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IN A LAD'S WORLD. A POPULAR TV SERIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE SHADOW OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

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Abstract. The essay deals with the enormous success of the Russian television series *The Boy's Word. Blood on the Asphalt* (*Slovo patsana. Krov' na asfalte*, 2023), directed by Zhora Kryzhovnikov, on both sides of the trenches during the Russo-Ukrainian war. It discusses the role of social media and the public reception in Ukraine and Russia. In particular, the way the series depicts the so-called 'Kazan phenomenon', when the Tatar capital was shocked by criminal youth gangs in the late Soviet Union, makes it attractive and topical in the current situation. By analyzing this, the essay also attempts to gain a better understanding of how popular cultural products take up and process social problems and conflicts in a complex way.

Keywords: Popular culture; TV series, social media; Russo-Ukrainian war; Zhora Kryzhovnikov; Russian TV series *Slovo patsana. Krov' na asfalte* (2023)

At the turn of the year 2023/2024, a Russian TV series managed to do what seems unimaginable during Russia's war against Ukraine: within a few days, *The Boy's Word. Blood on the Asphalt* (*Slovo patsana. Krov' na asfalte*, 2023) became the most popular series of the year on both sides of the trenches. Viewer and click figures reached record highs and the theme song *Pyiala* ("Glass") by the Tatar band Aigel made it to the top of various charts in both countries.¹ In the Russian Federation, the series was labelled "18+" and could only be seen on the private streaming services *Wink* and *START*.² However, during the broadcast of the eight episodes of the first season from 9 November to 21 December 2023, the series spread like lightning via Telegram and other digital media. Phrases such as "Lads don't apologize" or "Remember, you're a lad now, you're on the street now, and there are enemies all around you" became commonplace.

Inventive business people even designed a fashion collection in the style of the series, and activist local politicians put together film images to create an election campaign spot on social media.³ Pedagogues and politicians sounded the alarm when reports appeared in the press about brawls inspired by the series, both in Russia and Ukraine.⁴

Before the final episodes had even been broadcast, there was already a broad media response in both countries,⁵ although the reviews were controversial and ranged from enthusiastic acclaim to outright dismay and categorical rejection. But what kind of work of popular culture was it that attracted so much attention and caused such a stir on social media?

1.

The Boy's Word is set in 1989 in Kazan, the capital of the Autonomous Soviet Republic of Tatarstan, almost 800 kilometers east of Moscow. The world's first socialist country is in a state of collapse, and while the authorities are increasingly losing influence and power, youth gangs are taking over the streets. The Tatar capital became famous throughout the Union as one of the most dangerous places in the country, where criminal groups brutally extorted protection money and defended their spheres of influence, leading to repeated deaths.⁶ In this environment, the series traces the tragic fate of two 14-year-old boys who join one of these groups during the period of glasnost and perestroika. Marat and Andrei submit to rigid codes of honor, fall deeper and deeper into the maelstrom of violence and end up in a prison for young people.

Critics unanimously praised the realism of the portrayal of the so-called "Kazan phenomenon" and saw this as a key to its success.⁷ The "dramatic series" was excellently made, attempted to understand the true nature of the youth gangs⁸ and offered a "credible snapshot of a brutal era".⁹ This "swan song of Soviet collectivism",¹⁰ which is reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002),¹¹ is at the same time "the (joyful and fatal) recognition of the power and authority" of the stronger over the weaker, which is why the series is liked "by people with very different political views".¹² However, the open depiction of violence by the boys also gave rise to concerns: younger viewers were fascinated by the "exoticism", while older viewers were overcome by "nostalgia", which was mainly caused by the "romanticization of banditry".¹³

In Russia, the series was therefore initially met with harsh rejection, particularly from the political side.¹⁴ The ombudsperson for children in Tatarstan called for a complete ban, as it conveyed a "false idea of the criminal world" and jeopardized the "mental and moral health of young people".¹⁵ Duma deputies also warned and called for censorship.¹⁶ But after celebrities such as cinema director Nikita Mikhalkov and even priests spoke positively about *The Boy's Word*,¹⁷ the work has since received numerous awards in Russia, including some of the most prestigious prizes for television series.¹⁸

