Original Scientific Article

UDK: 343.974:7.097.7(470)
316.48-053.6(470)

https://doi.org/10.21301/eap.v19i4.1

Miša Đurković

Institute of European Studies, Belgrade
mdjurkov@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4305-8184

Conflicting Readings of the Brutality of Late Communism – The Case of the *Slovo Patsana* Series

Abstract: The paper explores how a phenomenon of popular culture undergoes very different interpretations within the same cultural circle. The author focuses on the immensely popular Russian series *Boy's Word*, which premiered in 2023. The show deals with the phenomenon of juvenile criminal gangs in Kazan, involving many associations and layers. All this was reinforced by the framework of the Ukrainian war, and the absurd outcome that it is the most watched series in Ukraine even though it is banned.

Keywords: Boy's Word: *Blood on the Asphalt*, television series/tv show, crime, Russia, Kazan phenomenon

Introduction

Contrary to older univocal interpretations of pop-culture products that interpreted and read this type of phenomenon from the limited perspective of their own ideology, cultural studies that have developed in recent decades have emphasized the contextualization of these products and dynamic, multi-layered readings. Quite often, a product such as a television series, over the course of several seasons, begins to acquire completely different dimensions, becomes interesting to a different audience, and performs completely different social, value, and even political functions in the same community. Elsewhere (Đurković 2004) we showed how, for example, oriental motifs in Serbian neo-folk music were the subject of multiple disputes and how the so-called *turbo folk* from the "sound image of Milosevic's wars" overnight became the "emancipatory sound of globalism" and the promotion of minorities. Different interpretations of television soap operas (e.g., Latin American) are very well known. In this case, we moved away from the standard discourse on dumbing down and propaganda to a far more complex reading that includes an

understanding of the female audience's need for warmth, sensitivity, justice, morality, and other threads that these products implied (Spence 2005, Đurković 2009).[1]

There are even more radical examples, such as *Por estas calles* (On These Streets), a series broadcast in Venezuela from 1992 to 1994. Conceived as a classic telenovela, it slowly transformed into a series that literally responded to the ongoing turbulent events in the country and spoke critically about them, describing life in a time of crisis. Those two years were marked by extreme instability, with two coup attempts, the impeachment of the president, the election of an interim president, numerous murders, protests, etc. (Gamboa, 2016). In the meantime, the genre began to change in that part of the world, with crime-focused series playing an increasingly important role. Thus, Palavesich writes about the development of the drug cartel genre (Palavesich 2016).

In recent times, thanks to streaming services and the expansion of Turkish-type or, for more elite audiences, Nordic-type productions throughout all corners of the world, serialized TV shows surpassed films in terms of popularity, influence, and cultural relevance, and became a phenomenon of serious interest to a much wider part of the academic community than classical experts in popular culture. For instance, the famous French international relations expert Dominique Moïsi published a special study on the geopolitics of television series ten years ago (Moïsi 2016), in which he analyzed six very popular global products. However, in the Introduction, he drew attention to the enormous complexity and importance of television series today, which, in his opinion, underwent a cultural revolution after 2000 and became not only a fantastic means of analyzing the modern world, but also a dominant discourse, a discursive habit through which ordinary people and even politicians transmit messages to the broadest audiences. Moïsi says: "Television drama series have not only become the equivalent of what feuilletons were in the 19th century, that is, the essential determinants of culture. Screenwriters of television series, at least the best ones, can be compared to the best novelists of the time, from Balzac to Dickens and Flaubert. They are not satisfied with a cold analysis of reality. They sense and predict this reality with the power of intuition, courage, and lucidity of their imagination. In fact, screenwriters of television series have become the best analysts of society and the modern world, if not the most reliable futurologists. This is similar to what happened before the First World War. While the most respected experts of the time

[1] Kovačević 2018, 106, indicates that the audience may react to the series with an expected, different, and sometimes completely opposite reading of the narrative and its intended messages.

declared that war was, if not impossible, at least largely unproductive, and therefore almost unbelievable – as aptly illustrated by the success of Norman Angell's book *The Great Illusion* – one could recognize in the paintings of Egon Schiele, Edvard Munch or Georg Gross a kind of premonition of the impending disaster, as if a depressive personality trait allowed these artists (or rather some of them) to become mediums capable of predicting the future of the world" (Moïsi 2016, 10).

Less than ten years after these lines were written, the world is faced with the danger of a direct nuclear confrontation and a new inter-bloc clash, which can easily turn from cold to scorching hot. But television shows globally have become one of the most important promoters of the whole new identity policy in the West, i.e., the presentation and promotion of the LGBT agenda from the 1990s onward, which showed a huge potential for changing the value system and encouraging and directing profound changes in many societies. The rapid transformation of this framework becomes apparent when we compare the original episodes of *The Sex and the City* series with the sequel *And Just Like That...* What used to be radically liberal narratives, with uninhibited discussions about sex, depictions of promiscuity, and representations of the gay community, now seem completely obsolete in the fully radicalized sexualized and transgender-oriented recent episodes. From charming erotica, it quickly transformed into discursive and increasingly graphic pornography.

On the other hand, since 2010, with his programming text and the entire *Black Mirror* series, perhaps even more than all philosophers and theorists combined, Charlie Brooker pioneered a critical approach to digital technologies and the world of gadgets, surveillance, technology addiction, and biotechnologies, unmistakably setting the direction of the instrumentalization of technology to rule over all pores of our life at the cost of destroying society and community. He did so in a thoughtful, elaborate, and innovative way that made Orwell's *1984* seem like a children's picture book. It's no wonder that ten edited volumes and monographs, as well as many stand-alone papers, have already been published about that series alone.[2] In Serbia, this series was discussed in Martinoli 2018.

