

# Emmi Kujanpää



## From Solidarity Concerts to Artivism:

Transnational European Folk  
Singing and Folk Singers'  
Agency in 2022–2024

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## Tukikonserteista artivismiin:

### Kansanlaulajien toimijuudet yllirajaisen eurooppalaisen kansanlaulun kentällä 2022–2024

ABSTRAKTI

Tämä artikkeli käsittelee eurooppalaisten kansanlaulajien toimijuuksia suhteessa käynnissä olevaan Venäjän ja Ukrainan sotaan. Etnografinen tutkimus perustuu 27 haastatteluun, jotka on toteutettu tammikuun 2023 ja joulukuun 2024 välisenä aikana viidessä eri Euroopan maassa. Tutkimuksessa on mukana yli kymmenen eri kansallisuutta. Tutkimus kysyy, millä tavoin Venäjän ja Ukrainan sota on vaikuttanut eurooppalaisten kansanlaulajien toimintaan, ja millaisia toimijuuksia haastateltavat ovat luoneet suhteessa käynnissä olevaan sotaan. Haastatteluanalyysin ohella tutkimus reflektoi lyhyesti artikkelin kirjoittajan toimijuutta tutkija-muusikkona suhteessa tutkimuksen teemaan. Analyysi nostaa esiin kolme toimijuuden kategoriaa, jotka ovat sekä keskenään risteäviä että vastakkaisia: Ukraina-suuntautunut toimijuus korostaa solidaarisuuden osoittamista Ukrainalle esimerkiksi työskentelemällä ukrainalaisten taiteilijoiden kanssa ja esittämällä ukrainalaisia kansanlauluja. Yleinen poliittinen toimijuus, jota lähestytään kansanlaularativismina, ottaa aktivistisesti kantaa poliittisiin ja yhteiskunnallisiin epäkohhtiin kansanlaulujen esittämisen avulla. Kolmas kategoria koostuu joukosta epäselviä toimijuuksia, joissa korostuu hämärä ja vaikeasti hahmottuva suhde Venäjän ja Ukrainan sotaan. Yhteenvedona todetaan, että Venäjän ja Ukrainan sota on korostanut eurooppalaisen kansanlaulun kentän polarisointumista: toisaalta kansanlaulujen esittäminen yhdistetään liberaalimpiin arvoihin ja tavoitteisiin, kuten ilmaisunvapauteen ja demokratian vahvistamiseen, toisaalta vähemmän liberaalit ja nationalistisia asenteita painottavat arvot ovat joko vahvistuneet tai nousseet esiin sodan myötä.

*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna, pokhylylasia.*  
*Chohos nasha slavna Ukraina, zazhurylasia.*  
*A my tuiu chervonu kalynu pidiimemo.*  
*A my nashu slavnu Ukrainu, hej-hej, rozveselymo!*  
Trad. Ukrainian, Marianivka, Kherson and Stepan  
Charnetskyi, 1914 (Centore 2022)

Oh, in the meadow, the red snowball tree has bent down.  
Somehow our glorious Ukraine has turned sad.  
But we will lift up the red snowball tree.  
Hey-hey, we will cheer up our glorious Ukraine!  
(English translation, Laine 2025)

**T**he Ukrainian folk song, *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna* (Eng. *Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow*), first published in 1875 and later arranged by Ukrainian writer Stepan Charnetskyi in 1914, became a global symbol of support for Ukraine after Russia expanded its indefensible invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Centore 2022; Melezhyk 2022; Ofman 2022; Petrovych 2025; Schwenk, Tikhonov and Wickström 2025). After February 2022, this song rapidly circulated on social media platforms such as YouTube, appearing in videos from Ukrainian bomb shelters and battlefields to solidarity concerts held around the world (see, e.g., Estonia Sings for Ukraine 2022; Melezhyk 2022; Petrovych 2025). After its spread via social media, *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna* also became an integral part of the repertoire of European folk-singing ensembles.

The European folk-singing scene of the twenty-first century is simultaneously transnational, national, and local (see, e.g., Bohlman 2011; Hämäläinen, Karhu and Martikainen 2023). Typical activities related to contemporary European folk singing include both local/national and transnational workshops and singing circles, small vocal ensembles and choirs, recording albums, making music videos, and event and festival performanc-

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es (see, e.g., European Folk Network n.d.). Alongside this transnationality, contemporary folk singers in Europe remain linked to the nationalities and language groups they primarily represent (Bohlman 2011). European folk singers who work and live in transnational contexts seem most active in the contemporary European folk music scene.

This article examines the artistic agency of European folk singers in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian war. I analyse what kinds of artistic agency European folk singers articulate in relation to the ongoing war, and the various shapes their agency takes in the processes of performing, conducting, and learning folk songs. The primary data consist of ten semi-structured face-to-face interviews and seventeen email interviews, conducted between January 2023 and December 2024, with singers who represent over ten different nationalities. I supplement the analysis with reflections about my own agency as a researcher and folk musician.

Following feminist research relating to the concept of agency, here I understand agency as the capacity to act and bring about change, the realisation of which varies according to social and cultural conditions (McNay 2016, 39). In addition to relevant theorisations of agency, my research draws from studies of contemporary transnational and national folk singing (Hill 2007; Bohlman 2011; Feinberg 2018; Hämäläinen, Karhu and Martikainen 2023); music, politics, and activism studies (Garratt 2018; Mononen and Välimäki 2018); recent research on militarisation (Enloe 2024; Hast and Kotilainen 2024); and the study of music and politics in the specific context of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Tukova 2023; Clark 2023; Petrovych 2025; Schwenk, Tikhonov and Wickström 2025).

The research summarised here was conducted during a period when the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine was acute, widely condemned, and causing enormous destruction and suffering to Ukraine and its people. The Russo-Ukrainian war has profoundly influenced and changed the European political climate, and at the time of writing (spring and autumn 2025), the war continues. In addition to thousands of deaths and extensive material damage, Russia's all-out assault also targets Ukrainian culture; through this systematic destruction, Russia is attempting to create a new Ukrainian identity based on the idea that Russia and Ukraine are one nation (Pynnöniemi and Parppei 2024). Russia has also destroyed more than 500 cultural heritage sites in Ukraine (Vaaranmaa 2025).

Following the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, the process of militarisation in European countries has become rapid and extensive (Hast and Kotilainen 2024). As recent research on militarisation demonstrates (Enloe 2024; Hast and Kotilainen 2024), the ongoing war is not only militarising the societies involved on a large scale but also affecting the attitudes and behaviours of ordinary people living within those societies (Myrntinen 2024; Vastapuu et al. 2024). Political scientist Gwendolyn Sasse (2024) noted that most research on war focuses on wars that have already ended rather than ongoing conflicts with as-yet unknown outcomes. Political scientist Timo Miettinen (2024) argued that contemporary Europeanism has focused too much on the continent's past instead of confronting our immediate problems. Furthermore, Miettinen (2024) claimed that history is an excellent starting point for learning but should not prevent the agency to actively respond to changes in the world.

