Not All Quiet on the Culinary Front: The Battle Over Borshch in Ukraine

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Preface

This article was accepted for publication in the fall of 2021, months before Russia's unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing atrocities committed by Russian soldiers. Considering these recent events, I was deeply hesitant as to whether this piece should actually appear in print. Discussing a metaphoric conflict over food seems inappropriate at a time when the entire country of Ukraine has been turned into an actual battlefield. However, upon further deliberation, it became clear to me that this work is still relevant. An "innocent" dish was a creative lens that served as a reminder that Russia's war on Ukraine began with the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent military incursion into the Donbas region. (1) Through borshch, some Ukrainians attempted to warn the world about the further impending danger of the Russian Federation, as the title of this newspaper article illustrates: "Забрали Крим і хочуть вкрасти борщ: Чому Росія на цьому не зупиниться" [They Took Away Crimea and Now Want to Steal our Borshch: Why Russia Won't Stop at This] [Tsaruk 2020]. The international community largely overlooked the severity of the problem. The voices of Ukrainian citizens may have been viewed as biased, due to their geographical and emotional proximity to what was seen as a localized conflict. However, Russia did not, indeed, stop in Donbas. Albeit indirectly and retrospectively, this study emphasizes what folklorists know very well— we need to consider insider perspectives seriously. In the case of the Ukrainian cultural activists, politicians, journalists, and regular citizens whose voices are featured in this paper, their geographical and emotional proximity provided them with a deep understanding and insight that outsiders did not have. The borshch conflict reinforces the importance of folklore studies, often dismissed as trivial, in anticipating and perhaps even the prevention of more serious and even tragic consequences. The following article is published in its original pre-war version.

Abstract

Borshch (also spelled as *borscht* and *borsch*) has lately become heavily contested as the intangible heritage of both Ukraine and Russia. Media reports trace the roots of the dispute to a 2019 tweet by the Russian Foreign Ministry describing the soup as part of Russia's significant heritage. In response, Ukrainian cultural activists have moved the traditional beet soup from intimate vernacular settings into the political spotlight. Borshch contests, workshops, and festivals are now organized in Ukraine at the highest state levels involving top-ranking

politicians and activists—all meant to legitimize borshch as a Ukrainian, not Russian, dish.

This paper focuses on the complex political trajectories of borshch in Ukraine. I show that the fight over the ownership of the dish, while it may appear humorous to outsiders, communicates "unlaughter" [Billig 2005] to those who reside in close geographical and emotional proximity to the real problems that the dispute communicates. This seemingly innocent dish has come to symbolize the serious matter of resistance to external threats in the context of the ongoing Ukraine-Russia crisis, simultaneously serving as a unifying tool within Ukraine. In other words, external gastroanimosity shaped by the crisis is directly related to the efforts of internal "gastrodiplomacy" [Ruddy 2014]. Additionally, unlike many other forms of traditional culture discussed in resistance and protest-related literature, borshch in Ukraine follows a cyclical trajectory. A dish that found its way from intimate family tables to the large international political arena returns to vernacular domains, transformed by politics.

Introduction (2)

½ pounds soup meat with bone
10 to 12 cups cold water
1 teaspoon salt
1 medium onion, chopped
2 medium beets, cut in thin strips
1 medium potato, diced
½ cup thinly sliced celery
½ cup diced string beans or cooked white beans
2 to 3 cups of shredded cabbage
¾ cup strained tomatoes or tomato juice
½ clove garlic, crushed, if desired
1 tablespoon flour
Beet kvas or lemon juice
Chopped dill
½ cup sour cream

These are the ingredients for a traditional soup called *borshch* (also spelled as *borscht* and *borsch*) as prescribed by a recipe from Savella Stechishin's *Traditional Ukrainian Cookery,* a cookbook cherished by many Ukrainian Canadians [1991: 52]. While there are numerous varieties of the dish throughout Ukraine and its diasporas, the above list includes the most common items. Although beet-less variations of the soup exist, beet-based borshch is by far the most widespread and known. A heated dispute over the ownership of borshch as a marker of traditional heritage recently developed between Ukraine and Russia. This paper will not provide a definite answer as to the origins of the dish. Instead, it will follow the recent political trajectories of borshch, showing how this

seemingly humble dish serves as a prism that sheds light on current turbulent realities in Eastern Europe.

