

# Ukrainian

Memory must



4/23

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**Memory / muisti**

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# *Editoria!*

**Text — Anna Kananen and Juho Pitkänen**

**I**n *Gazeta*'s first-ever issue in March 2022, we featured the text *Slava Ukraini! Heroyam slava!* on the cover. The 16-page issue's design was rough around the edges, created on Canva with practically no knowledge of how to do layout. Even though we did not yet have much skill, we wanted to send a message: in response to Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, we aimed to take a stance and establish a platform for students to contribute through writing, illustration, and the showcasing of their expertise.

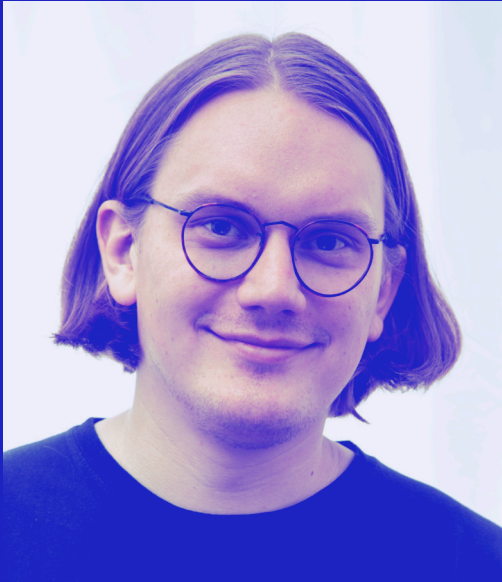
Due to Issuu's shitty policies (nowadays they only allow five issues with the free account on the platform), our first issue is not online anymore. However, the same *Gazeta* spirit has lived on for almost two years. For seven issues in total, we have provided our readers with sharp perspectives, grassroots knowledge and medium-to-extra spicy takes on Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus,

and – occasionally – Finnish politics. The mainstream media often tends to adopt a certain perspective – or neglect topics of our interest overall – to which we have aimed to respond.

In 2023, we also paid more attention to language inclusivity. Sasha itself has transformed from an ExpREES organization to a cross-cutting community of all Aleksanteri institute students, both from Finland and abroad, and *Gazeta* has kept up with the change. While our first issues in 2022 were completely in Finnish, nowadays we publish articles also in English, and other languages too – while still holding Finnish at a high value.

**I**n 2024, *Gazeta* will have a new editor-in-chief, but the magazine's spirit will surely live on, complemented with fresh ideas and perspectives – and an occasional article from previous editors-in-chief.

# Chair's Greetings



Text — Jalmari Sarla

Some weeks ago, we elected a new board for Sasha for the year 2024. I am delighted that our upcoming board better represents the entire spectrum of Aleksanteri Institute programmes than ever before: we now have six members from the MaREEES programme and four from the ExpREES programme.

Following a rule change implemented a year ago, we now proudly represent all Aleksanteri Institute programmes. It brings me great joy to witness members from the MaREEES programme embracing Sasha in new ways and actively contributing to the realization of these reforms. I am looking forward to further breaking the barriers between our two humble communities!

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our 2023 board. Collaborating with you over the past year has been an incredible experience, and I am exceptionally proud of our collective efforts in Gazeta and other activities. It has been among the highlights of my year to receive so much deserved praise for our magazine. I urge you to continue showing up in Sasha's events in the future, too.

As for myself, I will continue as a board member in the new term. The time has come for me to pass the chair position to Daniel List. Congratulations to him and the entire new board! Let us work together to make the upcoming year both memorable and enjoyable.

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# Travelling Back Home to Lithuania

Text and pictures — Kamille Grigonytė

***„Neris Vilniaus laiko upė,  
atminties upė. Ji pati nieko  
neprisimena, tik plukdo  
svetimą atmintį.“***

***”The Neris is the river of  
Vilnius’s time, the river of  
memory. It remembers nothing  
itself; it just carries others’  
memories.”***

**T**his is a quote from the exhibition *Vilniaus Pokeris* held at Mo Muziejus in Vilnius, which was quite a heavy experience – just like the book the exhibition is based on (**Ričardas Gavelis**: *Vilniaus Pokeris*, 1993). There were excerpts on the walls quoting the novel, a videotape of young people from decades ago telling about their life – some of them drunk and happy, others depicting the bottom of life; paintings from the 70s onwards, pictures of Vilnius, different sets and a long wall full of arrest pictures of the victims of repressions. A story was told with no filter on.

I left the museum quite anxious. That evening the weather was not pleasing either: it was pouring rain and the streets were flooding. After I got back to my airbnb, I wrote in my diary: “There is a part of Lithuania that

is still processing the traumas from the past that was not so long ago. It is still hurting and mourning. But even during all the difficult times that there have been in its history, it has never lost its hope, it has been resilient and loyal in preserving itself. The perseverance is inspirational and empowering, too.”

The exhibition was a mixture of voices telling memories about Vilnius and its people during the late 20th century. It was a piece that I added to the puzzle where I am constructing a picture of Lithuania; a picture with no beginning or end, not with a single truth, not coloured only using black and white. Rather it is a puzzle that I have always been unconsciously constructing, and it is polyphonic, colourful and resilient. It is a portrait of me, a person born in Vilnius in the shifty and unsafe times, the beginning of the 21st century. It

is also a portrait of my parents' stories and memories of the city where they ended up during their youth from different parts of the Soviet Union; a portrait of my grandparents' cultural and genetic legacy. And so on, through all previous generations. Seems that the puzzle is not mine only.

In this extensive journey of mine, Vilnius is one stop among many others, yet it is often, but not always, a conjunctive part. While assembling this I do not take anything for granted, I ask questions and I question; I listen, I try to understand, I take my time. I reject the definitions coming from outside from other people, since they all tell their own stories – and no story is an undeniable truth to anyone else, but the person itself. Just like mine.

## Outsider at Home

I started my first ever solo trip to Lithuania late this autumn, spent a few days in Vilnius and then went to Kaunas, a city where I had never been before. In the beginning of my journey I felt like an outsider and I was a little bit scared. But at the same time I tried to remind myself that this environment is part of me, and my experience is valid as well. And gradually, without even noticing, I started to build the picture of the town in my head, I recognized the places that my parents had told me about, and I hesitated less and less to speak Lithuanian.

The museum was only the beginning of my journey. Next day my colleague showed me the University of Vilnius and its church, the latter of which amazed me with its wealth and size. I then wandered around the Old Town and decided to go to the Republic of Užupis. Its artistic nature has always fascinated me, and this time I wanted to see more of it without any rush. I did not spend much time there, but I got to see many impressive murals and read some writings written on the walls in different languages, taking a stand on the present life and events happening in today's world.

