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## The Birth of the Soviet/Post-Soviet Cold Wave Style?: A Comparative Analysis of Kino and UK Post-Punk

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The late 2010s witnessed a surge in global interest in Russian and Belarusian post-punk, exemplified by the international success of a Belarussian band called Molchat Doma.<sup>1</sup> These bands' music is often named as Coldwave, Darkwave, or Sovietwave, etc. In my paper, I adopted the term "Cold Wave" to focus on their distinctive musical characteristics. These bands draw influence not only from 1980s UK post-punk such as the music of The Cure, Joy Division or Depeche Mode, but also, more significantly, from Kino, a Soviet band that epitomized youth culture during the perestroika era (1985–1991) and the final years of the USSR.

The group Kino solidified its status as legendary after the charismatic singer Viktor Tsoy's tragic death in a car accident in August 1990. As the Russian rock specialist Joël Bastenaire noted (2012: 297), "Kino holds a unique position in the imagination of Russian youth," serving as "the sole shared reference bridging the gap between the fifty-year-olds and the generations that follow". Indeed, most Russian and Belarussian Cold Wave bands consider Kino to be by far their primary influence among former Soviet bands, alongside the UK post-punk bands:

Victor Uzhakov (Ploho): « The first post-punk in Russia is transmitted with mother's milk: Kino [...] It is impossible not to hear this band in our country. Everyone who can play two to three chords on the guitar plays exactly Kino.» (Harriman 2020)

Roman Komogortsev (Molchat Doma): »Pioneering for Soviet and post-Soviet post-punk, yes. But not pioneering for the world, of course. Let's put it this way, KINO was the first band to reach the 'stadium level' and became a kind of 'public property'. Naturally, it's on everyone's lips yesterday and today, a phenomenon in a way.» (Alpaslan 2024)

Victor Uzhakov (Ploho): « There were many bands doing this music in the USSR at that time, and KINO was not even one of the first. Nevertheless, we can say that KINO was one of the most popular and important bands in Russian music of the 80s. » (Alpaslan 2024)

Nürnberg: « We have known each other for a long time and what unified us in the beginning was the love for bands such as "Кино" (Kino), "The Cure", "The Smiths", [etc] » (Vidjeskog 48)

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<sup>1</sup> The music has also emerged as a key influence in shaping the aesthetic and cultural identity of the internet-based pessimistic archetype known as the "Doomer," which is however not the focus of today's discussion.

- How do you explain the growth of interest in post-punk in general, it has become cult in recent years, right?

- [Andrei Degtyarev (Drunoy Vkus)]: »In our country, we can say thank you to the band "Kino" for this, many people still like this nostalgic sound. Fashion for music is generally cyclical, young people who did not live in post-Soviet Russia and began to study that period for musical heritage, groups began to appear that write music in a similar sound and many of them responded to this. I don't see a cult as such, but there is a clear interest. » (Yanchitsky 2021)

Gena Volgarev (Peremotka): « Tsoi is our common musical archetype. Even if you've not dived into his work, you've nevertheless dived into the music of other musicians who've delved into the work of Tsoi. But if we don't turn to Tsoi, then the Cure or The Smiths. But they are still living, theoretically there's still a chance. (laughs) » (Titova 2024)

Andrei Degtyarev (Drunoy Vkus): « I would explain this by the nostalgia of many musicians for the old sound. For the atmosphere of the music that many people still listen to...such as Modern Lovers, early Depeche Mode, Soft Cell, Dead or Alive and Joy Division. [...] In our country, the most popular group remains the Kino group, which has the same characteristic sound of the 80s. » (Vidjeskog 2022: 46)

Victor Uzhakov (Ploho): “We are often reproached for exploiting the sound of domestic 80s bands,” says Uzhakov. “I don't think it's exploitation, it's just a golden thread that runs through history and connects modern post-punk with the music of that time. This was a unique era for Russian music and I would not like to forget about it.” (Harriman 2020)

Roman Komogortsev (Molchat Doma): “After listening to this group, it blew my mind and I started digging information about this genre. I started learning about the classics: Joy Division, The Cure, Bauhaus, Sisters of Mercy, Siouxsie and the Banshees”; “we didn't learn that it was post-punk until much later. The first song I heard in this genre was ‘Lovesong’ by The Cure”; “But then I didn't know what post-punk was, because I was twelve years old. » (Ibid.)