On the Ukrainian side, on the other hand, the demand for a ban was primarily based on the origin of the series and an alleged fundamental civilizational difference between the two countries was emphasized. The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy argued that the series propagates “violence, crime and the aesthetics of the aggressor country as well as hostile propaganda, which is unacceptable in Ukraine during the war.”¹⁹ Some even found the series more dangerous than the Russian war of aggression itself, as it aroused sympathy among teenagers for a country that was “killing us all”.²⁰ The Ukrainian author and screenwriter Andrii Kokotiukha saw the fatal effect of the series in the fact that it conveyed unpleasant values to Ukraine:

“Russian ideas differ from the civilized world in that they accept violence and cultivate it directly or indirectly [...]: It is not the thieves who are bad, but the life that left them no choice. That’s why we should pity the criminals. [...] Western culture offers a completely different code of honor than Russian culture.”²¹

Nina Khrushcheva, a political scientist who teaches in New York and is the great-granddaughter of Soviet party secretary Nikita Khrushchev, also emphasizes this allegedly specifically Russian culture of violence, which is opposed to the ‘civilized’ West. She even saw the series as a preparation for a “permanent war”:

“In the Russian criminal drama *The Boy’s Word. Blood on the Asphalt* an aggressive and chaotic policy leads to aggression and chaos on the streets. When the leadership declares that enemies are hiding everywhere, or that the best defense is to strike first, then paranoia, intolerance and aggression increase. And so it is not surprising that against the backdrop of the war against Ukraine instigated by Putin, Russian children are bullying their classmates, young people are attacking passers-by and recording it on video and adults are starting mass brawls in public places.”²²

But did those who so emphatically emphasized the harmfulness of the series and in some cases vehemently called for it to be banned really watch it? Or was the journalistic and political outrage primarily a reaction to the enormous response the series had received on social media, where no political or moral barriers seemed to apply even in wartime? Had the indignant commentators perhaps fallen for the surface of digital communication, in which appealing memes, catchy slogans and entertaining video snippets ensure brief attention and lasting distribution without the actual media product itself coming into full effect? What was the TV series actually about?

2.

The series is the work of director Zhora Kryzhovnikov. Kryzhovnikov became extremely successful in the last decade with comedies that shy away from neither kitsch nor eccentricity and usually take blatant aim at the new Russian middle class and show business. The satirical and ironic approach often contains a serious socio-political concern, such as in the multi-award-winning television series *Call DiCaprio!* (*Zvonite DiKaprio!* 2018), for example. It focuses on the spread of HIV

infections among well-off heterosexual adults, which is otherwise barely addressed on state television, while also ridiculing the general homophobia and mendacious patriotic pathos of the Russian media industry.

There are hardly any satirical elements in the new series; instead, the critically acclaimed realistic portrayal dominates. It is based on the non-fiction book *The Boy's Word. Criminal Tatarstan of the 1970s – 2010s* (2021) by journalist Robert Garaev, who himself became a member of a street gang in Kazan in 1989 at the age of 14 and was involved in the series production as a consultant. Garaev writes that his book, which is based on extensive interviews with former participants, intends to make the traumatized “lads and their victims” talk and thus contribute to an understanding of the “Kazan phenomenon”. Because only by “desacralizing” banditry could it be prevented that their false ideas of honor could still penetrate everyday life today (Garaev 2024, pp. 613; 616 – 617).²³

Kryzhovnikov's series of the same name is also designed as a didactic “social and educational project to help young people and their parents in acute situations”, as the credits of each episode state, and is accompanied by a comprehensive range of help and advice online and on social media.²⁴ Accordingly, the series begins with the seductive power and fascination that neighborhood gangs exerted on teenagers at the time. Only if you became a member of such a group and followed its rules and rituals were you a real ‘lad’ (*patsan* in Russian) and could free yourself from the constraints of family confinement, school discipline and state authority. The gang promised a self-determined life without regard for laws and conventions. The Soviet muff of authoritarian upbringing and communist phrases, in which any deviant behavior is considered offensive, is contrasted with the brave new world of American baseball caps, kung fu films, porn videos and pop music. The catchy disco hits of those years, such as the song *Muzyka nas sviazala* (*Music has united us* 1989) by the Russian pop band *Mirage*, speak to the pubescent boys from the soul:

“Again I flee to my friends.
I don't know what draws me here
I can't be long without music.