Before exploring the rest of the neighbourhood, I spent some time outside of the Užupis Art Incubator and the Tibet Square. That spot is perfect for glancing at the river Vilnia that separates Užupis from the Old Town. The stream was peaceful and soothing, and the sound of it left behind the hustle of the city.

I left the spot with a tranquil state of mind and started roaming on the streets of Užupis. At some point I saw a stairway going up, and decided to follow it. I found myself on top of Altana Hill from where you can see glances of the city from above. The view from the Hill of Three Crosses is much better, but I was too tired to go there; instead, I went down the Altana Hill and, following Vilnia, I found myself in the Bernardine Garden.

At this point I did not feel tired at all even though I had been walking around the city all day. Before going home I stopped by the heart of Lithuania's Catholic shrine – the Cathedral of Vilnius. I had been there many times before, but its grandiosity, sanctity and beauty keep me going there over and over again.

## Grey Skies

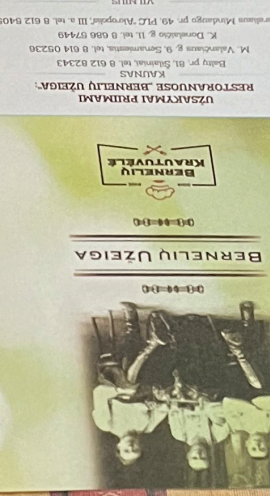
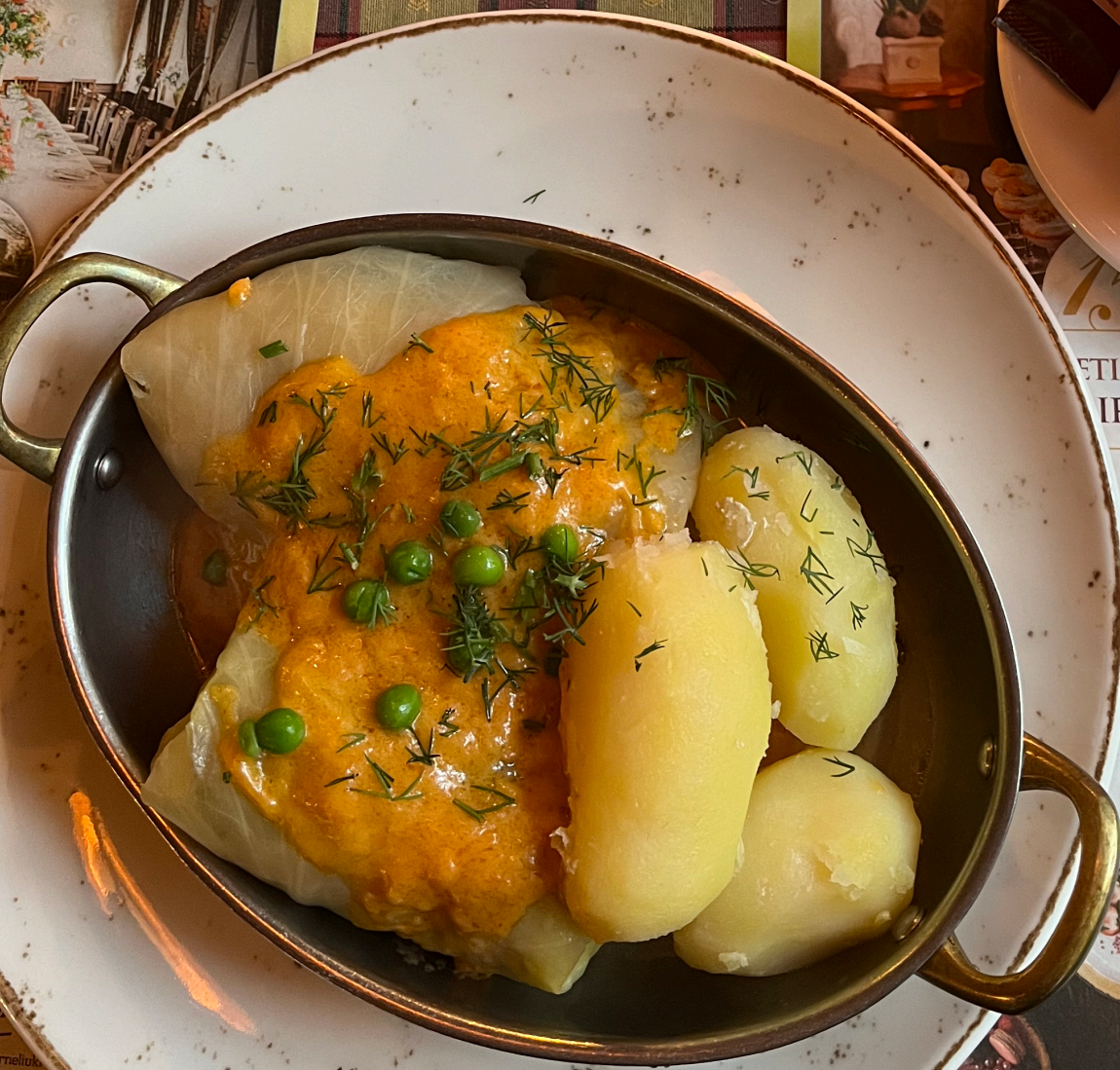
During my stay in Vilnius I was both an insider and outsider. I went to places I was already familiar with, met people that I already knew; but at the same time I just wandered unknown paths and parts of the city and observed the everyday life of Vilnius people. At first I felt uncomfortable, but the city accepted me as its undeniable part and made me feel like home. I felt connected to it. Vilnius started to reflect me and I reflect it – neither of us is defined by only one language, national sense, religion or culture.

**A**nd then I left to Kaunas, a former capital city of Lithuania. The views on the train were undeniably beautiful since the forest that seemed endless was colored in warm tones of yellow, orange and green. I was filled with calmness and clearness, even though I was on my way to something unknown.

I was expecting a well-preserved city with beautiful buildings everywhere, but my romantic image was contradicted with cold tones and lots of noise: the city met me with no sun but instead with a grey sky and lots of car traffic polluting the air so much that it made a sensible barrier in the air. I began to feel reserved and started wondering if this city is anything like in the mystical stories I had heard about it. But I decided to put expectations away and meet the city in its real form.

Once I got to the Old Town with its fresh air, I was absorbed into this dimension where I could sense all the culture and history that this city has, and especially walking on the Liberty Avenue emphasized this. There I could spot places where the





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members of the avant-garde literary movements would hang out back to the 1920s; I could appreciate the impact of Jewish culture on the architecture, and I was able to notice many languages being spoken or written. Avenue contains a lot, but you can always change to another street and find new dimensions to explore. But one thing I learned for sure – Kaunas is not less multicultural than Vilnius. In addition to that I realized that Kaunas is very welcoming too, and I started feeling connected to it as well.