This paper is part of my new research work at an early stage of development, which aims to analyze the musical evolution and cultural significance of post-punk music in post-Soviet Russia and Belarus, focusing particularly on the 'Cold Wave' subgenre and its connections to Kino. The sonic connection between Kino and post-Soviet Cold Wave bands is obvious: blending synthesizers and drum machines with the traditional setup of vocals, guitar, and bass.<sup>2</sup> However, if our understanding remains confined to this level, we risk dismissing this music as a mere re-creation of the 1980s UK Cold Wave sound, distinguished only by lyrics sung in Russian or Belarusian. Moreover, the fascination with post-Soviet Cold Wave in other regions might be superficially attributed to extra-musical factors such as the 'exotic' appeal of Russian-

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<sup>2</sup> Synthesizers creating a cold, atmospheric texture; electric guitars delivering sharp, clean tones with reverb: detached vocals that contribute to a somber and introspective mood, etc.

language lyrics or the typical imagery perceived by Western European and North American 'listeners-(and)-consumers'.<sup>3</sup>

My research aims to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of Kino's music itself, in particular focusing on the guitarist Yuri Kasparian, whose role is often overshadowed by the band's lyricist and singer, Viktor Tsoi. Kasparian's guitar style, while influenced by UK post-punk, stands out for its simplicity—what I would call an almost "ascetic" approach. His contributions became especially prominent during Kino's 'classic' period in the late 1980s. I'll be exploring what I describe as his 'discursive' and 'vocalic'<sup>4</sup> guitar approach, which differs significantly from the more timbre-focused, angular, and often jagged guitar approach typical of UK post-punk and new wave.

Western popular music researchers have often overlooked Kino's musical significance in Russian rock. For instance, *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World* (2005) includes Kino in its "Russia" section, written by Mark Yoffe and David Laing, and recognizes them as one of the most important bands of the 1980s. However, the coverage of Kino is remarkably brief, limited to just five lines. This stands in stark contrast to the attention given to other bands that embody various aspects of resistance, experimentation, or distinct artistic movements. For instance, Televizor, known for its resistance to censorship, receives fourteen lines, while Strannye Igry and Poluliarnaya Mekhanika, representing experimental and conceptual art, are allotted twelve and twenty-five lines, respectively. Zvuki Mu, reflecting an avant-garde spirit, is discussed over forty lines, while bands such as Zoopark (realist aesthetics, twenty-four lines), DDT (resistant and uncompromising lyrics, fifteen lines), and Grazhdanskaya Oborona (scandalous and rebellious attitude, thirty-six lines) receive considerably more attention. Despite Kino's significance as a cultural and musical icon, its limited representation in this prominent reference work underscores a broader tendency to overlook their impact within the Russian rock scene.

However, what makes Kino a compelling subject of study is the leader Viktor Tsoi's aim, especially in his later years, to become a 'pop superstar' or mainstream music producer, adopting musical language of Western post-punk, and diverging from the 'romantic' or purist rock

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3 Marco Biasioli, "'It wasn't our song anymore': Molchat Doma, the death of the reader and the birth of the TikTok", *IASPM Journal* 14, no 1 (2024): 151-71. While there has been a comprehensive study on the style of 1980s Soviet rock, including Kino, such as the one by Yngvar B. Steinholt, it is limited to the year 1986 and does not adequately address the musical developments of the late 1980s, which are central to our inquiry. Cf. Steinholt 2005.

