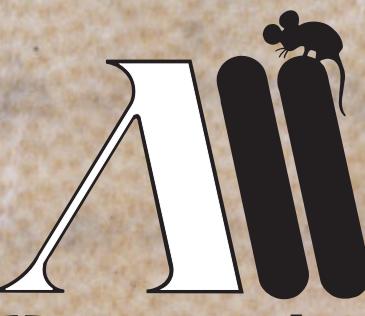


# ANNALES



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*Annali di Studi istriani e mediterranei*  
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## HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE BOSNIA?: LAIBACH AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS IN THE POST-YUGOSLAV CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

*This article follows chronologically the changes in the public perception of Laibach in Slovenia, Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav countries, Laibach's relation to the Slovenian state, and the group's status of informal (and occasionally formal) cultural ambassadors of Slovenia in the post-Yugoslav context. Because the state (in abstract terms) and Slovenian cultural identity play such an important role in Laibach's artistic output, their formal and informal representation of the Slovenian state and national identity are often misperceived by the media and cultural commentators. The aim of this article is to establish on which occasions and in which contexts Laibach have actually and formally represented Slovenia at international events.*

**Keywords:** Laibach, state, cultural diplomacy, Yugoslavia, Slovenia

## COME RISOLVERE UN PROBLEMA COMPLESSO COME LA BOSNIA?: LAIBACH COME AMBASCIATORI CULTURALI NEL CONTESTO POST-JUGOSLAVO

### SINTESI

*Questo articolo segue cronologicamente i cambiamenti nella percezione pubblica dei Laibach in Slovenia, in Jugoslavia e nei Paesi post-jugoslavi, ed il rapporto dei Laibach con lo Stato sloveno e il loro status di ambasciatori culturali informali (e occasionalmente formali) nel contesto post-jugoslavo. Poiché lo Stato (in termini astratti) e l'identità culturale slovena giocano un ruolo così importante nella produzione artistica dei Laibach, la loro rappresentazione formale e informale dello Stato e dell'identità nazionale slovena è spesso percepita in modo errato dai media e dai commentatori culturali. L'obiettivo di questo articolo è analizzare in quali occasioni e in quali contesti i Laibach hanno effettivamente e formalmente rappresentato la Slovenia in occasione di eventi internazionali.*

**Parole chiave:** Laibach, stato, diplomazia culturale, Jugoslavia, Slovenia

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO LAIBACH'S LONG CAREER

Slovenia's internationally best-known musicians and artists, Laibach have been developing their cross-media practice for more than four decades marked by political and social turmoil in the region of former Yugoslavia. Laibach works artistically with the interactions between art, politics and the processes of nation-building and popular culture. Formed symbolically in Trbovlje in 1980, Laibach responded to the situation in Yugoslavia following the death of Josip Broz Tito as a collective entity whose zeal for totalitarian authority (manifested in their sombre and militant music, imagery and overall attitude) apparently outstripped that of the socialist state. In a socio-political context where the state's legitimacy was entering a crisis and an alternative cultural scene of civil society movements in Slovenia was working towards a liberalization and political restructuring of the Yugoslav federation, Laibach were perceived as harbingers of new freedoms for the civil society (Mastnak, 2015).

The group has been surrounded by controversy from its earliest days. A series of early provocative appearances culminated in 1983 with a TV interview which enraged both the host journalist Jure Pengov and audiences throughout Yugoslavia. As a result, the presidency of the Ljubljana City Committee of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia passed a resolution that the group's German name was inappropriate, had no legal basis, and contravened the ordinance on the proper use of the city of Ljubljana's coat of arms, flag and name. A formal ban on all public appearances by Laibach under that name was registered in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia (Jeklič & Soban, 2015, 47, 50). In response to this situation, in 1984 Laibach founded the artistic collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), along with the visual arts group Irwin and the theatre group Scipion Nasica Sisters Theatre. NSK existed as a synchronized movement until 1992, when it was partly transformed into a virtual "NSK State", while the ban on Laibach's public performances remained in effect until 1987.

While they were discouraged from performing in Slovenia, Laibach developed new interests and started touring across both halves of Cold War Europe. Already in November 1983 they embarked on their first Occupied Europe Tour, pursued intermittently across both sides of the "Iron Curtain". Laibach tested their audiences' tolerance and reactions, ignoring ideological borders and dramatizing the military and cultural colonization of Europe. Outside Yugoslavia, they initially performed in Vienna, Budapest, Kraków, Warsaw, Toruń, Wrocław, West Berlin, Copenhagen, Hamburg, The Hague, Amsterdam, Eindhoven, Maastricht and London, and failed to pass border control at Komárno in order to perform two

illegal concerts in Czechoslovakia (Lorenčič, 2022, 72). It was particularly striking that they performed in Poland only a few months after the suspension of martial law, introduced in response to the growth of and pressure for change from the "Solidarity" movement. At a press conference in Warsaw one of the guests politely handed them a still-warm faecal gift wrapped in the *Trybuna Ludu* (the official newspaper of the Polish Workers' Party - PPR), after Laibach proclaimed themselves as communists (Skok, 2009, 6).

Laibach's "rehabilitation" in the home country coincided with the kick-off of their true international breakthrough, with the 1987 releases for the famed London label Mute Records, alongside such distinguished acts as Depeche Mode and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. With Slovenia's newly gained political independence in 1991, Laibach gradually became recognized as Slovenia's internationally most successful artists, a national cultural brand, and cultural ambassadors of a country aspiring towards full membership of the European Union.

Since their ground-breaking orchestral concert in Cankarjev dom in 1997, Laibach have been collaborating with symphony orchestras throughout Europe, resuming work on theatre and film music, releasing new albums, touring extensively and exhibiting their work in museums and galleries across four continents.<sup>1</sup> Their continuing relevance, however, seems to be the most palpable in the region of former Yugoslavia.