I only spent two days in Kaunas – the first day exploring the Western part of the Old Town. I once again wandered on the streets and ate at places that served traditional Lithuanian food. I visited the Museum of the History of Lithuanian Medicine and Pharmacy, where I got to know some interesting, as well as disturbing, facts about medieval medical practices in Lithuania. I unintentionally timed my visit to the museum perfectly, because I could join a guided tour with two people from Brazil. Turned out that the woman's grandparents had emigrated to Brazil during the early 20th century, and now she is visiting Lithuania regularly and maintaining her relationship with it. Both of them had such good and warm energy that made an indelible impression on me.


After the tour we said goodbye and I continued my journey to the Kaunas Castle where I once

again felt the strong presence of history, but in this place it got some bloody tones due to its past events. My day culminated when I decided to take a walk along the riverside and I arrived at the confluence of Neris and Nemunas, the mythic and legendary rivers that stream not only in the area of Lithuania, but also Belarus. This alone ensured my perception of Kaunas that it makes me feel little, even tiny; that I am surrounded by greater forces that make one humble. It's in nature, surrounding Kaunas, in the streets of the Old Town and in the buildings, especially the churches.

Maybe it is the essence of the memory of this city, and since Neris flows into there from Vilnius, it adds its content to the Nemunas intensifying it. Though both of these rivers rise in Belarus – a place full of its own memories. That untouchable content of people and places crosses so much land leaving its effect on anyone who passes them by.

## No Destination

Next day, after getting highly influenced by previous experiences, I headed to the Eastern part of the Old Town where I visited M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art. To me his art is melancholic and comforting. His idea to combine paintwork and symphony is mesmerizing and delicate, and the use of symbols that indicate Lithuanian culture is a true



*Memory seems to  
be an ongoing  
cycle, both in good  
and bad.*

devotion to this culture that is difficult to define by borders.

Not only did I get to see **Čiurlionis's** work, but I also learned about the history of Lithuanian traditions and religion – especially the history of Paganism and Christianity. The final touch was the exhibition called “Green” where Lithuanian art, history, nature and science were combined through the colour green presenting different interpretations and feelings that it awakes. The exhibition highlighted the importance of this colour for Lithuanians, and ever since I left that place I cannot unsee the factuality of this argument.

**S**oon after that I left Lithuania. A piece for my puzzle was developed, yet it is not in its final form, and I don't think it will ever be. As time passes, the interpretations of my memories change – sometimes they become deeper, other times dimmer, at times they even get opposed. Memory seems to be an ongoing cycle, both in good and bad. It is a strong part of one's identity as it is a part of the community's identity, too. Important and sometimes crucial, it is not always liable since it can be manipulated, distorted or erased. But if it becomes unbearable, I guess you can just leave your memory – or memories – to a river. It can carry the weight of it somewhere without any final destination.

# Quilt of Memory

I envy Finns. The national history of the independent Finland might be relatively brief, but the family memory of the Finnish people persistently impresses me as rather extensive. One friend of mine traces her ancestry to a certain Polish smith of the late XVII century, while other recollects exactly what farm his surname originates from. This sort of memory is quite common among Finns.

Although I am a Finnish citizen myself, there are many differences that separate the legal “us” into culturally distinct “me” and “them”. Some are negligible, if ever noticeable, while others are of rather unbridgeable character. Family memory, its cohesion and continuity, belong to the latter category.

To know of or even be able to trace any ancestors beyond the fourth generation feels as an unattainable luxury for those, like me, stemming from the post-Soviet space. Simultaneously, the further the family memories reach, the more difficult they frequently turn to reconcile with the official Russian history.

The victory in the Great Patriotic War in 1945 seems to justify and redeem whatever past and future actions by the masters of the Kremlin or the Winter Palace, virtually turning it into an eternal year zero. This memory lane offers no safe passage to those questioning its seemingly straightforward direction and those wondering what is cracking under their feet. Best to not look back and down.

Perhaps, that was exactly how some of my grandparents thought. Being of mixed heritage, my family history consists of rather contrasting mnemonic fabrics, carved and sewn by the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. There is Ingrian, Russian, and Ukrainian peasant linen, exchanged for a Soviet urban toiler cotton. Moscow’s boiling centrifugal washes of the XX century left little of their individuality. Treated in the same cruel manner, these distinct fabrics turned into equally battered and pale. Folk embroidery loosened up and fell off, worker garments wrinkled and shrunk, no longer offering any comfort or assurance – only visions of what they used to and could be.

Escaping the toilsome reflection of how to tie together this long overdue patchwork of a column, I indulged myself with yet another glance at other people’s recent memories on Instagram. I desperately needed the Deus Ex Machina to deliver me on this one and the genius of algorithms responded as I proceeded deeper into their temple. They presented me with the history of **Anne-Reet Pöld-Veemees** and her magnificently decorated quilt, now exhibited at the Estonian National Museum. Twenty years of embroidery turned the initially grey and featureless blanket this Estonian refugee had received in the ruined post-WWII Germany into a true masterpiece, an ode to her heritage and lost home.

Looking at photos of the amazing fruits of Anne-Reet’s dedicated labour, I remembered how simple the cure to my frustration was. Just like her, I gather my own colourful yarn of moments and solid threads of experiences fill the thin fabric of family memories, distorted by the Soviet era upheavals.

The national patterns I am creating are eclectic, but simultaneously mindful of those before me and their cultures, their favoured materials. Hopefully, I will live to pass on a quilt of family memory as elaborate as that of Anne-Reet. I know for sure that yet another detail will be sewn by cords from Tartu and the National Museum there.



# Make



# not



*The Balkans cannot be defined exhaustively, but usually they refer to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia, and sometimes also parts of Greece and Turkey.*

*Map recreated from [ontheworldmap.com](http://ontheworldmap.com)*

# burek



Smoky barbecue parties in the woods, ashtrays on kids' birthday tables, crazy drivers on bumpy roads. There's a specific place for Balkan humor in the depths of social media. Balkan memes use stereotypes to make fun of the culture, society, and traditions of the region. But, in the offline world, what does "Balkan" even mean?

Text — Sara Harju

# war!

I might not be the best person to answer, as I have no roots in the Balkans. Yet like many other outsiders, I find myself amused by Balkan memes.

Internet memes can be pictures, texts, videos, or combinations of all these – what makes them memes is the circulation, imitation, transformation, and the understanding of the context. They can express criticism towards the society or simply be amusing. In today’s politicized media climate, memes are an interesting and increasingly studied area of research.