4 Martin Laliberté, "Percussification de la culture sonore après 1900", in *Le Triomphe de la scène intermédiaire*, ed. Jean-Marc Larrue and Giusy Pisano (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2017), 115-36.

ideology of the 1980s USSR, epitomized by their mentors like Akvarium or Zoopark,<sup>5</sup> and thus anticipating a new era, as described by Bastenaire:

“The current unanimity surrounding the name Kino is not only due to the heroic image conveyed by cinema but also to the intuition of a nuanced aesthetic that the band’s leader shaped as he emancipated himself both from the conventional forms of English rock and the directives of his mentors from Aquarium.” [...] a whirlwind of exhausting tours culminating in a massive concert on June 24, 1990, in front of 62,000 people at Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium. This wave of success makes the music scene grimace, particularly the bands whose achievements are overshadowed by Kino’s, but also the true rockers [...] who are starting to realize that the pop aspects are outweighing the innovative ones. [...] Tsoi was the first Russian pop hero to gain recognition beyond his country's borders. [...] Perhaps he sensed the impending transition to a new era and, consequently, the futility of continuing to embody the historical truth of a terribly rigid time in which unwavering stances were universally accepted. [...] Viktor was halted midstream, caught between a time that demanded a purifying catharsis and the emerging new era, marked by the cynical acceptance of the status quo. Tsoi, who had tirelessly embodied the true rock hero—the heroic truth of his era—who had dismissed Moscow's rock scene as "a rock of humorists" and contrasted it with Leningrad's "rock of heroes," would also be the first to question this stance. (Bastenaire 306-324; my translation)

This research will analyze how Kino's style, especially in its later Cold Wave-influenced phase, differs from these bands through detailed musical analysis. Kino's music is often characterized by simplicity and repetition, even more so than other contemporary Soviet bands, yet little musicological research has explored the specific forms and features of this simplicity.

Richard Middleton, in his pioneering study on repetition in popular music, distinguished between "musematic repetition," and "discursive repetition"<sup>6</sup>: “Musematic repetition is the repetition of short units; the most immediately familiar examples—riffs—are found in Afro-American musics and in rock. Discursive repetition is the repetition of longer units, at the level of the phrase, the sentence or even the complete section”. Additionally, the discursive repetition—commonly employed in music hall and Tin Pan Alley songs—involves the technique of *sequence*, like Classical Sonatas or Baroque concertos, which means, put simply, a fixed melodic formula whose pitches are modulated, in other words, going up and down altogether to align with shifting harmonies or chords (1983: 242). While these distinctions have been the subject of ongoing debate,<sup>7</sup> my research seeks to build upon and reinterpret these

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<sup>5</sup> Polly McMichael, "'After All, You're a Rock and Roll Star (At Least, That's What They Say)': Roksi and the Creation of the Soviet Rock Musician", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 83, n° 4 (October 2005): 664-84.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Middleton, "'Play It Again Sam": Some Notes on the Productivity of Repetition in Popular Music", *Popular Music* Vol. 3, Producers and Markets (1983): 238.

<sup>7</sup> They remain foundational in popular music studies and have been further elaborated by scholars like Anne Danielsen or Robert Fink. Olivier Julien and Christophe Levaux, eds., *Over and Over: Exploring Repetition in Popular Music* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

concepts, applying them to analyze and differentiate the musical characteristics and narrative structures of Kino and UK post-punk bands.<sup>8</sup>

Now we will examine how discursive repetition and musematic repetition serve as distinguishing factors between the Cold Wave music by Kino and by UK post-punk bands. My analysis focuses on the songs from Kino's eighth and final album, released in 1990, since it embraced Cold Wave sound more explicitly than any other album.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the first song, "Leto" ("Summer"), one of the most frequently cited tracks speaking of post-Soviet Cold Wave, demonstrates many traits that characterize this musical style. First of all, it distinguishes itself by the sound of its main guitar riff using chorus and overdrive, which makes the sound quite similar to synth keyboard sound. In this guitar intro of the song, a two-bar melodic unit appears four times with slight modulations to make a quite long 8-bar phrase. Apart from the third two-bar unit, which is almost the same as the second while the chord changes (D to Bm), the succession of these units form a quasi-sequence, thus a discursive repetition that creates a contrast with musematic repetition on the drum machine beat and the bass guitar (see Figure 1).

The musical score for the intro of "Leto" by Kino (1990) is presented in three systems. The first system shows the first four bars of the guitar, bass, and drum machine parts. The guitar part is in 4/4 time with a tempo of 140. The chords are Em, D, D, and D. The second system shows the next four bars, with the guitar part modulating to Bm and C. The chords are Bm, C, C, and C. The bass and drum machine parts provide a steady, rhythmic accompaniment throughout.