I have worked as an artist in the field of folk music and folk singing for twenty years together with musicians from various European countries. My work can be described as activist musicianship, striving for social change related to inclusive and sustainable practices in music (Välimäki, Torvinen and Mononen 2018, 7–14).<sup>1</sup> Although the music I perform and compose is often based on historical archival folk song recordings, I have tried to combine folk singing with activities that support democracy, equality, and peace (see, e.g., Kujanpää 2025). My more recent agency as a researcher has developed from this background as an activist musician. Both roles affected the way I approached the interview material in this article. Whilst giving space particularly to the experiences of Ukrainian folk singers, I have also tried to ensure that my activist approach does not ignore other interviewees and their agency, and that all modes of agency were treated equally and empathetically (Ettorre 2016, 14–36).

Rather than focusing on the differences between the nationalities of various European folk singers, or on the relationship between music and nation or nationalism, long a topic of research on folk music and politics (see, e.g., Bohlman 2011; Feinberg

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1 In 2003, just a few years after the end of the Yugoslavian wars, I took part in Service Civil International's solidarity project for young European folk musicians in Sremski Karlovci, Serbia. That project aimed to involve Serbian young people, giving them the experience that different nationalities can work together. As a young folk musician myself, the project in Serbia was eye-opening. Later in the 2010s, I worked with both European (especially Bulgarian) musicians and artists on a transnational basis, often focusing on strengthening the agency of women musicians (Kujanpää 2025).

2018; Garratt 2018), this study provides insights into how the activities of folk singers are influenced by both the contemporary militarisation of societies and antimilitarist types of agency opposing it. However, this analysis also offers new insights into the relationship between folk singers and nationalism in the 2020s, and how emotions, bodily experiences, and music intertwine during an ongoing war.

In this article, I argue that the performance of Ukrainian folk songs can be viewed as an important form of agency in terms of expressing solidarity with Ukraine. Simultaneously, European folk singers create other types of agency in relation to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine by emphasising the transnational nature of folk songs as part of a shared European cultural heritage. Such an argument is used to justify both general political agency and antimilitarist activism, as well as the kinds of agency that deny and avoid engaging with the war.

In what follows, I first present the theoretical background of this study, which consists of theories of militarisation and music, as well as the theory of agency in times of political transition. Then, I describe the research materials, methods, and ethics. I next analyse the folk singers' artistic agency. In addition, I reflect on the research topic in relation to my work as an activist researcher, folk singer, and folk-singing teacher. To conclude, I discuss the types of agency revealed in this research, their entanglements, and the links between folk singing, war, and militarisation.

## Militarisation and music

Critical militarism studies examine military powers, ideologies, and values in societies (Enloe 2024; Hast and Kotilainen 2024). These studies reveal the ways in which military thinking is evident in the decisions of those in power and in subsequent practical changes to society based on military ideology (Vastapuu et al. 2024). Feminist theorist Cynthia Enloe (2024, 172) emphasised militarisation as an insidious, complicated, and multilayered process that always begins in times of peace. Political scientists Vastapuu et al. (2024) claimed that militarisation is based on a fear of war, whereby the threat of war represents the greatest risk to society's existence. In a militarised society, the demand for unity spills over from the armed forces to the rest of society, and other nonmilitaristic or critical activities and ideol-

ogies are viewed as both inferior and threatening to the armed forces that maintain security (ibid.). One of the main manifestations of militarisation is securitisation, both in regulating urban spaces (Maïche 2024) and controlling borders between states and the transnational mobility across them (Kynsilehto 2024).

Intersectional feminist militarisation studies tend to show how processes of oppression intensify as society becomes increasingly militarised. Specifically, militarisation requires and rewards emotional restraint (Vastapuu et al. 2024), in stark contrast to the pain, grief, sadness, anger, and fear war often causes.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is worth considering whether, in an acute situation of war, music can serve as a means of expressing emotional states and lived experiences which lie beyond words and cannot be controlled. War-related experiences and emotions live on, both as silences (Vastapuu et al. 2024) and as crisis narratives, in the memories of nations and families, and are passed on from generation to generation as intangible heritage (Häkkinen and Salasuo 2024).

Music historian James Garratt (2018, 8) emphasised that the political potential of music does not always directly link to traditional political practices but may extend to artists' activities and social activism in everyday cultural practices. Moreover he (ibid., 107–126) highlighted propaganda as a key concept in the study of music and politics, encompassing all forms of control and guidance through music. Garratt (ibid.) argued that in the twenty-first century the concept of propaganda can appear outdated and too negatively coloured. However, propaganda through the arts has also remained a part of the Russo-Ukrainian war (see, e.g., Lukin 2022), and, as a concept, has assumed new meanings since the onset of the war (Tukova 2023). Bohlman (2011, 53–57) viewed music as a unifier of past and present through which national identity is reconstructed but also as a tool for reinforcing nationalist expressions in twenty-first century Europe. In recent decades, nationalist aspirations in music in Europe have softened to emphasise territoriality over national boundaries in European cultural politics and on the world music scene (ibid.). However, since the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war, localism, transnationalism, regionalism, and national and nationalist values and practices have remained in constant flux. In this article, I examine folk singers' forms of agency through the lens

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2 For research on emotions as embodied and cultural practices, see, e.g., Ahmed (2004).

of politics – except when interviewees explicitly described their actions as propaganda. Framing agency vis-à-vis politics provides a broader perspective than focusing on propaganda alone.

The transnational European folk-singing scene is currently supported by both national and European Union (EU) cultural funds, whilst transnational co-operation also takes place at the grassroots level without external funding. However, differences exist between Eastern (post-Soviet) and Western European folk singers' transnational agency (on the differences and inequalities in transnationalism, see, e.g., Kyriazi and Visconti 2021; Yeoh and Collins 2022). The twentieth-century history of folk singing in Eastern European countries links to the Soviet regime's control of the arts and research, as well resistance to this control (see, e.g., Buchanan 1995; Kencis, Bronner and Seljamaa 2024). Whilst contemporary folk musicians in Western Europe have greater financial possibilities to realise their individualistic transnational artistic work (see, e.g., Kujanpää 2025), the folk-singing scene in Eastern European countries remains more national and locally based given the lack of economic support for transnational co-operation. Even when differences in the agency of European folk singers depend on the political history of their country and region of origin or residence, the actual agency of individuals is often multilayered, whereby the stark distinction between 'East' and 'West' no longer seems relevant in the twenty-first century (Bohlman 2011; Kujanpää 2025).

Since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine escalated in February 2022, Ukrainian culture has attracted widespread interest from abroad. Musicologist Iryna Tukova (2023) demonstrated that Ukrainian classical musicians who perform outside their home country act as both defenders of the existence of the Ukrainian state and as representatives of Ukrainian culture. She argued that Ukrainian music currently serves as a political statement, transcending people's personal feelings and experiences, and appealing to global sentiments of empathy and understanding (ibid.). In addition, she viewed musicians' activities as cultural diplomacy, attempting to convey the truth about the war through music. Several contemporary Ukrainian composers have written music about their war experiences. According to Tukova (ibid.), such compositions do not support militarism, violence, and the destruction of the attacker, but rather present personal experiences and reflections on tragic experiences. Similarly, political scientist Janine Natalya Clark (2023) highlighted how music plays a particular role in expressing resistance and

strengthening resilience during the war in Ukraine. Clark argued that strengthening resilience renders musicians and listeners active agents who influence the sonic structures of war. However, Clark also stressed that the connections between music and war are always multifaceted and complex. (Ibid.)

