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Performing in the Frame of the State: Slavic Music Groups in the Latvian Amateur Art System

Muzicējot valsts ietvarā: slāvu ansambļi Latvijas amatiermākslas sistēmā

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Summary The study documents a recent phase in the Latvian cultural policy implementation aimed at representing ethnic diversity in national cultural events. Since 2012, the Latvian National Center for Culture has provided institutional support for ethnic minority amateur groups. Still, the state's amateur art system is based on a well-established aesthetical canon that is not much shared by ethnic minorities. By combining the approaches of ethnomusicology and policy studies, the study tests the compatibility of the amateur art system with ethnic minority music groups. The case study has been narrowed down to the Slavic music groups performing in the frames of folklore and traditional music. Compared to the ethnic Latvian folklore groups, the preconditions of the local Slavic groups are more uncertain. The idea of a "rooted" performance of folklore meets not only the different backgrounds and choices of the musicians but also their available resources and social networks.

Kopsavilkums Pētījums dokumentē nesenu posmu Latvijas kultūrpolitikas īstenošanā, kas saistīts ar etniskās daudzveidības reprezentēšanu nacionāla mēroga kultūras pasākumos. 2012. gadā Latvijas Nacionālais kultūras centrs kļuva par mazākumtautību amatiermākslu organizējošu institūciju. Pētījuma jautājums izrietēja no novērojuma, ka valsts amatiermākslas sistēmas pamatā ir vēsturiski izveidots estētiskais kanons, kurš nav pašsaprotams mazākumtautību vidū. Apvienojot etnomuzikoloģijas un politikas īstenošanas studiju pieejas, šis pētījums testē valsts amatiermākslas sistēmas savietojamību ar mazākumtautību ansambļiem. Padziļināti tika pētītas slāvu mūzikas grupas, kas savu darbību saista ar folkloru un tradicionālo mūziku. Salīdzinot ar latviešu folkloras kopām, vietējo slāvu mūzikas grupu priekšnoteikumi ir neskaidrāki. Folkloras kopu ideja par "sakņotu" repertuāru un izpildījuma stilu atklāj ne tikai dažādās mūziķu kultūras pieredzes un izvēles, bet arī viņiem pieejamos resursus un sociālos tīklus.

Introduction In many European countries, even those regarded as ideologically multicultural, ethnic diversity surprisingly has been only recently addressed in national cultural policies (Saukkonen, Pyykkönen 2008: 49). Cultural diversity has become a common issue in cultural policies since the beginning of the 21st century, mainly as a response to the new minorities that have emerged in the process of globalization and recent humanitarian-crises-related migration. In Latvia, the most radical changes in ethnic composition have been caused by World War II and the Soviet occupation.[1] The current cultural policy reflects that not-so-recent but still unsettled social, political, and cultural situation. Describing the cultural policy in Northern Ireland – another territory of conflict-related cultural diversity – cultural geographer Catherine Nash points to the sensitivity of the field of culture in such areas: "In the post-conflict context…issues of symbolism, signification, representation – issues of 'culture' – are highly charged" (Nash 2005: 273). Concerning post-Soviet countries, the historical and geopolitical aspects of the ethnic culture policies have been examined in several publications (Kuutma et al. 2012; Rindzevičiūtė 2012; Melich, Adibayeva 2013). While sharing Soviet history and its impact on culture, the studied cases also reflect the countries' differences in ethnic histories and compositions, which affect current national cultural policies and related discussions.

Latvia's society is characterized by a comparatively small ethnic majority, both by number and percentage. Currently, around 1.2 million ethnic Latvians, or about 63% of the total population, are registered in the country (census of 2022, Official

1 In Latvia, World War II and the Soviet occupation caused radical changes in the society's ethnic composition. Baltic Germans and Jews – economically and culturally influential groups before WWII – almost disappeared from the ethnoscape. The number of ethnic Latvians significantly decreased from 1,467,035 before WWII (1935) to 1,297,881 after WWII (1959). In the context of the total population, the percentage of ethnic Latvians gradually decreased from 77% in 1935 to 52% during the decline of the Soviet Union (1989). Migration under Soviet rule caused a large increase in the Slavic population. The number of ethnic Russians increased from 168,266 (~9% of the total population in 1935) to 905,515 (~34% in 1989). The number of Belarusians increased from 26,803 (~1.4% in 1935) to 119,702 (~4.5% in 1989). Before WWII, Latvia had a very small Ukrainian community (1,844 people in 1935), a situation that significantly changed during the Soviet period. The population increased to 92,101 (3.45%) Ukrainians living in Latvia in 1989. After Latvia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, the number of ethnic Latvians started to grow again, and the number of Slavic ethnic groups started to decrease. In 2022, ethnic Latvians formed 63% of the population, Russians 24.2%, Belarusians 3.1%, and Ukrainians 2.2% of the population (Census data, Official statistics portal https://stat.gov.lv/en, accessed on 17.03.2023).

statistics portal https://stat.gov.lv/en, accessed on 17.03.2023). It is a factor that can explain the need for the special protection of ethnic Latvian culture at the national level and the mono-ethnical orientation of the most representative national cultural events. On the other hand, the large number of ethnic minorities assures that they cannot be excluded from the national cultural policy both for reasons of equality and national security. Since 2012, ethnic minority amateur groups have been officially included in Latvia's state-organized amateur art system supervised by the Latvian National Center for Culture, a key institution for implementing the national cultural policy. Noticing the performances of ethnic minority groups in representative national cultural events, one can see that they stand out from the well-established amateur art aesthetics, genres, and styles predominantly cultivated by ethnic Latvians. The stylistic differences are emphasized by allocating a particular day, venue, stage, or concert to the multi-ethnic side of Latvian culture.