This article follows chronologically the changes in the public perception of Laibach in Slovenia, Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav countries, Laibach's relation to the Slovenian state, and the group's status as informal (and occasionally formal) cultural ambassadors of Slovenia in the post-Yugoslav context. This includes the role of cultural and political commentators on current affairs in the regional media. The first part of the article discusses the concept of the state in Laibach's work and the role that Laibach played in the construction of the cultural identity of independent Slovenia. The second part discusses Laibach's response to the events surrounding the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the creation of the new, post-Yugoslav states in its stead. The third part discusses Laibach's place in the cultural exchange between the former Yugoslav republics, public reception, media interpretations of their work and cultural significance for our "region".

Because the state (in abstract terms) and Slovenian cultural identity play such an important role in Laibach's artistic output, their formal and informal representation of the Slovenian state and national identity are often misperceived (much to Laibach's satisfaction). The aim of this article is to establish on which occasions and in which circumstances Laibach have actually and formally represented Slovenia as a state, especially in the post-Yugoslav context.

1 For chronological overviews of Laibach's career, cf. Jerman (2020); Šentevska (2022).

## LAIBACH, SLOVENIA, THE STATE- AND NATION-BUILDING

In an early attempt to discuss Laibach's poetry, Slovenian literary scholar Taras Kermauner, described it in 1983 as going back "to the pack of wolves outside of society, free of the cage of home" (Kermauner, 2009, 51). The more this poetry is "unforeseen, the more surprising it is, the more it breaks the rules [...] as a disturbance" (Kermauner, 2009, 54). This author noted a "method, with which we attain the truth by means of darkness" as a constant theme in Laibach's literary output (Kermauner, 2009, 55). Along with their reservations towards the romanticist concepts of authorship and propensity for Duchampian procedures, in typical early lyrics by Laibach, the state becomes a lyrical subject: "[t]he State shall provide for the physical education of the people, especially of the youth, in order to increase national health, and national, labour and defence capacities".<sup>2</sup> As noted by Serbian music critic and promoter Dragan Ambrožić, in his recent essay dedicated to the song *Država*, Laibach's elevation of the phenomenon of the State beyond historical contexts, as something that transcends time, was something without precedent in the history of popular music (Ambrožić, 2024).

Laibach's public image in Slovenia began to change following their contribution to the theatre production *Krst pod Triglavom* (*Baptism under Triglav*), conceived and performed in 1986 by the various branches of NSK, in the convention and culture centre Cankarjev dom in Ljubljana. With a cast of 70 actors and dancers (including ten German Shepherds) (Jakovljević, 2016, 271), *Krst* was the largest Slovenian theatre production to have taken place up to that point. This staging of the central modern national myth of Slovenia, France Prešeren's lyrical poem *Krst pri Savici* (*Baptism at the Savica*), directed by Dragan Živadinov, received much public attention. NSK was subsequently awarded with *Zlata Ptica* (*Golden Bird*) for exceptional achievements in art by the League of Socialist Youth of Slovenia (Zveza socialistične mladine Slovenije – ZSMS). In that respect, NSK's practices differed from the Western "appropriation art" in that NSK appropriated the state itself (its official institutions and symbols) with its artistic interventions.

The support from ZSMS largely helped the normalization of Laibach's legal status in Slovenia. The leadership of ZSMS (to a significant extent) openly embraced and supported alternative youth culture, perceiving it as inherently progressive, emancipating, and in line with the democratizing efforts in stirring up public debates in Yugoslavia, which was nearing the point of "no return". Based on her interview with Robert Botteri, editor-in-chief of the journal *Mladina* Ljubica Spaskovska noted "a major shift in the realm of Slovenian youth after the 1986 Krško congress of the ZSMS, which coincided with a change in the Party leadership and a new liberal camp" (Spaskovska,

2017, 73). The agenda of the 12th Congress of ZSMS also included the demand for the legalization of Laibach's name and activities. It had already been clear by then that the bans were possibly more damaging to the Slovenian authorities than to Laibach.

The controversy revolved around Laibach's use of the German name for Ljubljana, which first appeared in the twelfth century and remained in use until 1918. Laibach and Neue Slowenische Kunst worked with the trauma of more than thousand years of German political and cultural hegemony over the small Slovenian nation: in socialist Slovenia Laibach was an unspeakable name associated with Nazi oppression and domestic collaboration in World War II. However, the Laibach controversy brought that word into constant public circulation. Laibach were thus involved in some of the first serious discussions in Slovenia about Germanization and collaboration with the Nazis, which predated the wider historical reassessments of the war period in the coming decades. They were also seen as questioning the post-war Slovenian identity and self-perception as a de-Germanized nation, free from foreign domination owing to the National Liberation Army, the Yugoslav partisans (Monroe, 2005, 166). Laibach's "illegal" period in Slovenia effectively ended when the label ŠKUC Ropot released their album *Slovenska akropola* on April 27, 1987. The launch coincided with the official holiday which commemorated the establishment of the Slovenian Liberation Front in 1941 (*Dan osvobodilne fronte*).

According to an early statement by Laibach, politics is "the highest and all-embracing art, and we, who create contemporary Slovenian art, consider ourselves to be politicians" (NSK, 1985, 24). This tendency of Laibach has been translated into preaching to a concert audience, often controversially. One of the subdivisions of NSK, the theoretical Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy headed by Peter Mlakar, has been closely associated with Laibach to this day (Mlakar, 2023). As prologues to Laibach concerts, Mlakar's politically-charged speeches, specific to the venues and locations, have been composed "out of found material – re-treating the waste products of the history of philosophy in a similar manner to the way in which Laibach reprocess discarded musical styles" (Goddard, 2006, 52).

