, that the abuses committed by Shapovalov and described by Volkova did in fact occur (the manager’s inappropriate conduct was observed by Trevor Horn),⁸ and the singer herself does not appear, during the interview, to perceive them as having caused her personal harm. Nevertheless, her nervous laughter and tendency to cover her face seem to be genuine reactions, revealing profound discomfort and shame rather than carefully rehearsed gestures. Katina, meanwhile, responds to Sobchak’s questions in a rather aggressive manner, which likewise appears far removed from calculated or deliberately crafted behavior. In my view, it is precisely through such behavior that concealed emotions become visible, in a sense deconstructing the carefully devised concept developed by Shapovalov many years ago and exposing its unethical dimensions. This does not alter the fact, however, that the now adult Volkova and Katina have not

⁶ Volkova said: “If I don’t do it, he [Shapovalov] will be pestering me for two days,” Sobchak, “ТАТУ: 20 лет спустя!,” at 1:00:08.

⁷ Sobchak, at 57:50–1:05:03.

⁸ Antti Okko, *Not Only Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Reception of Russophone Rock in the United States, 1985–2025* (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2025), 130.

distanced themselves from their past and may still, to some extent, be participating in a peculiar form of performance.

In what, then, did Shapovalov's success lie, and can it be related to broader cultural concepts? There is no doubt that t.A.T.u.'s stage image fits within the aesthetics of camp due to a certain degree of exaggeration resulting from a stereotype borrowed from pornographic productions. Volkova and Katina essentially played the roles of actresses in a carefully planned commercial venture designed to provoke shock by transgressing successive norms. This was achieved through, at times, obscene choreography, provocative poses in photographs, and encouraging concert attendees to undress on stage. As Przemysław Czapliński noted, in a broader sense, camp has become aligned with capitalist mechanisms by facilitating the acceptance of aesthetic forms and expressions that might otherwise provoke discomfort, disgust, or resistance. Through the commercialization of "bad taste," the normalization of issues related to gender and sexuality, and the market-driven validation of difference, camp has come to operate in accordance with the principles of the cultural economy characteristic of late capitalism.⁹ The group's commercial success may, in part, be attributed to its ability to capitalize on acts of norm transgression that nonetheless operated within the framework of a recognizable stereotype.

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider whether Shapovalov's concept may be understood as an instance of *stiob*, a phenomenon found exclusively within Russian culture; *stiob* may be regarded as a concept closely related to camp. Alexei Yurchak has described this concept as a form of humor that relies on an exaggerated identification with the very object it seeks to parody.¹⁰ In contrast to broader understandings of the term, Mark Yoffe conceptualizes *stiob* in a significantly narrower way:

I prefer to characterize *stiob* as a form of ironic mockery, parodic double-talk engaged in by the "initiated," or those "in the know" who presume that their utterances, aside from signifying the obvious, also signify something else, often the opposite of what is being stated straightforwardly, often making fun of it, rendering it absurd or exposing its false and hypocritical nature. *Stiob* is a very complex form of humorous cultural discourse that deeply permeates Russian culture.¹¹

⁹ Przemysław Czapliński, "Kamp – gry antropologiczne," *Teksty Drugie*, nr 5 (2012): 20.

¹⁰ Alexei Yurchak, "Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in Post-Soviet Nightlife," in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 76–109.

¹¹ Mark Yoffe, "The Stiob of Ages: Carnavalesque Traditions in Soviet Rock and Related Counterculture," *Russian Literature* 74, no.1/2 (2013): 209.

At first glance, it might appear that irony and mockery—elements inseparable from *stiob*—are absent from t.A.T.u.'s most famous music video. The video for *Ya soshla s uma* is saturated with emotion, and its lyrics, imbued with a sense of entrapment and shame, can genuinely move audiences and evoke sympathy for a forbidden love. On the other hand, Volkova and Katina's entire stage image was based on a stereotype derived from pornography, which may be perceived as offensive. In this sense, Shapovalov's concept may be regarded as a form of rather carefully concealed mockery. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the song *Malchik gay*, characterized by its upbeat rhythm; during live performances, it was accompanied by an obscene choreography performed by the singers, alluding to sexual intercourse. In this case, mockery and parody were, in effect, already overt. All these factors make it possible to situate Shapovalov's creation within a broader context, although he himself probably did not even assume this.