This article aims to analyze the implementation of recent Latvian cultural policies related to ethnic diversity. Until the last decade, the musical representation of ethnic minorities has been mainly organized by NGOs, dedicated individuals, and municipalities. This study focuses on the recent national-level institutionalization of minority performances in the frame of the state's amateur art system. At the center of this study is the issue of musical aesthetics represented at national cultural events. This issue is vital for policy implementation because the Latvian amateur art system is based on a historically developed and thoroughly maintained aesthetic canon, which, with some exceptions, is not shared by ethnic minority amateur groups. Most minority groups have different cultural backgrounds, so agreements and adjustments must be made both to the system and to minority performance practices.

The research field is characterized by close collaboration between street-level bureaucrats at the Latvian National Center for Culture and the policy target group, namely, ethnic minority amateur groups who apply to be represented at national cultural events. Together they build a policy network, or "policy community" – a term used by social anthropologists who apply social network analysis to policy studies (Wedel et al. 2005). By researching both sides of the collaboration, the focus in this study has been on the experiences of minorities: to inquire about their interpretations of the given system, their organizational and stylistic choices, and the possible limitations of their participation. The case study has been narrowed down to the Slavic music groups performing in the frame of *folklore* and *traditional music*. The study is based on fieldwork with music groups (semi-structured interviews, observations of performances) and research of the work of the Latvian National Center for Culture (documents, interviews, published information). Analytically, two issues were of the most significance: 1) terminological and aesthetic understandings that can be seen

in the requirements and expectations of the Center *versus* the practices of music groups and 2) resources and social networks needed for developing the music performances.

The study was conducted from 2018 through 2020 as a part of my postdoctoral research project on the politics and cultural visibility of ethnic minorities in Latvia. This article pairs with a study on emergent ethnic cultural policies in the newly established Republic of Latvia in the 1920s, reflected in the work of the Archives of Latvian Folklore (Tihovska 2020). The current case study refers to the year 2018, when two large, state-organized festivals occurred in Latvia: The Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration and the international folklore festival *Baltica*. More than a hundred ethnic minority groups applied to perform in these national-level events, most of which were Slavic music groups. Besides them, a few other ethnic groups participated, including Livonians, Germans, Jews, and Lithuanians; these groups were excluded from my study for easier comparison. Many Slavic music groups identified with a specific ethnic group (Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians, Polish, Bulgarians); still, some groups called their practices non-specified Slavic. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 calls for the reconsideration of the use of the unifying notion of Slavic music; indeed, even in the context of Latvia, the histories of the Slavic ethnic communities are different, which must be considered in the research of their musical practices. Still, I will keep using the generalizing term in this article because it was used in my original research setting; it does not challenge the raised issues and should not compromise the conclusions drawn.

Integration policy and the amateur art system in Latvia

Amateur musicians have played a significant role in developing and maintaining national music in Latvia. The history of the current state-organized amateur art system traces its roots to the 1860s when the choir movement emerged in the ethnic Latvian civil society of the Russian Empire. The choir movement arose around the Nationwide Latvian Song Celebration, established in 1873 and organized every fifth year through the present day. The Celebration became a key symbol of the Latvian nation and was gradually centralized and framed according to the political needs of the different democratic and non-democratic regimes throughout 20th-century Latvia.

Currently, organizing the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration (the present title of the historical Celebration) is the primary function of the Latvian National Center for Culture (further – the Center). It is an institution inherited from the

Soviet period. After Latvia's forced inclusion in the Soviet Union at the end of WWII, the amateur art system (*hudožestvennaâ samodeâtel'nost'*, "artistic self-activity") was established in the republic. In 1945 the Republican People's House of Art was founded in Riga to centrally organize and control amateur art activities (Daugavietis 2015: 133). Musicologist Martin Boiko describes this system as a typical Soviet phenomenon, not fully comparable to the general notion of amateur art because it was introduced and financed by a totalitarian regime for its needs: "It was a predetermined social structure, the function of which was to bring the musical and other artistic activities of the people into a certain frame and to channel them in a way not dangerous for the regime" (Boiko 2001: 114). Besides choirs, other formats of amateur art were included in the system or promoted by it: stylized folk-dance groups, folk theater, folk crafts, brass orchestras, modernized *kokle* (the Latvian zither) groups, Soviet popular music bands, and smaller vocal groups. Since the beginning of the 1980s, responding to the fast-growing folklore revival movement, folklore groups were added to the system, and the stylistic framework for public folklore performances was developed. The Republican People's House of Art employed experts for different branches of amateur art. Their role was to initiate and supervise amateur art groups (so-called *collectives*), provide methodological guidance, and organize events (Fedorovičs 1945: 2). An important controlling tool was so-called *skates* (*smotry* in Russian) – frequent competitive displays for evaluating the amateur artists according to their skills and ideological conformity (Kruks 2008).

This rather centralized, top-down system turned out to be viable when democracy was re-established in Latvia at the beginning of the 1990s. The Center became one of the crucial institutions for implementing the national cultural policy. Since 2012, after several renamings and reorganizations, it has been formulated as the policy "in the field of cultural and creative industry education, intangible cultural heritage, the traditions of the Song and Dance Celebration and the fields of folk art related thereto" (By-laws of the Center, adopted on December 18, 2012, https://likumi.lv, accessed on 22.01.2023). The conceptual changes related to the history of Latvian amateur (and folk) art are layered in this formulation: the pre-Soviet Nationwide Latvian Song Celebration tradition mingles with the Soviet system of *samodeâtel'nost'* and the more recent UNESCO policy for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage. Participating in amateur art and the events organized by the Center is vital and meaningful for a large part of the Latvian population (Daugavietis 2015, Tisenkopfs et al. 2002; 2008; Muktupāvela, Laķe 2018). To give an idea of the number of involved people, in the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration in 2018, more than 43,000 people were registered as participants, 1,200 of them representing ethnic minorities (Public Report 2018 by the Center).