Whenever we eat borshch, my husband, a fourth-generation Ukrainian Canadian, often jokingly remembers his great aunt, a woman who, apparently, was difficult to please. Upon one of the aunt's visits, his mother served borshch. Someone praised the borshch. The aunt's response was: "What do you mean "good borshch"!? Borshch is borshch [implying that there could be nothing bad or good about it]." To me, this comment conveys more than just his aunt's personality. It also shows the vernacular perception of borshch as something too mundane and familiar to be treated as special.

I grew up in the Soviet Ukraine and ate borshch often. In most cases the borshch of my childhood and youth was meatless, which appeared to be the norm at the time. However, in retrospect, I realize that my family's late Soviet and early post-Soviet consumption of borshch exemplified what contributors to the recent volume *Seasoned Socialism: Gender and Food in Late Soviet Everyday Life* refer to as the "economy of scarcity" [Goldstein 2019: xiii]. Meat was a luxury, neither easily available nor affordable. I have now lived in Canada for the last two decades, and my current middle-class status allows me to afford the best ingredients any time I have a craving for borshch. The version I often cook has a base made of smoked ribs, giving it a special flavor. Although I love borshch, it is really just a part of my habitual foodways, and the dimensions of the dish experienced at my personal family table would not have inspired the present study.

It is the recent political discourse involving borshch, including the international media attention given to it as a contested heritage of both Ukraine and Russia, that piqued my scholarly interest. Lately, Ukrainian cultural activists have moved the traditional soup from intimate vernacular settings into the political spotlight, and borshch is no longer just borshch for many in Eastern Europe. Reportedly, the current dispute began with a 2019 tweet from the Russian Foreign Ministry calling borshch "one of Russia's most famous & beloved dishes & a symbol of traditional cuisine" [Russia Government Organization 2019]. The Ukrainian reaction, led by renowned chef and cultural activist Ievhen Klopotenko, immediately followed. It included numerous public events – cultural festivals, workshops, and televised projects involving the highest-ranking politicians – all meant to legitimize borshch as a Ukrainian, not a Russian, dish. Many international newspaper headlines about the Russia-Ukraine dispute over borshch convey its overall militaristic connotation. *The Times* introduced the topic as "Knives Come Out in the Battle of Borscht" [Bennetts 2020]; *The New York Times* published the article "A New Front Opens in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Borscht" [Varenikova and Kramer 2020]; while *La Prensa Latina Media* offered the headline "Battle of the Beets: Ukraine Claims Borscht as Its Own" [Tokariuk 2021].

In this paper, I will engage with the following question: Why has borshch been chosen as a serious political instrument, considering that a fight over food origins often makes outsiders smile, as the above newspaper headlines (and,

frankly, the title of this paper) convey? I discuss how this seemingly innocent dish has come to symbolize the serious matter of resistance to external threats in the context of the ongoing Ukraine-Russia crisis, simultaneously serving as a unifying tool within Ukraine. In other words, external gastroanimosity shaped by the crisis is directly related to the efforts of internal gastrodiplomacy. (3) Consequently, by revealing the close interrelationship between traditional culture and national and international politics, the current dispute affects vernacular settings. Borshch has now acquired a new layer of political meaning, at least at some Ukrainian family tables.

Many historians of food indeed identify borshch as a Ukrainian dish. One is Viliyam Pokhlyobkin (1923 – 2000), a renowned Soviet and Russian food expert. The entry "borshch" in Pokhlyobkin's *Кулинарный словарь от А до Я* [Culinary Dictionary from A to Z] begins in the following way: "Борщ. Основное первое блюдо украинской кухни. Получило широкое международное распространение и признание" [Borshch is the essential first course of Ukrainian cuisine. It has been disseminated broadly and received wide international recognition] [Pokhlyobkin 2001 [1988]]. (4) In public interviews, Klopotenko often reinforces his own views about the Ukrainian origins of borshch by citing Pokhlyobkin; the fact that even famous Russian experts identify borshch as a Ukrainian dish adds political strength to his argument [e.g., Sokolova 2020].