In the late 1980s Mlakar's disturbing messages were not delivered only throughout socialist Yugoslavia, but also in Slovenia's close proximity. Laibach's concert *Ljubljana, Trst, Celovec* staged at the Slovenian Grammar School in Klagenfurt in March 1988 accordingly featured the video titled "United Slovenia". The festival organizer Wiener Festwoche almost cancelled their concert *Big Beat 88* at the Kaiser Franz Josef Reitschule in Vienna after Mlakar opened his speech with the statement "Austrians, you are Germans... but we, Slovenians, are better Germans than Germans are" (Laibach, 2024c).

<sup>2</sup> Own translation. Original quote is as follows: "[D]ržava skrbi za fizično vzgojo ljudstva, posebno mladine, v svrhu dviganja narodnega zdravja, narodne, delovne in obrambne sposobnosti" (Laibach, 1983).



**Figure 1: Laibach at Yalta, 1994.** Laibach launched this montage as promotional material for the release of the album *NATO* (Mute Records Ltd.) in 1994. The *NATO* tour reached its peak in Sarajevo in 1995, during the occupation of the city. On November 20 and 21, the band played two concerts at the Sarajevo National Theatre with the agenda of the *NATO* album. The second concert took place one hour after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, which marked the end of the war and the end of the years-long siege of the city. A few days later, *NATO* troops invaded Sarajevo. The band members were photographed by Diego Andres Gomez, while the image was edited by the design duo TANDAR, in collaboration with Laibach..

Slovenia's impending formal secession from Yugoslavia was heralded by the referendum of 23 December 1990, when a vast majority of the electorate voted in favour of a sovereign and independent state. Three days later Laibach returned to Trbovlje to celebrate their ten-year anniversary. This was their first public performance there after their initial "misunderstanding" with their symbolic hometown in September 1980, when their first exhibition and concert, as part of the program *Alternative Slovenian Culture* supported by Ljubljana's ŠKUC (Student Cultural Centre) was banned (Štrajn, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Laibach's "homecoming" concert took place in the harsh industrial setting of the disused Trbovlje Power Station 1 (TET 1), at a temperature reaching –15 degrees Celsius. Preceding Slovenia's actual independence, the concert was self-consciously titled "Deset let Laibacha – Deset let slovenske samostojnosti" ("Ten years of Laibach, ten years of Slovenian independence"). Describing the event, John Honderich wrote in *The Guardian*:

*Laibach's approach is to prepare an acid bath for their audience with pile-driver percussion, metal cutter electric guitar, sirens, horns and*

*harsh guttural incantatory vocals [...] With apparently fascistic banners and 1940s clothes, the whole effect is of a ritual or rally. It is highly unpleasant and can be genuinely disturbing, and also for those who can relate to it, very beautiful.* (Monroe, 2005, 184)

Laibach's commitment to a politics of "non-alignment", understood as critical distancing from the existing political institutions, resulted in NSK's decision to also declare political independence in 1991 by founding the "NSK State" or "State in Time". According to NSK both the state and its institutions needed to be constructed (anew), which in reality happened in Slovenia with the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991. While new states were being created on the territories of former Yugoslavia, NSK's state utopia designated its own conceptual territory, working with the institutionalized presence of state symbolism and artefacts in the cultural realm.

The more the real power of global capital grows, individual states cling more desperately to their national symbols as empty signifiers of bygone eras. Laibach and NSK underscored that, using totalitarian imagery to assert

<sup>3</sup> Laibach's black-and-white linocut posters which announced the events "provoked strong protest from the local socialist youth organization and from ordinary citizens and became a cause for a lengthy debate about artistic freedom, violence, fascism, and law and order. What the Trbovlje populace found most revolting about the posters was their purported visual and graphic violence and political obscenity" (Erjavec, 2003, 143).

that Nazi-fascism had never been effectively suppressed on both sides of what was once the Iron Curtain. The NSK State also challenged the denial of cultural repression by the state under capitalism, the narrative which attributes censorship only to authoritarian communist regimes.

The NSK State issued passports, visas and postage stamps, had its own visual identity and state symbols, opened embassies and consulates internationally, and has reached a population of around 15,000 citizens. As the self-described founding fathers of the NSK State, the members of Laibach were among its first passport-holders. On 21–23 October 2010 Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin hosted the first world congress of NSK citizens. This was preceded by Laibach's 30th anniversary celebrated on 23–26 September in Delavski dom in Trbovlje, with the exhibition and event *Red Districts + Black Cross 1980–2010*, which included a symposium on Laibach. Opening the anniversary celebration at Delavski dom, the first president of independent Slovenia, Milan Kučan, gave a speech and received a diplomatic passport from the NSK State.<sup>4</sup>

Back in October 1994, with the release of their album *NATO*, Laibach reactivated their "Occupied Europe" concept for the upcoming tour titled Occupied Europe NATO Tour. The London concert on this tour, held on December 3 at the Union Chapel, was attended by the ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia. As noted by Alexei Monroe, at that time Slovenia and the NSK State had established a new paradigm of interstate relations:

*when Slovenia formally offered to recognize the NSK State [...] The Slovene government of the time (which included many veterans of the alternative scene) sought to present itself as prepared to write new rules and explore new possibilities, while NSK received symbolic recognition of its ambitions through the same device it uses to maintain distance from Slovene politics. (Monroe, 2005, 252)*

The Ljubljana concert on that tour, held in the Dakota DC3 club on 26 October 1995, was broadcast on Slovenian TV and attended by the Slovenian foreign minister (and ex-ZSMS activist) Zoran Thaler. In this capacity minister Thaler presented Laibach's *NATO* album as a gift to two NATO Secretaries General, namely, Willy Claes and Javier Solana (Balantič, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

With their growing influence in Slovenia, Laibach ventured into more complex and demanding productions. The year 1997 saw their first collaboration with a symphonic orchestra.<sup>6</sup> This production, initiated by

Laibach, opened the EU-sponsored European Month of Culture program in Ljubljana. The concert held in Cankarjev dom on 15 May, was attended by two heads of state (Slovenia and Estonia), the diplomatic corps, and religious dignitaries. On this occasion Peter Mlakar addressed the audience wearing a fat-smeared butcher's apron. His unannounced speech discussed God, orgasm and more, and famously made the Ljubljana archbishop Franc Rode and other visitors walk out.