In an Australian TV show "Comedy Inc.," a parody of *All the Things She Said* was presented.¹² The lyrics of the refrain were replaced by the phrase "All you wanna see is like pornography." Though many might consider making fun of sexual harassment inappropriate, the authors of the comedy sketch hit the nail on the head: t.A.T.u. was basically a soft-porn act that exploited teenage girls. Eventually, the duo fulfilled its main objective: making big money despite its immoral nature. One of the elements intended to underscore t.A.T.u.'s commercial success was to be a victory at the 2003 Eurovision Song Contest. It could therefore be assumed that t.A.T.u., with their camp aesthetic, would align seamlessly with the camp and kitsch conventions of the Eurovision Song Contest, rendering Russia's victory virtually assured.

Don't Trust, Don't Fear, Don't Ask—Eurovision Performance

In May 2003, t.A.T.u. was a well-established phenomenon in showbusiness: their first English-language album *200 km/h in The Wrong Lane* succeeded, they had a promotional tour in the USA, and also, they were expected to perform *Not Gonna Get Us* at the 2003 MTV Movie Awards. Lena Katina and Julia Volkova became the most successful Russian export product of that time. It is quite clear why they were chosen by Russian Channel 1 to represent Russia at the Eurovision Song Contest without preselections. However, as Dana Heller wrote, this constituted a breach of the Eurovision Song Contest's distinctive tradition of

¹² "All You Wanna See," YouTube, March 13, 2019, <https://youtu.be/x2r-utou4ng?feature=shared>.

providing opportunities for relatively unknown artists.¹³ This decision was also criticized by Elena Kiper in the studio immediately after t.A.T.u.'s performance in Riga, where she categorically stated that Lena and Julia were artists of too great a stature for the Eurovision Song Contest and were capable of competing with Pink, No Doubt, or Eminem.¹⁴

On Russian Channel 1, special promo videos were broadcast encouraging viewers to watch Eurovision broadcasts. Lena and Julia were presented in front of the Kremlin, striking poses wrapped in the Russian flag. The main slogan was "Podderzhi nashikh" ("Support ours"). This support did not concern the actual voting for girls since it is not possible to vote for one's own country. It meant something different—cheering together for "our girls" had to create a feeling of community in Russian viewers. As we see, the campaigners were focused on patriotic feelings, which was a noticeable element of nation branding. Also, the emotional character of their performance was accented by the phrase "viewing is not recommended for people with unstable mental states" on screen at the end of the video.¹⁵ This was not a warning, but perverse encouragement to see their show as they were famous for capricious behaviour on stage. In another version of the commercial, the phrase "Oni nepredskasuyemy, oni dolzhny pobedit'" appeared, which means "They are unpredictable, they have to win."¹⁶ It revealed the main expectation: t.A.T.u. must win even at the cost of a scandal. Moreover, it was a clear sign of pressure on girls as representatives of Russia.

On May 24, 2003, in Riga, Julia and Lena performed a song called *Ne ver', ne boisia, ne prosi* (Don't Trust, Don't Fear, Don't Ask) in Russian, composed by Ivan Shapovalov and Mars Lazar with lyrics by Valery Polienko.¹⁷

Transliteration

Raznyye nochi, raznyye lyudi

Khochet—ne khochet, lyubit—ne lyubit

Translation

Different nights, different people

Wanting—not wanting, loving—
not loving

¹³ Heller, "t.A.T.u. You!", 198.

¹⁴ t.A.T.u. producers Sergio Galoyan and Elena Kiper @eurovision, interview excerpt, 2 min. 15 sec., YouTube, November 28, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Nyx04E8ixI>.

¹⁵ t.A.T.u., "Podderzhi nashih", ver. 1, promo spot, 20 sec., YouTube, January 6, 2017, <https://youtu.be/zEwoTxhCdfk?feature=shared>.

¹⁶ t.A.T.u., "Podderzhi nashih", ver. 2, promo spot, 41 sec., YouTube, April 5, 2008, <https://youtu.be/ln7F5ug2x1Q?feature=shared>.

¹⁷ Valeriy Polienko, "Ne ver', Ne Boisia, Ne prosi", 2003, source of lyrics: <https://genius.com/Tatu-ne-ver-ne-boisia-lyrics>, acces May 30, 2025, and English translation, access May 30, 2025, <https://lyricstranslate.com/ru/ne-vero3g-ne-boisia-ne-prosi-ne-ver-ne-boisia-ne-prosi-dont-trust-dont-fear-dont-ask.html#songtranslation>, access.