(Refrain:) Music has united us
This is our secret.
To all coaxing I give the answer:
‘We will not be separated, no!’”²⁵

Right from the start, the series makes it clear that this new world is incredibly brutal. In the very first scene, the half-strong “lad” Marat punches the “loser” Andrei in the tram for a trivial offence. Andrei, a young piano player and talented student who is growing up in relative poverty with his single mother and younger

sister, quickly realizes that he cannot stand up to such bullying on his own. When he is asked to tutor Marat, of all people, whose father is the chairman of a large military company, the two become friends and Andrei decides to become a gang member too. This plunges him into a rough world of boys in which unconditional subordination and mutual humiliation, bullying and fights with other neighborhood gangs are part of everyday life. On a trip to Moscow, where Andrei tries to help a punk who was almost kicked to death by Marat, he ends up in police custody for the first time. The desire to be a cool guy is constantly thwarted by the consequences of his own actions. When his friends try to make amends, things only get worse. For example, when Andrei's mother, in her naivety, bets all her money and her fur hat in a shell game with members of the gang and Marat prevents her from jeopardizing her coat at the last moment by setting off a false police alarm: At first he gets in trouble from his own gang members. But as the code of honor forbids harming the families of the "lads", Marat then steals the fur hat from his English teacher, which the whole gang then ceremoniously presents to Andrei's mother as compensation. Later, when the mother, proudly wearing the new fur hat, has to speak to the English teacher about Andrei's misbehavior at school, the teacher recognizes her property and Andrei's mother is exposed as a vile thief, causing her to lose her mind.

The real escalation begins when Marat's older brother, a former boxing champion nicknamed Adidas, returns from the war in Afghanistan. He overthrows the corrupt gang bosses involved in drug trade, strives for reintroducing discipline, tries to enforce a ban on alcohol and smoking, and instead of opaque deals with other neighborhood groups, he wants to re-establish a clear balance of power. These attempts are a complete failure: extortion of protection money and a video parlor are only successful to a limited extent, and the fights with other groups become increasingly bloody. When another gang finally kidnaps and rapes Marat's girlfriend, Adidas is horribly humiliated and finally shoots his tormentors in bold blood. Not only does the world of the strong guys collapse, but Andrei and Marat also drag their own families and girlfriends into the abyss with them. The seductive gang life proves to be a nightmare that destroys all interpersonal relationships and damages them severely.

The friends repeatedly come into conflict with the lads' strict code of honor: not only do they demand absolute loyalty to the group and forbid apologies to anyone else, they also follow patriarchal role models, according to which only an innocent girl is 'pure' and deserves to be your girlfriend, while everyone else is considered a 'slut' and a 'whore' without honor. If you associate with them anyway, you are 'tainted' yourself and are excluded from the gang as a 'scumbag'. Andrei and Marat initially try to keep their chosen women 'pure', sometimes with extreme ruthlessness, but this fails. Andrei's beloved Irina works for the militia, is a member of the communist youth organization Komsomol and has fun with the subcultural bohemians, who have nothing but contempt for the

‘hooligan’ Andrei. It is not Andrei who protects Irina but, conversely, Irina, who is already of age, repeatedly has to iron out the consequences of his offences and transgressions. Marat, on the other hand, desperately remains faithful to his girlfriend Aigul after she is raped. Nevertheless, she is ostracized as a whore by the gang and their girls. Even her parents cannot bear the shame, so she sees no way out and takes her own life. In their senseless rage at their own helplessness, Andrei and Marat almost become the murderers of the supposedly guilty rival gang members themselves.