In the mid-1990s, when Latvia started the process of accession to the European Union, social integration issues became urgent to comply with the EU regulations. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, many ethnic minority groups tended to represent themselves and be perceived as united. The resulting social situation is now often described as a "bi-communal state" (*divkopienu valsts*) (Dribins 2004; Volkov 2009; Ustinova 2011). The ethnic composition of Latvia consisted of ~42% ethnic minorities, and ~37% count Russian as their native language – even if only ~30% were recorded as ethnic Russians (census of 2000, Official statistics portal https://stat.gov.lv/en, accessed on 22.01.2023). Popularly labeled as "Russian speakers," they formed a rather solid social and political identity (named "Russian-speaking nationality" by Cheskin 2015; 2013). Strengthened by a separate media space and political parties, it existed next to, and often in opposition to, the community of ethnic Latvians.

At the end of the 1990s, the first integration policy conception was created (Rozenvalds 2010). It was also the time when the first festivals of ethnic minorities were established in Latvia; the festival *Latvijas vainags* (The Garland of Latvia, 1996–2008) was considered the most important[2] (Apine et al. 2001: 34–35). Initially, *Latvijas vainags* was organized by individual enthusiasts – the then state TV producer Irina Vinnika and others. Gradually it became a more intentional part of the integration policy and, in 2003, was incorporated into the main program of the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration. The state had officially taken over the staged cultural visibility of ethnic minorities in 2011 when the implementation of the integration policy was delegated to the Ministry of Culture after a ten-year process of allocating this responsibility to several other ministries and institutions.[3] In 2012, the Latvian National Center for Culture began to organize the participation of ethnic minorities in the Song and Dance Celebration and other national events.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, only a few ethnic minority groups have joined the general amateur art system and participated in events not specialized for ethnic

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2 Before the festival *Latvijas vainags* (The Garland of Latvia), some other attempts to organize festivals of ethnic minorities were made – in 1993, a festival *Mēs visi* (We All) was organized, and a couple of years later, a children festival *Zelta kamoliņš* (The Little Golden Clew, 1995–2010) was started.

3 The institutional history of Latvian integration policy started in 2000 when the Department of Social Integration was founded, and in 2001 the law of the Society Integration Foundation was passed. In 2002 a particular governmental institution was founded – the Secretariat of the Minister of Social Integration (known by the acronym ĪUMSILS). The Secretariat existed for six years until 2009, when its functions were taken over by the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, which was renamed to the Ministry of Children, Family and Social Integration Affairs. In the same year, another re-organization happened, and social integration was delegated to the Ministry of Justice. In 2011 the implementation of the integration policy became a responsibility of the Ministry of Culture.

minorities. An exceptional long-term participant in the Song and Dance Celebration has been the folk-dance group *Ivuška*. More than once, several other groups have participated: a cappella choirs *Accolada*, *Blagovest*, and *Jutrzenka*, folk-dance groups *Balaguri* (Balagury) and *Kukulečka*, and the vocal group *Maļinovij zvon* (Malinovyj zvon). (Here and hereafter, I use Latvianized names first and the ISO9 Cyrillic transliteration in parenthesis.) The most accessible to ethnic minorities has proven to be the field of folklore. Several minority folklore groups have joined the folklore revival movement and participated in folklore events such as the international folklore festival *Baltica*. Six of them perform Slavic music: *Iljinskaja pjatņica* (Il'inskaâ pâtnica), *Zdravica*, *Berendejka*, *Karagod*, *Ļubo mņe* (Lûbo mne), and *Jurjev denj* (Ûr'ev den'). The others are *Kāndla*, *Līvlist* (Livonian, an autochthonous Finno-Ugrian group in Latvia), and *Jurginas* (Lithuanian). Besides that, some choirs and folk-dance groups of ethnic minority schools participate in the Latvian School Youth Song and Dance Celebration. This article focuses on the possibilities, strategies, and difficulties of ethnic minority **groups** included in the state's amateur art system and national cultural events, not considering individual choices. It is known that individuals of different ethnic backgrounds participate in the "ethnic Latvian" choirs, folk-dance groups, orchestras, and other amateur groups. Their exact number is unknown; still, the inclusion of ethnic minorities and their culture has been repeatedly considered in major surveys and studies of the Song and Dance Celebration ordered by the state (Tisenkopfs et al. 2002; 2008; Laķe et al. 2014).

Currently, the Center monitors around a hundred minority amateur groups and functions as a "guidepost in the state's amateur art system, introducing the current forms of involvement developed and offered by the state, and helping to participate in them" (Interview with the director of the Center Signe Pujāte on October 8, 2020). As the previous paragraph shows, only a few groups are ready to participate in the historically established artistic niches with higher and more specific standards and expectations, such as a cappella choirs, folk-dance groups, or folklore groups. Besides these genres, the performers can apply to the recently established branch called "collectives of ethnic minorities" (*mazākumtautību kolektīvi*) with not-so-strict regulations and standards. This branch has its own management team, strategy, and events. Different types of amateur groups apply to this branch: choirs, folklore groups, ethnic song groups, senior or junior vocal groups, folk dance groups, etc. The branch of "collectives of ethnic minorities" is not unified and standardized (yet), and it leads to greater diversity (not only ethnic but also stylistic) and lesser stylistic control over their performances. After participating in competitions (*skates*) of this branch, amateur artists can take part in events organized specifically for the representation of ethnic minorities. This is the current strategy for the variety of performers to be "separately included" in the official national cultural scene.

According to the amateur art system, a frequent activity for the "collectives of ethnic minorities" are competitions (*skates*) organized before all the significant events. An organizational function of *skates* for ethnic minority groups is evaluating their performances and selecting participants for coming events. Besides this competitive and supervising function, *skates* are positioned as a possibility for the performers to gain stage experience and develop artistically. Official tasks also align with the integration policy by aiming "to introduce the society to the variety of ethnic minority cultural heritage and artistic creativity, to promote the purposeful participation of ethnic minorities in the Latvian cultural life, thereby increasing the national cultural capital of Latvia and raising the country's international prestige" (Regulation of the competition in 2018, issued by the Center on July 07, 2017). The regulation specifies that in addition to the performance of "minority national culture," the program must also include at least one piece representing ethnic Latvian culture (folklore). Performances are evaluated according to five criteria: the content of the performance in the context of the participant's national identity and the Latvian traditional culture (conformity with tradition); skills of commenting on the performance in the Latvian language; artistic quality; technical quality; general impression of the performance (costumes, performance skills) (ibid.).