However, in addition to Ukrainian and Russian sources, other ethnic cookbooks, including Jewish [e.g., Koenig 2015: 80-81] and Polish [Strybel and Strybel 2005: 190-193], present borshch as a traditional dish of their respective cuisines. This situation would not surprise folklorists who are well aware that folklore exists in variations, and neighboring countries or ethnic groups residing in close proximity to one another often share numerous cultural characteristics. In the case of foodways, similarities are frequently shaped by the local availability of produce as well as close contact, whether positive or negative (such as the result of occupation by the other). Moreover, folklorists know that it is nearly impossible to determine the exact origins of many traditional practices. More importantly, in line with Deborah Kodish's theorization of "authenticity" [2011: 34-46], if communities practice particular traditions that they find meaningful, folklorists are obliged themselves to treat the traditions with similar respect. Instead of engaging with the question to whom borshch actually belongs, I am pursuing a different question: Why does it matter? Why is it that suddenly, in the Ukrainian-Russian case, we can no longer speak about what folklorist Sabina Magliocco, among others, addresses as "the old style cultural diffusion," and "social exchange or reciprocity"? [Magliocco 2004: 234]. Why is the idea of ownership now at the core of the borshch discourse in Ukraine, while it would have been unimaginable (at least as a serious matter) as recently as a several years ago?

Studying Borshch: Contexts and Methods

The political trajectory of borshch in Eastern Europe takes us beyond what Lucy Long identifies as the main spheres of the folkloristic study of foodways,

namely, "mundane aspects of culture involving everyday events, activities, and people [that are, in turn,] often trivialized and dismissed as insignificant in understanding the larger systems of power […]" [2021: 8]. In Ukraine and Russia, borshch has reached the highest levels of political and cultural discourses. Thus, we enter into the realm of documentaries, festivals, the commercial media, and official public voices. While these are not the lived vernacular realities that most frequently draw the attention of folklorists, I agree with Giovanna Del Negro who, like others, argues that folklore should not be theoretically viewed as an independent entity. In practice, it often both informs and is shaped by other interrelated domains such as popular culture, media, and politics. Moreover, it is this complex inter-relationship that is often communicated in the performance of folklore [Del Negro 2008].

At the conclusion of this paper, I rely on ethnographic snapshots to illustrate the inter-relationship of politics and vernacular culture through the prism of borshch. I have not formally undertaken research on vernacular foodways in Ukraine. My ethnographic encounters took place in the context of my personal interactions with family and friends and were completely unsolicited. However, I find this represents a methodological strength rather than a weakness. The encounters are not the result of my pursuits and research questions that often come with subjective theoretical frameworks conveying, in turn, what appears to be important to a scholar. They come from my interlocutors themselves, revealing meanings that appear to be significant to them.

This work is informed by a growing body of literature devoted to the creative dimensions of protest and the closely related notions of resistance and activism discussed in the Introduction [Lesiv 2021:3-4]. One element that unites many of these methodologically and theoretically diverse works is a focus on creative cultural forms and expressions as a means of giving a voice to marginalized, oppressed, underrepresented, or discriminated against segments of a population *within* a particular social or political unit, whether in an institution, a village or a country.

The present case study of borshch is unique in this regard. On one hand, we deal with the typical situation of "weak versus powerful" characteristic of many other contexts that generate resistance. Through a traditional dish, Ukrainian cultural activists attempt to voice a response to official Russia, their significantly more powerful opponent. On the other hand, the dispute over borshch takes place not *within* one clearly defined political unit but *between* two countries. This context comes with a unique interplay of power dynamics. The Ukrainian activists do not risk their freedom, social positions or lives, as it is the case for many anti-hegemonic actions in other settings, especially in present-day Eastern Europe. Their initiatives are directed at threats coming from outside of the political unit within which they live and operate. In Ukraine, borshch-related resistance endeavors represent not only a bottom-up but also a top-down process. The activists' messages find resonance at the highest echelons of political power, which, in turn, brings access to administrative resources and influential media outlets. This fact has implications for their reach and influence on the larger

society resulting in transformative effects on vernacular culture, including the consumption of borshch at family tables.

Laughter Versus Unlaughter: Beets, Politics, and Emotional Proximity

Widely covered and promoted by the commercial media and social networks, recent public events devoted to borshch in Ukraine resonate with folklorist Jack Santino's concept of the "ritualesque." It refers to "a class of public performances that involve overtly symbolic images and actions, as well as other theatrical and dramatized elements" [Santino 2009: 24]. While they share some characteristics with more formalized ritual, these "instrumental symbolic actions" are "directed less toward the transcendent and more toward the sociopolitical realm," as they aim to transform public opinions and attitudes [Santino 2009: 9, 24]. The borshch-related ritualesque transformed the dish from a traditional habitual meal into what folklorist and ethnochoreologist Andriy Nahachewsky would refer to as an objectified cultural symbol serving as a "logo" of Ukrainianess [Nahachewsky 2003: 37]. It can also be viewed as a form of "gastronationalism" [DeSoucey 2010: 433; Jönsson 2020: 224].