The only consolation that remains in the end is the pop music that accompanies the guys in all situations, and in particular the hits of the boy band Laskovyi Mai (*Tender May*). Their singer Yuri Shatunov with his androgynous appearance – himself an orphan from a children’s home who was just 13 years old when the band was founded in 1986 – became the Soviet Union’s first teen star. His song lyrics get to the heart of what the rowdyish boys are unable to put into their own words when, in the final scene of the series in the prison’s culture club, they bawl the chorus of *Sedaia noch’* (*Grey Night* 1987) together under the red banner “We praise work, our country and time”:

“And again the grey night, and only it I trust.
You know, grey night, all my secrets.
But you can’t help me either, and your darkness
is of no use to me at all, absolutely not.”²⁶

But at the end of the series the viewer understands very well that the eerily familiar secret of the grey night, for which no help is of any use, are the traumatic experiences of violence, experiences generally not spoken about publicly, even on television.

3.

Popular culture products are always tied to audience success and therefore react strongly to current moods in the population or among certain target groups. Whether it's music trends, gaming communities or internet memes, they might all indicate and reinforce what is considered relevant and appropriate. At the same time, they also provide a symbolic space in which social unease, widespread fears and political concerns can be articulated and adjusted to the current reality (Storey 1996). In today’s Russia, in particular mass commodity products such as popular literature, films or TV series help people come to terms with daily discontent and frustration by remodeling it into fictional captivating adventures and romances (cf. Hermann 2008; Borenstein 2011; Norris 2012; Boele et al. 2020; Schwartz & Weller 2024). These dynamics between imaginary adjustment and social discontent are always ambivalent. Thus, popular formats are indeed an instrument of state actors

to attune the population to existing social conditions and ideological narratives. But since popular culture – unlike mere propaganda – remains dependent on the interest and participation of consumers, it produces contradictory and conflicting symbols and semantics at the same time (Schwartz 2016; Weiss-Wendt & Adler 2021; Borenstein 2022; Hutchings 2022).

This is also the case with this series. On the one hand, it undertakes a revision of common images of the perestroika period and follows the current zeitgeist within the Russian Federation. On the other hand, the series contradicts it in many respects. This becomes clearest in the way Soviet psychiatry is portrayed, but also with Andrei's uncle Ildar, who is a senior investigator in the criminal investigation department. In the course of the investigation into Andrei's youth gang, Ildar increasingly reveals himself to be an empathetic and righteous man who in the name of humanity wants to enforce the rule of law against rampant street crime with all the force he can muster. This is where the series takes on clearly counterfactual traits – after all, in the late Soviet Union, the corruption of state authorities was proverbial.²⁷

However, the ideological orientation of the television series is most clearly recognizable in the depiction of the war in Afghanistan, in which the Soviet Union was involved for a decade after its invasion in December 1979 until February 1989. A whole generation of young conscripts who were forcibly sent to fight were traumatized by the guerrilla warfare of the Mujahideen. After the end of the war, they had massive problems reintegrating into the collapsing society, and many fell into alcohol and drugs. None of this is mentioned in the series, on the contrary: Adidas seems to have been steeled in the war, is the favorite of all older and younger women and immediately takes over the leadership of the neighborhood gang.²⁸ The series only indirectly shows that he is also severely traumatized, for example in the scene where he spends a romantic night with his lover Natasha not in bed but in the kitchen with a guitar, singing Afghan songs until she cries out that she no longer wants to hear about death. His return to society ultimately fails on all levels: Instead of creating military order and discipline, all his actions only harm the group; and his father, who has made a career as the head of an arms company supplying weapons to the Soviet invading army, ends up a social outcast because he is the father of a criminal and murderer. The implicit message is that war heroes are not fit for civilian life.