Mlakar's "playful" attitude towards religious matters and the Catholic Church resulted in exorcism and re-consecration of the mediaeval church on Mount Kum in Trbovlje, following a Laibach promo party which announced their album *WAT* in July 2003. Nevertheless, on its tourist website, the Municipality of Trbovlje today encourages "music enthusiasts to find out what impression the Laibach group left on Kum, which had its own event in 2003, under the leadership of the unconventional pastor Peter Mlakar in the church of St. Neža" (VisitTrbovlje.si, 2021).

#### LAIBACH, YUGOSLAVIA AND THE POST-YUGOSLAV SPACE

In the complex cultural and political situation of the 1980s socialist Yugoslavia, where new social forces were competing for empowerment and resources, Laibach caused distress with their overall attitude and imagery. Amidst the rising nationalist tensions throughout the country, Laibach's sermons served as warnings that the "times of peace are over".<sup>7</sup>

The continuous presence of Laibach in the public consciousness throughout Yugoslavia also had much to do with their indirect involvement in the so-called Poster Affair, the event which shook socialist Yugoslavia in the last years of its existence (Stepančič, 2015). Laibach's membership partly overlapped with that of the NSK design group *Novi kolektivizem* (NK), which had already been collaborating with ZSMS "in a mutually exploitative process that brought work and opportunities for intervention to NSK and radical kudos to ZSMS" (Monroe, 2005, 41). A person who went by the name engineer Nikola Grujić "discovered" (and shared his discovery with the Yugoslav press) that the poster design by NK for the 1987 Youth Day (official celebration of Josip Broz Tito's birthday) was a "remake" of a Nazi propaganda painting. NK's provocation was widely perceived as a symptom of Slovenia's separatist tendencies which undermined the foundations of Yugoslavia's socialist federation, and Laibach were

4 As part of the same anniversary festivities, Laibach's exhibition *Gesamtkunst Laibach – Foundations 1980–1990* at Ljubljana's International Center of Graphic Arts (MGLC), curated by Lilijana Stepančič, was opened by Major of Ljubljana Zoran Janković.

5 The same symbolic gesture was repeated in 2014 to mark the 10th anniversary of Slovenia's membership in the alliance. This was reported on the web site of Slovenia's Permanent Representation to NATO (Šentevska, 2022, 196).

6 Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra, including the mixed choir APZ Tone Tomšič.

7 "Cari amici soldati, i tempi della pace sono passati" was a paraphrase from Benito Mussolini famously uttered at the 1982 *Novi rock* festival in Ljubljana by Laibach's first frontman Tomaž Hostnik, who committed suicide later that year.

seen as collaborators in this misdeed. The Poster Affair eventually acquired the status of an historical event on Slovenia's way towards political independence. As such, in 2007 it was celebrated with the exhibition *Poster Affair – 20 Years Later* mounted in the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia (Strlič, 2009). In a recent interview for the Bosnian weekly *Stav* Laibach disclosed that “[politicians] of the time began to take us seriously too late, which was confirmed to us by the former Yugoslav president Janez Drnovšek, before he died, but also recently by the first Slovenian president Milan Kučan, who was requested by Slobodan Milošević to have us all locked up” (Abaz, 2021).

During the late 1980s, in spite of their internationally successful record releases, extensive touring across Europe and routine media reports on these activities, Laibach's reputation in Yugoslavia remained controversial. Due to their propensity to stir public outrage, Laibach mainly performed in the largest and culturally most tolerant cities of Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade, with minor exceptions. However, they routinely encountered setbacks even in those cities. For example, when Laibach were scheduled to appear at the 1987 Belgrade International Theatre Festival – BITEF in Michael Clark's production *No Fire Escape in Hell*, “the festival management would not allow them to perform live. So the show was staged using recorded music, and they were also obliged to censor the video recordings of a patriotic speech by Tito” (Jeklič & Soban, 2015, 49). Several months later, *Delo* in Ljubljana reported on the “Black Rose Sect,” allegedly an alternative youth suicide cult which performed quasi-Satanic rituals at Laibach concerts in Zagreb (Potočnik, 1988, 12). In the wake of the success of their 1987 album *Opus Dei* Laibach performed in Yugoslavia as an internationally acclaimed band, and other Yugoslav cities, such as Split and Rijeka, began to host their concerts. Their first concerts in Sarajevo were held in the youth culture venue CDA Mladost as late as in April 1989, despite pressures on the organizers to cancel them.

Amidst the turmoil surrounding the internal political conflicts and gradual disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, Laibach continued to provoke Yugoslav audiences to reflect on the current goings-on in the country. In 1989 they tested the Yugoslav audience's patience with new cultural and political provocations, beginning their concert at Dom sportova in Zagreb (April 9) with the sounds of *gusle*, strongly (though not exclusively) associated with Serbian folklore and heroic epics. By the end of the same month Peter Mlakar was giving a speech “to the Serb nation”, addressing the audience in German and Serbian. He was paraphrasing the Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević while opening the concerts held at the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, at that time definitely not a venue where supporters of Milošević would choose to congregate. The event also incorporated a Third Reich propaganda film *The Bombing of Belgrade*.