There are various accounts dedicated to “Balkan memes” on Instagram and Facebook, many of which have thousands of followers. On TikTok, there is also a growing number of videos under hashtags such as #balkantiktok and #balkanmemes.

One of the most popular Balkan meme accounts is an Instagram account called Balkan\_memes, whose profile says MAKE BUREK NOT WAR (burek is a traditional pastry popular in many countries influenced by the Ottoman Empire). This gives a hint of the contents: Balkan memes

deal with history and politics with the help of black humor.

Balkan memes joke about food, family relations, and beauty standards, as well as violence, political history, and living conditions. There is often a comparative element: “the rest of the world” vs. the Balkans, the rest of the world meaning the so-called Western world.

The meme below is an example of this.



# The Balkans as "the other"

The comparison mentioned above needs to be addressed with criticism. First of all, there is no universal geographical definition of the Balkans. It refers to a group of countries in South-Eastern Europe, but the countries have different views on identifying as Balkans. In public and academic discourse, the area is also often divided into Western and Eastern Balkans.

A useful concept in researching Balkan humor is Balkanism. Balkanism can be viewed as a variation on the orientalist theme that distinguishes the Balkans as a part of Europe that used to be under Ottoman rule and, as such, different from Europe "proper"<sup>1</sup>. According to the Balkanist view, Balkan people are backward, tribal, and uncivilized. For centuries, Western Europe has aimed to differentiate itself from it.

In Balkan memes, the humor derives partly from the geopolitical position of the Balkans. According to **Marina Antic**, the Balkan self exists in the space in-between East and West<sup>2</sup> – this means that being

Balkan only has a meaning within the reflected perceptions and self-perceptions. In this context, divisions such as West and East have little to do with geography and a lot to do with discourses and power.

The whole Eastern Europe has been a subject of so-called othering, meaning that Western Europe is "us" and the rest is "other". The aesthetics of Balkan memes – grandmas, rusty playgrounds, and canned vegetables – are sometimes



1 Bakić-Hayden, M (1995). Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia.

2 Antic, M (2006). The Balkans and The Other Heading: Identity and Identification on the Margins of Europe.

also used when describing “Slavic” or “Eastern European” aesthetics instead of specifically Balkan lifestyle.

According to a Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova, the Balkan self is never separate from the European gaze. The Balkans have been mythologized as the “non-European part of Europe”<sup>3</sup>. Todorova argues that although the Balkan peoples have been somewhat passive objects in the shaping of their image from the outside – meaning that they didn’t participate in spreading the discourse – they have not been passive recipients of the “Balkan” label either.

Now meme-makers are actively using these same

characteristics and stereotypes to describe Balkan people.

## Memes and memory

Virtual public spaces have become important sites for collective identity formation, and meme culture is creating new possibilities for belonging. It is quite clear that most Balkan memes are made by and for Balkan people. Many jokes require first-hand

experience or at least knowledge of the cultural history and traditions in the Balkans. Most of the humor makes sense to foreigners too, and that is because the stereotypes are so well-known.

According to a study focusing on European meme community, memes focusing on certain geographical area can reinforce the imagined community<sup>4</sup>. I argue that Balkan memes also form an imagined community that builds heavily on memory and not as much on the present day. When looking at the memes and their topics, it becomes clear that what they have in common is history.

The post-conflict context adds its own flavour to the collective memory in meme-making. Balkan memes do not joke about current politics because it would be impossible to form a shared experience on that. The countries in the Balkan area have chosen different paths during the past decades. On the other hand, the social grievances that memes bring out are often recognized by people who share a common or similar history.

What is also notable is the ability of memes to create unity inside the diaspora. Some Balkan memes particularly deal with immigrant parents’ habits that – once again – get contested in the new, more “Western” surroundings.

### Balkan parents be like



3 Todorova, M (2009). Imagining the Balkans.

4 Enverga, M (2019). Meme-ing Europe: examining the Europeanization of humorous discourse in an online meme community.

Hospitals in  
Balkan countries



Hospitals in  
Western horror  
movies



# Dark humor as counter-memory

One can argue that there is a specific place for dark humor in Balkan culture. For instance, Anna Sheftel writes that Balkan humor is “infamous”, and that many of the best jokes deal with Yugoslavia’s violent dissolution<sup>5</sup>. She also studies how the narratives of that violence affect the region’s present. For example, dark humor is a form of counter-

memory that allows Bosnians to express dissent from dominant narratives of the Bosnian war.

One popular aspect of Balkan memes is joblessness and poor living conditions. There are many memes of Balkans moving out of their country as soon as they can. Sheftel gives an example of a Bosnian joke

referring to the idea that war criminals have been afforded better lifestyles than ordinary Bosnians – the prisons in the West are more luxurious than half-built houses and cramped apartments in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This logic also forms the humor in the meme below.

The meme below uses dark humor and brings Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs together, referring to the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. The first thing in their minds in 1996 wasn't exactly to chat and read books in romantic coffee shops. This shows that it's possible to handle even a vulnerable topic with jokes.



Who is laughing  
and at whom?

**I'm sorry ma'am  
I don't know what  
Ajvar is**



*(Ajvar is a traditional Balkan spread made from roasted red peppers.)*

Balkan memes use self-irony to joke about a group of people that, from the outside view, seems like a unity. Are Balkan memes creating a sense of unity that only exists on a superficial level?

In Balkan memes, it is the meme creators who define what is Balkan and what resonates with the followers. There is often discussion in the comment section about the similarities or differences between countries: one popular question is whether Turkey is part of the Balkans or not. It seems like in today's political climate, the "us" is mostly

virtual. Perhaps the imagined community could not be formed around anything serious or at least anything political.

There is also an interesting difference between Balkan and Yugoslav humor. The former rarely divides people into ethnic groups or makes fun of a specific country, whereas the latter used to do that more. It is, of course, essential to understand that former Yugoslavia and the Balkans are not comparable concepts, since the Balkans is a large area with a long history whereas Yugoslavia was a country that

existed in the region for less than a century.

According to Anna Sheftel, humor is a powerful and widely used tool that has yet not been given enough consideration by Balkan and memory scholars. So far Balkan memes haven't been studied almost at all, but this year, one quantitative research was published<sup>6</sup>. Balkan memes offer a whole research subject in memory and identity studies. Whether the topic was the war or common swear words, memes speak to people in the Balkans and beyond.

THEY THOUGHT THEY HAD A CHOICE,  
BUT IT WAS ALREADY...