On a side note, there is a plethora of books like *The Simpsons and Philosophy* and various other series, suggesting that the academic world has also recognized the inevitability and appeal of television shows as a space where discursive, cultural wars and research of contemporary society take place. In Serbia, see Ildiko Erdei's book about the locally produced influential sitcom *Pozorište u kući* (*Theater at Home*) (Erdei 2020).

[2] Some of the literature is listed in Đurković 2022.

Context: The War and the Crime

This introduction, which was supposed to underline the enormous importance of television series and the need for their far more complex interpretation and understanding within a rapidly changing world and societies, should prepare us for a veritable tornado of conflicting readings of a similar phenomenon: an eight-episode Russian series broadcast in November 2023 under the name *Слово пацана (Slovo patsana)*, that is, *The Boy's Word: Blood on The Asphalt*, that premiered in November 2023. Less than half a year has passed since this series debuted, yet we can already say, without exaggeration, that it will remain one of the most important pop culture and social phenomena not only in Russia, but in the entire post-Soviet space as well. Across social networks, the show is already perceived as the final offshoot of the new "holy trinity" of crime-based pop culture products, which includes Aleksei Balabanov's two-part noir film *Brat (Brother)* and *Brat 2*[3] and the 2002 miniseries *Brigada*, also known in English as *Law of the Lawless*. The series started streaming on online platforms in November and has so far had 25 million viewers who watched it legally and probably at least three to four times as many who watched it pirated. In Serbia, several pieces have already been published on portals (Kolarić, 2024, Pajović, 2024); in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the treatment of the series has been raised to the level of state security policy, while the most complex attitudes towards it and conflicting readings can be found in Russia itself.

The topic of juvenile crime comes with the ethnic backdrop of Tatarstan within the so-called SVO (Special Military Operation) or the war with Ukraine. The plot unfolds while most of Russia is changing on the inside, deeply questioning the previous three or four decades and the value system adopted from the West during that period. Then comes the nostalgia for the aesthetics of late communism, i.e., the *perestroika* and the beginning of the overall transition, followed by the question of the history of crime in the USSR, and particularly the so-called Kazan phenomenon, i.e., the history of juvenile gangs, *grupirovke* or *gopniki*. All this results in an incredible mixture of meaning and context in which it is extremely interesting to see how even parts of the establishment react in different ways to the phenomenon and some of its aspects.

To the people of the Balkans, who have been through a simultaneous process of the disintegration of the country, transition, wars, and, above all, sudden changes in the value system, which pushed criminals from the margins of

[3] The cult status of this series continues to grow. A luxurious monograph with almost 300 pages, complete with pictures, anecdotes, and trivia, was published last year to commemorate the 25th anniversary of its release (Zakhariev 2023). T-shirts with Danila asking *В чем сила брат?* (What makes might, brother?) are one of the symbols and popular souvenirs to bring home from St. Petersburg.

society into the media and the epicenter of social events practically overnight, much of what is said about this phenomenon will sound familiar. In a way, *Slovo patsana* can be compared to *Rane (Wounds)*, Dragojević's slightly caricatured film from 1997 that captured the subculture and iconography of Belgrade's *patsani*, juvenile killers and criminals like Knele, who marked the 1990s in Belgrade. Another noteworthy contribution was the 1995 documentary *Vidimo se u čitulji* (*See You in the Obituary)*, which preceded the *Wounds* and beautifully depicted the relocation of crime from the social margins to the public sphere and mainstream media (Pajović, 2024). But *Slovo patsana* is an independent phenomenon with a much wider scope; in this paper, we will attempt to offer an analysis while pointing out the principal debates the series has sparked and the reasons it has given rise to so many debates and conflicting opinions. It is worth noting that Serbia has also recently seen a wave of shows about youth crime, some of them running for several seasons. Suffice it to mention *Klan, 12 words*, and *Grupa*, for example.[4]

Criminal Subculture in Russia

The history of crime in the Soviet Union is one of the most intriguing and under-researched phenomena in Soviet and communist studies. The culture of so-called thieves by law (*vori v zakone*) continued throughout the duration of this social experiment; we know about the tragedy of the ruthless (*besprizornye*) from the 1920s and early 1930s, but perhaps the most interesting phenomena have to do with late Brezhnevism and the *perestroika*, which directly bring us to the narrative of the terrifying Russian mafia of the 1990s and the marriage of crime, business and politics in post-Soviet Russia. However, there is also a special local flavor of individual regions, just as in today's Moscow, with a clear division into ethnically based crime of Russians, Chechens, Georgians, and others. We must also mention the so-called Kazan phenomenon, i.e., the history of youth and boy gangs that operated from the beginning of the 1970s until the end of the 1980s in this famous city, the capital of Tatarstan, the birthplace of Turkish nationalism (Uzer 2016), among other things. There were also women-only groupings, as well as female members of groups, *patsanke*, but it is nevertheless a distinctly masculine phenomenon, whose symbolic masculinity, old-fashioned sense of honor, and even a certain conservatism much like that of the Italian mafia, became very interesting during the war followed by the revival of the cult of masculinity, courage, and loyalty in wartime Russia.

[4] For the two most popular crime dramas, *Besa* and *Južni vetar*, see Milovanović and Šibalić 2022.

These groups reached their peak in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, only for the state to gradually suppress them and reduce them to a relatively acceptable level. Intriguingly, Timor Bocharov's paper from 2021 argues that the phenomenon of these groups has all but disappeared from the media, which he sees as a result of the views of local authorities that these groups have indeed been suppressed and brought under control (Bocharov 2021, 127). However, Bocharov also wrote reviews of two important books that appeared in the span of several years, detailing the Kazan phenomenon and its recent history. These are Svetlana Stevenson's *Life by the Rules: Street Gangs in Russia* from 2017 (Stivenson 2017) and Robert Garaev's *Slovo patsana, Criminal Tatarstan 1970 – 2010* from 2020 (Garaev 2020). His excellent presentation indicated the importance and quality of both books a few years ago, renewing interest in the *patsan* culture of Tatarstan.