Figure 1: Intro of "Jemo" / "Leto" ("Summer") by Kino (1990)

<sup>8</sup> While research on Russian pop/rock in Western Europe and North America spans diverse fields like performance, gender, and national identity, strictly musicological studies remain rare, even more so in Russia. This gap stems partially from the belief that lyrics play a more central role in Russian, leading to the assumption that understanding 'Russkiy Rok' lyrics equates to understanding the music. However, in any popular songs, as Ralf von Appen and André Doehring (2007) argue, "When language is structured as it is in song lyrics, we must absolutely view it in relation to its form and not just the meaning of the words."

<sup>9</sup> Although Kino had a drummer, a drum machine was exclusively used throughout the entire song, which aligns with the prevalent musical characteristics of Cold Wave.

In terms of larger temporal progression, this eight-bar main melodic formula, which repeats without any modification to form a sixteen-bar intro, reappears unchanged as an instrumental link (or re-intro) between each verse-chorus pair. Moreover, the initial Intro+Verse+Chorus pattern of 46 bars repeats three times with only the lyrics changing, resulting in a *circular* structure with no interlude, bridge or solo section. Then the same formula returns as an extended outro, repeating at least **six times** before fading out, **suggesting an endless conclusion**. The outro lasts 1 minute and 30 seconds, accounting for a significant portion of the total 5-minute-50-second runtime (see Figure 2).

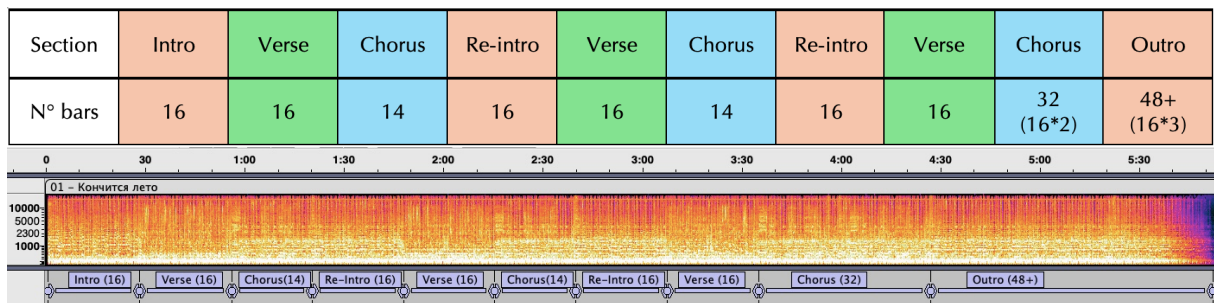


Figure 2: Horizontal/sectional structure of “Leto”

The lyrics depicts a stagnant, hot and wet summer where nothing happens. “I’m waiting for an answer, there is no hope left. Summer will soon be over”; “And time goes day by day, one day we eat, three days we drink”; “And the restaurant round the corner is closed for five years.” The last verse, “But maybe there will be a day”, offers a glimmer of hope, yet **the music contradicts this sentiment**: The discursive main guitar phrase suggests a narrative of moving forward, but in a larger perspective, its repetitive nature, devoid of veritable progression, ultimately mirrors the protagonist’s entrapment in an unchanging fate (Figure 3).

I turn the TV off, I write a letter to you About how I can't watch this shit anymore About how I am out of strength That I almost started drinking, but haven't forgotten you That the phone rang. It wanted me to get up, To dress and walk, or rather to run But I let it be, Said that I'm sick, and tired from my sleepless night	Now the weather is fair—it's <b>the fourth day straight of rain</b> But the radio said that even in the shade it will be hot. But still, the shade I am in Remains warm and dry; however, I'm afraid now... <b>And time goes by day by day: one day of eating, three days of drinking,</b> And our lives are good; it's not important that it's raining outside My radio broke It is silent, all is well.	Outside the window, there is construction, a crane is working <b>That restaurant around the corner has been closed for five years</b> And on the table is a jar In the jar is a tulip, and on the windowsill is a glass. And year after year it will go on like this, just like life. <b>And for the hundredth time, the bread will fall butter-side down.</b> <b>But maybe there will be a day,</b> <b>Or at least an hour, when we will be lucky.</b>
<b>I'm waiting for an answer, there is no hope left</b> <b>Soon, summer will end.</b> <b>This summer.</b>	I'm waiting for an answer, there is no hope left Soon, summer will end. This summer.	I'm waiting for an answer, there is no hope left Soon, summer will end. This summer.