## Folk singers and agency

Political scientist Lois McNay (2016, 44) defined the third-wave feminist concept of agency as a form of resistance, stressing the potential agency holds for liberation and empowerment. McNay (2000, 1–12) emphasised that the concept of agency should not be limited to processes in which agency is formed through subjugation or resistance. Instead, agency is creative and linked to power hierarchies and individuals' abilities to interact with power structures, either by reinforcing or transcending them. Thus, agency is also related to abilities to renew one's identity and orient (oneself) towards the future (ibid). McNay (2016, 57) acknowledged that, as the world becomes increasingly uncertain and fragile, feminist theory should also adapt its understandings of agency. Furthermore, agency as a concept is undergoing major changes in the wake of the acute Russo-Ukrainian war. For example, Enloe (2024, 13) discussed Ukrainian feminists who want heavy weapons instead of antimilitarist activities, asking whether sending cannons and guns is a new form of transnational feminist agency and solidarity. Simultaneously, sociologists Honkasalo, Ketokivi and Leppo (2014) emphasised that agency forms within a social, material, and cultural network in which both human and nonhuman actors play an important role, although as a concept agency is often viewed as ambiguous and vague. However, they also noted that the idea of agency as fragile and contextual opens up the discussion regarding how agency is not always strong and clear-cut, but also passive and uncertain. Within art and artistic research, agency can overlap with the concept of activism. Moreover, types of agency, which combine art and activism, have been approached using the term activism (see, e.g., Nossel 2016; Mononen 2023). All such forms of activism – activism, musician activism, and activist music research – aim to advance social change (Nossel 2016; Välimäki, Torvonen and Mononen 2018, 7–14). Human rights advocate Suzanne Nossel (2016) argued that art's ability to produce change should not be underestimated or considered inferior to traditional ac-

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tivism. In this article, I distinguish between what can be interpreted as musicians' agency versus musicians' activism, and how militarist and antimilitarist activities are intertwined with both.

Agency can also be based on the denial of an existing phenomenon. Sociologist Stanley Cohen (2001, 1–20) introduced different forms of denial, where violence or cruel behaviour, committed by a person we know for instance, is so difficult to face that it is easier to create agency based on denying the unpleasantness rather than admitting it. As legal scholar Connor Gearty (2024) aptly summarised the forms of denial Cohen (2001, 1–20) outlined, to include "literal denial (it never happened), interpretive denial (it's not what you think it is), and implicatory denial (we have to do it/it's terrible, but it's not our fault)". Thus, denial can either lead to individual agency, or take place collectively as a form of agency organised by families, communities, and states (Cohen 2001, 1–20). According to Cohen, denial is not a single psychological mechanism, but rather a range of complex phenomena, including processes of avoidance, rejection, reinterpretation, and rationalisation. Through these reactions, people avoid thinking about suffering, cruelty, and unpleasant information, as well as the consequences of these things. (Ibid.)

Ethnomusicologist Juniper Hill (2007) examined the roles of Finnish folk musicians in relation to performance, cultural ownership, and cross-border collaboration. Hill noted that Finnish folk musicians see themselves as part of a global folk music community united by shared liberal values, where national borders do not limit the performance of folk music. In particular, Finnish folk musicians emphasise values rooted in a shared sense of humanity and in the belief that music can help build a better world through transnational co-operation, interaction, and the freedom of expression. (Ibid.) I argue that folk music can thus be viewed as creating a kind of safer space, transcending national borders. Notably in recent years, intense and necessary debates have taken place regarding cultural appropriation and ownership in Finland vis-à-vis Finnish folk music and its relation to the Karelian, Ingrian, and Sámi traditions (see, e.g., Haapoja-Mäkelä 2020; Silvonen and Kallio 2023; Korhonen 2025). These discussions may have shattered some folk musicians' perceptions of folk music as a universal, safe space.

Anthropologist Joseph Grim Feinberg (2018) researched the Slovakian folk music and dance scenes following the country's transition from socialism to democracy. During the socialist era in Slovakia and other socialist states, folk music and dance were

promoted as art forms unifying the people and the state. After 1989, in the post-communist period, the folk music and dance scenes lost both state support and their earlier status, forcing scenes to redefine themselves. In Slovakia, the folk music and dance scenes were increasingly valued for their communal and intimate nature, replacing the folklore spectacles and nationalist propaganda of the socialist regime. Feinberg (ibid.) observed, however, that even though contemporary folk music and dance performers emphasised the communal and cultural aspects of folk traditions, these forms could subtly adapt to also serve nationalist purposes. According to Burton (2025), in recent years, the Slovakian folk music and dance scenes remained under pressure from the country's neo-nationalist government. By developing new forms of agency, the folk scene more broadly found ways to resist the influence of the neo-nationalist regime (ibid.). More generally, folklorist Anna-Leena Siikala and anthropologist Jukka Siikala (2005, 280–281) emphasised the evolving nature of folk traditions, seeing them as a resource from which to draw and reinterpret needs given changing circumstances.

Hill (2007) also emphasised the evasive attitude of Finnish folk musicians towards Russian folk traditions. Following her study, some researchers in Finland focused on addressing the lack of discussion surrounding Russian folk music performances and the influence of Russian folk traditions on Finnish traditions (see, e.g., Väänänen, Häkkinen and Dahlblom 2019). Based on my knowledge of folk-singing ensembles in different parts of Europe, Russian and Belarusian folk songs were considered part of the common European cultural heritage, taught and performed alongside other European folk songs prior to the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022. In addition, the folk songs of ethnic minorities within the Russian state, such as those of the Finno-Ugric peoples, were regarded as part of a shared cultural heritage. These folk songs were performed by European folk-singing ensembles in Finland (Hill 2007) and elsewhere in Europe (e.g., Singfrauen Berlin 2016). However, the Russo-Ukrainian war has considerably changed these dynamics in Finland and beyond.

## Reflections on my position as a musician-activist and activist researcher

Feminist research emphasises situated knowledge, that is, where and how information has been produced (see, e.g., Paju et al.

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2001; Hawkesworth and Disch 2016, 1–15). Whilst my research is not autoethnographic, I employ concepts from feminist autoethnography to emphasise the importance of articulating my position and agency as a researcher. Feminist sociologist Elizabeth Ettore (2016, 14–36) discussed the importance of reflexivity in feminist autoethnographic research. Here, the researcher must carefully position themselves in the cultural context of the research and approach the topic with political and ethical sensitivity. Ettore also urged researchers to adopt a compassionate approach towards those involved in the research, whether they are part of autoethnographic narratives or participate as interviewees. (Ibid.) An empathetic approach could also be applied to the researchers themselves.

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine escalated into a full-scale war on 24 February 2022, I was one of the thousands of artists in Europe who started organising a solidarity event for Ukraine. The need to do something and show solidarity with Ukraine were inescapable and compelling. Together with the Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria in Helsinki, the Käpylä Music Institute, and the folk-singing choir Kukuviitsa which I conduct, I served as an organiser of the Folk Singers' Solidarity Concert for Ukraine at the Koskela Church in Helsinki on 2 April 2022. Finnish folk musicians, folk choirs, and theatre professionals performed folk songs, poetry, and a lament for Ukraine (Fihlman 2022) at the event. The concert was attended by the Ambassador of Ukraine, Olga Dibrova, and a few other European ambassadors based in Finland. Because the Russo-Ukrainian war had just escalated into a full-scale invasion, the concert atmosphere remained quite mournful and sombre. The Ukrainian writer Jevhenija Kuznetsova (2024b) aptly described the atmosphere of the spring 2022 solidarity with Ukraine concerts as funeral-like. Subsequently, I came to understand that the emotions associated with the ongoing war are complex and overlapping, rarely consisting of simple or persistent fear, as Kuznetsova (2024a, 59) also described in her novel *Tikapuut* (Ukr. *Drabina*).