Of course, other researchers have also dealt with this phenomenon. Suffice it to mention D. V. Gromov and T. Shchepanskaya, who produced insightful ethnographic works fifteen to twenty years ago. However, these two recent authors have offered truly anthological studies that systematically and minutely covered this phenomenon from different perspectives. Stevenson, a professor in London, has done a nine-chapter sociological study. In addition to theoretical material, she also included interviews, focus groups, and field research conducted in the period 2005–2010, and the book was originally published in English by Cornell Press in 2015. A Russian translation appeared in 2017 by the publisher Strana Oz (Stevenson 2017).

However, the book that appeared three years later is more relevant to the topic of this paper because it directly inspired the creation of the series we are discussing. Just as Vladan Jovanović's article on Macedonian opium from Old Serbia, published in 2009, directly inspired Dragan Bjelogrlić's TV show *Black Sun,*[5] this book resulted in a series of the same name.

The book was not made as a narrative template, but as an interesting ethnographic study in which the author created a collage, a kind of interactive, collective enterprise. He first started a group on social networks called the Kazan Phenomenon and allowed former and current members of the groups to present their own testimonies about how and why they were involved, and what the system looked like from the inside. The author had spent two years as a member of one of those groups, hence the book contains his witness accounts as one of the informants. In addition, each chapter includes a small theoretical introduc-

[5] Garaev was involved in the project as an expert consultant and was mentioned in the credits. Unlike him, Jovanović was unhappy with what Bjelogrlić made of the story and asked for his name to be removed from the credits, renouncing any association with the series. In the meantime, he published an extraordinary book called *Opium in the Balkans*. See Jovanović 2020.

tion and excerpts from the works of other writers and scholars who have dealt with these matters. Put together, this diverse material gave a very readable and comprehensive overview, providing, unlike Stevenson, an insight into the phenomena of sexual relations, the relationship of *patsani* to these issues, etc...

In 2007 (Dyachok 2007), M. Dyachok published a synthetic article about the very term *patsan* and its history and path from the streets to literary works and the mainstream, all the way to dictionaries of subcultures and slang. The word *patsan* is equivalent to the Russian literary words *malchik* and *yunosha*, says the author, and does not appear in written records from the 19th century. It first appeared in literary usage in the novels of Sholokhov (1928) and Ostrovsky (1936). It places the geographical origin of the phenomenon to the areas around the Black Sea and Southern Ukraine, classifying it in the *lumpen* category. Dyachok lists three versions of its origin, of which the Yiddish source seems the most relevant to him. It is interesting that the word received its first scholarly definition in 1929 in Mirtov's dictionary *Donskoy slovar,* published in 1929 at Rostov-on-Don. At that time, it was used in the big cities of southern Russia to describe boys aged 12–13.

The term did not enter wider usage until the 1960s, appearing in Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Due to the changed social environment, the meaning of the term expanded in the 1990s. It has two primary meanings. The first is a young, noisy, conflict-ready guy, and the second is a young member of a criminal group. There are also variations, such as of *patsanka* for a female member of such a group, and adjectives such as *patsanski*, *po-patsanski*, or *patsanska* culture. The broader term *gopnik* is closely related, and it is claimed that the *patsani* have their own language, laws, rhetoric, symbols, and gestures.

Their culture and ecosystem are often studied as part of the parallel world of subculture and, in particular, the world where violence as a way of life is widespread. In an informative article, Ilya Rogotnev (Rogotnev 2013) discusses the *patsani* as part of a trinity that also includes nationalist organizations, as well as skinheads and *natsbols* (national-Bolsheviks or followers of the controversial writer Eduard Limonov). Building on Professor Gromov's research, this author emphasizes the importance of violence for the existence of these groups. Yet, on the other hand, it is limited by a very strict and binding street moral code and traditional notions of male honor. Violence is mostly directed towards members of enemy groups and, less commonly, towards people whose habits and clothing they do not like. Along with masculinity, order is also important, based on a clear and recognized hierarchical structure.

The Kazan phenomenon is about half a century old. This criminal subculture gained momentum in the period of late communism. After the great success of the show in Russia, various records, recordings, and documentary material about gangs from the 1970s and 1980s also garnered enormous popularity,

amassing millions of views on YouTube. These recordings are of great value for their atmosphere of naivety, showcasing the famous *patsani* collective dances and the overall aesthetics, which also have a very prominent role and a strong symbolic meaning in the series. Dance was used as a form of collective identity building (team building), as a form of exercise, but also as a reflection of creativity because each group tried to create its own moves and recognizable distinctive dance style.

Slovo patsana Show

Inspired by Garaev's book, the series was directed by Zhora Kryzhovnikov, a well-known name considered close to liberal circles.[6] Kryzhovnikov is a director, producer, and screenwriter who was, among other things, one of the directors of the popular multi-season sitcom *Kitchen*, which was also screened in Serbia. The series was filmed in 2023 in the backdrop of the Ukrainian war and released in November of the same year. It consists of eight episodes, with the last one having two versions with different endings for certain storylines and the fates of the main characters.

The series is set in the era of *perestroika* amidst the obvious disintegration of the previous system of values and social organization, as well as the family. The story revolves around a young talented pianist, Andrei (codenamed Coat, *palto*), a teenage schoolboy who lives with his mother and little sister. In the first episode, he is harassed on the bus by Marat, who extorts money from ordinary children, his peers, beating them viciously. We slowly get to know the atmosphere in which an otherwise decent, hard-working, and ordinary boy decides to join a gang to protect himself not only from Marat, but also from other violent groups at school. After a brutal initiation in which he proves he can endure a fight and not give up, the leaders of the group accept him and recruit him into a street gang made up entirely of teenagers of different ages, managed by several older young men more seriously involved in the world of crime.