# INVOKED



RANĆ PRODUCTION PRESENTS INVOKED A FILM BY LUKA PAPIĆ & SRĐA VUČO WITH SUPPORT OF  
FILM CENTER SERBIA AND MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND INFORMATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

# INVOKED – REMEMBERING THE FIRST MULTI-PARTY ELECTIONS IN SERBIA

*Invoked (Prizvan i pozvan) is a documentary film about the first free elections in Serbia in 1990. The film recounts one of the strangest periods in Serbian political history and tells the stories of five former presidential candidates. In this interview the directors **Luka Papić** (b. 1989) and **Srđa Vučo** (b. 1984) tell the readers of Gazeta Sasha about their newest work.*

Text — Omar Fasolah

Pictures — Luka Papić & Srđa Vučo, MK GRAF

**M**any students might come across different interpretations of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the role of **Slobodan Milošević** in it. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Milošević won the 1990 elections due to his media manipulation. Nationalist themes and rhetoric were his cornerstone, but he also gave screen time to every candidate which made him look the only reasonable alternative. Luka Papić and Srđa Vučo have created a very intriguing depiction of those times. Therefore it is interesting to hear what the directors remember and how this period is remembered in Serbia nowadays.

**Srđa:** I mostly remember the atmosphere and the television, which my parents and their friends used to stare at. I remember those bizarre presentations and characters in the mist. That was something we wanted to represent in this film. Nothing was not clear for me but I felt the atmosphere and I think that everyone already knew the outcome.

However, this event is a bit forgotten because the war broke out less than a year after the elections.


**A**lmost 50 political parties participated in the elections and there were vast groups from anarchistic humour groups to ultra nationalists. One of them was the Great Rock 'n' Roll Party, which promoted "sex, debauchery, madness and drugs". The group wanted to show that "any fool in Serbia can found a political party. Maybe because of this plenitude, it was not difficult to find ex-candidates who were ready to talk to the cameras.

**Srđa:** Most of our protagonists had more than a strong will to be in front of the cameras again, present themselves and tell their version of those events. Among other things, this is a film about ego, and therefore we chose such colourful characters. **Savo Nešković** is a sole exception and I think he agreed to be filmed because of us. We've known each other for a while

and we get along with each other, so he obviously saw that we care about the film.

**I**n addition to Savo Nešković, the documentary gives a voice to persons like **Ljiljana Čujić**, the first Serbian female presidential candidate and **Dragan Jovanović**, writer and philosopher. Firstly, they interviewed some more famous candidates like **Vojislav Šešelj** but later decided to omit the footage. Although those candidates did not make the final cut into the finished film, they helped to develop the project itself.

**Srđa:** It wasn't a big thing to find these people. It was harder to make the decision that only these five people should be included in the film and not these more famous candidates we have unfortunately been watching for more than 30 years. We also filmed more famous politicians, but we made the decision that they will appear in the film through the archive material, and not from today's view.



We also filmed more famous politicians, but we made the decision that they will appear in the film through the archive material, and not from today's view.

**T**he directors have used archival material abundantly and they have compared the used material to films like *Robocop*. However, as a significant difference to fantasy films, the spectator is presented with authentic footage of the moments that led to ethnic cleansing and annihilation. When Luka and Srđa watched the material that Srđa had collected with the

research collective called *Medijska arheologija*, they realised that they had a kind of ready-made situation.

**Luka:** The characters and the archive material reminded us of dystopian representations of the media in *Robocop*. Some segments of the material seemed to be like Monty Python episodes, and some more mystical footage reminded us of a dream sequence in John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness*. Then, we logically had the will to make a film that was in some way as exciting as the films that the material reminded us of.

The end result is audiovisually mesmerising since the soundtrack of the film is a riveting selection of the Yugoslavian popular music. *Divlje jagode* and other bands from the 1980s amplify the dynamic cutting. The film can be heavy but it has received positive feedback in the Balkans, but also internationally.

**Srđa:** I think that the film brings back some repressed memories to the older domestic audience. Something similar to the book *It* by **Stephen King** when 27 years later the characters get an unpleasant call that It has returned and they have to face the ghosts of the past.

**Luka:** The reactions depend on the country where it is screened, but so far there has always been some reactions. People are everywhere provoked by something. After the screening at *De Baile* in Amsterdam, a Dutch man in the audience told me that he hated our film. Another person in the audience jumped to defend the film and told him he had no right to hate this movie. Before they started to fight I intervened by saying, "Wait, let him hate the movie, that's great, maybe that is even better than if he was thrilled by the movie". Afterwards, he

explained to us that he simply identified too much with our protagonists and it hurt him that he was such a person, and he bought us a couple of rounds of beer.

**Srđa:** All the participants have been very satisfied with the way they are presented in the film, but they have been disappointed that the film is not only about them. Savo Nešković is again an exception. He has not seen the film yet, and I believe that he is not even interested in watching it. He is too cool for our film, for real.

**I**t will be interesting to see what kind of reactions *Invoked* will trigger in the Finnish audience. Luka and Srđa send greetings to the readers and tell that the film also has an interesting connection with Finland.

**Srđa:** We hope that the Finnish audience will enjoy the film as much as we have enjoyed the song Tragedy by Hanoi Rocks. We used to listen to that song a lot while we made this film. Thanks for Finland and Hanoi Rocks!






**A sequence from a Ukrainian *khorovod* folk dance.  
It can be danced in celebration of the New Year!**

Text and picture — Johanna Porkkala



JP

# Train to the past and future – a travelogue to Moldova

  
CALEA FERATA DIN MOLDOVA  
CHISINĂU - BUCUREȘTI

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*As soon as you arrive at Chişinău Train Station, you will see currency exchanges, pawn shops, and travel agencies. Already in the beginning, the capital of Moldova says to you: “You better sell everything to get out of here.”*

*But we will not, my reader. It seems that Chişinău and the whole of Moldova hide complex mechanisms and rich cultures that nobody knows about. Take my hand and let me guide you through this hidden gem, Moldova!*

Text and pictures — Anna Koryukova

## **Pro-European spirit**

When walking around building blocks, a person from the former Soviet Union feels right at home: the same Brezhnevkas, the same vivid billboards that destroy the landscape, the same old ladies selling berries and moonshine on the streets. And suddenly you see a dentist clinic with a European flag on it. What is going on?

Even though Moldova borders Ukraine, the spirit in Chişinău remains calm and quiet. However, tensions are increasing in the parliament. After the full-scale invasion, Moldova, as well as Georgia and Ukraine, applied for membership in the EU. Last week, the EU decided to open negotiations with both Moldova and Ukraine.