During the gradual dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s Laibach displayed a keen interest in geopolitical topics, such as the New World Order and the former Eastern Bloc's turn to the free market economy. Meanwhile, they closely followed the developments surrounding the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and USSR, reunification of Europe and role of NATO in the contemporary global politics. In 1992–93 the group embarked on its most ambitious and technically most elaborate, “Kapital” tour, remaining actively occupied with the contemporary events in the former Yugoslav republics. For example, while promoting their first concert in Greece in September 1992, they expressed in a TV interview their support for the former Yugoslav republic Macedonia (which Greece persistently refused to recognize under that name), and its president Kiro Gligorov. A year later Laibach performed in Skopje, where they were welcomed by the Macedonian minister of culture. While still in favour by right-wing activists and nationalists internationally, in this period they also rejected the proposals from Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky to organize a Russian tour for Laibach, and from Serb film director and paramilitary commander Dragoslav Bokan to compose an anthem for his ultra-nationalist formation White Eagles (Beli orlovi) (Šentevska, 2022, 196).

The fascination of the right-wing political formations with Laibach throughout the region did not cease after the 1990s. In 2015 Laibach notably sued the Croatian right-wing political party HDSSB (Hrvatski demokratski savez Slavonije i Baranje) for unauthorised use of their track *Geburt einer Nation* in a promo film for its newly-established paramilitary formation (Slavonska sokolska garda). In an interview for the Serbian newspaper *Danas* Laibach said that those responsible for the incident in fact tricked the party very well because their version of the song “speaks much more clearly and directly about the character, composition and essence of that party than their political program... [B]y using that song, they said more about themselves than about us”. The problem, according to Laibach, was that they broke the (copyright) law and that is something that “no political party – which seeks the voters' confidence – should allow itself, be it right-wing or left-wing” (Ćuk, 2015).

During the conflicts in former Yugoslavia Laibach did not return to its former capital until November 1997, when they held a memorable concert in the sports venue Hala sportova. Although well attended and supported by the Belgrade City Assembly, the concert was scarcely reported in the Serbian media, as if Belgrade was still not ready to welcome Laibach after several years of strained relations between Serbia and Slovenia. Following the racially motivated murder of the 14-year old Roma boy Dušan Jovanović by a group of skinheads, a number of Roma organizations protested Laibach's concert in Belgrade on account of the group's association with “Nazi ideology”, although Laibach announced that

part of the proceeds from the concert would go to the victim's family. Moreover, the concert was announced as breaching the cultural barrier between Slovenia and Serbia which had been in place for nine years (Naša borba Internet, 1997). Due to the general atmosphere in Serbia at that time, security measures at the venue were increased dramatically. Following Peter Mlakar's memorable speech Laibach recalled that "in the very introduction of the concert the chief of security said something in the sense of: 'And now, comrades from Laibach, you must take care of yourselves, we will not be able to protect you'" (Laibach, 2024c). According to Laibach's website, with this speech "the group dramatically warned Serbs once again about their future, but unfortunately with little political effect. Milošević and Serbia soon after started their war on Kosovo and NATO finally bombed the city and the whole country in March 1999" (Laibach, 2024a).

Part of the "whole country" bombed in 1999 was Montenegro, which became an independent state in 2006. In 2019, more than twenty years after Laibach's 1997 concert in Belgrade, Montenegrin news portal Antena M featured Peter Mlakar's address to the audiences, referring to Laibach as the "greatest Yugoslav [music] group". In the speech, Mlakar asked "dear Serbs" what had happened "in these ugly, misfortunate and evil times? Why has everyone abandoned you, why all this blood and misery, contempt, pain and guilt?" The reader who sent the text of Mlakar's speech to the portal, himself posed the question: "what do you think, how many people from Montenegro would dare to say this in Belgrade today, let alone at that time?" (Aprcović, 2019).

In any event, Laibach's best remembered public appearance during the wars in former Yugoslavia were the two concerts held on 20–21 November 1995 in Sarajevo. During the last months of the siege by the armed forces of Republika Srpska (which lasted from April 1992 to February 1996 and tormented the city for 1425 days), the National Theatre in Sarajevo was proclaimed territory of the NSK State. NSK staff issued regular and diplomatic passports, and some of them were used for illegal escapes from the starved and exhausted city. In addition to two concerts by Laibach, the event visited by 5000 people included an exhibition and speeches by the NSK philosophy department. Peter Mlakar memorably addressed the audience with the words: "Agony and death to the one who committed a crime, that is alright. But only through forgiveness shall you process the criminal into kebabs (ćevapčiće) and burgers (*pljeskavice*), only in forgiving the worst fear shall you experience true happiness. You shall be the call of freedom. You shall be masters of peace" (Abaz, 2021).

The first Laibach concert took place as the Dayton Peace Agreement to end the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was being finalized at the US Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio. The agreement was signed one hour before the start of the second concert.

"Before the concert, and in reference to the peace deal being brokered, graffiti could be seen on walls around the shattered city bearing the legend: F\*\*k Dayton, Laibach are playing" (McGrady, 2001, 16).

In a recent interview Ivan Novak described how Laibach reached Sarajevo in such harsh circumstances:

[w]e followed a convoy, there was no way we could do it on our own, an UNPROFOR convoy, across Croatia, soon after the military Operation Storm [Oluja], when all that part of Croatia with Knin and its surroundings was in flames... This was a true war situation, the houses were burning, and we came to Mostar, a terribly, completely ruined city. There was a whole lot of barricades, para-state border controls we had to go through, never knowing whether we'd be allowed to pass or not. We went there during the winter, across the mountain Igman... And somehow we reached Sarajevo, which was all demolished and shattered. (N1 podcast s Suzano Lovec, 2023)

As an interesting detail from the concerts, Novak recalled asking the organizers whether it would be problematic if they performed their track *Mars on River Drina* (originally a patriotic march composed by Stanislav Binički, which celebrated the Serbian victory over the Austro-Hungarian army at the Battle of Cer in 1914), as this would be an extremely offensive gesture for the Bosniak soldiers attending the concerts. The organizers replied that Laibach should figure this out by themselves. After they finished the number "the reaction was really incredible. First there was complete silence, followed by a thunderous applause. Which is incredible and, of course, tells something about that legendary tolerance of the people of Sarajevo", said Ivan Novak in the same interview in March 2023.