Kto to otstanet, kto-to soskochit

Someone falls behind, someone
slips off

Kto-to ustanet i perekhochet

Someone tires and stops caring

Kto-to zakrutit provod na klemmy

Someone connects wires to the
terminals

Kto-to zamutit novyye temy

Someone starts new ideas

Kto-to—ponty, a kto-to—man'yak

Someone's a braggart, and some-
one's a maniac

Kto-to—kak ty, kto-to—kak ya

Someone like you, someone like
me

Ne zazhigay i ne gasi

Don't ignite and don't extinguish

Ne ver', ne boysya, ne prosi

Don't trust, don't fear, don't ask

I uspokoyasya, i uspokoyasya

And relax, and relax

Ne ver', ne boysya, ne prosi

Don't trust, don't fear, don't ask

Ne ver', ne boysya, ne prosi

Don't trust, don't fear, don't ask

Ne ver', ne boysya

Don't trust, don't fear

Ne ver', ne boysya

Don't trust, don't fear...

Ne ver', ne boysya i ne prosi

Don't trust, don't fear and don't
ask

Gde-to yest' mnogo, to, chego malo

Somewhere there's much that is
not enough

No na dorogakh budet oblava

But on the roads we'll be gathered

Kto-to risknet, a kto-to ne smozhet

Someone will risk, but someone
cannot

Kto-to poymet, no ne pomozhet

Someone understands, but doesn't
help

Kto-to uynet, kto-to vernetsya

Someone will leave, someone will
return

Kto-to naydet novoye solntse

Someone will find a new sun

Kto-to v kusty,

Someone in the bushes,

A kto-to v menya

And someone in me

Kto-to—kak ty, kto-to—kak ya

Someone like you, someone
like me...

Ne zazhigay i ne gasi
 Ne ver', ne boysya, ne prosi
 I uspokoyssa, i uspokoyssa
 Ne ver', ne boysya, ne prosi
 Ne ver', ne boysya, ne prosi
 Ne ver', ne boysya
 Ne ver', ne boysya
 Ne ver', ne boysya i ne prosi

I ne prosi

Don't ignite and don't extinguish
 Don't trust, don't fear, don't ask
 And relax, and relax
 Don't trust, don't fear, don't ask
 Don't trust, don't fear, don't ask
 Don't trust
 Don't fear...
 Don't trust, don't fear and don't
 ask
 And don't ask

The use of one's native language is another element of nation branding, more significant than patriotic promo ads. The title phrase is known in Russian mainstream culture due to Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. It has a special meaning, which might not have been so significant for fans from other countries. This slogan came from the Russian prison discourse and could be considered as simplified rules for captives: firstly, do not trust other prisoners and administration, because they might deceive you; secondly, do not show your fear as it provokes violence; thirdly, do not ask for anything in order not to be dependent on anyone.¹⁸ It is a cruel irony, that Lena Katina and Julia Volkova, who were victims of sexual harassment, sang that phrase. Moreover, it has some kind of religious meaning as a denial of Christian values: instead of belief in God and godly fear there is distrust. Also it is rejection of phrase from the Gospel of Matthew: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."¹⁹ What is more, Shapovalov defined the main phrase as the rules of survival.²⁰

Even though the lyrics are quite simple and rhythmic due to the repetition of the word *kto-to* (someone), the message was primarily understandable by Russians. It mainly conveys some kind of cynicism and indifference: nothing is constant and there is no one to rely on in the case of danger. Even if someone asks for help, he or she quickly quits. The world is full of duplicitous or manic

¹⁸ Yevgeni Zubkov, "Smysl slovopotrebleniya *Ne ver', ne boysya, ne prosi* v russkom ugovnom diskurse," *Mova i kul'tura* 17, vol. 1 (2014): 89.

¹⁹ Yuliya Vladimirovna Antipova, "Rossiya na, Yevrovidenii: Opyt Osmysleniya," *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Kul'turologiya i iskusstvovedeniye*, no. 56 (2024): 129, <http://vital.lib.tsu.ru/vital/access/manager/Repository/koha:001150663>.

