# Pet Shop Boy Neil Tennant discusses Russia's descent into homophobia and barbarism



Neil Tennant, co-founder of Pet Shop Boys, has shared his fascination with Russian politics during an interview with Andrey Sapozhnikov of Novaya Gazeta Europe, a prominent independent Russian newspaper now based in Latvia to escape censorship by the Russian government.

Tennant's interest in Russia goes back to his childhood encounter with literature about the 1917 revolutions, sparking a long-standing fascination with the transition from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union, which unleashed energy yet descended into a brutal dictatorship under Joseph Stalin. “Since then I have read a lot about Soviet culture," he said, "particularly the work and struggles of Shostakovich and Prokofiev and other artists, writers, musicians. This interest fed into the lyrics I wrote.”

Pet Shop Boys first connected with Russia in 1988 during a landmark exchange between Soviet and British teenagers, a pivotal moment that revealed the existence of a Soviet audience eager to connect with Western music. Tennant recounted his first trip to Russia in 1993, coinciding with the launch of MTV Russia, and described filming part of the video for their song Go West in Red Square, an action that symbolised the country’s political shift towards the West.

During his visits to Russia, he remembers how economic instability led to stark contrasts between prosperity and poverty. He recalls witnessing economic despair, such as “old ladies… selling possessions on the street” while simultaneously describing a newfound vibrancy among young entrepreneurs and a lively nightlife scene.

The evolution of Putin's regime is central to Tennant's reflections. Initially perceived in the early 2000s as a figure who might enhance Russia's standing by challenging oligarchs, Tennant's optimism waned as he realised the emergence of a repressive regime. He quoted a friend’s blunt assessment of Putin, reducing the Russian leader to one name: "Stalin."

As the years progressed, Tennant observed a stark transformation in the sociopolitical landscape. He noted that while Moscow and St Petersburg became more prosperous, significant human rights issues began to arise. The imposition of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and increased censorship of media raised alarms, and instances of violent homophobia surfaced, creating an environment markedly different from his earlier experiences in the country.

Prominent events during this period included a performance by Pet Shop Boys in Red Square for the Live 8 initiative in 2005, which symbolised a brief moment of Russia's inclusion in global humanitarian efforts. However, Tennant later recognised that this moment of inclusion was ephemeral, as human rights abuses intensified alongside governmental control over media and civic freedoms.

With his lyrics from songs such as Kaputnik, Tennant has continued to address and critique these themes, using his platform to comment on the political climate. "Kaputnik... is really about Putin and the former Soviet republics,” he explained during the interview, revealing how personal narratives can intersect with broader political analysis.

Focusing on the future, Tennant expressed despair regarding Russia's political trajectory under Putin, suggesting that a transformative change requires not only a rejection of current leadership but also a profound reassessment of historical narratives, particularly regarding Stalin and the Soviet era. He argues that the path to a more peaceful and prosperous Russia relies on distance from its historical patterns of autocracy and imperial resurgence, listing necessary steps like reparations to Ukraine and accountability for leadership.

Tennant concluded his reflections with the recognition that while his opinions may not bear weight in the current political discourse within Russia, the intricate ties between culture, art, and politics continue to create important dialogue opportunities in a world marked by authoritarianism.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/06/05/pet-shop-boys-get-political-a24704> - This article supports Neil Tennant's engagement with Russian politics, including his support for Pussy Riot and his observations on Russia's treatment of minorities. It highlights the Pet Shop Boys' historical connection to Russia and their musical commentary on political issues.
* <https://bodie-ashton.de/2020/11/call-for-papers-a-cloud-in-a-box-history-politics-and-the-pet-shop-boys/> - This call for papers explores the Pet Shop Boys' relationship with politics, including their historical allusions and critiques of political figures and events. It underscores Neil Tennant's background in political history and the group's political commentary.