In 2024, I worked as a folk-singing teacher and conductor on the play *My life, Ukraine!* at the OSIRIS Theatre in Helsinki (OSIRIS teatteri n.d.). This documentary theatre production, directed by Liisa Isotalo, focused on the real-life stories of Ukrainian women who fled the war, featuring actors and singers on stage were both Ukrainian and Finnish. The folk songs I proposed for the play represent women's singing traditions from Karelia and Ingria, whilst the Ukrainian actors taught the work-

ing group Ukrainian folk songs. In the play's programme, folk songs served as the common cultural heritage of humanity and the songs' themes as "eternal yearning, warmth, caring, love, and sorrow" (OSIRIS teatteri n.d.). *Oj u luzi chervona kalina*, the song mentioned at the beginning of this article, was performed at the play's conclusion.

When I began my research interviews in 2023, I intended to write an article on peace activism amongst European folk singers vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine. I knew pro-Russian attitudes and far-right movements existed in countries such as Bulgaria (see, e.g., Stanchev 2023). At that time, other European countries were also witnessing significant growth in far-right (and far-left) movements (see, e.g., Vasilopoulou and Zur 2024). These shifts in the political climate across Europe also affected the agency of my interviewees and my fieldwork.

In relation to agency, being an activist musician has been more straightforward than doing activist ethnographic research, which involves much more uncertainty and unexpected elements. Accepting uncertainty is part of any research process and one's growth as a researcher (Salo 2015; Braun and Clarke 2022, 11–12). However, I did not expect the degree of changes that occurred during my research. My naive idea of folk singers showing solidarity with Ukraine transformed into an understanding that folk singers' agency is much more ambiguous and contradictory than I had expected, and that some folk singers approve of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. My earlier assumptions about the shared liberal values of the transnational folk music community mirrored those of Finnish folk musicians (Hill 2007), who tend to view folk music as a universal, humanistic, and safe, empathetic space. My research challenged these beliefs, revealing the diversity of values and types of agency within the global folk music community.

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## Research materials, methods, and ethics

I conducted ten semi-structured face-to-face interviews and seventeen email interviews between January 2023 and December 2024. The twenty-seven interviewees in this study were selected based on their activities and/or activism in relation to folk singing, with respondents representing more than ten European nationalities. All are either active in folk singing as performers, teachers, students, choir directors, or composers, or they per-

form folk songs in conjunction with other artistic activities such as music theatre. Some also organise activist events such as solidarity concerts for Ukraine.

Interviewees' ages varied between 25 and 72 years, with a gender distribution as follows: 89% women, 7.4% men, and 3.6% other.<sup>3</sup> Respondents live in several European cities and capitals. Many have hybrid nationalities or they live outside their country of origin. This stems from the above-mentioned selection criteria rather than the transnational nature of the folk-singing scene. Interviewees also included Ukrainian and Russian nationals.

The face-to-face, video, and email interviews asked "How has the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war affected your activities in the field of folk singing (performing, conducting, learning)? Please describe your situation even if the war has not affected your activities." During the semi-structured face-to-face and video interviews, this question was complemented with clarifications and additional questions about the interviewees' views on the mutual relationship between folk singing and gender, and the emotions interviewees associated with different folk songs. I also completed informal discussions with many interviewees beyond the formal interviews. Some interviewees granted permission for the inclusion of these informal discussions in the text and in the analysis. All interviewees quoted in the study provided their permission to be quoted. I have also given them the opportunity to review and revise their quotations.

I analysed the twenty-seven interview responses employing thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). Data were first coded and then categorised according to three main types of agency I found in the interview material: Ukraine-oriented agency, general political agency, and war-denying agency, which I analyse below. I approach agency reflexively (Salo 2015) and as existing as a state of constant becoming (Tiainen 2012; Salo 2015; Moisala et al. 2014). Based on these approaches, the agency of folk singers in relation to the ongoing war can be analysed as an ambiguous formation which is in a constant state of change (Honkasalo, Ketokivi and Leppo 2014), with the different categories overlapping and contradicting each other.

Political scientist Marc Lynch (2020) described the vulnerability of fieldwork in political transitions and amidst unpredictable political changes. As Lynch suggested, political change can occur suddenly and unpredictably during times of war, conflict,

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3 Contemporary folk singing is predominantly performed by women.

and political transformation, especially when conducting fieldwork in authoritarian states. Protecting both those interviewed and the researcher is extremely important in such circumstances. Moreover, research related to an ongoing war requires a particular sensitivity (Lynch 2020). Thus, I have removed most of the interviewees' background information, which was not my original intention. I anonymised the name, gender, age, nationality, and country of origin of the interviewees in this article (whether the interview took place face-to-face, via video, or via email). Herein, I include the year in which the interview took place, and the nationality of the interviewee in some quotes when that information offers important insights and lacks any risk of harm to the interviewee. Since the nationalities of the interviewees are mostly anonymised, this study does not analyse how the history of the interviewees' home countries, as well as those countries' relationships to Russia and Ukraine, are reflected in the interview responses. Nevertheless, more generally, it is possible to say that the interviewee's home country and its history have, in some cases, affected the folk singer's agency in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian war.

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## Ukraine-oriented agency

I call the first main type of agency discernible in my data Ukraine-oriented agency. This consists of activities highlighting the importance of the Ukrainian language and culture, which are threatened by the acute war situation. Ukraine-oriented agency can be interpreted as a significant counter-agency to Russia's efforts to deny Ukraine's sovereignty and to completely destroy Ukraine, its political institutions and civil society, and to reincarnate Ukrainian culture as part of Russia (see, e.g., Pynnöniemi and Parppe 2024).

Ukrainian artists in particular emphasise the value of the Ukrainian language and culture. That said, other European folk singers also show solidarity through their widespread study of Ukrainian folk songs, language, and culture, and through collaborative art projects with Ukrainian artists. According to activist music researchers Välimäki, Torvinen and Mononen (2018, 7–14), activities that work for change and justice can also be considered musician activism.

As Iryna Tukova (2023) described, following the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian music emerged as an essential symbol of Ukrainian culture abroad. According to

my interviewees, Ukrainian folk songs in particular carry a special significance, symbolising the existence of Ukrainian culture. According to one interviewee, performing Ukrainian folk music is not only a political statement and form of resistance, but singing in the Ukrainian language can also be interpreted as preserving the very thread of life:

Ukrainian folk songs are one of the brightest symbols of Ukrainian culture. Now, our enemy is trying to destroy not only the state, but also the culture. He [the enemy] suppresses people's urge to sing. But, as long as Ukrainian songs are heard, even beyond the borders of our country, until then Ukraine will exist.