As the current director, Signe Pujāte, states, the approach of the *skates* generally becomes more horizontal and open to the needs and suggestions of the amateur groups, and the *skates* function mainly for an overview, inventorying, and monitoring of the active groups. At the same time, the effort of the Center is to maintain the quality standards traditionally developed in the different fields of amateur art and to accommodate the various performances to the artistic conception of the main events: "There are artistic ideas which we realize through the guidelines, rules, criteria, and in such way, we achieve the result considering the incredible amount of people" (Interview with Signe Pujāte on October 8, 2020).

When a group applies to participate in *skate* for the "collectives of ethnic minorities," it has to fill out a form giving the following information: title, ethnicity, a brief history, repertoire, and the represented "genre" chosen from the given list: choral music, vocal music, instrumental music, vocal-instrumental music, staged folk dance, arranged folk music, traditional music, traditional theater art, and "other genre." Each "genre" has its history in the Latvian amateur art system, but this historical knowledge is not always shared by newcomers who may interpret these categories more freely. For instance, arranged folk music was conceptually separated from the unarranged originals ("authentic" folklore) during the rise of the Latvian folklore revival movement in the 1980s (Boiko 2001). Later, the "traditional music" category substituted the generally more popular notions of "folklore" and "folk music" as a response to the

changing approaches and concepts in Latvian ethnomusicology. Through years of discussions and musical practice, Latvian academics, policy implementers, journalists, and musicians have acquired an approximate consensus on the term "traditional music." Still, the non-Latvian part of the society has been much less involved in this discursive process and often is not familiar with the specific content of this more recent terminology, as was proven by this study.

This study focuses on the performers of Slavic music (specified or generalized) who associate themselves both with "folklore" (according to their title) and "traditional music" (according to their indicated "genre"). In the competitions of 2018, from around 100 groups, 18 Slavic groups indicated "traditional music" as their genre. Only six of these groups called themselves "folklore groups," and one was a "group of authentic singing" with a similar musical identity and intention. For comparison, in 2020, there were around 250 ethnic Latvian folklore groups registered at the Center. The other 11 "traditional music" groups have more vague titles and musical approaches, such as "Ukrainian song ensemble" (ensemble is an alternative term for a small music group), "junior vocal ensemble," and "ensemble of Cossack songs." Seven more "folklore groups" did not claim to perform "traditional music" and mainly indicated arranged folk music as their "genre." By doing fieldwork with the "traditional music" groups, I aimed to explore their understanding of the term and their musical practices, which do not always align with the academically and politically agreed image of traditional music.

Routes to the roots. A portrait of Slavic "traditional music" groups in Latvia

This chapter will introduce six Slavic music groups who indicated traditional music as their "genre" when applying to the *skate* in 2018. Four groups are based in Riga, one in the second-biggest city, Daugavpils, in Southeastern Latvia, and one in the village of Nākotne, 65 kilometers southwest of Riga. The differences in their goals and approaches to repertoire reflect their sense of belonging (ethnic, regional, or aesthetic) as well as their access to cultural and musical resources and networks.

One of the most experienced and knowledgeable persons of Slavic traditional music in Latvia is Sergej Olenkin. He is the leader of the children's folklore group *Iljinskaja pjatņica* (Il'inskaâ pâtnica, founded in 1988 or 1989) and the center for folklore pedagogy *Tradiciâ* (founded in 1997) in Riga. Since 1987 his efforts have been directed toward studying, practicing, and teaching the repertoire and singing style (the sound) of traditional village singers. His group has participated in national cultural events since 1997. However, since the 1980s, his primary source of inspiration has been the

folklore revival movement in Russia, especially the researchers and performers Anatolij Mehnecov, Vâčeslav Asanov, and Nadežda Žulanova. Since 1989 Olenkin has organized many field trips to Latgale and northeastern Vidzeme, the Latvian regions bordering Russia and Belarus and having a significant Slavic population: "In expeditions, we worked with three sub-ethnic groups: Latgalian Belarusians, Latgalian Russian Old Believers, and Russian Orthodox people. Each has their own dialect, folklore, history, and self-awareness" (Interview with Sergej Olenkin on June 7, 2018). The extensive fieldwork provided Olenkin with a rich local repertoire for his music group: "In general, we sing all that we have recorded. Still, when compiling the concert programs, we must obey the audience's demands. That is why we also add vivid examples recorded by other folklorists, mostly from the Pskov region [in Russia, bordering Latvia] or from Belarus" (Ibid.). Olenkin has authored several books and methodological materials and has developed a method for learning traditional singing that other Latvian folklore groups also acknowledge.

The family folklore group *Berendejka* (1994) from Riga is another Slavic group that has been involved in the Latvian folklore revival movement by participating in its events since 2006. The founder of the group, Ol'ga Dergunova, sees performing folklore as a tool for social cohesion: "One of the folklorists once said that folklore is medication for people. And Ilga Reizniece [a key figure in the Latvian folklore revival movement] in courses often repeats: 'Folklorists[4] of the world, unite!' For me, it is the feeling of unity and not division, and that I like the most" (Interview on May 21, 2019). In the beginning, the group consisted of three kindergarten teachers and their pupils. Nowadays, several families form the group, consisting of around 30 people. The participants emphasize the value of uniting the generations so that the group is not "dying" and the younger generation learns about the traditional culture. *Berendejka* is a socially active and responsible music group participating in many national cultural festivals, municipal celebrations, and charity events to support elders and animal shelters.