Closely linked to this indirect criticism of the destructive consequences of war are questions about humaneness. Its absence runs like a leitmotif through the series, illustrated by discriminatory speech, disrespectful gestures and assaultive behavior.²⁹ Above all, however, the omnipresent sexism within the group has a toxic effect. The series does not present an idealized image of the Soviet Union in any other way either: the chairman of the local Komsomol is a typical careerist of the transition period who recognized the capitalist signs

of the new era early on and runs a production facility for blue jeans in the club rooms.

Thus, *The Boy's Word. Blood on the Asphalt* is certainly an attempt to fulfil the state's ideological and educational requirements with in today's increasingly repressive and authoritarian Russia, but simultaneously it also subtly allows for other points of view. The series clearly follows the official narrative that only a strong state can ensure law and order. Putin's dictum of the collapse of the Soviet Union as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" is vividly demonstrated using the "Kazan phenomenon". At the same time, the series uses the two young protagonists Marat and Andrei to depict the fascination that counter-cultural youth movements can develop and the fatal consequences that extreme violence can have for everyone involved. Yet, the catastrophic consequences of the Soviet mission in Afghanistan for an entire generation of young soldiers are only indirectly addressed through the figure of war veteran Adidas, who is unable to return to civilian life.

It is probably this successful combination of an exciting and captivating story about young alternative cultures with a multi-layered thematization of the consequences of violence and war for their own society that explains the enormous popularity of the series on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian front. Because, as Robert Garaev writes in the epilogue to the new edition of his book:

"Unfortunately, the world of lads has not only returned to our screens, but also to our reality – and to a much greater extent than we could have imagined. [...] Given the situation in 2023, where the world is sinking into chaos and military conflicts, I would like to believe that the reader will draw the right conclusion after reading this book: Wars can have reasons and preconditions, but sometimes the winner is not the one who rushed headlong into this conflict, like the heroes from 'The Boy's Word', but the one who stood apart from these battles, immersed himself in the matter, understood it, evolved and resisted everything, based on his understanding of the world and rules of honor." (Garaev 2024, p. 634, p. 638)

The television series also contains such an offer to understand and resist. However, in the scandalized popular reception through social media on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian front, this differentiated engagement with war and violence was largely overlooked. What effect the series actually had in the trenches and how many viewers it made understand and resist will presumably only become clear after the war.

NOTES

1. Aigel. Piyala. In: *YouTube* (21.1.2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE_7HeBZgYE. As Aigel Gaisina, the band's singer, emigrated after making critical comments about Russia's war against Ukraine, all information

about the song was later removed from the series' credits. I would like to thank Franziska Thun-Hohenstein, Nina Weller, Roman Dubasevych, Dirk Naguschewski and Igor Polianski for their helpful comments.