²⁰ Nikolay Nelyubin, "*Ne ver', ne boysya, ne prosi*—eto printsip vyzhivaniya," Interview with Ivan Shapovalov, *Novy prospekt*, May 1, 2021, <https://newprospect.ru/news/interview/ivan-shapovalov-ne-ver-ne-boysya-ne-prosi-eto-printsip-vyzhivaniya/>.

people: “Kto-to—ponty, a kto-to—man’yak” (“Someone’s a braggart, and someone’s a maniac”). In this verse another word from prisoners’ slang is used: “pont” means poseur or braggart, which has entered the colloquial language.²¹ Volkova and Katina in their white T-shirts became strict opponents to every ‘pont’.

The best way to avoid a peril is staying strong and unmoved (“Don’t ignite and don’t extinguish”). There is no hope: “someone will find a new sun,” but not you. What is also interesting, the references to prison language were a kind of comment on actual social problems: political crisis, a high crime rate, and homeless children (“besprisorniki”).²² In fact, in this performance Russia was portrayed negatively; the song was dark in its pop-rock arrangement, aggressive way of singing, and morose lyrics.

A specific nod to the international audience was the phrase “Don’t trust the voices” sung by Lena. Obviously, it is not a literal translation of the title phrase; however it is still a demonstration of distrust and independence. Knowing the dark truth about the band’s history, we can interpret this in a more subversive way: don’t trust anything that Shapovalov had created.

The checkered ties from their school uniforms were used as an element of visual identification in the mentioned promo video. So why have the distinctive uniforms been replaced by simple T-shirts and jeans? First of all, it was in contrast with the tendency to overdress in the Russian domestic pop scene;²³ it could be understood as resistance to the mainstream, even though t.A.T.u. was the most popular Russian band at the time. It may accent “ordinariness” and “informality” of their look. According to Galina Miazhevich:

the girls modelled and mimicked the looks and style of globalised pop music culture. However, their immaculate looks, perfectly shaped bodies and carefully managed stage movements were out of keeping with the “casual” stage image and behavior of Western pop idols.²⁴

T-shirts with a message had been used already in the stage image of t.A.T.u.: the girls entered Jay Leno’s “Tonight Show” wearing shirts with inscription “Khuy voyne” (“Fuck the war”) as their objection to war in Iraq. T-shirts bearing explicit

²¹ Sergey Grigoryevich Vorkachev, “Reinkarnatsiya tshcheslaviya: ponty,” *Vestnik Voronezhskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Lingvistika i mezhkul’turnaya kommunikatsiya* (2018): 5.

²² Antipova, “Rossiya na ‘Yevrovidenii,’” 130.

²³ Galina Miazhevich, “Sexual Excess in Russia’s Eurovision Performances as a Nation Branding Tool,” *Russian Journal of Communication* 3, no. 3/4 (2010): 248–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2010.10756776>.

²⁴ Miazhevich, “Sexual Excess in Russia’s,” 257.

anti-war messages differ markedly from the “anonymizing” function of school uniforms. By wearing them, the vocalists are no longer presented merely as “sexy schoolgirls;” instead, they emerge as provocateurs who articulate positions on political issues and actively engage in political discourse (although it was still a component orchestrated by Shapovalov in order to provoke shock). In the Eurovision Song Contest, they wore number 1 on their shirts, demonstrating their determination to win. In many interviews they had said they certainly would win. Katina had claimed: “We were chosen by our country to go. We don’t care about their rules at all—we are going to do what we want to do.”²⁵

As Dana Heller wrote:

The strict ESC guidelines only further spurred the duo’s defiance as they had to be repeatedly warned not to miss or be late for rehearsals and to contain their behaviour on stage during the performance. Although they mocked the guidelines by threatening to perform nude, Katina and Volkova ultimately complied.²⁶

t.A.T.u.’s performance at Eurovision itself was not as shocking as it had been expected. They didn’t kiss nor make obscene gestures. Even though they were assessed negatively for their arrogant behaviour at the press conferences, one has to remember that haughtiness was a crucial part of t.A.T.u.’s image. An example of this unfavourable assessment was the attitude of a Polish commentator, Artur Orzech. During the broadcast of the Grand Final of The Eurovision Song Contest, he cited a rumour that Julia allegedly had insulted the German representatives. Moreover, he ironically commented on girls’ vocal skills before performance: “here they have to sing live, without playback.”²⁷ He had been partly right: Lena was bit off tune. She had rehearsed with another singer because Julia complained about throat problems. Eventually, they came third, which was a big disappointment.

The Eurovision televoting procedure has caused controversy:

²⁵ Michael Osborn, “Tatu Sneer at Eurovision Dream,” BBC News Online, May 20, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3043557.stm>.