(Interview 25, 2024)

This interviewee emphasised the importance of singing and performing Ukrainian folk songs, both locally and transnationally, as a form of agency resisting Russia's attempts to silence and eradicate Ukraine and its culture (see, e.g., Pynnöniemi and Parpei 2024). This form of agency reflects the performance of Ukrainian folk songs to underscore national identity and traditions distinct from Russian culture. This contrasts with Hill's (2007) research on global folk music, which frames folk songs as a shared cultural heritage uniting humanity and involving empathy towards other cultures. Notably, Hill's (ibid.) work concerns Finland and was conducted during a period of peace in Europe. In the context of the ongoing war, Ukrainian folk songs function as powerful symbols of national identity and resilience, embodying the vitality of the Ukrainian people. Both Siikala and Siikala (2005, 280–281) and Feinberg (2018) noted that the significance of folk traditions and their interpretation may change according to the surrounding circumstances.

Rather than being stifled and silenced, several interviewees described a way of singing that comes directly from the singer's body. This way of singing comprises expression through a shouting voice as a way of preserving one's culture, land and life.

It's like screaming about us, about Ukrainians [...] just like a person, with or without anything.

(Interview 7, 2024)

This interviewee described singing as a shout for the existence of Ukrainians – something people do in all situations when they

have no alternative. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2021) discussed complaining as an agency for being heard. Amongst my interviewees, the voice and a kind of full-body complaint can be interpreted as agency for a life-sustaining force.

In an acute war situation, what are the alternatives to militarisation and/or propaganda for those whose country is invaded? Is all agency influenced by militarisation or propaganda, or are there varieties of agency operating somewhere in-between militarisation and propaganda? One Ukrainian interviewee reflected on the performance of Ukrainian folk songs and their relationship to propaganda, and separating of Ukrainians from Russianness:

I'm not just singing; I show my culture. [...] And now when we here make something in Europe [...] when I sing Ukrainian folk songs [...] it's good propaganda, like positive. [...] We are different [from Russians]. We have different songs. We have everything different. [...] We have a different culture, we have a different language. [...] We have our own personality, it's a nation.

(Interview 7, 2024)

As Tukova (2023) described in her article on the importance of presenting Ukrainian culture abroad, the interviewee here also emphasised that singing is not merely a performance: it is a way of showcasing Ukrainian culture outside Ukraine. This Ukrainian interviewee viewed this as positive propaganda and as a means of distinguishing themselves from Russianness. This type of agency functions both as resistance and as a counter-agency to Russia's attempts to unify the Ukrainian and Russian cultures (see, e.g., Pynnöniemi and Parpei 2024).

Both Enloe (2024) and Hast and Kotilainen (2024) claimed that militarisation seeps into our mental landscape by influencing our behaviour, thoughts, and values. A significant part of vocal production in Eastern European, Baltic, Balkan, and Finno-Ugric folk singing can be analysed as a loud, direct, bright, and chest-dominated voice (also called white voice singing), which includes different kinds of shouted and ornamented singing techniques (see, e.g., Helbig 2013; Kujanpää 2016; Maćko-Gieszcz 2020; Kujanpää 2025). Can a folk-singing technique support resilience (Clark 2023) and serve as a militarised, vocalised agency by creating a bodily experience of defending one's body and country? One interviewee noted the following:

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The war has greatly increased their [Ukrainians'] appreciation of their own culture [...] and the music rises and screams out: "Even now [as] I'm being threatened, I sing my song!"

(Interview 27, 2024)

This interviewee, who has collaborated with Ukrainian artists, observed that the war had deepened Ukrainians' appreciation of their culture. They described how, during performances by Ukrainian artists, music emerged from the body in a powerful and defiant way, embodying a form of resistance noted by Clark (2023).

Recent compositions by Ukrainian composers have attempted to depict the soundscape of war as realistically as possible, including by using orchestral instruments to represent the sound of bombs. Ukrainian folk songs, especially lullabies, have also been used as part of such compositions (Tukova 2023). One interviewee described the need for a realistic soundscape when working on a performance about war:

I first thought I should design the sound of bombs in an "artistic" manner – use something abstract or compose the sound with an instrument. Playing bomb sounds from a sample library just seemed insufficient. But, then, a realistic bomb sound is what my Ukrainian colleague wanted. Because that's what it is. You can't make it more horrible or scary; let it just be what it is. A good lesson for me.

(Interview 26, 2024)

The artistic practice described by this interviewee provided an example of the empathetic approach mentioned by Ettorre (2016, 14–36). Instead of creating denial-based agency (Cohen 2001, 1–20) in terms of artistic choices, this interviewee sensitively listened to their Ukrainian colleague's experience of war and created a soundscape in line with their colleague's wishes.

I asked Ukrainian interviewees how European artists could further support Ukraine. One of them stressed the importance of collaboration and communication with Ukrainian artists:

Artists who want so much exactly [sic], support Ukraine. I think they need to look for some connection with Ukrainian artist. [...] And talk with them together and help them maybe make Ukrainian artists' voices louder.

(Interview 7, 2024)

This Ukrainian interviewee stressed that European artists can do more to support Ukraine and Ukrainians by forging connections with Ukrainian artists, engaging in dialogue with them, and helping amplify their voices. I would argue that such agency can be seen as a form of musician activism (Välimäki, Torvinen and Mononen 2018, 7–14), which actively strives for justice, and requires a committed and proactive willingness amongst European artists to collaborate with Ukrainians.

As a researcher, I find it surprising that many of my interviewees shared experiences of a lack of knowledge of European languages and cultures, even within Europe. This was particularly concerning for smaller European countries and their language groups. In this context, the importance of studying Ukrainian folk songs, language, and cultural traditions can be viewed as a significant act of solidarity with Ukraine. One interviewee made a clear distinction in their agency between supporting Ukrainian culture and appropriating Ukrainian cultural traditions<sup>4</sup>:

The fact that I am now learning Ukrainian [...] it has given me a lot to have contact with them [Ukrainians] and their language, literature, culture, and crafts. [...] When Ukrainians see that I'm wearing a *višivanka* [an embroidered shirt belonging to Ukrainian national costumes], it's interpreted as support for Ukraine. [...] When there is the resistance movement that emphasises Ukraine's freedom and independence, I thought that it [wearing the *višivanka*] had nothing to do with cultural appropriation [...]. I'm showing my respect, support, solidarity, and love and everything.

(Interview 14, 2024)

This interviewee's agency in supporting Ukraine is multifaceted and reciprocal, whereby they emphasised gaining significantly from their connections with Ukrainians, including learning the Ukrainian language and acquiring a broader understanding of Ukrainian culture. The interviewee sought to publicly identify themselves as part of the resistance movement for Ukraine's sovereignty by wearing a Ukrainian *višivanka* shirt, whilst also underscoring solidarity and respect for Ukraine rather than appropriating Ukrainian culture.

Ukraine-oriented agency was the clearest type of agency identified in the interview data, widely represented in respons-

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4 On cultural appropriation in folk singing, see, e.g., Haapoja–Mäkelä (2020).

es by Ukrainians and other nationalities. Performing Ukrainian folk songs created an important counter-agency that resists Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and singing Ukrainian folk songs was expressed as a life-sustaining force. Performing folk songs, working with Ukrainian artists and taking an interest in Ukrainian culture in general were also viewed as demonstrations of solidarity and empathy by European folk singers and artists outside Ukraine. However, despite the prevalence of Ukraine-oriented agency, it was rarely the sole agency amongst interviewees. Rather, this agency intersected with the other types of agency discussed below.