2. "Patsan" means something like 'bloke, guy, lad, boy', "slovo" in this phrase means not just "word", but "word of honor", so the literary translation would be rather "A Lad's Word of Honor". I'm keeping the more vague title "The Boy's Word" here because it has become generally accepted as the translation in English, but in the text I use the British English colloquial word "lad" for "patsan". In colloquial Russian, the noun "patsan" has a patronizing connotation and can also indicate membership of a criminal group. A trailer for the series with English subtitles can be found on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDYwliWsAa8>.
3. Redaktsiia. Outlaw i Wink predstavili kollektsiiu odezhdy po serialu "Slovo patsana" [Outlaw and Wink presented a collection of clothes based on the TV series "The Boy's Word"]. In: *Pravila zhizni* (28.12.2023), <https://www.pravilamag.ru/news/film-news/28-12-2023/714789-outlaw-i-wink-predstavili-kollektsiyu-odejdy-po-serialu-slovo-pacana/>; [Anon.]. Iz "Slovo patsana" smontirovali predvybornyi rolik [They made an election video out of "The Boy's Word"]. In: *Holod* (28.02.2024), <https://holod.media/2024/02/28/iz-slova-pacana-smontirovali-predvybornyj-rolik/>.
4. Cf. e.g. Anastasiia Khokhlova. Skhodki, draki i zony vliianiia: na shto idut podrostki posle posmotra seriala "Slovo patsana" [Gatherings, fights and zones of influence: what teenagers go to after watching the TV series "The Boy's Word"]. In: *Radio 1* (29.11.2023), <https://radio1.ru/news/obschestvo/shodki-draki-i-zoni-vlianiya-na-chto-idut-podrostki-posle-prosmotra-filma-slovo-patsana/>; [Anon.]. Rosiiska propaganda v ukraiinskikh shkolakh zabili na spoloch cherez serial "Slovo patsana" [Russian propaganda: Ukrainian schools raise the alarm over the TV series "The Boy's Word"]. In: *Gazeta.Ua* (04.12.2023), https://gazeta.ua/articles/celebrities/_rosijska-propaganda-v-ukrayinskih-shkolah-zabili-na-spoloh-cherez-serial-slovo-pacana/1164140.
5. Cf. inter alia Anastasiia Goncharenko. "Slovo patsana": chomu tsey serial znenavidili v Ukraini ta chomu pidlitki "pidsili" na nogo ["The Boy's Word": why this series was hated in Ukraine and why teenagers got hooked on it]. In: *TSN* (11.12.2023), <https://tsn.ua/ukrayina/slovo-pacana-chomu-cey-serial-znenavidili-v-ukrayini-ta-chomu-pidlitki-pidsili-na-nogo-2468176.html>; Anna Kundirenko. "Slovo patsana". Pochemu skandal'nyi rossiiskii serial stal populiarnym v Ukraini ["The Boy's Word". Why a scandalous Russian TV series became popular in Ukraine]. In: *BBC News (Russkaia sluzhba)* (09.12.2023), <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c4n0n9n8wwro>.
6. However, juvenile crime and hooliganism were already in the 1980s repeatedly the subject of popular feature films such as "*Lads*" (*Patsany*, dir. Dinara Asanova, 1980) or "*My Name is Harlequin*" (*Menia zovut Arlekino*, dir. Valerii Rybarev, 1988), which were also used didactically in school lessons.
7. Cf. Varvara Koshechkina. Vyshel serial "Slovo patsana" o molodezhnykh bandack vremen raspada SSSR [Released the series "The Boy's Word" about