²⁶ Dana Heller, “Russian Body and Soul: t.A.T.u. Performs at Eurovision 2003,” in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, ed. Robert Deam Tobin and Ivan Raykoff (London: Routledge, 2007), 112.

²⁷ “48. Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji - Ryga 2003,” commentator Artur Orzech, a copy of the broadcast of 24 May 2003 from Polish Television (TV P1), published on YouTube, March 16, 2019, <https://youtu.be/vOIXszmflQI?feature=shared>, at 46:34–46:53; Unfortunately, at the time the article was being prepared for publication, the video was no longer available on YouTube. The Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine archived only a snapshot of the webpage containing the video’s description, access August 21, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220610202454/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOIXszmflQI>.

Several days after the contest, Igor Burenkov, PR director of Channel One in Russia, cast doubt on the accuracy of the voting results, claiming that t.A.T.u.'s performance had received 'unlikely low points' from a number of countries, including Ireland, which had in fact replaced its televoting results at the last minute with jury voting because of slow processing time. Russia threatened a national protest; however, its petition for a recount was put to rest when it was confirmed that even an Irish televote would not have changed the results of the contest.²⁸

This was the first major failure for t.A.T.u. In 2004, the reality show "Tatu v Podnebesnoy" was broadcasted. The main idea of the show was to follow the process of recording a new album. Not only did it end as a fiasco, as only two songs were created, but the girls also decided to break their contract with Shapovalov. Moreover, it turned out that Volkova was pregnant, which contradicted the image of the two lesbians.

t.A.T.u.'s performance was also outstanding comparing to other Russian representatives. The contrast between *Ne Ver, Ne Boysya, Ne Prosi* and Dima Bilan's *Believe*, from the representative of Russia in 2008, is most visible. First of all, Bilan's stage setting was pompous with accompanying dancers. Volkova and Katina did not use such tactics, relying instead on their own personalities; the drummer and guitarist on stage seemed like insignificant extras. The emotional character of their performance was emphasised by scattered lights resembling thunderbolts. As Anna G. Piotrowska commented Bilan's song:

Western commentators assessed Bilan's show as tailored to suit "Western" eyes with "polished pop acts with young and physically attractive singers and an upbeat song, ideally performed in English." His performance was described in terms of a successful formula mingling "catchy English-language songs, sexual clichés, and carefully thought-out choreography." However, it seems quite naïve to assume that Russian acts simply conformed to ESC standards. The "campy" nature of Bilan's performance was predominantly missed, as if the Western hemisphere was oblivious to the fact that Russians were quite familiar with the concept, very popular in the Russian culture since the late Soviet times under the name *stiob*. That mode of parody was reinvented in the new post-Soviet reality, but the idea of *stiob* remained basically "reminiscent of the *stiob* of late perestroika," as it still reacted against imposed symbolism and ideology, while the contemporary "context of ideological heteroglossia is that

²⁸ Heller, "t.A.T.u. You!" 202.

stiob may often position itself vis-à-vis a whole group of different ideological discourses simultaneously, in one text.”²⁹

It is quite obvious that t.A.T.u. fit in with the camp aesthetic as all their stage image was based on a non-authentic story. Moreover, as I observed, their song had a more serious character without such an overt element of *stiob*. In addition, it should be noted that Bilan’s strategy was more effective: he won the contest. What is more, even though t.A.T.u. choose their native language to express patriotic feelings, they did not use popular Eastern European folklore motifs because it did not match with their stage image as rebellious and fashionable girls and harsh pop-rock sound.

In 2005, Russia sent Nataliya Podolskaya to the Eurovision Song Contest with the song *Nobody Hurt No One*, which constituted a protest against gun violence. With its pop-rock sound and atmosphere of threat, it could be seen as somewhat reminiscent of *Ne ver, ne boysia, ne prosi*, although contemporary issues were addressed in a far less allusive manner: America was explicitly blamed for the violence.³⁰ A notable difference, however, was the singer’s image, characterized by a glittering outfit and heavy makeup, as well as the use of the English language. The performance failed to gain significant recognition, and Podolskaya ultimately finished in 12th place. As can be seen, Russia’s subsequent attempt to address more serious issues at the Eurovision Song Contest was not met with enthusiasm, despite the singer’s more glamorous image. Against this background, t.A.T.u.’s performance stands out distinctively and appears to be one of Russia’s most memorable appearances at the Eurovision Song Contest, although Shapovalov’s entire concept was not without consequences.