Two months later, Laibach were back in Sarajevo to perform their "musical" *Wir sind das Volk*, a production originally staged in Berlin (Hebbel am Ufer) in 2020, conceived and directed by Anja Quickert and Laibach, and based on the works by Heiner Müller. The media in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported that the Government of Sarajevo Canton approved reallocation of budget resources from the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs to the festival "Modul memorije" (a beneficiary of the Ministry of Culture and Sports), to be able to host the production *Wir sind das Volk*. The respective ministers Omer Osmanović and Kenan Magoda publicly expressed their support for this example of inter-ministerial cooperation, on account of the perceived contribution of this project to "preserving the legacy of the defence-liberation war" in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Šentevska, 2023, 270). Due to this governmental support, tickets for the performance *Wir sind das Volk* were free of charge and ran out quickly.

This performance, which took place on 9 May (Europe Day) in the same venue as Laibach's 1995 concerts, symbolically closed the festival "Modul memorije" which had been launched precisely in 1995. On behalf of Laibach, Peter Mlakar accepted the festival's Award for contribution to preservation of cultural memory. In his speech at the award ceremony, the festival's director Nihad Kreševljaković noted: "In spite of all the madness that Dayton [Peace Agreement] brought with it, there are two beautiful things connected with this date, namely: this was the announcement of the arrival of peace and end of the bloodshed, and Laibach had a concert in Sarajevo" (N. O., 2023). In a recent interview for an academic journal from Sarajevo Laibach referred to this concert as a: "humble but also necessary expression of solidarity with the besieged city and clear rejection of the logic of military aggression ... We wanted to stress that the proclamation and practice of elementary statehood will be an important element in the constitution of peace in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Adžović, 2023, 11).

In another recent interview, published in Northern Macedonia, responding to the claim that "without Yugoslavia Laibach is an orphan", Laibach explained:

*Laibach is an orphan by its own decision and therefore we don't nourish any kind of nostalgia for Yugoslavia, we are only nostalgic for the nostalgia itself. Yugoslavia was otherwise an eloquent creation which in many respects anticipated what is nowadays happening in Europe. Besides, as a state and ideology, it was a relatively safe haven for fraternized, but ever quarrelling Balkan tribes. Today, the newly-formed states on the former territory of Brotherhood and Unity are mostly a small change of the international political interests and exploited hunting grounds for the local mob godfathers. We are, perhaps, openly sentimental toward this formerly common space and for that reason we extend our wishes for a lot of happiness and success with the [national] coexistence in it. However, we are not too optimistic that it will really come about. (Čuškova, 2023)*

#### LAIBACH AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS OF INDEPENDENT SLOVENIA

Laibach's extensive activities since the establishment of the independent Slovenian state have encompassed fewer instances of participation in its official representation than one might expect from an entity so closely associated with Slovenian political independence in the public perception throughout the region of former Yugoslavia. After the tumultuous 1990s, at the

invitation from the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia (Laibach, 2024b), they performed on 18 June 2000 at the EXPO 2000 world exhibition, as part of the presentation of Slovenia at the Messegelände Hannover. On 31 May 2008 they performed at the musical event *A Night in Slovenia*, organized by the National Geographic Traveller and Slovenia Tourism Organisation at the Town Hall in New York.<sup>8</sup>

In summer 2015 major news agencies and media around the world reported on Laibach's expedition to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and their concerts held on 19 and 20 August 2015 in Ponghwa Theatre and Kum Song Music School in Pyongyang. As a result, Laibach were perceived across the globe as going to North Korea to entertain an utterly unpredictable audience in the most totalitarian and isolated society in the world. Laibach's "collaboration" with Kim Jong-un's regime stirred a lively public debate in Slovenia, informed by local knowledge of Laibach's history and modes of operation, which was largely absent from the international coverage (Šentevska, 2020). While the right-wing commentators harshly criticized Laibach's enthusiasm for North Korea as a sign of nostalgia for the dark, totalitarian (communist) past, Laibach tricked the "other side" of the debate table (their supporters included) mostly into showing their fascination with the Supreme Leader of North Korea (Kim Jong Un) and his mode of government. The Slovenian diplomatic service was completely unsupportive of Laibach's endeavour: in fact, prior to the concerts in Pyongyang, Slovenian diplomats (in China and other countries) were banned from helping Laibach prepare the events (Laibach, 2024b).

Some of the participants in the "North Korean" debate nevertheless emphasized Laibach's "ambassadorial" capacity. For example, journalist Borut Mehle noted that this was not the first guest appearance of a Slovenian act in North Korea: the modest cultural exchange between the two countries went back to the Yugoslav era when "folklorists of Emona" paid an official visit. This, however, would make Laibach's expedition no less "pioneering": Mehle thus saw Laibach in the same mission as Yugoslav performers of light music who toured the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain (Mehle, 2015). In his comment, journalist Jure Tepina (who was a member of Laibach's 25-member North Korean's expedition) expressed his view that with this tour Laibach effortlessly did more for Slovenia than any politician in the preceding 30 years (Tepina, 2015). Along the similar lines, journalist and editor of the portal Fokusokus Marko Crnković saw Laibach as "ambassadors of democracy", effectively in the same role as Wham in China,<sup>9</sup> only 30 years later (Crnković, 2015).