- youth gangs of the times of the collapse of the USSR]. In: *Lenta.ru* (10.11.2023), <https://lenta.ru/articles/2023/11/10/slovop/>; Unless otherwise labelled, all translations are mine.
8. Anton Khitrov. *Slovo patsana. Krov' na asfal'te* - otlichnyy serial Zhory Kryzhovnikova o kriminalnoi kazani 1980-kh, vkotoruiu riskuet prevratitsia Rossiya2020-kh ["The Boy's Word. Blood on the Asphalt" – an excellent series by Zhora Kryzhovnikov about the criminal Kazan 1980s, in which Russia 2020s risks turning]. In: *Meduza* (25.11.2023), <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/11/25/slovo-patsana-krov-na-asfalte-otlichnyy-serial-zhory-kryzhovnikova-o-kriminalnoy-kazani-1980-h-v-kotoruyu-riskuet-prevratitsya-rossiya-2020-h>.
 9. Aleksandr Folin. *Slovo patsana. Krov' na asfal'te*: Dostoverniy srez zhestokoi epokhi ["The Boy's Word. Blood on the Asphalt" – a credible snapshot of a brutal era]. In: *KinoReporter* (9.11.2023), <https://kinoreporter.ru/slovo-pacana-krov-na-asfalte/>.
 10. Sergey Toymentsev. Review of "Zhora Kryzhovnikov: The Boy's Word of Honour (TV)". In: *KinoKultura* 83 (2024), <https://www.kinokultura.com/2024/83r-slovo-patsana.shtml>.
 11. Vasilij Stepanov. Bezhat' boiat'sia [They are afraid to run]. In: *Kommersant'* (3.11.2023), <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6298062>.
 12. Anton Dolin. *Slovo patsana* stalo nostoiashchei sentsatsiei ["The Boy's Word" became a real sensation]. In: *Meduza* (22.12.2023), <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/12/22/slovo-patsana-stalo-nastoyaschey-sensatsiey-anton-dolin-osmyslyaet-sluchivsheesya>.
 13. Anna Kundirenko. "Slovo patsana". Pochemu skandal'nyi rossiiskii serial stal populiarnym v Ukraine ["The Boy's Word". Why a scandalous Russian TV series became popular in Ukraine]. In: BBC News (Russkaia sluzhba) (09.12.2023), <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c4n0n9n8wwro>.
 14. Il'ia Litov. 'Sozhrali stranu': tak li vreden serial "Slovo patsana" dlia molodezhi ["They devoured the country": is "The Boy's Word" so bad for young people]. In: *Moskovskii Komzomolets* (05.12.2023), <https://www.mk.ru/culture/2023/12/05/sozhrali-stranu-tak-li-vreden-serial-slovo-pacana-dlya-molodezhi.html>.
 15. Alja Trynova. Detskij ombudsmen Tatarstana prosit Roskomnadzor proverit' serial "Slovo patsana" [The Ombudsperson for Children of Tatarstan asks Roskomnadzor to review the series "The Boy's Word"]. In: *Vechernie vedomosti* (29.11.2023), <https://veved.ru/events/191582-detskij-ombudsmen-tatarstana-prosit-roskomnadzor-proverit-serial-slovo-pacana.html>. Roskomnadzor is the "Federal Inspectorate for Information Technology and Mass Communications" in Russia.
 16. Sergei Aksenov. Fil'm "Slovo patsana" napomnil o perestroechnykh problemakh 80-ckh [The film "The Boy's Word" recalls the perestroika problems of the 1980s]. In: *Svobodnaya Pressa* (06.12.2023), <https://svpressa.ru/society/article/396957/>.
 17. Tass. Mikhalkov nazval ogromnoi glupost'iu prizyv zapretit' serial "Slovo patsana" ["Mikhalkov described calls for a ban on the series *The Boy's Word* as a great stupidity"], in: *TASS* (9.12.2023) <https://tass.ru/kultura/19498945>; Sergiy