“Robot, Ya Tebya Lyublyu...”—Lost Voice, Playback and AI

Cooperating with Ivan Shapovalov had a particularly negative impact on Julia. Not only was she forced to perform humiliating actions in front of millions of viewers, but the producer also demanded that she scream in songs without any professional guidance on how to do so safely without harming her voice. This led to serious problems with her vocal cords—in the 2004 TV show “t.A.T.u. v

²⁹ Anna G. Piotrowska, “The Eurovision Song Contest—A Continent (still) Divided?,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33, no. 3 (2020): 379.

³⁰ Emily D. Johnson, “A New Song for a New Motherland: Eurovision and the Rhetoric of Post Soviet National Identity,” *The Russian Review* 73, no. 1 (2014): 45.

Podnebesnoy” Volkova complained that she could not sing. The viewers of the TV show “accompanied” her to her doctor’s appointments. In 2006, her voice was so damaged that she could not sing high notes—at a concert in Mexico she tried to perform *Obezzyanka Nol’* and all fans heard how devastated her voice was at that time. This video is quite emotional and shows her devotion to music. Even sadder, in 2012 Volkova was diagnosed with throat cancer. She underwent surgery at a Moscow hospital, during which her thyroid was removed along with the tumor. During the surgery, her vocal nerves were damaged. Nowadays her voice is much better, but she will not be able to sing high notes again.

In 2009, the Eurovision song contest took place in Russia, and the ceremonies could not take place without Russia’s most famous band. Lena Katina and Julia Volkova performed *Not Gonna Get Us* with the Alexandrov Ensemble.³¹ Of course, playback was used. It was not something new over the course of the band’s career. Playback had been used from the beginning of t.A.T.u.’s journey, as it was challenging to perform complex choreography and sing live simultaneously, especially when Volkova faced health issues. This is another reason not to trust the voices.

Lena Katina and Julia Volkova ended their cooperation in 2010. Inconsolable fans have had to accept the fact that t.A.T.u. as a duo doesn’t exist anymore. To comfort themselves, the most talented fans created and published mashups of songs that Katina and Volkova had created separately, sharing them online. Nowadays they have great help—AI. This tool allows users to create ‘fake covers’ of many pop stars. Thanks to AI, the voice of teenage Volkova has been ‘resurrected’. It is easy to find new songs by “artificial t.A.T.u.” on YouTube. The activities of fans employing AI technologies may be classified along several distinct axes. The most evident of these is the generation of new musical content through neural network-based systems. Another significant practice involves linguistic adaptation: songs that never received an official Russian-language version, such as *All About Us*, have been translated and re-performed using AI-generated voice models trained on the voices of Volkova and Katina. Lyrics are usually based on the demos or fan translations. *Ne Ver’*, *Ne Boysya*, *Ne Prosi* may likewise be situated within this category. The phrase “Don’t trust the voices”, sung by AI-generated voice models of the girls (not their actual voices), sounds uncanny. What is more interesting, the English lyrics are not literal translations of the

³¹ “Eurovision Song Contest 2009 / Semi-Final 1 (Swedish Commentary)”, a copy of the broadcast of May 12 2009 from Sveriges Television (SVT), published on YouTube on February 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVq1h37ovoE>.

original song, but something more superficial. The reference to prison culture and an alarming atmosphere were replaced with confessions of serene love.

A further area of fan activity concerns the production of AI-generated covers of songs originally performed by other artists, recreated through synthetic versions of the singers' voices. Several cases are particularly noteworthy in this regard. The commercial and cultural success of t.A.T.u. prompted numerous attempts to reproduce the group's formula. One such effort was undertaken by Elena Kiper, who launched her own project, Nichya. Another example is the group TEMA, formed by the duo Nastya Kotova and Sasha Anokhina. The musical aesthetics of both projects closely resembled that of t.A.T.u., to the extent that their songs were frequently misattributed in pirated distributions and presented as new recordings by Volkova and Katina.

Contemporary AI practices have further complicated these processes of attribution and authenticity. AI-generated versions of songs by Nichya and TEMA, performed with the reconstructed voices of t.A.T.u., are readily available on YouTube.³² Such productions can be interpreted as a form of participatory reconstruction that blurs the boundaries between original and derivative works. More broadly, they contribute to the creation of an alternative musical reality in which songs associated with t.A.T.u.'s successors and imitators are retrospectively incorporated into the duo's imagined repertoire.