Things become complicated with the return of Marat's older half-brother Vladimir, known as Vova Adidas (after the gopnik's favorite sports brand). This combination of Russian and Tatar names and their family, with a Russian father and a Tatar mother, gives a distinct ethnic, Eurasian flavor and atmosphere to the series, as well as the city of Kazan as its setting.[7] After initially siding with the older group of criminals, Vova reorganizes his kids from the group; together,

[6] He supported anti-regime protests in 2019 and declared himself a liberal in an interview. See https://actualcomment.ru/rezhisser-kritikovavshiy-putina-stal-kreativnym-prodyuserom-nmg-2103181400.html

[7] However, the series was not filmed in Kazan due to a ban by the regional authorities.

they chase away the older ones and take over the space where they gather and train. In a safe, in addition to some money, Vova also finds a gun, which will play a significant role as the plot advances, reflecting Chekhov's famous dictum about the gun on the wall in the first act that must be used in the last.

The general narrative shows the functioning and life of their group, which is trying to defend its region and fight for its place on the map of Kazan. This includes a string of conflicts and fights with rival gangs, as well as the first victims. They begin to extort money from passers-by on the road and people in their area. Also, after stealing a video recorder from a man in an apartment, they start a business, using it to show movies to a wider auditorium. This causes a big conflict when a more powerful group takes advantage of their weaker protection and steals all their equipment, kidnapping Marat's girlfriend, fourteen-year-old Aigul. In Vova's attempt to resolve this amicably, several of them are ambushed and gravely humiliated when Vova agrees to apologize in order to prevent Marat's ear from being cut off. But the *patsani* never apologize; that's the first rule of honor in the street world.

He reacts to this humiliation by going to the headquarters of this gang with a gun, killing their leader Zholti and wounding two others, freeing Aigul, who had been raped in the meantime. These criminal activities attract the attention of the authorities, embodied in a police investigator who in the meantime enters an emotional relationship with Andrei's mother. The police start chasing the Suvorov brothers (Vova and Marat) to solve the murder. The world of crime and real life gets even more complicated when Vova starts a relationship with a nurse, Natasha, a relative of the man he killed, and by a bizarre set of circumstances ends up at his wake and funeral. The resolution is brought by the last episode, which was done in two versions: the final and the demo version released later. In both versions, Vova dies.

In parallel, several more plot lines deal with Andrei's personal development from an exemplary boy and budding pianist to a gang member who eventually bullies the younger ones as others had bullied him. The authors show how his new life destroys the family: his mother is committed to an asylum, and his little sister is under the care of social services. The darkest part is the unhappy love story of Marat and Aigul. After the rape, even though she has done nothing wrong, she is treated as defiled, an outcast with whom no one is allowed to maintain relations. Her friends abandon her, the members of the gang run away from her, and they all put pressure on Marat to stop seeing her. This harsh code of honor leads to her complete isolation and, ultimately, suicide.[8] The urge for

[8] Some interpretations have noted a fundamental difference in the moral code and understanding of honor compared to American biker gangs, where members sometimes have sexual relations with the same women, that is, where promiscuity is understood as part of identity-building within the group.

revenge makes Marat a traitor to his group, and he accepts an invitation to go into politics not only to avoid prison but also, through political connections, to get the opportunity to take revenge on the man who had raped Aigul. After various vicissitudes, Andrei seems to be able to gather the family and get indications of a positive response from a social worker he likes.[9] However, at the market, he is recognized and caught by the man from whom he had stolen the video recorder and TV. The last scene in the series shows him with his hair cut in a juvenile prison as he plays the piano to accompany the prison choir performing the song *Sedaya Noch*, widely used as a hymn for their *grupirovka*.

The showrunners pointedly emphasized all the consequences of teenage crime: murder, suffering, injuries, disintegration of families, social humiliation, the fact that real criminals did not live to be 20 or 25, mutual betrayals to save their own skin, etc. On the other hand, the obvious knowledge of the ethnographic material brought by Garaev ensured a fair portrayal of the motives that led boys from the margins to become members of a criminal community, going beyond the mere survival their parents' lives had been reduced to, and to belong to a system in which, at least seemingly, there are chivalrous codes of honor, solidarity, the urge to help one's own, etc. (Stephenson 2011).

Music plays a special role in the show. The hit of the Tatar hip-hop group *Aigel*, called "Piyala," which runs whenever there is a fight or something dangerous happening, has become a huge symbol in the entire post-Soviet space. It is curious, however, that they were not listed in the credits because they became active critics of the regime and the war, and eventually moved out of Russia. The old techno-pop hit by singer Yuri Shatunov and his band *Laskovyi Mai*, which perfectly reflects the aesthetics of transition, the naivety of young people eager to imitate Western pop culture at that time, gained no less popularity. The song "Sedaya Noch" forms the basis for the dance of friends in the group, their girlfriends, and all the young people who gather at the local disco. The special dance that accompanies this song has become very popular, with YouTube offering numerous clips of young people from Riga to all parts of Russia dancing identically. However, the screenwriters revealed their feelings about the West in the superb episode with the American caps that Marat and Andrei steal from a free shop. Vova, who comes from Afghanistan, immediately takes off those caps and throws them on the floor, warning that the manufacturers of those caps were sending stingers to the Mujahedeen which they used to kill his friends, the Soviet soldiers. They give it up in shame to see how the Russian cap will be worn as part of the uniform in the future.

[9] In the updated version, the mother ends up in a mental institution and has a breakdown while the family falls apart. This version was filmed after a demo version of the eighth episode appeared on the Internet. The most significant difference is the death of Vova. In the demo version, he is killed by a member of a rival gang and in the regular version by the police.

