

Opinion – A Musical Take on Putin’s Rape Taunt: “Like it or don’t like it, [lie back and] endure it, pretty girl.”



Russian band Red Mold (Красная плесень) performing in St Petersburg, 28 Apr 2012.

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English speakers are at a disadvantage trying to understand the Russia-Ukraine conflict as news media make an effort to clean up the vulgar language used by the parties. CNN published among the least sanitized versions of remarks to the press by Russian President Vladimir Putin (“Putin’s use of crude language reveals a lot about his worldview” by Nathan Hodge, Feb 8), and *Business Insider* was slightly more explicit (“Putin quoted song lyrics about rape and necrophilia to explain Russia’s demands from Ukraine” by Bill Bostock, Feb 8), but neither fully captured the crudity of a bizarre taunt from one head of state to another.

BI translates Putin’s taunt as “Whether you like it or don’t like it, bear with it, my beauty.” This is unquestionably sexual in tone, implying rape: Calling Ukraine “my beauty” (and imputing effeminacy to Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky) is a typically Putin-esque assertion of hypermasculine dominance, and the Russian word Putin used, “терпеть,” more accurately means “endure” or “suffer,” so the best sense of Putin’s remark would be translated as “Like it or don’t like it, [lie back and] endure it, pretty girl.”

Asked by the press to respond, Zelensky pointedly switched from Ukrainian to Russian, saying “Ukraine is a beauty. As far as ‘my’ is concerned, that’s a slight overstatement.” A professional comedian before his election as president, Zelensky treated Putin as a heckler: “I think Ukraine is very patient. Because that’s wisdom. I think that’s important not just for Ukraine, but for all of Europe.”

Although denied officially by the Russian government, Putin appeared to be quoting lyrics from the punk band Red Mold (Красная Пресня) and their song “So the Guest Doesn’t Leave” (“Чтобы гость не

уходил”) with its refrain:

Спит красавица в гробу,
Я подкрался и ебу.
Нравится - не нравится,
Спи, моя красавица.

Sleeping beauty in a coffin
I crept up and fucked [her].
Like it - don't like it,
Sleep, my beauty.

The band is well-known in Russia: they've been active since 1989 and released so far 55 albums. As with most of their songs, the lyrics are absurdist self-parody, intended to shock by introducing rape, necrophilia, and cannibalism to the “sleeping beauty” legend, talking about cutting off toes to make meat pies and ears to make dumplings, the singer ending by saying he doesn't need a live girlfriend because he keeps his dead one in a coffin.

CNN noted that Putin in 2017 decriminalized common kinds of domestic violence. New York University Prof. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, an expert on the history of authoritarianism, in her book *Strongmen* devotes an entire chapter to “Virility” where she writes, “Putin is a case in point. His body display is an integral part of his identity as defender of Russia's pride and its right to expand in the world. The Kremlin releases images of him in macho poses... The government also deploys images of him as a hypermasculine thug to send a message when his power is threatened, as when he posed with bikers in a black leather jacket in August 2019 as tens of thousands of Russians protested him in the streets.”

This sort of rhetoric is well beyond “grab 'em by the pussy,” and it has immediate political (and possibly military) implications.