## General political agency

The agency of several folk singers in this study can be described using the concept of general political agency. These folk singers support Ukraine alongside several other activist pursuits and events which promote justice and solidarity. Folk singers view folk songs as a flexible and transnational art form which can be used as a tool to express political attitudes and to take a stand. General political agency reflects Hill's (2007) ideas about shared liberal values and the community of transnational folk musicians who strive to emphasise shared cultural heritage and promote empathy through folk music. This agency can be seen as strongly activist, because it seeks to bring about decisive change and highlight existing injustices (Nossel 2016; Välimäki, Torvinen and Mononen 2018, 7–14). I propose that general political agency could also be described as folk-singing activism, combining folk singing as an art form with activism (Nossel 2016).

What emerges from my interviews is that folk songs are viewed by many as part of a shared European cultural heritage that knows no borders (see Bohlman 2011, 53–57). Below, two interviewees shared their perspectives on European cultural heritage and the transnational character of music:

I feel that folk songs have like a [common] spring [...] that is bubbling [...] billowing now. [...] Why wouldn't Europe find the same [connection]?

(Interview 27, 2024)

Instead, Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlights a common cultural heritage that ultimately knows no borders. People

have moved from place to place, giving and receiving influence. Music has tended to unite rather than divide.

(Interview 21, 2024)

The first interviewee illustrated that, in an acute situation of war, a hopeful view amongst non-Ukrainians persists whereby folk songs can bring an understanding of a shared humanity and increase solidarity with Ukrainians. In turn, the second interviewee pointed out that the Russian invasion against Ukraine has also reinforced an understanding of the shared cultural heritage and music's possibilities for uniting people. Both interviewees adhered strictly to the liberal values Hill (2007) mentioned and viewed folk songs as symbols of a shared cultural heritage.

General political agency amongst folk singers can also be interpreted as creating a counter-agency to militarisation processes. Singers raised issues such as minority rights and the freedom of expression and responded rapidly to acute ongoing crises and social problems. According to Vastapuu et al. (2024) militarised societies perceived these topics as less important and as a kind of soft politics. The following interviewee described musician activism in their folk-singing ensemble:

We also always tried [...] to take part in political events, like solidarity events [...] what we want to fight for. [...] We did one for the earthquake in Turkey, one for an Iranian female organisation.

(Interview 6, 2023)

This interviewee explained how their ensemble responded to local and global social challenges, expressing solidarity through the performance of folk songs. Such descriptions demonstrate that musical activism – or, in this case, folk-singing activism – is an essential element of the artistic practice within their folk-singing ensemble (see Nossel 2016; Välimäki, Torvinen and Mononen 2018, 7–14).

Yet another important motivating factor for general political agency apparently emerged as a need to express empathy (Hill 2007; Ettore 2016, 14–36) and share the experience of suffering through performing folk songs. However, the question remains: Do folk singers and their activities take into consideration whether people whose homelands are in acute conflict need contact and want to be a part of public, artistic suffering?

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Some of my interviewees had participated in a mobilisation event in a European city, the purpose of which was to revisit the repertoire from regions affected by the ongoing war. One interviewee described the purpose of this folk-song project as follows:

... to create a connection to the people who were suffering, who are suffering. [...] The war also brought to the surface again topics of migration, war, loss, that are very innate to folk-song themes.

(Interview 3, 2023)

Recently, general political agency amongst folk singers, such as the performance of folk songs at solidarity events and demonstrations, has been interpreted in some European countries as a form of political activism potentially threatening state security. One interviewee observed the securitisation taking place in Europe stemming from increasing militarisation processes (Maïche 2024) as a police intervention restricting the freedom of expression:

It feels more and more that we can't express our opinion [...] and empathy. [...] There has [sic] been in [a European city] bigger events [demonstrations] we could have joined with our folk-singing circle and sung peaceful songs in whatever language. [...] But, the demonstration was cancelled by the police. [...] The reason was possible plans for a terrorist attack if you're doing it in a language other than [one language] or [another language]. We are not capable of understanding this.

(Interview 15, 2024)

This interviewee described how the police controlled the language used in demonstrations and prevented the performance of folk songs sung in different languages in one European city. This interviewee experienced police actions as preventing folk singers from voicing their opinions and empathy. Such police actions, as described here, exemplify the growing securitisation in Europe (Maïche 2024) and reveal how art can also be construed as a potential threat to national security. Viewing the performance of folk songs as a potential security threat clearly lies in contradiction to the views of folk musicians in Hill's (2007) work, which emphasised the performance of folk music as a shared cultural heritage fostering empathy towards other cultures.

Honkasalo, Ketokivi and Leppo (2014) conceived agency as context-bound and uncertain. Given this understanding of agency, my interviewees revealed a contradictory and ambiguous relationship to Russian folk songs and cultural heritage when selecting teaching and performance repertoires. Moreover, several interviewees revealed a fear of being interpreted as passively supporting Russia and being targeted by a hybrid operation because of their cultural interest in Slavic folklore in general. One interviewee described how history and memory intertwine with the present situation when teaching singing:

I was teaching a course that used to include a medieval song from Russia. Now, I hesitate whether to teach it or not. [...] Then, I thought that this melody, or a variant of it, is probably closer to 1000 years old and has nothing to do with Putin. I took the tune into the classroom. No one asked any questions. But, I felt the need to explain this thousand-year thing. At the same time, I find this rejection absurd, because ancient music and its creators are in no way responsible for the atrocities of today. However, the presence of any Russian can be interpreted as passive support for Russia. [...] My motivation to sing Russian folk songs is now zero because of the war and this contradiction.

(Interview 10, 2024)

This interviewee explained that performing and teaching Russian folk songs evoked uncertainty in their agency (see Honkasalo, Ketokivi and Leppo 2014). This uncertainty stemmed from the historical nature of folk songs and the challenge of distinguishing between the historical and contemporary contexts of folk singing. Nevertheless, the interviewee perceived a potential connection between Russian folk songs and contemporary Russia and its current politics. Despite this ambiguity, the interviewee made a pedagogical and artistic decision to teach a Russian song.

Another non-Ukrainian interviewee reflected on their agency and how the war between Russia and Ukraine granted new meaning to their work as an artist. The interviewee also underscored the importance of reflecting on the meaning of democracy as a part of artistic practice:

After all [...] Ukraine is not very far. The war is somehow present in the consciousness. It motivates me to continue [making art]. Music and culture usually unite people and, in this

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case, they become even more important because that is what we artists are able and supposed to do. [...] Also, it becomes even more important to continue discussing what democracy is and how we [artists] view it in this relatively new situation.  
(Interview 12, 2024)

This interviewee's description illustrates that liberal values and the notion of folk music as a unifying force (Hill 2007) have become clearer and stronger after the escalation of the war between Russia and Ukraine.