The group's repertoire comes mostly from publications: while on vacation, participants visit libraries and festivals and bring back recordings and sheet music. Different regions of Russia are represented in their repertoire – Kostroma, Bryansk, Smolensk, Vologda – though they consider the songs from regions closest to Latvia the easiest to sing: "The borderland between the region of Pskov and Latvia comes the easiest to us. Those songs fit us both by their *voice* and range, so we often turn to these songs. We must admit that our range is not wide enough for the songs from Siberia. We must

4 Since the rise of the folklore revival movement in Latvia in the 1980s, the term "folklorist" has been widely used in public, referring not only to the academics working in the field of folkloristics but also to all the folklore revivalists.

sing, as the Russians say, 'where you were born, there you are useful.' Sing the songs that you have heard and that have been sung nearby!" (Ibid.).

The Slavic ensemble of authentic singing *Karagod* was founded in Riga in 2002. It is a group of female adults. They study traditional singing by listening to and imitating ethnographic field recordings and attending workshops and festivals. Their repertoire consists mainly of songs of calendrical and family rituals, and they emphasize that they are not singing romances – a newer and more sentimental style. In the first decade, they mostly sang the local repertoire from southeastern Latvia and its neighboring areas: southern Estonia, the Pskov region in Russia, and the Vitebsk region in Belarus. They also organized field trips to these areas. After years of studying the local repertoire, they turned to a freer approach: "During the first ten years, we researched, but in the last six years, we are singing what is pleasant to our soul. This is both southern and northern Russia, as well as many Ukrainian songs and some songs from Belarus" (Interview with Ol'ga Bogdanova on February 13, 2019). They consider their repertoire to be a witness of a different mindset of the people who originally sang the songs: "The melody is totally different there. Totally different structure of music. Folklore is not emotional compared to romances or contemporary songs where passion is present.... When I hear this music, I think – if people sang such songs, then they must be totally different people! They have a different emotional system. And then I sometimes think – it is like touching something archaic. You are touching another world" (Ensemble member Aleksandra Rostovceva in an interview on February 13, 2019). The ensemble *Karagod* shares this characteristic passion for the sound of traditional singing with Sergej Olenkin and many other folk music revivalists in Latvia and abroad.

Ļubo mņe (Lûbo mne, 2015 or 2016) is one of the newest Slavic folklore groups with a repertoire focused on Russian and Cossack songs. The group's foundation is rooted in the member's studies of family heritage and self-reflection on their identities. The participants describe their identity as belonging to Latvia without sharing the identity of the majority, and they relate to the general ethos and principles of the Cossack life: "Our love of folk songs came together with self-awareness. Yes, we were born in Latvia, live in Latvia, and love Latvia, but who are we? Though we are not Latvians! And likely, we are also not these Russians [from Russia]. When I introduce myself, I say – I am a Russian from Latvia. Clear. And together with self-awareness – who are we? – came the idea that if we are Russians and have Russian roots, almost all of us, then what songs should we sing? One can sing the contemporary *èstrada*[5],

5 *Èstrada* is a term initially attributed to the Soviet entertainment culture. Literally, it means a stage platform for performances. The term became widely used for Soviet pop music; for instance, pop songs were (and still are) called "*èstrada* songs."

one can sing jazz, and one can sing Indian songs. But of course, it would be reasonable to sing the songs of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, the songs of our ancestors" (Interview with Anatolij Artûhov on June 8, 2019).

An important impulse for starting the music group was discovering the Cossack heritage of a singer and a belief that folksongs wake up genetic memory: "We, with my wife Tamara, worked in an archive in Russia trying to find our roots. Why? To get the answer – why do we suddenly feel ourselves like this? And imagine, Tamara found in those old books that her great-grandfather was a Cossack. Exactly so it is written in the church books – a Cossack. That is all" (Ibid.). Besides the story of ancestry, they also explain their choice of Cossack repertoire with the Cossack ethos to which they relate: "But what is a Cossack? Firstly, it is a state of soul and worldview. Spirit, energy. It is a set of principles you follow in your life. And for the Cossacks, the common [principle] is freedom. You cannot force a Cossack to go and do something. If he wants it, he will go and accomplish it.... And [it is] a life by conscience and not by yourself. Nowadays, we are living on our own – we close our apartment door and do not know the neighbor's name. But by conscience, it is living together – therefore, when I do something, I immediately think: 'But how will it be to my neighbor? If I take it, he will lack it.' Such collective being is characteristic of Cossacks" (Ibid.). A broader context for the group *Ļubo mņe* is the Cossack revival movement that began in Ukraine and Russia after 1991 (Olson 2004: 160–175). It has served as a model and musical source for the *Ļubo mņe* performances.

Compared to the Slavic music groups in Riga, the approach of the groups residing away from the capital is somewhat different. Slavic folklore group *Slavjanočki* (Slavânočki) is based in Nākotne – a village 65 kilometers from Riga. The group was founded in 2003 by several local unemployed women who organized rehearsals twice a week. The leader of the group is a local teacher, Ol'ga Rožko. At first, she was invited to consult the group on Slavic customs, but soon she became the leader of it, as she mentioned, despite her lack of musical education. She emphasizes the importance of actively educating herself by attending different courses. The only member with formal musical education is the accordionist, an ethnic Latvian named Līga. She does not count herself a specialist in folklore; her role is to work on the vocal skills of participants, especially in the non-folkloric repertoire, like authored songs.

Ol'ga Rožko has lived in Nākotne for over 50 years and is aware of its sizable Slavic population.[6] She intends to ensure that no generation grows up in Nākotne

6 Nākotne (translation: Future) is a village in Glūda parish, Jelgava district. In 2022 the parish had 3,284 inhabitants, including 915 people of Slavic background (28% of the population): Ukrainians, Belarussians, Polish, and Russians (Data provided by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs on February 1, 2022).

without knowing its own culture. Besides leading the group, she organizes Slavic traditional celebrations (Maslenica and others) involving schoolchildren, their parents, and other local people and initiates publications on Slavic traditions and other local cultural projects. Ol'ga believes that the function of folklore performances is to carry on the essence of traditional customs and celebrations. However, she points to the lack of local Slavic folklore repertoire, comparing their situation to the ethnic Latvians, which "have everything ready here." Referring to the extensive fieldwork of Sergey Olenkin, Ol'ga comments that she cannot do such a large amount of work as her hobby. When starting to work on the repertoire, she realized that the needed books were not easy to acquire from the Latvian bookstores, so she collected some repertoire from her mother, sister, and a local Polish woman and published the collection in a book. An important source of their repertoire is the internet – Ol'ga often listens to the recordings of "ethnographic ensembles," particularly from the Myšlanka village in Novosibirsk Oblast. Still, *Slavjanočki* cannot meet the cultural and entertainment needs of the local population by performing only "folklore", so they also perform arranged folk songs from a compilation *Slavânskij bazar* (ed. by F. Takun, 2005) and authored songs.