Examples of this process in the case of borshch include a recent move by Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry submitted an application to UNESCO requesting the recognition of the preparation of Ukrainian borshch as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage [Tkachenko 2020a]. The public events surrounding borshch are, in part, meant to increase Ukraine's chance for success in this process. Oleksandr Tkachenko, Ukraine's Minister of Culture and Information Policy, stressed this idea while describing his own borshch initiative in a Facebook post on 20 December 2020. In collaboration with Olga Stefanishyna (Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration), Ihor Petrashko (Minister of Economic Development and Trade), and Roman Abramovskyi (Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources of Ukraine), Tkachenko organized a borshch preparation contest. Chef Klopotenko served as the judge. Tkachenko reflected on the event in the following way:

> Минулого тижня запропонував колегам-міністрам проготувати разом борщ. Така активність вкрай важлива для промоції страви та включення "Культури приготування українського борщу" до списку нематеріальної культурної спадщини ЮНЕСКО. І сьогодні нам це вдалося.
>
> [Last week, I proposed to my fellow ministers that we cook borshch together. Such activities are extremely important for the promotion of the dish and the inclusion of "The culture of preparing Ukrainian borshch" into the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage. And today we succeeded] [Tkachenko 2020b].

According to Tkachenko, even though it was a competition between two teams, "перемогу здобув борщ" [the winner was borshch] [Tkachenko 2020b]. He concluded by commenting on related Russian reactions:

> Останнім часом щодо теми борщу активізувалися росіяни, які не можуть змиритися із правдою. Вони продовжують червоніти, писати коментарі та недолуго жартувати. Жарти-жартами, але нам не потрібно нічого доводити. Бо борщ – наш.
>
> [Lately, Russians, who cannot accept the truth, have become more active on the topic of borshch. They continue to turn red with anger, write comments and joke awkwardly. Jokes are jokes, but we don't need to prove anything. Because borshch is ours] [Tkachenko 2020b].

As mentioned above, these initiatives, and especially the international reports describing them, may evoke at least some degree of humorous response from outsiders. They convey what anthropologist William O. Beeman identifies as "the basis for most humor," namely "the setting up of a surprise […] for an audience," where "incongruity" plays the central role [Beeman 1999: 103]. (5) While reporters often explore the root of the problem in their actual articles, the headlines appear to indicate that their authors were surprised in the same way I had been when I first heard about the dispute. I remember smiling because beets are not immediately associated with fights.

The problematic aspects of foodways in various contexts have received a growing amount of scholarly attention. For example, folklorist Joy Fraser explores the contested political meanings of Scottish haggis [2011] and folklorist Diane Tye, while approaching her mother's recipe book as a diary, traces complex meanings related to gender and resistance behind her mother's baking [2010]. Journalist Rose Gerber compiled the list "10 Times People Have Protested Using Food Around the World" [n.d.], correctly pointing out that food often played a significant role in protest movements because it "has major cultural, religious, and/or historical connections with the countries and issues involved" [Gerber n.d.]. The so called "hummus wars" involving Israel and its Arab neighbors represents perhaps the most closely related example [see Avieli 2016: 19-30].

Despite these examples, we generally tend to think about food in positive terms, as a friendly and unifying medium. In line with this perception, beets are too innocent to be viewed as weapons in the context of battle, and it is exactly this incongruity that makes at least some of us smile. Folklorists are well aware, though, that humor is a complex entity, and audiences play a central role in its reception [see Brodie 2014]. What some people may view as funny can evoke an opposite reaction in other settings. The smiles that media headlines about the Ukrainian-Russian dispute over borshch elicit in some communicate the geographical and emotional distance through which we perceive it. In contrast, in Ukraine, the dispute is more often than not viewed as a serious matter. The very

fact that it is worth the time and energy of top-ranking Ukrainian politicians speaks to this fact very clearly.