Source: <https://lyricstranslate.com>

Figure 3: Lyrics, “Leto” (English Translation; my emphases)

A similar usage of repetitions can be found in many other songs on the album. “Muraveynik” (“anthill”) provides another example of a discursive guitar phrase, which dominates the song (see Figure 4). These guitar phrases can be described “vocalic”, as they exhibit “a tendency towards the melodic, the continuous, which favors clear notes over duration over time” (Martin Laliberté 2017: 117). While the actual vocal occupies the foreground of the sonic sphere, the main guitar takes its place in its absence, as if singing what the vocalist might otherwise express. The main guitar melody in “Muravejnik” is even more vocalic than in “Leto”: it moves up and down in mostly stepwise intervals with a pitch range spanning a minor sixth, even narrower than the vocal range. The sound remains restrained, with minimal reverb and clean tones, without any additional effects.

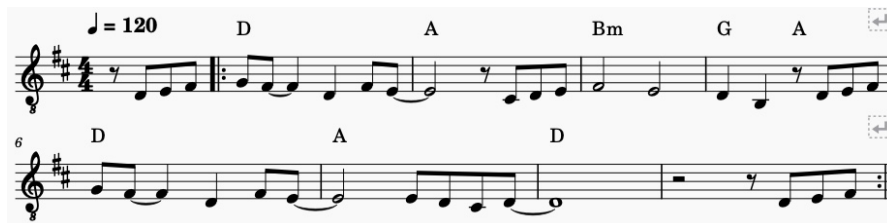


Figure 4: The main guitar melody of “Muraveynik”/“Muravejnik” (“Anthill”) by Kino (1990)

The temporal structure of “Muraveynik” is also similar to that of “Leto”, even more minimalist (see Figure 5). Every section is sixteen bars long, and the extended guitar outro consists of four unvaried repetitions of the intro guitar phrase. The outro, lasting over two minutes of the total 5’15” runtime, fades out, creating an impression of *infinite* repetition. Like “Leto,” it is not only extended but built from repeated units with minimal variation, lacking additional gestures or decorative elements to create a climax.<sup>10</sup>

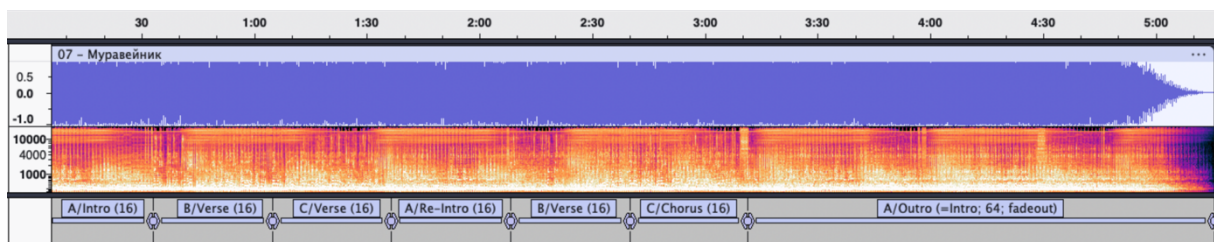


Figure 5: Horizontal/Sectional Structure, “Muraveynik”

<sup>10</sup> Lengthy and discursive guitar outros can also be found in other well-known songs by Kino, such as “Groppa Krovi” (1’30” of 4’45”) and “Spokoytnaya noch” (1’10” of 6’), both from the sixth album (1988), and Pachka Sigaret (1’10” of 4’26”) from the seventh album (1989), as well as “Nam s toboy” (1’10” of 4’49”) and “Kogda tvoya devushka bol’na” (1’6” of 4’19”) from the last album.