In Daugavpils, a singing group exists at the Ukrainian culture center *Mrija* (Mrìâ). The center was founded in 2003, and its main function is to provide a place for socializing in the Ukrainian language. It is a close diaspora community, and their songs reflect their thoughts of belonging and cultural representation. The center is attended mainly by the older generation of Ukrainians who have emigrated to Latvia from different Ukrainian regions during the Soviet period. The center has an apartment on a basement floor where rehearsals and other social gatherings and celebrations occur. During the fieldwork, we witnessed the cooking of traditional dumplings *vareniki*, a rehearsal for a coming festival, and a birthday celebration with informal a cappella multipart singing as well as singing with a pre-recorded accompaniment called *minusovka* (backing track). The founder and leader of the center and music group, Nadežda Stahovska, noted that she does not have a formal musical education. When preparing the group for public performances, she involves local non-Ukrainian accompanying musicians (accordionist and violinist) or searches for pre-recorded accompaniments online. In her experience, singing with a backing track is not easy, but it is much cheaper than hiring musicians.

The group's repertoire consists mainly of popular Ukrainian folksong arrangements and solo, duet, or trio performances of popular songs (so-called *èstrada*). The musical categories proposed by the Latvian National Center for Culture do not bear a special meaning for the singers: "You know, in ethnic NGOs, we do not divide. That is simply our Ukrainian song. But what is it like – is it an old folklore or a not-so-old folklore or *èstrada* – we do not divide. We liked it, and we want others to hear it, so we

learn it and sing for people so they can hear the beauty of the song" (Interview with Nadežda Stahovska on July 23, 2020). To this group, representing Ukraine is more important than representing a particular musical style. However, Nadežda points out that their connection to contemporary Ukrainian culture is not strong enough, and in Ukraine, they have been expected to represent Latvia: "We need to revive our repertoire spiritually and hear and see contemporary Ukraine. I have lived in Latvia for 50 years, and my impressions about Ukraine are of that time.... Sadly I do not know contemporary Ukraine. Last year [2019], we went to Odessa for a small festival.... We went to show that we are from Ukraine and have not forgotten our traditions [while living] in Latvia.... However, in Ukraine, they say: we know Ukrainian songs ourselves; sing us the Latvian songs" (Ibid.).

The introduced music groups show a broad spectrum of motivations and contexts that lead to different interpretations of the notion of "traditional music." It can mean dedicated musical explorations of traditional – sometimes autochthonous or originating geographically close to Latvia – rural singing styles. It can also be based on the repertoires of particular Slavic countries and regions that are personally significant to the participants. It can also mean the integration of generalized "folkloric" or "ethnic" music into traditional customs to maintain ethnic identity and knowledge. The choice of the repertoire can also be based on pure aesthetic preferences or be random. It can also express belonging to a particular community, be it an ethnic group or a community of folk music revivalists. It can be observed that the groups from the urban center of Latvia develop a more specific niche approach and have better access to specific historical or local music sources. Groups from the periphery need to adapt to the needs of local communities and develop a more popular and flexible approach to the repertoire and musical style.

The challenges of performing "folklore"

The fieldwork showed that performing "folklore" is considered a rather difficult task among the Latvian Slavic music groups. It is challenging for several reasons: the interest in folklore is not common among the Latvian ethnic minorities; it is not easy to reach the imagined "folkloric" sources while living remotely from its primary contexts; and the expected performance styles are not easy to acquire. This section will introduce the challenging aspects of performing "folklore" and the understanding of this notion among its performers as well as among the groups who avoided identifying themselves with this category.

When asked why there are so few folklore groups among ethnic minorities, the informants pointed out that folklore is not popular among their communities compared

to ethnic Latvians. The leader of the ensemble *Karagod* Ol'ga Bogdanova mentioned the low prestige of folklore among the younger Russian-speaking generation: "Unfortunately, the Russian-speakers of Latvia…are not interested in their own culture. Unlike Latvians, whom it is taught in schools, and there are hobby groups, and it is said in families: 'Yes, yes, you go to a [folk] dance group, it is wonderful!' Among us, if a girl gets to know that a guy is dancing in a folklore group – what?! What is folklore?! You need to breakdance!" (Interview with Ol'ga Bogdanova on February 13, 2019). Another aspect is emphasized by the leader of the folklore group *Slavjanočki*, Ol'ga Rožko. Unlike in Riga, where a narrower stylistic specialization is possible because of the larger population and more music groups, in smaller towns and villages, the groups need to fulfill all the entertainment and cultural expectations of the local people: "The parish expects from us that we organize events, but we cannot organize an event with folklore only. Therefore, we play theater and dance and sing different songs" (Interview with Ol'ga Rožko on July 11, 2020).

Besides the lack of popularity and prestige, another layer of difficulty is the singing styles of traditional music – the specific ethnographic *sound* that several groups strive to master. To acquire the traditional *sound*, the most experienced teacher of Slavic traditional singing, Sergej Olenkin, uses vocal exercises and learns from the original sources of the tradition: namely, the field recordings or the recordings of the "ethnographic ensembles" that have inherited the specific traditional styles. Olenkin's efforts to acquire that specific *sound* have a years-long history: "I sang traditional songs long before the ensemble was founded. I was interested in setting the voice [because] *that sound* is rather extraordinary and intriguing for me. Singing in this manner is a tough job. I did not find *the sound* immediately. First ten years, now I understand it, it just seemed to me that I mastered *that sound*, and step by step, I had discoveries in this direction" (Interview with Sergej Olenkin on June 7, 2018).