In turn, a Ukrainian interviewee highlighted the simultaneous experience of the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of art in the context of acute warfare. The meaning of art can be interpreted as a constant state of becoming (Tiainen 2012; Moisala et al. 2014):

What can you do? [...] We make our performance. [...] And there's [a question]: What, what did we do? Nothing, I mean. It's not enough, but at the same time it's important.  
(Interview 7, 2024)

In summary, general political agency amongst folk singers can be viewed as an activist counter-agency to militarisation processes in European countries, raising issues (such as minority rights) societies would like to silence. This kind of agency takes a broad stand against injustices in European societies through the performance of folk songs, defining folk-singing activism as an approach combining folk singing with activism. The interviewees highlighted the transnational nature of folk singing as a shared European cultural heritage and also expressed the need to discuss the meaning of democracy as a part of artistic practice. Solidarity with Ukraine was expressed as a component of other activist aspirations, and the general political agency intersected and overlapped with the Ukraine-oriented agency and the agency I discuss next related to denying the Russo-Ukrainian war. However, since the escalation of the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022, many hesitate to work with Russian folk songs, either avoiding or ceasing performances of the Russian folk song repertoire as a part of European cultural heritage. Notably, the interview material did not reveal a desire to avoid folk music from ethnic minorities living in Russia, such as the Finno-Ugric people, but only excluded songs of the Russian majority.

## War-denying agency

The third kind of agency detectable in my research material can be described as war-denying agency. As Cohen (2001, 1–20) described, denial is a complex phenomenon involving different kinds of reactions, such as avoidance, rejection, reinterpretation, and rationalisation. The interviewees avoided the Russo-Ukrainian war as an ongoing conflict in several ways in their responses. This avoidance of the war created several kinds of agency, described as vague, shadowy, contradictory, unclear, and partly unpredictable (Cohen 2001, 1–20; Honkasalo, Ketokivi and Leppo 2014). For example, interviewees offered rather long and ambiguous answers regarding their identity and how it changed following the war, whilst also claiming the culture they grew up in will always remain the same for them. In my view, at the core of the interviewees' denial and avoidance lay a refusal to accept the existence of the war. For some interviewees, avoiding the issue of war resulted in a seemingly endless need for explanations regarding their identity, for instance, making their stance and their agency difficult to interpret. Moreover, I underscore that, in some European countries where democracy is unstable or almost non-existent, the need to protect oneself and one's family members may result in complex forms of denial and silences. As such, war-denying agency emerges in the space between silence, confusion, indirection, and a kind of secrecy.

Following Cohen (2001, 1–20), and Gearty's (2024) summary of Cohen's theory, in my research material war denial can be interpreted as based on literal denial (the Russo-Ukrainian war does not exist) or interpretive denial (the war is not what you think it is). For my interviewees, this denial is probably influenced by the political situation in Russia, where they risk punishment if they mention the war, and by Russian militaristic rhetoric, which speaks of the invasion of another sovereign country as a special military operation (see, e.g., Pynnöniemi and Parpei 2024). Furthermore, it may be difficult to accept the reality and consequences of war. Cohen (2001, 1–20) spoke of both individual and state-level denial, creating personal and collective forms of agency. However, war-related denialism was present amongst many of my interviewees' responses, who together represented more than ten different nationalities. Notably, I highlight the different ways in which war-denying agency can be mobile and shady: even if an interviewee seems to deny the existence of war in their statements, they can simultaneously take part in activist solidarity events supporting Ukraine. It is also possible that

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the Russo-Ukrainian war and its profound impact on Europe is altogether a difficult topic to discuss.

The interviewees viewed folk songs as a transnational culture always sung at weddings and funerals, whereby the songs' origins do not matter – whether Ukrainian or Russian, for example. Interviewees also mentioned that they wanted to keep folk-singing and politics as separate as possible, without showing support for any one nation. This avoidance of nationalism was emphasised, for example, in Feinberg's (2018) study of the Slovakian folk music and dance scenes. Some interviewees emphasised freedom as the ideology guiding their agency, potentially interpreted as the freedom to sing whatever songs they want. They said they sang Ukrainian songs because the audience wanted to hear them. We can view such agency as calculating and thus denying the existence – or at least the significance – of the war. Some interviewees expressed a desire to continue transnational cultural co-operation with people living in Russia and feared a ban on all Russian cultural heritage and the singing of Russian folk songs.

The following serves as an example of an ambiguous response, whereby several forms of denial-based agency emerged. This interviewee reflected on their relationship to Ukraine as a nation, the nature of folk songs in general, their relationship to Russian folk songs, and their need to stay away from war games, as well as the role of ordinary people in villages in the midst of war:

I'm not so convinced of what I should think about the war. I feel probably a little bit awkward to scream "Ukraine, Ukraine," as a country. [...] I feel this is a nationality they promote, they want to have their rights, they want to identify as Ukrainian. And, then, I just feel, wow, what is actually folkloric singing? What role does folkloric music have in it? Who am I when I sing that? [...] But I didn't feel that I'm not allowed, or that I shouldn't sing Russian songs anymore [...] because I think I don't want to participate in these political war games. Always the small people in the villages, they never wanted war. And folk music still existed and continues to exist.

(Interview 4, 2023)

This interviewee expressed uncertainty about their views on the war and felt uncomfortable with the public support for Ukraine. They acknowledged that Ukrainians are defending their right to exist and their national identity. However, it appears that this

interviewee may be personally denying or struggling to confront Russia's war of aggression (Cohen 2001, 1–20), or perhaps they are unwilling to acknowledge the suffering this war has caused the Ukrainian people. This interviewee also reflected on the act of performing folk songs, questioning their true meaning and their own identity when performing them. They pointed out that they cannot be prohibited from singing Russian folk songs, stressing their desire to distance themselves from the political dynamics surrounding the war. They also underlined that villagers, as a group of people without a particular nationality, never want war. However, this stance itself can reflect a form of denial (Cohen 2001, 1–20). As such villagers, despite their position, remain part of a nation with a relationship to the ongoing conflict and its broader political context, regardless of whether they are part of an authoritarian regime restricting the expression of opinions and any potential counter-agency related to the war.

In ethnographic research, timing matters (Huttunen 2010, 21–22). During my research (2023–2024), the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war caused rapid and sudden changes to the field of folk singing. By autumn 2024, interest in and support for the situation in Ukraine had waned, both because people seemed accustomed to the war and because other conflicts – particularly in the Middle East – had escalated (Foy 2024). During my research, opinions and actions towards the war may also have changed radically amongst some of the interviewees, from opposing the war to supporting it.<sup>5</sup> The following interviewee described how the idea of a shared antiwar agency was shattered in a Ukraine-related solidarity art project:

I'm a pretty naive person in the sense that when I've done the work, I've somehow imagined that they [artists in the project] are all on the same side, so that all [supporting the Russia's invasion] has emerged for me afterwards. [...] After something like that has come to light, you have as little contact with the person as possible. [...] It is perhaps my own protection.

(Interview 27, 2024)

This interviewee described themselves as naive in assuming that all artists involved in the same project also oppose Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Upon realising that the artistic working group included individuals who support the Russian invasion, this new

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5 In relation to sports, see, e.g., Arkimies (2024).

understanding created a sense of ambiguous agency oscillating between acceptance and denial (Cohen 2001, 1–20; Honkasalo, Ketokivi and Leppo 2014). This interviewee created agency by distancing from persons who supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In doing so, they aimed to protect their own wellbeing. However, this agency was based on silence, on not speaking out about this uncomfortable subject.

Feminist studies of militarisation note that war can permeate the structures and practices of societies and families, whilst also feeling too risky to discuss, creating various silences of which everyone is aware (Häkkinen and Salavuo 2024). Feminist research often seeks to listen to and highlight the experiences, affects, and practices that lie beneath silences (Vastapuu et al. 2024). Although my interviewees did not verbalise direct support for Russia during the interviews, some expressed such opinions afterwards during informal discussions or mentioned the topic indirectly. Presumably, these participants did not want to reveal their support for the Russian invasion during the interviews because they formulated their responses based on what they thought I expected to hear, a common occurrence in research (see, e.g., Huttunen 2010; Paju et al. 2014). Notably, the interview question (How has the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war affected your activities in the field of folk singing?) did not necessarily provide an opportunity to express direct support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instead, it may have indirectly approached the subject.