A comparative analysis with some songs by UK bands in the 1980s offers interesting observations. “Lovesong” by The Cure, from the 1989 album *Disintegration*, features a simple horizontal structure (Figure 6). However, compared to “Leto” by Kino, which is nearly twice as long with the same tempo, “Lovesong” introduces more varied musical materials that unfold one after another or overlap. The eight-bar synth intro leads into the main guitar phrase, a two-bar melodic pattern ascending and descending through A, C, D, and E. This formula appears four times within the eight-bar chord progression, but remains harmonically unchanged, thus exemplifying musematic repetition (Figure 7).

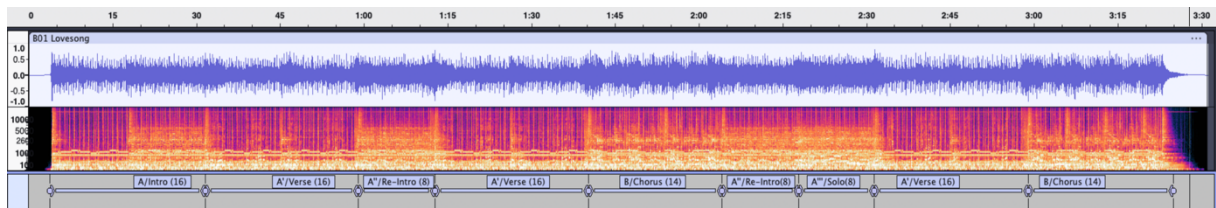


Figure 7: Horizontal/Sectional Structure of "Lovesong"



Figure 6: Guitar intro of "Lovesong"




Unlike discursive repetition, which, as Middleton (1983: 244) observes, *composes* time, musematic repetition tends to *obliterate it*. “Leto” can be compared to other UK post-punk songs such as The Cure’s earlier hit “Boys Don’t Cry” (1979), Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear Us Apart” (1980), or Magazine’s “Shot by Both Sides” (1978), where melodically driven single-note guitar phrases often lead the song from the intro and sometimes align with the vocal. Siouxsie and The Banshees, often regarded as forerunners of Cold Wave (or “Dark Wave” in the sense of a gloomier sound) also assign the unquestionable importance to the guitar sound. However, it is rare to find a song built around a guitar melody that combines such extensive discursive and monotonous repetitions without incorporating elements that add diversity or complexity.

Kino’s guitar phrases exemplify Middleton’s notion of discursive repetition, which "makes us aware of rise-and-fall, a discursive hierarchy, and thus refers us to irreversible experiences. Within the ontology of repetition, it introduces a teleological directedness" (Middleton 1983: 243). However, in Kino’s music, this operates within an overarching circular structure,

reminding us that there is no destination beyond the present moment. This circularity allows the music and sound to transcend the meaning of the lyrics.

## Historical and musical repetitions by post-Soviet Cold Wave

I would like to conclude this presentation by showcasing an analyse of the most-played songs by the four Russian (Buerak, Peremotka, Durnoy Vkus, and Ploho) and two Belorussian Cold Wave bands (Molchat Doma and Nürnberg). A summary of their instrumentation, linear structure, and the main guitar phrases is provided in Figure 8. Most of the songs open with guitar-led sections, characterized by single-note melodies and discursive phrases echoing Kino’s music. Besides, four out of six songs feature extended outros.<sup>11</sup> The horizontal structures are predominately simple, typically in quadruple meter, with section lengths consistently spanning sixteen bars or doubling to thirty-two bars.

“Sudno” (2’20’)	Guitar Vocal Bass Drum- Machine Synth	
		A(8)   A(16+2(break))   A'(8(inst)+8+4(break))   B(16)   B'(16)   B'' (12+(inst.))
		Intro(8)   Verse(18)   Verse(20)   Chorus*(16)  Verse*(16)   Outro (12+)
“Sportivnye ochki” (2’15’)	Guitar (Synth) Vocal Bass D.M.	
		A(16)   A'(16)   A''(16)   B(8)   B'(8)   B''(32)
		Intro(16)   Verse(16)   Chorus(16)   Break(8)   Verse(8)   Outro(32)
“Kak tebya pokorit” (3’38’)	Guitar Vocal Bass D.M. Synth	
		B'(16)   A(16)   B(16)   B'(16)   A(16)   C(32)   B(16)   C (32)
		Intro   Vs(16)   Ch (16)   Solo(16)   Vs (16)   Post-Chorus(32)   Ch(16)   Post-Chorus(32)

<sup>11</sup> “Sudno”, “Sportivnye ochki”, and “Valasy” played by the guitar, and “Po krayu ostpova” by the synth.