Since 1989, Moldova has tried to become closer to Romania, while the invasion of Ukraine has reached its climax. The pro-European **Maia Sandu**, the president of Moldova, and her party PAS have set a goal to become a full member of the EU by 2030. The goal requires time, reforms, and resources: from the mass firing of judges to EU flags on buildings and even on grass.

Let's enter the parliament. The parliament building is dark inside, because the parliament tries to save on electricity. Due to the war, which has been dependent on Russian energy, Moldova has become short of gas and electricity supplies and has attempted to be independent from Russian supplies. An occasional power blackout is also a common thing.

We are met with a warm welcome from two young PAS members. They are two inspired and enthusiastic souls, who want to bring the European Union to Moldova, yet they are aware of how hard it is going to be to make a change, especially in the light of continuous crises:

*“Since we came to power in 2021, we have been hit by one crisis after another. First, we had to finish up the problems we had with the pandemic, then we had the energy crisis forced by the Russian Federation. Then, of course, the war started, refugee crisis. We were probably not as well prepared as we would wish to be. Another crisis is the economic crisis, which was caused by the increase in energy prices.”*

These are not the only continuous crises that divide Moldova. There is division between Moldova and Transnistria, pro-European and pro-Russian people, past and future, old and young generations, the ones who stayed and the ones who migrated in hope of finding a job. There is a big task ahead for the government: to unite people to believe they are one big family working for building a society here, not outside as guest workers.

## Everyday life

When I asked an old taxi driver about the new reforms of Maia Sandu, the middle-aged man behind the steering wheel didn't believe that reforms would have any effect: *"As soon as a government that isn't pro-European government is elected, everything will go back as it was"*. It might seem the man is cynical, but cynicism is what unites people in the post-Soviet area, I think.

Moldova is quite absent in our media and is not a popular holiday destination. Therefore, we didn't expect anything, and we were open to everything. In return, the people of Chişinău appeared to be open, friendly, and very polite to us.

Moreover, it is not hard to find delicious mamaliga in one of the traditional restaurants, such as *La Plăcinte*, and cheap wine, sold in plastic bottles in supermarkets. Wine is an essential part of Moldovans' everyday lives. Most places in the world forbid this, but in Moldova, it is legal to produce homemade wine. This phenomenon doesn't only take place in rural areas. By walking around in a garage area, you can sometimes see men brewing the wine right in the public area. Of course, it is worth it to visit wine cellars, such as Cricova and find out that it is not only cellars. It is a whole underground town with its own infrastructure, cinema, church, etc.

Another famous drink from Moldova is cognac, Kvint. Actually, it is specifically from Transnistria, a breakout republic close to the Ukrainian border. I have a special story with Kvint. When walking around late at night in Chişinău, I accidentally cast my eye on a shady building, which seemingly had not been renovated since the 1970s, I guess. A group of young people were smoking in front of the building. My curiosity defeated my shyness, and I asked the group what this place was. And

then I ended up in a room with techno music, where artists were voluntarily working for their underground publishing house and treated us with shots of Kvint.

One of the artists, **Anton Poleacov**, shared a glass of Kvint with me, and talked about his childhood in Transnistria. He even wrote a book about growing up in a country isolated and not recognised by any country. The book was full of atmospheric pictures and citations from local people. When I asked him if he would like to promote his piece of art with the help of Danish students, he answered very humbly that he doesn't want to earn money on his art, as capitalism would destroy the underground culture and the spirit of Dom Kulture, which is based on people's initiatives for having fun and volunteering.

His statements seemed to me to sound like those of a person from the Soviet Union. Perhaps Transnistria had an impact on him in the sense that Transnistria has preserved Soviet heritage. Let's find out and take a trip to Transnistria.

## Transnistria

Transnistria is located on the east bank of the Dniester River. The locals call this place “behind the little river” (*за речкой*). Officially, Transnistria is called the left bank and Moldova the right bank, which in English sounds quite ironic. In 1992, a war took place between the nationalistic Moldovan movement and Transnistria, predominantly inhabited by the Slavic population. Volunteer soldiers from Russia and Ukraine were involved in the conflict, and, currently, Transnistria is under the “protection” of the Russian army. Although the war ended 21 years ago, the ongoing conflict between the left and right banks continues to shape Transnistria’s isolation.

As a Transnistrian citizen, you are very restricted in your rights and mobility. The region operates with

its own universities, institutions, and even currency, the Transnistrian ruble, but no country recognizes its validity. With a medical degree from Shevchenko State University in Tiraspol, you can’t get a job anywhere else than Transnistria. It would be difficult to obtain a degree in Moldova, as their entire educational system is in Romanian, which is challenging for Russian-speaking Transnistrians. You can’t travel with a Transnistrian passport in your pocket even to Moldova; therefore, most people have dual citizenship. Transnistria has its own separate healthcare system, but with limited ability; however, referring to health care services on the right bank will be challenging. NGOs in Transnistria are restricted in applying for international funds compared to their Moldovan colleagues.



By passing the border at the Transnistrian check-point, it feels as if you are coming to a totally different country. There are only Russian-language signs, Russian flags everywhere, soldiers with Russian flags on the arm, standing next to anti-tank obstacles.