These AI covers bring to mind t.A.T.u.'s Russian-language song *Robot* from the album *200 po Vstrechnoy*. In the lyrics, the girls expressed their love for a machine: "Robot, I love you, let's fly, we wanted it." In this way fans create their "artificial paradise" in which t.A.T.u. as the band is still active, and Volkova and Katina are constantly those girls in checked skirts singing screeching about forbidden love. In this sense, the mystification continues; this time sustained by captivated fans.

More Than a Pop Song—Closing Remarks

From a propagandistic point of view, t.A.T.u.'s choice to represent Russia in the Eurovision Song Contest was natural, given the girls' status as Russia's biggest commercial success. However, it seems puzzling to perform a song with such a dark message, referencing prison aphorisms, at the Eurovision Song Contest.

³² There are entire YouTube channels of this kind; see, for example: t.A.T.u. AI Covers by trudnyvozrast [archive], <https://www.youtube.com/@t.A.T.u.ai.covers/videos>.

Just before t.A.T.u.'s performance, the German representative Lou sang "Let's get happy, let's be friends." Polish singer Michał Wiśniewski raised pacifist and cosmopolitan slogans *Keine Grenzen* (No Borders). In this context Katina's and Volkova's display appears to be outstanding. A more natural move would seem to present a song about the power of youth or teenage rebellion—a modified version of *Not Gonna Get Us* in one word.

However, a different song was chosen—the song with depressing lyrics about instability and distrust performed in an aggressive way. It is noteworthy that the generational conflict portrayed in *Not Gonna Get Us* does not pose a threat; the main problem is that adults do not understand youth, but they do not want to hurt anybody. In the case *Ne Ver, Ne Boysia, Ne Prosi* the main message is about how to act in the presence of real danger. What is more ironic, this phrase was sung by victims of terrible sexual harassment. Could they have trusted someone, not been afraid and asked for help? In my opinion, this important message of the song was not understandable for non-Russian viewers, which would help ensure the failure of t.A.T.u.'s performance in Eurovision.

As a way of concluding, the current situation of t.A.T.u. should be noted. On September 3rd, 2022, many years after splitting, Volkova and Katina performed together their biggest hits and announced their return as t.A.T.u at the Ovion Show in Minsk's Dinamo Stadion. Fans had to wait for the full-length concert until 19 July 2025, when a great show took place in Yalta (Crimea). They sang in the luxury resort "Mriya" owned by Russian SberBank.³³ In the current political circumstances, i. e. Russian invasion of Ukraine, it could be interpreted as a clear political declaration: support for the war, which strictly contradicted previous activities like anti-war T-shirts in 2003. This is yet another piece of evidence that their stage image as a rebel was only for marketing purposes.

Sufficient evidence of t.A.T.u.'s cultural significance can be found in the Polish reception of the duo's work. The phrases "Nas ne dogonyat" and "Ya soshla s uma" remain recognizable as important elements of early-2000s popular culture. This is evidenced, for example, by the performance of Michalina Sosna and Katarzyna Maciąg as t.A.T.u. on the Polish edition of television program "Your Face Sounds Familiar" in 2018. Furthermore, in 2021, the melody of "Ya soshla s uma" was used by Mandaryna, Gosia Andrzejewicz, and Ina in a protest song associated with the All-Poland Women's Strike movement. The adaptation relied on the phonetic similarity between the Polish phrase "Nie będziesz szła sama" ("You will not walk

³³ V. Tenishcheva, "tATU vernulis': kontsert v Krymu. Podderzhka Putina i traditsionnykh tsennostey. Kak tak?" episode of web show "Ne ta dver," YouTube, May 25, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnTg8oklo-HA&list=WL>.

alone”) and “Ya soshla s uma” (“I’ve lost my mind”), despite their entirely different meanings. Although the result was controversial, it demonstrates the enduring presence of t.A.T.u. in Poland. Additionally, the duo continues to be referenced in entertainment media articles, primarily in connection with Volkova’s plastic surgery and expressions of support for Vladimir Putin.

Even though all t.A.T.u.’s image was based on mystification, including abuse, this song seems to sound authentic in a perverse way. Unfortunately, in order to notice this contradiction, it is necessary to know the whole context: the specific meaning of the title phrase connected to prison language and the band’s horrid backstory. With this background Volkova’s and Katina’s performance at Eurovision becomes more significant than just a pop track.



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