My personal discussions with relatives, friends and acquaintances in Ukraine further demonstrate that the topic is often treated as serious not only at the official political level but also in vernacular settings. I even had a few encounters that reflected the concept of "unlaughter" coined by social psychologist Michael Billig [2005]. Unlaughter is "a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded" [Billig 2005: 192 cited in Smith 2009: 150]. When I mentioned the topic, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, to a couple in their seventies and, later, to a female friend in her forties in Ukraine, it did not elicit the humorous reaction I expected. Those conversations forced me to reflect more critically on my own identity and voice in this study. Even though I am a native of Ukraine, return to the country on a regular basis, both to visit family and conduct research, and still have an insider understanding of many political and cultural dynamics, I too have developed an emotional distance.

The media coverage of the borshch dispute generates unlaughter from those who live in immediate geographical and emotional proximity to all the country's complexities. That unlaughter has a contextual explanation. The overall dispute is not about beets *per se*. It is, rather, an extension of matters that are serious and tragic, namely, the ongoing Ukraine-Russia crisis that began with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This move by the Kremlin violated the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurance. The Memorandum was signed by the United States, Great Britain, and, ironically, Russia, and further endorsed by France and China [Yekelchyk 2015: 68]. According to the document, Ukraine agreed to eliminate its large arsenal of nuclear weapons in exchange for the guarantee of its territorial integrity and sovereignty [Yekelchyk 2015: 68]. Moreover, following the annexation, the Kremlin has also been widely reported to be behind the ongoing military unrest in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine [Mitrokhin 2015].

Thus, many Ukrainians perceive official Russia's claims of borshch ownership not simply as a cultural competition but as an extension of a very real external threat and a form of what journalists and scholars describe as Russia's "hybrid war" [Galeotti 2016]. A close geographical and emotional proximity does not allow many people to look at this situation through any other prism but that of the continuous news from the front reporting the number of wounded and killed soldiers on a nearly daily basis. Thus, borshch became a symbolic form of resistance and protest against Russia's hegemonic expansion. This is clearly conveyed by Ukrainian media headlines such as "Криму їм мало: Боротьба за український борщ вийшла на міжнародний рівень" [Crimea is Not Enough for Them: The Fight for Ukrainian Borshch Reached the International Level] [Kuzmenchuk 2020] and "Забрали Крим і хочуть вкрасти борщ: Чому Росія на цьому не зупиниться" [They Took Away Crimea and Now Want to Steal our Borshch: Why Russia Won't Stop at This] [Tsaruk 2020].

It is safe to hypothesize that the present-day dispute would not have happened had the Russian Foreign Ministry's tweet about borshch not taken place in the midst of the crisis between the two countries. Prior to the tweet, chef Klopotenko did not appear to treat borshch with any particular reverence. He shows this attitude in his Russian-language TED talk "How Food Can Change Your Life" recorded in Kyiv in 2018 [Klopotenko 2018]. In the presentation, Klopotenko critiques Ukrainians for being too conservative regarding their food choices. He confesses to holding a similar opinion until he became a young adult and discovered a variety of new products and spices:

> Я понял, что двадцать лет я жил просто скучной едой. Я понял, что от еды можно получать удовольствие. Я понял, что голубцы, борщ и вареники – это хорошо, но не всю жизнь! Есть мир намного больше.
>
> [And I realized that, for twenty years, I lived consuming dull food. I realized that one could receive pleasure from food. I realized that *golubtsy* [cabbage rolls] borshch, and *vareniki* [dumplings] are good but not for a whole lifetime! There is a world that is much larger!] [Klopotenko 2018]

In the context of this talk, borshch receives criticism as a dish that is too widespread and popular that, in turn, prevents Ukrainians from creative experimentation with new foods. Thus, even chef Klopotenko, the main driving force behind the current borshch ritualesque, did not treat the dish as something very special as few as three years ago.