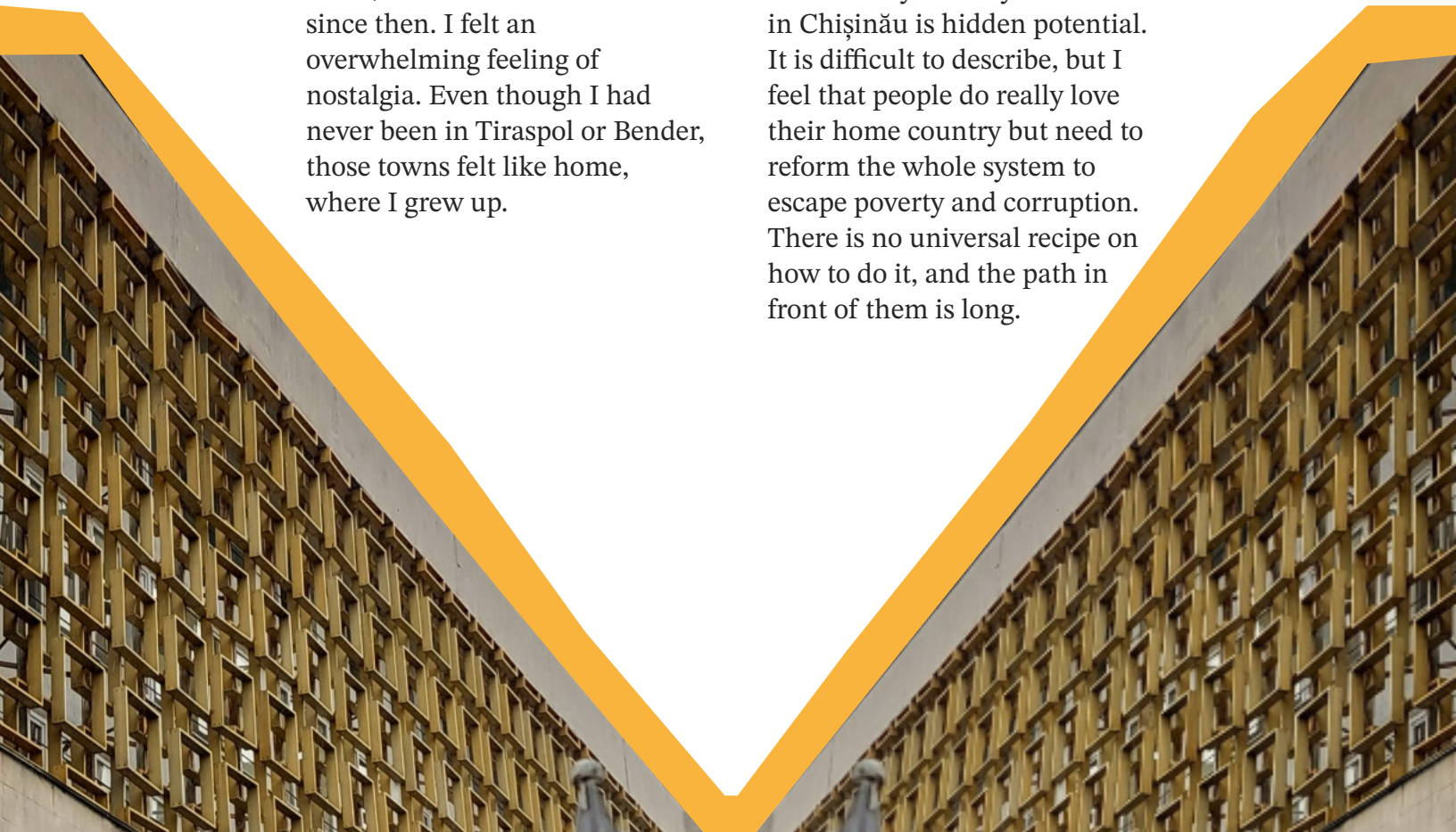
You can feel the isolation of the region from the rest of the world. School children around 14-15 years old look at us with the greatest interest, because they have never seen foreigners before. People, hearing the sound of a foreign language, can't take their eyes off you. As a tourist from non post-Soviet countries, you become an attraction, that everyone would like to take a picture of you.

As a person who grew up in Russia in the 2000s, I felt like I was being thrown back to those times, as if time had been frozen since then. I felt an overwhelming feeling of nostalgia. Even though I had never been in Tiraspol or Bender, those towns felt like home, where I grew up.

Moreover, people were very kind to us. At the bazaar, old ladies treat you with the free delicious *golubtsy*. Another old lady behind the desk referred to you as "my dear" (*моя хорошая*). An old nun in an Orthodox church will run just to bring you sweets and paper with her telephone number.

Even though it is quite dangerous to travel to Transnistria as the embassy of your home country will not be able to help you, if you get into trouble, I have only warm feelings for this place and its people. When I was leaving this place, I tried to hide my tears.

Now our journey is over, and we are heading to catch the famous train from Chişinău towards Bucharest. Unfortunately, like most Moldovans, we are leaving this friendly country. What I saw in Chişinău is hidden potential. It is difficult to describe, but I feel that people do really love their home country but need to reform the whole system to escape poverty and corruption. There is no universal recipe on how to do it, and the path in front of them is long.





## Bucket list

- Cricova Winery
- Cats Café at Alexander Pushkin Street 32, if you are into eating *pelmeni* with cats sitting next to you.
- Drink a locally brewed beer at Taproom 27: A Hoppy Place or at Bar Draft
- Try a legendary cherry wine from Ukraine at Piana Vyshnia

## How to Chişinău 101

- Use YandexGo as it is cheaper than local taxi companies. If you to take a local taxi with a taximeter, bargain the price before the trip.
- You can take the famous train Bucharest – Chişinău, but be aware that you can't buy a ticket online.
- Follow or contact local cultural coalition *Coaliția Sectorului Cultural Independent din Republica Moldova* for upcoming events.
- There is also an amazing tour guide to brutalistic buildings in Chişinău by Kathmandu and Beyond



# Svobodny: Koreans in the Russian Civil War



Picture source: [https://imnews.imbc.com/news/2023/politics/article/6518323\\_36119.html](https://imnews.imbc.com/news/2023/politics/article/6518323_36119.html)

What are we to think of Korea's relationship with the Russian Civil War, and what are some limitations of the Korean discourse on an international conflict?

On August 24th this year, a general who fought for Korean independence with a conspicuously Communist militia was brought to the fore of public attention in Korea for a while. This general, **Beom-do Hong** (홍범도) had a bust erected in his memory in the Korean Military Academy campus (consider it the Korean version of the *Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu*) in 2018 under the previous administration. The Minister of Defense (a member of the current ruling party) took issue with this, essentially out of the blue, claiming that it is not right for a person who was directly involved in the massacre of Korean independence activists and militiamen in the *Svobodny* incident, and was also a known Communist. Hence, this bust should be moved somewhere else, preferably the Independence Memorial Hall.

For a few months at least this was a very contentious topic, but perhaps not for the most tasteful reasons. Some historians dug up a letter that Hong allegedly wrote to **Iosif Stalin** himself in 1941, four years after ethnic Koreans were 'relocated' to Siberia: the now old man, in his 70s, allegedly requested Stalin to send him to the frontlines and fight the fascists. Regardless of our own opinions on Stalin, there is something deeply admirable and genuine about Hong's

letter and the conviction behind it, though it must be said that this letter does not appear out of a complete political vacuum. Hong was a prominent figure amongst the ethnic Koreans after all - it is said that in 1922, he met **Vladimir Lenin** and **Leon Trotsky** personally and received a pistol with his name engraved. At least we could say that he stuck to his guns, then.

What is less focused on in this whole debate, is a relatively under-researched part of Korean history concerning ethnic Koreans in Manchuria and Far East Russia and their attempts to achieve independence via warfare. How successful this entire idea was or how grounded in reality it was is outside of the scope of this article and requires serious historical research, but a very interesting event was mentioned by the Minister of Defense in his argument in favor of moving the bust elsewhere: the *Svobodny* incident. Let us travel around 1,539 kilometers and try to see what happened there.