The technical aspect of the series received mostly good reviews, noting its realism, screenplay dynamics with no filler content, realistic depiction of violence and its contextualization, excellent soundtrack, scenic design, costume design, and even the revival of the famous mass dances of these groups. However, moving on to value assessments and the potential consequences of its broadcasting or streaming, and its great popularity, we come to a very slippery slope where the most diverse and conflicting opinions and attitudes intersect. This paper attempts to recap and analyze at least some of those readings.*

Different Receptions and Hermeneutics

The above-described scene when the boys remove the American caps is one of those incidental moments supercharged with dramatic symbolism. The symbolism must be authentic, however modest it may be. It must not be an imitation of the West. This is the key symbolic departure from the previous world described by Peter Pomerantsev in the very informative and widely read book *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* (Pomerantsev 2014), which depicts the real life of the jaded Russian business, media, and political elite, fascinated by the West. This incredible world of people who make millions, send their children to be educated in the West, throw decadent, vulgar parties, buy outrageously expensive properties in Western resorts and London, and despise their own people, is generating enormous dissatisfaction and hatred not only among ordinary citizens of Russia but also among the population of surrounding countries who still see Russia as the center of their cultural, value and even ideological system. Many Russians now fighting on the side of Ukraine and many radical Ukrainians despise and hate that value system and the most radical imitation of the West in the popular culture, e.g., Alla Pugacheva's offerings or TV shows that televisions are full of, even though they are allies with the West in this war. This seemingly paradoxical position is the reason that young people in Ukraine are so fascinated by *Slovo patsana* and the moral code that the series brings. It is about the meaning of life, where instead of hoarding money and indulging in decadence, they finally see what they want in Russia: young people who believe in something, who are ready to lay down their lives for a friend, their community, a sense of belonging. This is evident in the numerous debates on Telegram channels, the most popular social network in the post-Soviet space. Two decades ago, Prokhorova wrote about this need for community, meaning, belonging, and group identity in Russian transitional crime dramas (Prokhorova 2003, 520).

* Please note that many sources are from Telegram or other social networks, therefore it is impossible to cite them with precision.

All of that is underlined by this Tatar flavor as a symbol of the protagonists' Eurasian yet non-European identity. However, we can read this from several angles. The Tatars themselves, especially the youth, have embraced the show and are very proud of the way the series portrays them, allowing them to more strongly assert their distinct identity within the framework of the Russian Federation. This, in turn, coincides with the interests of Ukraine and Turkey, but also of the entire West, actors traditionally interested in the affirmation of minorities in Russia, and the Tatar community in Crimea. On the other hand, among Ukrainians and Kazakhs and others, it is precisely this layer of Tatar Eurasianism and the combination of brutality, loyalty, courage, and honor that causes enormous fascination. The Ukrainian and Kazakh authorities also recognized the layer of implicit and understated yet unmistakably present Russian patriotism and acknowledged the series as a powerful tool of Russian soft power, seeing it as a threat to their control over the socialization of youth and middle-aged people. The series was filmed at a time when the Chechens, another Muslim minority, played a particularly prominent role in the hostilities in Ukraine on Russia's side, therefore the parallel with Tatarstan caused additional problems.

On a side note, Vova uses the methods and exercises he learned in Afghanistan to train his boys. The series exudes masculinism as an "antidote" to St. Petersburg hipsters and "the general decadence" of the anti-war majority at universities and the urban youth when the war began. Many of these people left Russia in the meantime, but the conviction remained that the legacy of pro-Western views, hedonism, and artistic trends among the youth was too strong. Therefore, the appearance of a show that reaffirms masculinism, warriorship, and chivalry was received as a tribute to the young men from the provinces who bear the brunt of the war on the Russian side and as a return to and legitimization of violence in the public space to motivate people to fight.

Even though the show's director is not considered to be on the patriotic side of the creative spectrum in Russia, its state sponsorship through NTV raised suspicions of a hidden political agenda, if only behind the scenes, when the series premiered.

The series became hugely popular even though it was only available on streaming platforms. As noted above, it reached 25 million legal views. The *Slovo patsana* hashtag brings up over 11 billion posts, and all social networks are full of show-related content. In particular, there are millions of views of clips, simulations, documentaries, statements of participants, etc., on TikTok. Various types of merch are also available, such as a bag of chips with Marat's image. Criminal slang from the streets of Kazan became very popular, so a family in Kazan named their son Chuspan – the opposite of a *patsan*, someone who is an ordinary citizen, that is, not a gang member.

Reportedly, entire families watched the show together. Young people enjoyed discovering a new world and the adrenaline-heavy scenes, while parents enjoy its nostalgia and revisiting memories of their youth. Yuri Saprikin, a critic, described the show as a grassroots phenomenon and a product that talks about small, ordinary people and classic ideas such as friendship, betrayal, revenge, and justice, thanks to which it appeals to everyone and is universally watchable (Dergacheva 2024).

The regime tried to channel the show's popularity and hype in a direction that suited its interests, hence during the 2024 election campaign, a short video with scenes from the series was used, with a cover of the song "Piyala" playing in the background, calling people to vote in such a turbulent time. The independent portal *Meduza* wrote about this and included the video. However, even within the regime, from the very beginning, opinions were divided as to the series itself and its possible interpretations. The government of Tatarstan was against it from the outset and began to talk about an upsurge in copycat crime, claiming that the show and its popularity would reaffirm this unpleasant heritage and identity of Kazan, and directly increase violence among the youth and on the streets. As additional problems, they highlighted the depiction of a minor committing suicide, the relationship between a 23-year-old man (the actor who plays Marat) and a 14-year-old, and the rape of an underage girl.[10]

[10] Of course, there are also claims that the entire project was commissioned and implemented by the state for its political and military needs. Interestingly, someone using the pseudonym Anarch posted a comment on the Novi Standard website under Stefan Pajović's text (Pajović 2024): "Let me tell you as someone who has lived in Russia for almost 14 years. *Slovo patsana* was commissioned by the authorities as part of the media campaign for the presidential elections, although in reality there are no elections, with the aim of showing how life used to be bad and now life is good. In addition, the *Kazan phenomenon* began sometime in the 1970s, and in the series, the plot takes place during perestroika. That's no accident either."