The dish that may have seemed too ordinary earlier becomes special today because it helps to shape a distinct Ukrainian identity and create a desired distance from Russia. The present-day sentiments surrounding borshch overlap with larger official initiatives aimed at reinforcing the distance. In 2015, the Ukrainian government passed the so-called de-communization laws to strip the country of the symbols of its Soviet past, a past associated with Russian hegemony [*Ukrainska pravda* 2015]. While the laws are directed toward the public display of such symbols, Soviet-era cuisine, which remains popular in private settings, also began to face negative reactions from some Ukrainians. In addition to growing scholarly critique of the detrimental economic and ideological aspects of this cuisine [Stiazhkina 2021], emotionally charged comments on the topic appear in commercial media. One example is journalist Khrystyna Rivera's recent article "Міф про смачну та здорову радянську їжу" [The Myth About Tasty and Healthy Soviet Food]. Rivera deconstructs the propagated nutritious values of some very popular ingredients and dishes of the Soviet period, concluding with rhetoric characteristic for an active political protest:

> Сподіваюся, м'ясо по-французьки згине, як і всі бутерброди зі шпротами, яйця, фаршировані майонезом і смаженою цибулею, салат "Вогник" із плавленого сирка і майонезу з часником,

> горезвісне "Олів'є", "Мімоза", "Крабові палички". Навіть оселедець під шубою я готова кинути у вогонь гастрономічної революції!
>
> [I hope that "French-style meat" will perish, along with all the canapés with sprats, grated eggs with mayonnaise and fried onions, the "Light" salad made from processed cheese with mayonnaise and garlic, the infamous "Olivier," "Mimosa," "Crab Sticks." Even "herring under a fur coat" I am ready to toss into the fires of gastronomic revolution!] [Revira 2020]

Enemies Versus Allies Through the Prism of Borshch

Political conflicts are associated not only with enemies but also allies, and borshch is no stranger to the bridge-building process. One example is the documentary series *Борщ: Секретний інгредієнт* [Borshch: A Secret Ingredient] produced by Klopotenko. The documentary follows the chef on his trips to various parts of Ukraine, where he collects diverse recipes for borshch. He travels to distinct locales such as Chornobyl, the present-day frontlines of the Russian conflict, and the culturally unique Hutsul region. He also visits minority communities such as Crimean Tatars, Hungarians, Jews, and Romanians in Ukraine. The documentary is produced in two formats, as a single film [Kochnev 2020] and as a number of discrete segments. While the film includes brief episodes of Klopotenko's diverse encounters, the individual episodes contain more extensive and detailed portrayals of them. The overall political message of the documentary is that while contemporary Ukrainians are culturally and ethnically diverse, they are all united by the tradition of making borshch (albeit with different accents), a tradition and sense of unity that their northern neighbor Russia lacks.

Understandably, Klopotenko's show is not ethnographic material, but a cultural production created through a producer's gaze and accompanied by cinematic effects. It does not allow me to fully uncover his guests' perspectives or to distinguish between their staged interactions and genuine political sentiments. What is clear is the producer's intention. Let me provide an example.

One episode is devoted to Jewish borshch in Ukraine's south-eastern city of Odesa, a city known for its strong and vibrant Jewish presence. In the episode, Klopotenko is hosted by a middle-aged Jewish couple, Borys and Marharyta. This case study is an exception to folklorist Regina Bendix and ethnologist Michaela Fenske's observation that "[i]n its ability to communicate, eating exceeds what spoken language can do" [2014: 22]. Klopotenko speaks exclusively in Ukrainian while Borys and Marharyta speak in Russian. A focal point is a play on the Ukrainian and Russian terms for beets. The first instance takes place at Pryvoz, Odesa's famous central market, where Borys purchases ingredients for borshch. Borys says to Klopotenko (in Russian): "Вот теперь слушай меня. Борщ никогда не получится, если мы покупаем свеклу… потому, что нужно покупать буряк" [Now, listen to me. Borshch will never turn out good if we buy

svekla [Russian for beet] … because we need to buy *buriak* [Ukrainian for beet]. One may think that Borys means different types or parts of beets. In fact, this is exactly what the English subtitles erroneously convey. However, a native speaker of both Ukrainian and Russian immediately recognizes this short exchange as nothing other than a political play on words. The wordplay is further dramatized with the help of the camera that is focused on Kloponeko and captures the chef raising his eyebrow in confusion after Borys mentions the Russian term *svekla*. The confusion then transforms into a wry, satisfying smile immediately after Borys mentions *buriak*. This language game is further reinforced by Klopotenko's conversation with Marharyta who says (in Russian): "Во первых, надо поставить буряки варить" [First, we have to put the *buryaky* [Ukrainian beets] on to cook]. Klopotenko says (in Ukrainian): "Це не свекла, а буряки. Це вже я знаю" [This is not *svekla* [Russian] but *buriaky* [Ukrainian]. I already know this (hinting at his earlier conversation with Borys). Then Marharyta, who had been previously speaking Russian the entire time, says one sentence in Ukrainian: "Свекла… та я вже не знаю зовсім цього слова" [*Svekla* … I no longer know this word] [FILM.UA. 2020].