8 The venue was built in 1919–1921 on behalf of the League for Political Education, originally a pro-women's suffrage group.

9 This British pop duo (George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley) was the first international pop attraction allowed to perform in China in 1985.



*Figure 2: Laibach at Drvar, BiH, 1943. This photomontage was produced to mark the release of the album “We Forge The Future”, for the Austrian label GOD Records, and serves as the cover of the booklet that accompanies the album. The album features a recording of a concert the band gave at Madrid's Reina Sofía Museum, during which Laibach reconstructed the famous concert at the Music Biennale Zagreb, where they performed on April 23, 1983. At this concert, the band projected pornographic sequences from a Super 8 mm projector over a 16 mm propaganda film about Yugoslavia, entitled 'Revolucija još traje' (directed by Milan Ljubić, 1971), which was projected on the big screen of the stage of the Moša Pijade Hall, where Laibach was performing. Due to the controversial content the concert was interrupted and Laibach was consequently banned from public performance (in Slovenia and Yugoslavia) until 1987. The montage was created by Matjaž Komelj in collaboration with the band.*

When Ljubljana was declared the Green Capital of Europe, Laibach and the RTV Slovenia Symphony Orchestra performed a concert on 9 February 2016 at the Centre for Fine Arts BOZAR in Brussels. Laibach were asked in an interview: “How do you feel about this? Isn’t it ironic that a city that tried to ban your concerts under the name of Laibach... is now asking you for this celebration?” They responded:

*Very ironic – but we love the irony. What goes around comes around... Even more ironic is the fact that the Environment Directorate of the European Commission protested against the choice of Laibach in this context, stating that*

*‘there could seem to be a significant risk that the irony which underpins their musical style may be misunderstood by an audience unfamiliar with the genre’ and they were openly suggesting that ‘for that reason, it may be prudent to look again and perhaps veer towards a more classical style of entertainment’. Now this is a much more radical censorship than the one that we faced in North Korea. Thankfully, the city of Ljubljana ignored it and we are still able to perform the show as originally planned. We just can’t link it officially to the Green Capital of Europe handover ceremony event, which is absolutely fine with us. (Kruth, 2016)*

In Autumn 2022, Laibach arrived at the conclusion that their presence is now needed in the occupied Ukraine. After making some enquiries, they received an invitation from the Bel Etage Music Hall and its manager Vlad Lyashenko to perform in Kyiv. With airports being closed, they were supposed to travel either by bus, risking long delays at the Ukrainian border, or by a direct train to Kyiv from Warsaw or Przemysl in Poland. The concert was scheduled for 31 March 2023, while the official announcement included a remark that *Laibach: Eurovision* in Kyiv was possible thanks to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It turned out that a significant portion of the Ukrainian public was irritated by Laibach's insufficiently clear support for Ukraine and statements such as "Putin was driven into a dead end and forced to start a war" (Šentevska, 2023, 254). Laibach saw their concert in Kyiv as a "test of Ukrainian audiences 'democratic tolerance' – something people will have to learn if they want to differ from their oppressors".<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Laibach's expressions of sympathy for both sides in the conflict led to the cancellation of the concert in Kyiv.

Back in Slovenia, Laibach's spokesman Ivan Novak received an invitation to an informal meeting at the premises of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, also attended by Andrej Benedečič, State Secretary for National and International Security and Vojko Volk, State Secretary for International Affairs. The state officials inquired why the concert in Kyiv was cancelled and whether it was still possible for Laibach to hold a concert in Ukraine. It turned out that Prime Minister Robert Golob and other representatives of the Slovenian government planned to visit Kyiv on the day of Laibach's scheduled concert. Their intention was to partake in the potential response of the world media to Laibach's gesture of solidarity with Ukraine (Šentevska, 2023, 260–261). Although Laibach's concert was cancelled, Slovenian Prime Minister visited Kyiv on 31 March 2023 and met with the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky.<sup>11</sup>

On 21 February Laibach participated with a group of guest artists<sup>12</sup> in the opening ceremony of the 43<sup>rd</sup> FIS Nordic World Ski Championships 2023 in Planica. Their version of the 19th century patriotic song *Oj, Triglav, moj dom* met with almost universal acclaim. According to journalist Suzana Lovec, this performance and the song itself made everyone in Slovenia proud of Laibach. (N1 podcast s Suzano Lovec, 2023) Five days later, their concert in Kyiv was cancelled and Laibach promptly fell from grace with a large portion of the Slovenian public.

The group got some bad press in which (like in the case of the expedition to North Korea) it was portrayed as dealing directly with the "regime", almost face to face, be it Zelensky's or Kim Jong Un's (Mekina, 2023). Their position of entrepreneurial and mostly self-financed artists was once again confused with the prerogatives of official representation of the Slovenian state and its taxpayers.

However, Laibach's symphonic work *Alamut* (Nym, 2023), conceived as a collaboration with the Tehran Symphony Orchestra,<sup>13</sup> was the most high-profile event on the program of the official presentation of Slovenia as Guest of Honour at the 2023 Frankfurt Book Fair. Laibach performed it with the RTV Slovenia Symphony Orchestra on 19 October 2023 at Frankfurt's domed Jahrhunderthalle with "more than 100 people, including technicians and two choirs", with the logistical challenge of transporting the production being "more complicated than the symphony itself" (Anderson, 2023). Laibach's interpretation of Vladimir Bartol's novel *Alamut* published in 1938 focuses on the character of Hassan-i Sabbāh, religious and political leader of the Nizari Ismailis, who founded in XI-century Persia the military formation known as the Assassins. In his novel, Bartol, a Slovenian author born in the vicinity of Trieste, reflected upon the mechanisms of propaganda and contemporary rise of Italian fascism.