<p>“Plastinki” (3’5’’) </p>	<p>Guitar Vocal Bass D.M. (Synth)</p>	 <p>A(16) – B(16) – C(16) – A(16) – B(16) – C(16) – A(16) – C(16)</p> <p>Intro(16)   Vs(16)   C(16)   Re-intro (16)   Vs(16)   Ch(16)   Re-Intro(16)   Ch(16)</p>
<p>“Valasy” (2’56’’) </p>	<p>Guitar Vocal Bass D.M. Synth</p>	 <p>A’(4)   A(16)   B(16)   A(16)   B(16)   A’’(16)   A’’’(16)   A’(18+)</p> <p>Intro(4+16)   Verse(16)   Re-intro(16)   Verse(16)   Break(16)   Solo(16)   Outro(18+)</p>
<p>“Po krayu ostpova” (3’40’’) </p>	<p>Guitar Vocal Bass D.M. Synth</p>	 <p>A(16) – B(16) – A’(16) – A’’(16) – B(16) – A’’’(16) – A’’(16) – A’’’’(16)</p> <p>Intro(16)   Verse(16)   Chorus(16)   Solo(16)   Verse(16)   Chorus(16+16)   Outro(16)</p>

Figure 8: Historical and musical repetitions by post-Soviet Cold Wave

The most interesting example will be “Plastinki” [“Records” or “Vinyls”] by the band Durnoj Vkus, a song that nostalgically reflects on old records, with lyrics referencing mostly UK musicians such as Peter Gabriel, Sting, Morrissey and The Cure. The guitar intro is transcribed in Figure 9. The melody introduced here undergoes only minor transformation when reappearing in both the verse and chorus, while the instrumental link remains identical to the intro (see Figure 10). This verse–chorus–(re-)intro pattern repeats once, forming a complete loop that begins and ends with this intro section. The song concludes with a final presentation



Figure 9: Guitar intro of “Пластинки”/“Plastinki” by Durnoj Vkus

of the chorus, without any additional embellishments, reinforcing the cyclic nature of its horizontal structure.

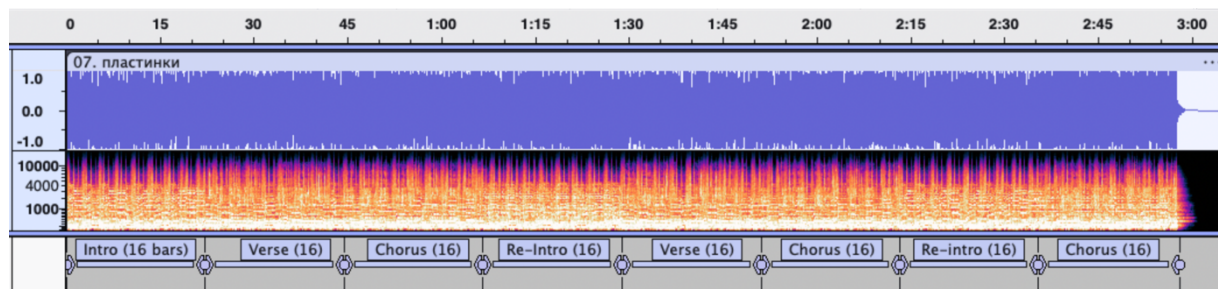


Figure 10: Horizontal/Sectional Structure of “Пластинки”/“Plastinki” by Durnoj Vkus

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the connections between Kino’s music in the late 1980s and the post-Soviet Cold Wave in the late 2010s, emphasizing both historical and musical repetitions. Kino’s minimalist and repetitive structures, marked by discursive guitar phrases and circular song progressions, resonate strongly in the works of a new generation of Russian and Belarusian bands. This ongoing research aims to move beyond lyric-focused interpretations of Russian rock, uncovering the deeper interplay between musical form and cultural expression within this evolving style of music. Thank you for your attention!

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