Even though Russian is their primary language, the Jewish couple appears to reject the Russian term for the main ingredient of borshch in favor of its Ukrainian equivalent. Borys and Marharyta are portrayed as distancing themselves from Russia and communicating their sense of belonging and allegiance to Ukraine. The producer creatively attempts to build internal bridges with the help of borshch, uniting Jews and Ukrainians against the external enemy of Russia.

Many accounts of Ukrainians as historically good neighbors to Jews have been attested. One telling example is the "Righteous Among the Nations" database compiled by Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center. The "Righteous Among the Nations" is "a worldwide project to pay tribute" to those people "who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust" [Yad Vashem 2021]. An automatic search results in 1439 matching records for individuals whose "nationality contains Ukraine" [Yad Vashem 2021]. Another example comes from a recent article in *The Jerusalem Post* devoted to Andrey Sheptytsky (1865-1944), the Metropolitan Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church from 1901 to 1944 [Liphshiz 2020]. Liphshiz discusses new evidence showing that the Metropolitan may have risked his own life to save Jews and may now have a chance for this honored recognition, alongside his brother Klymentiy who already holds the title [Liphshiz 2020]. However, the overall Jewish-Ukrainian history is far from happy. While there are ongoing debates about the exact nature and scale of such instances [Hrytsak 1996], historians continue to uncover evidence showing that some Ukrainians were involved in the atrocious acts of the Nazis during the Holocaust [Himka 2011; Lower 2021]. These more recent accounts were preceded by the anti-Jewish pogroms that began in late imperial Russia in territories that are part of contemporary Ukraine [Dekel-Chen et al 2010].

Continuous efforts to reconcile the tragic Ukrainian-Jewish past have been made in Ukraine. Some telling results are reflected in the voices of Jewish community leaders in light of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. For example, while hypothesizing about the future of Jews in post-Euromaidan Ukraine, journalist Josh Cohen, cites Yaakov Dov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Ukraine. Bleich, while fully aware of the existence of anti-Semitism in Ukraine, sees this as the hand of Russian extremists in many instances. He says: "The Ukrainian Jewish Community is definitely more afraid of Putin and these pro-Russian hooligans than of Ukrainian anti-Semitism" [Cohen 2014]. Cohen concludes that, "the threat from Russia has actually brought Jews and Ukrainians closer together" [2014]. Klopotenko's documentary is an attempt to symbolically connect the two ethnic groups even more closely with the help of borshch.

Another example of an attempt to reinforce the unity of diverse regional and ethnic groups in Ukraine via borshch involves Crimean Tatars. On 5 March 2021, the Institute of Culture of Ukraine, created by Klopotenko, and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy held the online festival *Культура приготування українського борщу* [The Culture of Ukrainian Borshch Cooking]. During the event, representatives from 25 regions of Ukraine cooked borshch. The number 25 appeared to symbolize Ukraine's administrative map—24 *oblast*s and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea—prior to the annexation of the peninsula. The participants' attire was also symbolic. Each cook wore a traditional embroidered shirt characteristic of their specific region and an apron with the inscription "Borshch" followed by their region's name. Klopotenko's chef shirt featured a stylized embroidered map of Ukraine in which each region was represented by the motifs and colors of its characteristic folk embroidery. The inscription "Борщ всеукраїнський [Borshch is All-Ukrainian]" was featured on his apron. While the 25 participants cooked various kinds of borshch based on their family recipes, Klopotenko prepared a 26th version by including unique ingredients from each region.

The event was widely covered in the media, including TSN news, one of the most-widely watched news services in the country. The report featured Lerane from Crimea as one of the participants. While traditional Crimean Tatar cuisine does not include borshch [Sobolieva 2019], Lerane's mother had often cooked a beet-less borshch, and Lerane used that recipe at the event, symbolically communicating her support for the Ukrainian cause. Lerane's sense of allegiance to Ukraine was reinforced by her attire: an embroidered Ukrainian shirt in combination with a traditional Crimean-Tatar fez. In addition, in the TSN interview, Lerane displayed native fluency in Ukrainian. The importance of her presence at the event was further reinforced by Minister Tkachenko:

> […] встановили рекорд України! Масове одночасне приготування представниками 25- ти регіонів України традиційних українських борщів. А це вкотре доводить – наша сила в різноманітті.