Following this official engagement in Frankfurt, President of the Republic Nataša Pirc Musar awarded Laibach *in absentia* (while on tour) with a Medal of Merit for their long and successful career, creativeness and "encouragement of alternative approaches to music genres" in Slovenia. The Slovenian punk and rock groups Pankrti and Kameleoni were also honoured. The award ceremony was held on the occasion of the upcoming national holiday, Independence and Unity Day (26 December) (M. K., 2023). This Medal is "conferred for especially remarkable achievements and results in the fields marking an important contribution to the development and international standing of the Republic of Slovenia" (President of the Republic of Slovenia Nataša Pirc Musar, 2024). Before this, undoubtedly most distinguished accolade in their career, Laibach received a Lifetime Achievement award "Zlata piščal" in 2017 for achievements in the realm of popular music and were recipients of the municipal awards "Nagrada glavnega mesta Ljubljane" (1997) and "Prvojunijska nagrada mesta Trbovlje" (2000) as symbolic gestures of recognition from both Ljubljana and Trbovlje, respectively.

10 Laibach in an e-mail to Vlad Lyashenko, 24. 2. 2023 (Šentevska, 2023, 257).

11 Former Prime Minister of Slovenia Janez Janša also visited Kyiv, four days before Golob, and met with the Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal.

12 Boris Benko and Primož Hladnik (Silence), vocalists Sevra Gjurin and Tomi Meglič (Siddharta), zitherist Irena Anžič, percussionist Petra Vidmar, members of the Slovenian Philharmonic Choir and RTV Slovenia Symphony Orchestra.

13 Due to the recent political situation in Iran, Laibach were not able to collaborate and perform with the symphonic orchestra from Tehran, but only with individual Iranian artists, such as composers Nima A. Rowshan and Idin Samimi Mofakham, conductor Navid Gohari, or the four-member Human Voice Ensemble.



**Figure 3: Members of Laibach in Pyongyang, 2015 (Photo: Jure Tepina).**

## CONCLUSION

In more than forty years of their collective existence Laibach went a long way, from spearheading the radical cultural alternative in socialist Slovenia and Yugoslavia, to becoming globally relevant and acknowledged (but continually contested) artists and cultural ambassadors of independent Slovenia. As the most internationally successful Slovenian group of artists, they are featured even in mainstream domestic tourist literature. Laibach have been engaged in conflicts and collaborations with the state in Slovenia on many different levels. Nevertheless, the group has always maintained a level of independence and never arrived at a fixed social position.

Laibach's primary reference point is authoritarian politics in abstract terms (often interpreted as an obsession with, or glorification of, totalitarianism), which forged close ties between Laibach and former Yugoslavia's political and social history, especially in the context of Slovenian politics in the 1980s and break-up of the Yugoslav federation.

Through various artistic devices (symbolic date of birth, historic connotations of their chosen name, politically controversial iconography, elaborate anniversary celebrations, to name but a few) Laibach

have made persistent efforts at entangling the group's history with wider, highly consequential historic narratives, often associated with the Slovenian nation/state. Following the establishment of the Republic of Slovenia as an independent political entity, this has often resulted in confusing Laibach's position of entrepreneurial and largely self-financed artistic collective with some form of state-sponsored and official representation of their home country. Laibach were, in fact, selected to officially represent Slovenia as a state on only four occasions: EXPO 2000 in Hannover; *A Night in Slovenia* event in New York (2008); concert at BOZAR in Brussels (2016) and performance of *Alamut* in Frankfurt (2023).

For Laibach, interviews have always been a creative medium, an outlet for reflection, social commentary, provocation and communication of the unexpected aspects of their unique mindset. Consequently, their constant presence in the media and cultural events which shed light on the past, present and future of the countries of former Yugoslavia grants them membership in an unofficial diplomatic corps which works on establishing and maintaining intellectual exchange in the region - either in occasional collaboration with, or bypassing altogether, the official interstate channels.

## KAKO REŠITI PRIMER BOSNE IN HERCEGOVINE?: LAIBACH KOT KULTURNI ATAŠEJI V POJUGOSLOVANSKEM KONTEKSTU

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### POVZETEK

Članek kronološko sledi spremembam javne percepcije skupine Laibach v Sloveniji, Jugoslaviji in postjugoslovanskih državah, odnosu Laibacha do slovenske države in statusu skupine neformalnih (in občasno formalnih) kulturnih ambasadorjev Slovenije v postjugoslovanskem kontekstu. Sem spada tudi vloga kulturnih in političnih komentatorjev aktualnega dogajanja v regionalnih medijih. Prvi del članka obravnava koncept države v Laibachovem delu in vlogo Laibacha pri izgradnji kulturne identitete samostojne Slovenije. Drugi del govori o odzivu Laibacha na dogodke ob razpadu Jugoslavije in nastanku novih, postjugoslovanskih držav na območju nekdanje Jugoslavije. Tretji del pa obravnava Laibach v kulturni izmenjavi med nekdanjimi jugoslovanskimi republikami, njegovo javno percepcijo in medijsko interpretacijo ter kulturni pomen za postjugoslovansko območje. Ker imata država (v abstraktnem smislu) in slovenska kulturna identiteta v Laibachovem umetniškem ustvarjanju pomembno vlogo, je v Sloveniji njihovo formalno in neformalno predstavljanje slovenske državne in nacionalne identitete pogosto napačno razumljeno. Glavna ugotovitev članka je, da je obsežna dejavnost skupine Laibach od ustanovitve samostojne slovenske države redkeje kot bi pričakovali povezana z uradnim predstavljanjem Slovenije v postjugoslovanskem območju, sploh vedoč, da je Laibach prav na tem območju razumljen kot entiteta, ki je zelo povezana s slovensko politično osamosvojitvijo.

**Ključne besede:** Laibach, država, kulturna diplomacija, Jugoslavija, Slovenija

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