Olenkin is an authority to other Slavic music groups, and he has attempted to teach traditional singing to some of them. However, he concluded that it is difficult to learn in adulthood. Therefore, his main effort is to teach children: "I thought that it is very difficult for young children – to master the form of folklore. But later, I tried with them, and I found out that it was much easier. [..] They are more receptive and gain success, learn a song, the manner, singing style, and different subtleties much faster. The older the person, the more difficult it is for him to succeed" (Ibid.). This observation was confirmed by Ol'ga Rožko, who has tried to study with Olenkin: "I do not consider myself a master of traditional singing. I graduated from a school where I studied music, but my voice is not strong enough to sing traditionally. It is very important, but not so easy to learn at my age" (Interview with Ol'ga Rožko on July 11, 2020). After an initial singing workshop with Olenkin, her group *Slavjanočki* decided to give up the idea of

acquiring the traditional singing style because of their age (43–70) and the previously acquired habits of singing.

Another challenge of performing "folklore" is the unwritten rule that it should be learned from the "original sources." Music groups are expected to establish a connection to some place, find the traditional repertoire of that place, and preferably listen to local traditional singers or ethnographic recordings to learn from them. Ol'ga Rožko says: "Sometimes I get angry with all these rules of the festival [folklore festival *Baltica*] – only the traditional, only from an original source…. We cannot do that! Several folklore groups have such an opportunity – either they are musically educated or go to Russia more often. Almost all of us are citizens [of Latvia], and we rarely go somewhere. Generally, it is complicated" (Ibid.). Ol'ga points to the fact that their traveling to Russia is more complicated if compared to the local Slavic people who are citizens of Russia or Belarus or are the so-called "non-citizens of Latvia."

Detachment from the needed resources and networks is an obstacle for the Slavic music groups living out of the urban centers. Still, also the group of Russian and Cossack songs *Ļubo mņe* from Riga mentioned that learning from the "original sources" is not easy because ethnographic recordings are complex and difficult to learn from: "To be honest, for us non-professionals working with these [ethnographic recordings] is difficult. Working with secondary recordings made by professional collectives who graduated from *Gnesinka* [The Gnesin Russian Academy of Music] or a conservatory is much easier for us. They have taken songs from authentic performers, and they perform them in their professional way, and by listening to them, we can learn the voices much clearer and correctly, and that way, we can try to repeat. Of course, it is not the same, but it is how we can do it" (Interview with Anatolij Artûhov on June 8, 2019).

My fieldwork aimed to interview all the Slavic music groups which indicated "traditional music" in the application forms for *skates*. Several of these groups do not call themselves "folklore groups," and it was important to listen to their arguments on why they distance themselves from this category. One such group is the ensemble of Russian songs *Bariņa* (Barynâ). The ensemble was founded in 2000 or 2001 in Jēkabpils in Eastern Latvia. The ensemble leader, Elena Agafonova, has graduated from the Minsk Pedagogical Institute as a teacher of academic music. She is creating arrangements for two and three-part singing and teaching them to the a cappella female group. When they do not need to perform in the frame of "traditional music," Agafonova adds improvised piano accompaniment. They are proud to be the only Slavic music group in the town that performs without pre-recorded accompaniment. The a cappella singing brings out this group from the local cultural context and makes it "more traditional" than others. Adding a classical piano is considered the

"non-traditional" element they "allow themselves" because of Agafonova's strong identity and skills as an academic musician. She considers her understanding of folk music a professional skill: "That is exactly the professionalism. It is simple – to understand music, its soul.... For musicians, these are a few common methods and nothing more. We can simply create the soul, as any artist can perform any stage role excellently. So does a musician – he understands everything from Bach and Beethoven to the Latvian, Russian, and Ukrainian songs" (Interview with Elena Agafonova on July 20, 2020). Other participants share the opinion that the power of Russian folksongs is their topicality – songs narrate about themes that were topical in the past and are topical nowadays.

Agafonova emphasizes that the "pure folklore," as she calls it, is difficult, and they do not have the needed connection to the local rural musical traditions. She remembers that in a festival *Troickie horovody* in Orel (Russia), *Bariņa* was announced as a diaspora ensemble without connection to the Russian musical traditions, and therefore it performs stylizations. Their reflection reveals both their lack of connection to "pure folklore" and the complexity of that music: "Well, we are more like a *song ensemble*. Folklore in its pure form... You know, we tried to learn folklore. Not everybody can be successful in folklore. To master folklore, first, you need such roots – connected with the folk, with the countryside. [..] But we all are from the town. [..] We can say that we sing Russian pop music. These are the popular [folksongs]. But folklore – it is so difficult! That is unthinkable! I got two wedding song collections as a gift when we were in Orel, all with written-down sheet music and lyrics. I opened it, and there was just eight-part music! That is the province of Orel, and it was like visiting the forests of Orel! I closed the book. I understood that I needed to break my head there, and I could not give it to my girls... You must be such a professional to sing such folklore, wedding folklore, eight-part, seven-part. That is folklore!" (Ibid.).

This chapter illustrated the situation common nowadays when "traditional music" and "folklore" has changed from descriptive to prescriptive categories, and amateur musicians adapt, intentionally learn, and perform music to correspond to the externally developed ideas.

Discussion

This study documents a recent phase in the Latvian cultural policy implementation aimed at representing ethnic diversity in national cultural events. In 2011, the implementation of the integration policy was delegated to the Ministry of Culture of Latvia. Since the following year, the Latvian National Center for Culture has provided an institutional frame and methodological support for ethnic

minority groups who are willing to be part of the state's amateur art system. The research question was motivated by the observation that the Latvian amateur art system is based on a well-established aesthetic canon, efforts, and criteria that are not much shared by ethnic minorities. For decades, most of the minority amateur art activities have developed outside the aesthetic frame of the state. Amateur musicians have freely created their ethnic music by adapting aesthetic elements from folk music, art music, popular music, entertainment shows, and Soviet-style folk music standards, often in an eclectic way. This study tests the compatibility of the state's amateur art system with ethnic minority music groups of different cultural backgrounds.