In recent years, community and socially engaged arts have paid particular attention to ethics and power relations (see, e.g., Kantonen and Karttunen 2021). The values underpinning the objectives of international and, for example, EU-funded arts projects often reflect the European Commission's (2025) strategic objectives in cultural policy (i.e., strengthening democracy and equal opportunities). Yet, gaps may remain in addressing ethical issues and identifying power relations (see, e.g., Lehtonen 2021). The following Ukrainian interviewee reflected on an art project organised in a European country during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, where both Ukrainian and Russian artists performed together on the same stage:

How is it possible when in one project I need to be, like, sensitive to Russian refugee stories and Ukrainian refugee stories? [...] Remaining on stage with some person who is also a refugee, but he just buys [...] the train [ticket] [...] from [one

city] to [another city] and just then comes to [a city] and now you are standing on the stage and says [...] that you both have the same problem. [...] One escaped the war and bombing and the other one just took [a train].

(Interview 7, 2024)

It seems that even in activist and antimilitarist art projects aimed at peaceful interactions, issues of power relations and war-related emotions can be neglected, partly because the holistic impact of war on individuals is denied and power relations are not yet sufficiently recognised.

In addition to the kinds of agency described above, the interviewees also mentioned, at times somewhat contradictorily, that the war had not affected their folk-singing activities. Instead, the war had brought new meaning to and interest in their own roots, including the folk-singing and cultural traditions of their own nations and ancestors. On some level, these answers denied the existence of the war and included no empathy for the suffering of Ukrainians. The interviewees' agency was thus focused on finding and strengthening their own roots in the context of folk singing.

War-denying agency was the most difficult and ambiguous type of agency to identify in the interviews. Furthermore, war-denying agency developed at the intersection of silence, confusion, indirectness, and a kind of secrecy. The interview material revealed that, in some cases, the agency of folk singers related to either war-denying or war-avoiding activities, which they justified with, for example, the transnational nature of folk songs, artistic freedom, and the desire to keep music and politics separate. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine was not directly supported in the interviews, but understanding of or support for the war emerged during subsequent informal discussions. In addition, the importance of identifying power relations in art projects involving different parties to an acute conflict emerged from the interview material. The war had also led European folk singers to reflect on and search for their own roots and cultural traditions. Interestingly, war-denying agency overlapped with both Ukraine-oriented agency and general political agency. Even when interviewees either denied or avoided the existence of the war, they could simultaneously take part in solidarity events supporting Ukraine.

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## Conclusions

In my analysis, I discovered that the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has transformed the European folk-singing scene, and that European folk singers are creating different types of agency in relation to the war. Transnational folk-song performers have often defined and performed folk songs based on liberal European values, such as the freedom of expression and equality, and a shared human cultural heritage (Hill 2007; Kujanpää 2025). However, the Russo-Ukrainian war has brought hidden non-liberal, nationalist attitudes to the fore within Europe, with the war potentially boosting them. It is likely that the folk music community has always held diverse values, such that the ongoing war has simply rendered these differences more visible. Folk traditions are a resource that can be adapted for new purposes (Siikala and Siikala 2005, 280–281). Thus, the question becomes what values are associated with cultural phenomena such as folk songs and how do these values take on new forms in a contemporary context.

This study identified three partially overlapping and intersecting categories of agency amongst folk singers: Ukraine-oriented agency, general political agency, and war-denying agency. Ukraine-oriented agency consisted of activities demonstrating solidarity with Ukraine by performing Ukrainian folk songs and working with Ukrainian artists. Ukrainian folk songs were viewed as a life-sustaining force for Ukraine and Ukrainians. General political agency emphasised the transnational nature of folk singing, assuming a broad, activist stance against injustice through the performance of folk songs. In addition, general political agency amongst folk singers can be considered a form of folk-singing activism, combining folk singing with activism. War-denying agency was based on vagueness and ambiguity, and the avoidance or denial of the existence of the war. Such evasions and denials were justified, for example, by the transnational nature of folk songs and the desire to keep music and politics separate. Direct support for the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine did not emerge during the research interviews, only during informal discussions following the interviews.

The militarisation processes of European societies were reflected in the interview responses in different and sometimes contradictory ways. For instance, performing Ukrainian folk songs was interpreted as both militarised and ‘positive’ propaganda and as creating counter-agency to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, I argue that general political

agency acts as a counter-agency to the militarisation processes in European countries, using folk songs to take a stand on issues that contemporary societies want to silence such as minority rights. Such folk-singing activism has also recently been banned in one European city on the grounds of potential security threats and accusations linking it to terrorism. As a music researcher, it is difficult for me to assess whether the threat of terrorism is real or exaggerated. This kind of securitisation is typical of militarisation processes. Ultimately, the relationship between war-denying agency and militarisation remained more opaque, with responses highlighting a general need for the freedom to sing the songs one wants.

I approached different types of agency as existing in a continuous state of change and state of becoming. This flexible approach to agency allowed me to form the primary analytical categories and identify overlaps and contradictions between them. Furthermore, this approach shed light on silences and helped identify ambiguous forms of agency in relation to contemporary European folk singing and the Russo-Ukrainian war.

This research has demonstrated the importance of studying the relationship between music and the ongoing war, however difficult and ambiguous it may be. This study complements understandings of the concept of agency in musicology, folklore studies, and feminist studies, and offers new socio-ethical insights into the links between music, war, and militarisation. An ongoing war affects not only folk singers (and their agency) whose home countries are part of the conflict, but also folk singers in surrounding countries. Specifically, this work has shown me how the contemporary transnational folk-singing field is not a separate 'safe[r] space'. Phenomena like polarisation that appear in the context of an ongoing war in our societies also exist in the folk-singing scene.

In addition, my research has revealed silences related to contemporary folk singing and the Russo-Ukrainian war even I did not want to listen to initially. These silences consist of various forms of war-related denial and the vague agency associated with it. Identifying such silences in my data has been difficult given the ambiguous nature of denial processes. After I began to identify my own processes of denial in relation to the data and the attitudes behind ambiguous types of agency, these unravelling processes caused anxiety, distrust, suspicion, disgust, fearlessness, and fear. These emotions resulted from listening to and analysing the silences in these data. By mentioning these emo-

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tions here, I attempt to create an empathetic approach towards myself as a researcher engaged with a sensitive research subject (Schwenk, Tikhonov and Wickström 2025).

I propose that activist musicians and researchers should be more sensitive to power relations given that such relations between participants often remain neglected or receive too little attention in international art projects. We should listen carefully to the personal experiences of our colleagues when creating cross-cultural projects through the arts, especially in situations where such artists' home countries are in armed conflict with each other.

This research also raised many questions about the position and safety of both the respondents and the researcher. Therefore, I wish to underscore how important it is to pay attention to the wellbeing and safety of both interviewees and the researcher when conducting research with sensitive data on an ongoing war.

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Ten face-to-face interviews and seventeen email interviews, collected by the author between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2024.

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