However, the famous film critic Anton Dolin proposed another interpretation – the chief "patsan" is Putin because "patsani" apologize to no one. Neither is Putin with his murders of political opponents and military aggression against independent states. The "patsani" are a closed circle (like the government of the Kremlin Sanhedrin, which protects its "real people" to the end), and all the others are "tshcushpans", that is, "non-humans."

Also, the last episode was re-recorded before airing. The Kremlin Sanhedrin watched the last episode before airing and said – no, we don't like the ending, refilm it like this. Director Zhora Kryzhovnikov (pseudonym), of course, filmed it as requested. I had the opportunity to see both the director's and the Sanhedrin version, and I can say that the difference is huge.

By the way, most of the scenes were filmed in Yaroslav because the Republic of Tatarstan has banned filming in its territory."

In the Duma, some demanded banning the show for inciting violence. In December, Deputy Speaker Nina Ostanina requested an official investigation and ban. The main objection was the romanticizing and incitement of violence. *Roskomnadzor*, the agency responsible for monitoring Russian mass media, issued a statement saying it saw no reason to ban the show. It seems that the first wave of alarm stopped after the show aired and when, among others, the famous director Nikita Mikhalkov commented on the series in December. He said: "I think it's very stupid. This is a very powerful show indeed. And if your child watches it and becomes like the villains in the show, it means that you are bad parents. And the fact that they show how things played out should be clarified and explained to people. Here's what happened, and what shouldn't be happening."[11] Others recalled that violence had been a problem even when there was no violent content on television. Ultimately, the faction of defenders of artistic freedom and free expression prevailed together with those who saw the state's vested interest in the series, therefore it endured. In general, the enormous popularity of the series guaranteed it would not be banned because the political cost to the regime would have been too high.

A new wave of controversy swelled around April 15, when the series was first aired on the NTV channel, which has statewide coverage. Several prominent figures came out at the same time with very negative comments regarding the consequences of the show so far, calling on the authorities to contain the show's reach in anticipation of its statewide airing. An incident involving the murder of a minor in Irkutsk, very similar to a scene from the series, was mentioned. The head of Tatarstan pointed out the problems this caused for children, and the children's ombudsman of Tatarstan also reacted. In an interview on April 15, the day that the series aired, Alexander Bastrykin, the chairman of the investigative committee of the Russian Federation mentioned a significant increase in juvenile crime. He did not mention the show but suggested that violence among young people was growing at an alarming rate. However, the war in the neighborhood, the spillover of violence from the Telegram channel, soldiers returning home, and the violent syndromes they bring along would have been enough to spark this upsurge even without the series. The same day, Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol, Chairman of the ROC Synodal Department for Cooperation with Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies, issued a statement, requesting that this series would not be shown on NTV, especially during the so-called Special Military Operation. He spoke very critically about the show and its adverse effects on the youth and the value system.[12]

[11] Statement by Mikhalkov for TASS, https://www.film.ru/news/mihalkov-pro-patsana

[12] For the full statement, see https://stavropol-eparhia.ru/obrashhenie-mitropolita-stavropolskogo-nevinnomysskogo-kirilla-v-svyazi-s-reklamoj-seriala-slovo-patsana-krov-na-asfalte-na-federalnyx-kanalax /

Elements of this process were also apparent in the field. At the beginning of April, a large mural with an image of Vova Adidas and a twisted message about contemporary art appeared in St. Petersburg but was painted over very quickly. Similar murals cropped up in other places, too.

It seems that despite the initial restrained and complex attitude towards this phenomenon, the regime, like the church, began to see it as problematic. Of course, the project had been state-funded through the Internet Development Foundation, with the direct support of NTV, a state-owned television channel. Violence, the incitement of violence and the promotion of masculinity are certainly desirable and necessary in times of war, but there is always the problem of the level and ability to control its spillover onto social life and, more importantly for the regime, onto politics. Wagner and the unexplained attempt of this military formation to organize a kind of coup, with their march on Moscow, drove the regime to consider the potential political consequences of all this. The experience from the Yugoslav wars suggested that Milošević had noted the same problem in 1993 and 1994 and that the launch of TV Pink, with its gay and cosmopolitan aesthetic, and the creation of the anti-war, business-oriented party JUL was a planned package to contain the wartime masculinity whose symbols had begun to return home and threaten Milošević's survival. Borisav Jović, (Jović 2001, 145, 153), former associate of Milošević, confirmed this and the author of this paper described this mechanism in his 1999 article "Surveillance and Subterfuge" (Đurković 2002).

The second level of reading is the show's reception in the surrounding countries. Although a cover of the title song in Azerbaijani by singer Man El appeared in Azerbaijan, the reception there was more lukewarm than in Kazakhstan and, in particular, Ukraine. At the beginning of December, the Ministry of Culture of Kazakhstan formed a working group to examine the harmful consequences of the show (mostly pirated) in their country. Kazakhstan recently replaced the Cyrillic alphabet with Latin and is on a path of distancing itself from the Russian cultural space, therefore the immense popularity of the *Slovo patsana* show goes against the country's current orientation, pulling it back into the Russian cultural space, much to the chagrin of the regime.