The strategy of the Latvian National Center for Culture has been to form a separate administrative unit for "collectives of ethnic minorities" for those amateur groups who are not attempting to join the previously existing niches and their events, such as the branch (and shared cultural space) of a cappella choirs or folklore groups. Taking the latter as an example, at the beginning of 2023, there were only seven ethnic minority groups in the list of 243 folklore groups registered at the Center. Most minority groups prefer (or are willing or able) to comply with the community, aesthetics, and criteria of the newly established branch intended for ethnic minorities (93 groups applied for a competition to participate at the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration in 2023).

The authors of a sociological study, *The Song Celebration in a Changing Social Environment* (Tisenkopfs et al. 2002), discussed three possible models for including ethnic minorities in the national cultural scene a decade before the recent integration policy phase started. The three proposed models were: 1) individuals joining the "ethnic Latvian" choirs or folk-dance groups; 2) establishing minority groups that also prepare the common "obligatory" programs of the Song and Dance Celebrations; 3) organizing separate events for the representation of ethnic minorities. The current strategy shows the priority of the third model, though the status and potential of the first model are under-researched. The second model appears to be the least developed because of the differences in aesthetic background and corresponding skills of the "ethnic Latvian" and minority groups. The current model was assessed as effective but the least integrative (Tisenkopfs et al. 2002: 61). Similarly, discussing the case of the International Cultural Center *Caisa* in Finland, Pasi Saukkonen and Miikka Pyykkönen pointed to the positive and negative scenarios of specialized minority institutions and activities: "In the positive scenario…cultural sensitivity is incorporated into normal services and immigrants and their communities are taken into account in the mainstream cultural policy . [..] In the negative scenario, the center becomes an isolated multicultural universe, 'a reservation' within a society that otherwise refuses to accept the diversification of social realities" (Saukkonen, Pyykkönen 2008: 59).

Considering the results of the "third model" implemented in Latvia in the last decade, the integration/isolation issue asks for a more detailed evaluation. A survey following the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration in 2013 showed that the participants prioritized the "third model," with a separate event for minorities (76%), over including minority performances in the Final concert of the Celebration (70%); still, the difference is not excessive (Laķe 2014: 34).

Another issue to consider is the new criteria and expertise needed for the newly established branch of ethnic minorities in the Latvian amateur art system. New cultural competencies of experts (or new experts) are needed to evaluate the ethnically diverse performances if a criterion is "conformity with tradition." The conceptual issue of what defines artistic quality in a multicultural environment was raised by a researcher of cultural policy in Denmark, Dorte Skot-Hansen: "If one believes that the yardstick for artistic quality is universal, then the board must be said to be just as competent in this area as in the other funding areas. However, if one believes that artistic quality is defined on the basis of the traditions and aesthetic conventions on which the work derives, i.e. a differentiated concept of quality, it is a problem if one is not familiar with the tradition on which the ethnic art is based" (Skot-Hansen 2002: 204). The challenges of transition from a monocultural to a multicultural approach have been major issues in European cultural policy debates, and the resulting provocation of historically well-established values has been recognized:

> "[I]t is obviously difficult to integrate group-specific multiculturalism into a field that has been accustomed to work in terms of universal values, quality-based assessment, individual creativity and national interest. The full incorporation of communal cultural diversity in cultural policy provokes questions about the primary criteria behind artistic value judgments. Opening this box might be quite a task unto itself. Furthermore, the true recognition of minorities and their traditions might lead to the necessity to approve the simultaneous existence of different but equally valid quality criteria. In this sense, cultural diversity really challenges some basic components of contemporary arts policy, and from this point of view, opposing change is quite understandable" (Saukkonen 2014: 196).

This study has aimed to consider the choices, interpretations, and challenges of the ethnic minority musicians who have been motivated to perform in the frame of the state's amateur art system of Latvia. To achieve that, fieldwork was organized in 2018–2020 with a selection of Slavic music groups who associate themselves with "traditional music" and "folklore" categories. Their different social and cultural backgrounds cause various strategies of repertoire building and musical style. Though performing in the frame of "folklore" or "traditional music" appears to be especially demanding because of the particular idea of the repertoire sources and interpretation styles developed within the Latvian folklore revival movement since the end of the 1970s. The cultural backgrounds of Slavic (Ukrainian, Belarusian, Polish, Russian)

music groups vary, just like the histories of Slavic communities in Latvia. Some music groups derive their repertoire and performance style from local historical sources. Still, their sources, references, and networks are often not based in Latvia. Typically, the participants of the groups come from different countries and regions. The idea of a "rooted" repertoire of folklore groups meets not only the different choices of the musicians but also their available resources for the repertoire and performance building. Compared to the ethnic Latvian folklore groups, the preconditions of the local Slavic groups are more diverse and uncertain, and often their performances are created in a place socially and culturally more distanced from historical musical sources.

The research process combined ethnomusicology with policy implementation studies, and the ethnomusicological approach of this research raises a question about the categories of music used for the organization of amateur art. Creating categories is a mechanism of policies with the function of "shaping, controlling, and regulating heterogeneous populations through classificatory schemes that homogenize diversity, render the subject transparent to the state, and implement legal and spatial boundaries between different categories and subjects" (Wedel et al. 2005: 35). Two categories in focus here are "folklore" and "traditional music." These notions have been questioned and discussed thoroughly in academia – a recent contribution to the academic definitions of "traditional music" has been proposed by the ethnomusicologist Ulrich Morgenstern (2021). This study explores the different understandings of these categories in the policy implementation process. As a top-down prescriptive category in policy documents, "traditional music" is contrasted with "arranged folk music" in a simplified way. The music-making communities try to interpret and internalize these notions to navigate the given system successfully. Not always are the categories understood similarly, leading to the question of their utility. Most likely, when used for policy implementation, they function as a blueprint for the imagined and desirable aesthetics of national culture.

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