The *Amur Oblast* is a region in Russia that borders *Heilongjiang*, the northernmost and easternmost province in China. The region during the Russian Civil War was nothing short of a mess: the Bolsheviks were fighting various White armies such as those led by **Alexander Kolchak** and **Grigory Semyonov**, all the

while trying to contain the Japanese movement towards the north. Other contingents such as *Zelenyy Klyn* (more accurately ethnic Ukrainians residing in the Russian Far East) were also present there, not to mention various factions of expatriate Korean militias who traveled north from Manchuria after the devastating Japanese campaign that targeted them.

By the time more Korean militias moved their bases of operation to the *Amur Oblast* near a city formerly called *Alekseyev*, or *Svobodny*, the Bolsheviks had decided to create a buffer state in the Far East, aptly called the Far East Republic. The Far East Republic was not exactly the most stable state - in 1921, a coup led by White Army factions fizzled out after they did not receive their promised support from the Imperial Japanese Army. Even amongst the Red Army factions, there were Anarchists and Socialist-Revolutionaries. Not only were there ethnic Koreans, but also Chinese, Ukrainians, Russians, Japanese, and even Jews living in the region under a very shaky balance of power. In short, although it takes up a lesser part of our knowledge and attention of the Russian Civil War, the Far East was a region that encapsulated the extremely complicated political and ethnic interrelationships that characterized the war itself.

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And here, a great tragedy that not even a lot of Koreans remember occurred. In 1921, the Red Army, fearing a potential escalation of their conflict against the Imperial Japanese Army, attempted to disarm the Korean militia in the region, who had already gathered in Svobodny to form a unified front against the Japanese. This attempt did not go smoothly, and the situation rapidly devolved into gunfights. In the end, around 300 Koreans were killed as a direct consequence. The exact figures are unclear, but sources tend to agree that at least 36 were killed outright, with some arguing that 200 more died while being pursued.

This is what the Korean high school history textbooks talk about. Not the part about the complicated ethnic and political dynamics in the Russian Far East, nor the part that this event occurred within the context of the Russian Civil War, but just that the Red Army attempted to disarm Korean militias, and massacred Koreans. Historical events are reduced to only involve Koreans and their suffering. I remember reading about it when I was a high schooler in Korea myself - I only read about it and never remember being taught about this particular event, because by the time we were covering the early 20th century, our semester was coming to a close

and there were 'more important' things the teacher had to lecture us about. Still, the events stuck in the back of my head. Only now am I, writing this article, actually finding resources to learn more about this event.

It would thus be a surprise for most Koreans to know that the aforementioned *Zelenyy Klyn*, the separatist movement of Ukrainian settlers who arrived in the Far East during the later part of the 19th century, even existed: as far as I remember no part of the history textbook dealing with the *Svobodny* incident even discusses the existence of people other than Koreans, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Russians. Reality proves to be much more complex, as usual.

Another painfully ironic aspect of the *Svobodny* incident is that the very militia that the Minister of Defense claimed to be the victims of the Red Army and Communist militias were in fact the perpetrators of the relatively well-documented *Nikolayev* incident in 1920, in which certain Korean militia detachments serving with **Yakov Tryapitsin** (who was part of the Red Guard) were complicit in the total destruction of *Nikolayevsk-na-Amurye*, killing both Japanese and Russian people alike. It was not as if any Koreans and Korean militias in the region were working independently

from the Red Army, it turns out.

The lesser known link between modern Korean history and the conflicts in the Soviet Union does not stop there. The commander of one of the Korean anarchist militias was an ethnic Georgian, **Nestor Khalandarishvili**, who served under the Far Eastern Republic. On the other hand, there were communist Koreans who aligned themselves with the Bolsheviks as well. It is impossible to fully capture the nature of the Korean independence movement without thinking about the Soviet Union, for better or worse.

All of these links, though historically present, were hardly dealt with in historical discourse in Korean politics or generally, until a very weird incident happened two months ago at the time of writing this piece.

How are we to see this? Is it to be considered a Korean version of Baltic and other post-Soviet countries removing communist monuments? Or is it something weirder that defies a more conventional explanation? I find that drawing a direct equivalent to decommunization of monuments hinges on a very misguided understanding of what communism meant within the efforts to liberate

Korea from Japanese colonial oppression.

A direct parallel is somewhat forced, as a key aspect of the debate in post-Soviet spaces is lacking in the Korean context: it was not as if the Soviet Union somehow forced Koreans to be communist and fight on their side (although Korean political discourse throughout the last few decades position itself dangerously close to that type of reasoning). It is certainly true that all leftist militias or armies during this time did commit documented and undocumented atrocities of their own. That in itself, however, is a bit different from the Soviet Union forcefully enlisting unwilling people on their sides. But one may argue that those who oppose the statue being torn down are essentially making the same argument as their post-Soviet counterparts. There is at least a certain rhetorical similarity to it that, eerily enough, echoes the arguments of a group of people from the southern side of a certain country that is very influential in world politics.

In a very broad sense one may understand Korea as being in a liminal post-Soviet space. Although South Korea was never within the Socialist Bloc, as a frontier facing it, the very existence of North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union has somehow exerted a

gigantic influence on Korean discourse. In a way, it resembles Finland, although the emotional and political proximity between Korea and the United States has never allowed the Soviet Union to strongly influence Korean politics. Its influence is lasting, but operates in a negative way, in that certain political actions or speech is taboo by virtue of its ideological proximity to communism.

In this light there is a good reason why proposal to remove the monument sparked a national controversy - Koreans never really faced the legacy of communism head on, because we lacked the political language to do so. Because of that, somehow when we have to confront our history in relation to the Soviet Union and communism more broadly, discussions concerning the influence of Communism on Korean history tends to devolve into name-calling. One side calls another communists who would gladly sell out the country to North Korea (which, ironically enough, removed any reference to Marxism or Leninism years ago from their constitution) and the other calls their opponents uneducated, ahistorical fearmongers (which is of course disingenuous but somehow superficially not that far off from the truth). We don't really get to talk about history, legacy, or memory. And if things stand like this, the

chance for a productive discussion about South Korea's existence and communism (more broadly any sort of leftist ideas, for that matter) remains unfortunately slim.

In the end the Hong monument controversy dissolved in a few weeks - like in many other countries, politics in Korea is a fickle beast which keeps on generating and burying controversies. Nothing really came out of it, and to be very honest, it happened so that nobody really cares anymore. A few weeks later a completely different controversy about a politician's problematic economic conduct arose. But with that, the chance to discuss the role of communism, the interlinked nature of ethnic issues in the Soviet space which included not just Koreans but also Ukrainians, Jews, and so on, unfortunately also entered oblivion for the time being.