- Kruglov. "Slovo patsana". Zapretit', chtoby ne uznavat' samikh sebia ["The Boy's Word." Ban so as not to recognize yourself]. In: *Pravmir* (14.12.2023), <https://www.pravmir.ru/slovo-paczana-zapretit-chtoby-ne-uznavat-samih-sebya/>. By the end of 2023, Russian cinema critics had already named the series the best of the year, see [Anon.]. Kritiki nazvali serial *Slovo patsana* luchshim v 2023 godu [Critics have declared the series The Boy's Word the best of 2023], in: *TASS* (25.12.2023), <https://tass.ru/kultura/19623361>.
18. In April 2024, the series received the highest honors of the National Prize for Web Content (Natsional'naia premiia v oblasti veb-kontenta). At the awards ceremony of the Association of Film and Television Producers (Assotsiatsiia prodiuserov kino i televedeniia, abbreviated to APKiT) in Moscow - roughly comparable to the US Emmy Awards - it even received nine awards in June 2024. See Susanna Al'perina. Bondarchuk i "Slovo patsana". Hazvany pobeditli V. Natsional'noi premii vebkontenta [Bondarchuk and *The Boy's Word*. The winners of the V. National Web Content Award winners announced]. In: *Rossiyskaya gazeta* (16.4.2024), <https://rg.ru/2024/04/16/bondarchuk-i-slovo-pacana-nazvany-pobediteli-v-natsionalnoj-premii-veb-kontenta.html>; Vera Tsvetkova. Vol'shebnoe "Slovo pacana..." [The magic *The Boy's Word* ...]. In: *Nezavisimaja gazeta* (20.6.2024), https://www.ng.ru/tv/2024-06-20/7_9032_word.html.
 19. Marija Kabatsii. Bez "Cheburashki" i "Slova pacana" ne obiihlysia: iaki fil'my ukraiistsi guglyly e 2023 rotsi [Without *Cheburashka* and *The Boy's Word* it doesn't work: Which films Ukrainians googled in 2023]. In: *Ukraiins'ka pravda* (12.12.2023), <https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2023/12/11/258233/>.
 20. Juliia Liubchenko. "U vas ie rozum?" Irma Vitovs'ka zvernulas' po tikh, chto dyvyt'sia rosiis'kyi serial "Slovo patsana" ['Are you still in your right mind?' Irma Vitovska addresses the viewers of the Russian series "The Boy's Word"], in: *RBK-Ukraiina* (7.12.2023), <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/stylar/u-e-rozum-irma-vitovska-zvernulas-tih-hto-1701958598.html>.
 21. Andrii Kokotiukha. Movkhaniiia ukrainskoho patsana [The Silence of the Ukrainian Lad]. In: *Novoe vremia* (11.12.2023), <https://nv.ua/ukr/opinion/slovo-pacana-krov-na-asfalti-kokotyuha-rozpoviv-shcho-mozhe-zaminiti-rosiyskiy-kontent-50375507.html>. This extrapolation of all the negative aspects of the common Soviet past as a genuinely Russian element is not a special case. Oleh Sentsov's film *Rhino* (*Nosorih*, 2021) is typical of the Ukrainian cinematic depiction of street violence in the late 1980s and 1990s, with its plot set primarily in eastern Ukraine. To a certain extent, it represents a counter-project to the Russian cult films *Brother* (*Brat*, 1997) and *Brother 2* (*Brat 2*, 2000) by Alexei Balabanov.
 22. Nina Khrushchova. Rosiia gotuiet'sia do postiinoi viiny. Iak tse vidbuvaet'sia [Russia is preparing for a permanent war. How it will come about]. In: *Novoe vremia* (24.1.2024), <https://nv.ua/ukr/opinion/putin-gotuye-rosiyan-do-dovgoji-viyni-hrushchova-pro-nenavist-u-rf-i-pravdu-v-seriali-slovo-pacana-50386903.html>.
 23. In interviews, Garaev repeatedly commented favourably on the film adaptation, which corresponds to the concerns of his book, see Polina Khabarova.

- Gruppirovki byli podobny gosudarstvu [The groupings were state-like]. In: *Kommersant*' (4.2.2024), <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6492283>.
24. See, for example, the website *Patsany meniaiutsia* [Lads are changing], <https://xn--80aaplaeciwi8a9cybmd.xn--plai/#menuopen>.
25. Mirazh. Muzyka nas swiazala. In: *YouTube* (17.7.2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjOvzWJbFdA>.
26. Accompanied by scenes from the TV series, see the music track: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbbGV1JthRA>. There are two words for 'grey' in Russian: *seryi* for the color grey, which can also mean 'dull' or 'boring', and *sedoi*, which refers primarily to the color of hair ('grey-haired, greying'). The title *Sedaia noch*' (1988) connotes this meaning in the sense of a night that has grown old. Laskovyi Mai. *Sedaia noch*'. In: *YouTube* (19.01.2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVnPU4BVuw>.
27. In this respect, the series is very typical of contemporary Russian TV series, which often portray not only police officers and investigators, but also KGB officers and secret service agents, as human individuals who can make mistakes.
28. This embellished portrayal of the Soviet mission in Afghanistan and its consequences is nothing new. After the glasnost era and the early 1990s saw a relentless debate - the best-known testimony of which in the West is Svetlana Alexievich's documentary novel *The Zinc Boys* (*Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, 1989) - this slowly changed in the new millennium. Comradeship, discipline and perseverance as military virtues once again came to the fore, with Fyodor Bondarchuk's blockbuster *Ninth Company* (*9 rota*, 2005) pioneering this different attitude to the past in popular culture.
29. It is striking that nationalist or identitarian discourses play no role whatsoever; all the heroes are conspicuously color-blind in this respect. Christianity and Islam are also only mentioned in passing. In fact, as Robert Garaev's book also shows, everyday racism between different ethnic groups is only a phenomenon of the 1990s.

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