However, none of these reactions come close to the chaos the show has caused in Ukraine. Many of the country's authors and officials spoke about the devastating fact that during a war with Russia, by far the most watched show is a Russian offering, officially banned and available only through illegal channels, in pirated copies. Various government agencies issued statements warning parents that if a child behaved oddly and used terms such as *patsan*, *chushpan*, *avtor*, etc., they should pay close attention to the youngster's behavior and watch out for any possible damage from watching this Russian show. In December, the

Ministry of Culture of Ukraine issued a special statement calling on the public not to contribute to the popularity of this series as it aids the occupier.[13]

The Spanish *El País*[14] and the BBC portal also wrote about this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of the show's immense popularity in Ukraine, mentioning a string of episodes that initiated the official elite's clash with the ordinary people and influencers who not only watch the series but also use it as a cultural and discursive reference. Ukraine's Ministry of Culture sees the show as part of Russia's propaganda war. Many pro-war activists support it, but there are also those who interpret the phenomenon as part of *ostalgia*, that is, nostalgia for the old East. Some Ukrainian patriots, who wish to remain anonymous, liked the show and refuse to see it as a tool of Russian propaganda. Other commentators on the Telegram network thought it was good that Russia was portrayed in a bad light, but there are very few of them. Rather, it is a phenomenon known as the American model of negative soft power, discussed by Milovanović and Šibalić in the aforementioned article (Milovanović and Šibalić 2022, 55). Mykhailo Uhman and Viktor Tregubov, besides insisting that it is abnormal to like and follow the cultural content of one's enemy, emphasized the need to invest more resources in creating their own distinct culture that could be offered to young people instead of Russian cultural products (Uhman 2023).

The article was written less than six months after the show premiered – at the time it was beginning to air on a television channel with statewide coverage. The series is undoubtedly well and interestingly done and, as critic Yuri Saprykin predicts, will go down in history as an important and influential cultural phenomenon (Dergacheva 2024). However, in the past six months, we have seen how different readings of the meaning of gangs, especially the reception of the series in Russian society and the societies of the surrounding countries, intersect and clash. Thanks to Telegram channels, the show received an alternative reception even in the USA, where its influence is spreading in alternative circles. Due to the current circumstances, it is impossible for it to be aired on Western streaming services, but one could easily see it rivaling the popularity of the Spanish show *La casa de papel* (*Money Heist*). Two articles about the show have appeared in Serbia (Kolarić, 2023, Pajović, 2024), suggesting that the series is watched through pirate services. It would also be interesting to see

[13] For the statement, see https://mcip.gov.ua/news/zayava-ministerstva-kultury-ta-informaczijnoyi-polityky-shhodo-rosijskogo-kinetografichnogo-produktu-yakyj-nabuvaye-poshyrennya-ukrayini-zokrema-sered-pidlitkiv/. On June 22, 2023, the President of Ukraine, Zelensky, signed a decree prohibiting the import of books from Russia. See https://rtcg.me/cir/vijesti/ukrajina/441008/zelenski-potpisao-zakon-o-zabrani-uvoza-knjiga-iz-rusije.html

[14] https://elpais.com/internacional/2023–12–18/polemica-en-ucrania-por-el-exito-de-una-serie-de-television-rusa.html

its effect on regular television channels in our country, especially given the immense popularity of the series *Brigada*.

To conclude, the example of the *Slovo patsana* series has shown how interesting, stimulating, and complex it can be to capture different meanings and readings of the same relatively short-format television show amidst the dramatic circumstances of a war and radical changes in the internal value and political structure of a society such as the Russian. At the same time, its reception in the surrounding countries, notably in Ukraine, similar to the reception of Serbian neo-folk music in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Yugoslav wars, demonstrates that even during civil wars, anthropological patterns and cultural spaces remain unchanged and compact. That is why a young Ukrainian, even while his country is at war with the "Moskali",[15] will be much more likely to identify with *Slovo patsana* than with the *Sopranos*.

References

Bocharov, T. 2021. „Светлана Стивенсон, Роберт Гараев", *Laboratorium: Žurnal social'nyh issledovanij* 13(1): 127-131.

Garaev, R. 2020. *Slovo patsana. Kriminal'ny Tatarstan* 1970–2010kh. Moskva: Individuum. (*Слово пацана. Криминальный Татарстан 1970–2010х)*.

Dergacheva, D. 2024. "Russian series on Perestroika youth gangs breaks popularity records, defying attempts to ban it", *Global Voice*, 22. 01, https://globalvoices.org/2024/01/22/russian-series-on-perestroika-era-youth-gangs-breaks-popularity-records-defying-attempts-to-ban-it/

D'yachok, M. T. 2007. „Patsan: slovo i ponyatie". *Politicheskaya lingvistika*: 110–116. (Пацан: слово и понятие).

Đurković, M. 2002. *Diktatura, nacija, globalizacija*. Beograd: IES.

Đurković, M. 2004. „Ideološki i politički sukobi oko popularne muzike u Srbiji". *Filozofija i društvo* 25: 271–279.

Đurković, M. 2009. *Slika, zvuk, moć.* Beograd: MST Gajić.

Đurković, M. 2022. „Black Mirror, Enhancement and Impossibility of Forgetting". *Disputatio philosophica* 23 (1): 23–41. https://doi.org/10.32701/dp.23.1.2

Erdei, I. 2020. *Moderni život u udarnom terminu*. Beograd: Evoluta.

Gamboa, A. 2016. „*Por estas calles*, la realidad refejada en una telenovela". *Medium*, https://medium.com/@alexandrac763/por-estas-calles-la-realidad-reflejada-en-una-telenovela-37a5fe1b11c2

Zakharev, A. A. 2023. *Nezabyty geroy. Kul'turny fenomen, izmenivshy istoriyu*. Moskva: Bombora, Kino. (*Незабытый герой. Культурный феномен, изменивший историю*)

Jovanović, V. 2020. *Opijum na Balkanu. Proizvodnja i promet opojnih droga 1918–1941,* Zagreb: AGM

[15] A pejorative term for Russians.

Jović, B. 2001. *Knjiga o Miloševiću*. Beograd: Knjžara Nikola Pašić.
Kolarić, V. 2024. „Reč pacana – najpopularnija ruska serija". *Novi standard*, 07. 01.
Kovačević, I. 2018. „O antropologiji TV serija". *Zbornik radova Fakulteta dramskih umetnosti* 33: 97 –112.
Martinoli, A. 2018. „Black Mirror – digitalni mediji i uticaj novih tehnologija na savremeno društvo". *Zbornik radova dramskih umetnosti* 33: 133–146.
Milovanović, A, i V. Šibalić. 2022. „Transmedijalni dizajn i meka moć kriminalističkog žanra: *Besa* i *Južni vetar*", *Zbornik Fakulteta Dramskih umetnosti* 42: 45–58.
Moïsi, D. 2016. *La géopolitique des séries, ou, Le triomphe de la peur: essai*, Stock.
Pajović, S. 2024. „ 'Vidimo se u čitulji' na ruski način", *Novi standard*, 01.03.
Palaversich, D. 2016. „Junaci našeg doba: lik narko bosa u kolumbijskim tv serijama". *EAP*, 11(2): 457–475. https://doi.org/10.21301/eap.v11i2.7
Pomerantsev, P. 2014. *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*. Public Affairs.
Prokhorova, E. 2003. „Can the Meeting Place be Changed? Crime and Identity Discourse in Russian Television Series of the 1990s". *Slavic Review* 62(3): 512–524.
Rogotnev, I. 2013. „Subkultura i nasilie: ot agressii ka destruktivnosti", Sotsio– i psikholingvisticheskie issledovaniya 1:11–16. (Субкултура и насилие: от агрессии ка деструктивности)
Spence, L. 2005. *Watching Daytime Soap Operas, the Power of Pleasure*. Wesleyan University Press.
Stephenson, S. 2011. "The Kazan Leviathan: Russian Street Gangs as Agents of Social Order". *The Sociological Review* 59: 324–347. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02007.x
Stivenson, S. 2017). *Žizn' po ponyatiyam. Ulichnye gruppirovki v Rossii*. Moskva: Strana Oz. (*Жизнь по понятиям. Уличные группировки в России*)
Tonkova, E. G. 2024). „Rech' uchastnikov ulichnykh gruppirovok kontsa xx – nachala xxi veka: novye vozmozhnosti i perspektivy izucheniya". *Russian Linguistic Bulletin* 1(49): 1–6.
Ухман, М, (2023), „Мільярд доларів на кіно і культуру", *Цензор*, 12. 05, https://m.censor.net/ru/blogs/3459683/mlyard_dolarv_na_kno_kulturu
Uzer, U. 2016. *An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism: Between Turkish Ethnicity and Islamic Identity*, University of Utah Press.

Sources

Black Mirror, (2011–2024)
Money Heist, (2017–2021)
Por estas calles, (1992–1994)
Rane, 1997
Senke nad Balkanom, (2017–2020)
The Sopranos, (1999–2007)
Vidimo se u čitulji, 1995
Slovo patsana (2023)

Миша Ђурковић
Институт за европске студије, Београд
mdjurkov@gmail.com

Конфликтна читања бруталности касног комунизма – Случај серије Реч дечака

Током 2023 године у Русији је снимљена, а затим и емитована серија Реч дечака, крв на асфалту, која је изазвала огромну пажњу, како у самој земљи, тако и у суседним државама, укључујући и Украјину. Повод за анализу су различите и често директно супротстављене оцене и облици рецепције који су се појавили током емитовања. Серија обрађује малолетнички криминал у доба перестројке. Заснована је на реално постојећем материјалу, односно на такозваном казањском феномену малолетничких криминалних банди које су постојале од почетка седамдесетих година у престоници Татарстана. Серија је инспирисана истоименом књигом Роберта Гараева, бившег припадника једне од тих банди. Има осам епизода, уз то што је последња добила две верзије. Аутор најпре разјашњава читаву историју тзв. пацана, јунака ове серије, као и академску обраду тог феномена, чиме се стиже до саме серије. Она је настала у доба украјинског рата и носи снажан печат вредности које се афирмишу у борбеним формацијама, како у бандама тако и у војсци. Читав тај систем вредности и поглед на свет, обележен и снажним маскулинизмом, доживљава се као опозиција до тада доминантној владавини кича, конзумеризма и хедонизма и чини се да је управо због тога атрактиван за велики број младих и средовечних људи у свим поменутим земљама. Но, с друге стране, огромна популарност серије и њено преливање на друштвене мреже, у јавни дискурс и животе људи, изазвали су опречне реакције чак и међу припадницима исте политичке елите у Русији. Аутор покушава да прикаже ова различита и супротстављена читања истог феномена поп културе и реакције појединачних политичких центара моћи на последице које серија оставља у практичном животу. Показује се да чак и друштва која су у рату попут Русије и Украјине, остају везана за исти културни и антрополошки круг.

Кључне речи: „Реч дечака: крв на асфалту”, ТВ серија, криминал, Русија, Казањски феномен

Lectures opposées de la brutalité du communisme tardif – le cas de la série Slovo pacana

Dans le présent travail est exploré comment le phénomène de la culture populaire est soumis à des interprétations très différentes à l'intérieur du même

cercle culturel. L'auteur se concentre sur une série russe extrêmement populaire, *Parole de garçon*, qui a été diffusée pour la première fois en 2023. La série se penche sur le phénomène des groupes criminels de jeunes adolescents à Kazan, ce qui inclut différentes associations, interprétations et couches d'interprétation. Tout cela est renforcé par le cadre de la guerre en Ukraine et le fait en apparence absurde qu'il s'agit de la série la plus regardée en Ukraine en dépit de son interdiction.

Mots clés: *Parole de garçon: du sang sur l'asphalte*, série télévisée, criminalité, Russie, phénomène de Kazan

Primljeno / Received: 4.06.2024
Prihvaćeno / Accepted for publication: 29.09.2024