> І хоч страва одна, але деякі інгредієнти мене вразили. […]. Із задоволенням скуштував би всі, якби зміг, але обрав кримський.
>
> Формуємо усвідомлення та визнання на світовому рівні, що борщ – український. Щоб маніпуляції на цьому тлі, які використовує Росія, ніколи не спрацювали за кордоном
>
> [We set a Ukrainian record! Mass simultaneous preparation of Ukrainian traditional borcshts by representatives of 25 regions of Ukraine. And this proves – our strength is in diversity.
>
> And though this was just one dish, there were several ingredients that impressed me […] And I would have gladly tasted all of them, if I could have, but I chose the Crimean one.
>
> We are forming an awareness and recognition at the world level, that borshch is Ukrainian. That the manipulations against this backdrop being used by Russia will never work abroad] [Tkachenko 2021].

The annexation of Crimea profoundly affected Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of the peninsula, especially considering that their pre-annexation history with Russia was nothing short of tragic. Most recently, the entire Crimean Tatar population was forcibly deported to Central Asia by Stalin in 1944 and was only allowed to return in 1989 [Aydingün and Aydingün 2007]. Their fears about the 2014 annexation were not groundless. The event was followed by "draconian restrictions of freedom of speech and expression that have effectively silenced Crimean Tatar voices of opposition" [Charron 2019: 41-42]. Tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars found refuge in continental Ukraine, having become "devoted citizens of the Ukrainian state" [Charron 2019: 41-42]. Cultural and political geographer Austin Charron, while focusing on the growing presence of Crimean Tatars in Ukraine's creative arts landscape, sees this phenomenon as part of Ukraine's new pro-European orientation and narrative of multiculturalism [2019]. The recent borshch-related events involving Crimean Tatars is an extension of the same narrative and sense of Crimean Tatar—Ukrainian allegiance under the auspices of traditional culture.

Activism and Vernacular Culture

While the majority of related literature focuses predominantly on the role of traditional culture in the context of resistance and protest initiatives, the present case study allows me to take one step further. It enables me to address the cyclical trajectory of borshch. A dish that found its way from intimate family tables to the large international political arena returns to vernacular domains transformed by politics.

On a summer day of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in our province had eased, my husband and I invited a couple whom I will call Ol'ha and Viktor, both in their thirties, to our house for dinner. Considering that Ol'ha and Viktor had recently arrived to Canada from Ukraine, we served some traditional Ukrainian dishes, including borshch. As newcomers at the time, Ol'ha and Viktor followed Ukrainian news very closely. "Have you heard that borshch was recently included in the national list of intangible cultural heritage items in Ukraine?" — asked Ol'ha as soon as I began to serve borshch. She then continued: "Thank God! Finally! Otherwise, Russians would have continued to call it their own. How can that be?" Ol'ha referred to the widely reported news that, due to the efforts of Klopotenko and his team, borshch was indeed approved to be included in the national ICH list on 7 October 2020 [Pyrih 2020]. Clearly, for Ol'ha, in light of the present-day Ukraine-Russia crisis, borshch ceased to be just borshch. She now eats it politically. At least she did at my family table.

My second example communicates the vernacular efforts of symbolic distancing from Soviet heritage and, thus, Russian influences, via resistance to Soviet-era cuisine. As mentioned earlier, despite the emerging critical discourse surrounding this cuisine and Ukraine's official efforts to eliminate the remnants of its recent past, Soviet dishes remain popular among many Ukrainians, even including those who are very nationally conscious. This situation can partly be explained by the fact that the dishes do not immediately evoke explicit political associations but are consumed as habitual family meals. It would require a special intellectual effort to reflect on them in political terms.

My close relative, a man in his late thirties whom I will call Oleh, is one of those citizens of Ukraine who recently began to make such efforts. Even though the following encounter is not related specifically to borshch, it is directly connected to the activist efforts of Ievhen Klopotenko. In fact, it was Oleh who first introduced me to the chef's endeavors to strengthen a Ukrainian national identity via food. Klopotenko regularly critiques Soviet-era cuisine, and instead draws attention to widely unknown traditional recipes that he has collected all across Ukraine. The chef's research findings, imparted with his professional touch, are presented in his recent book, *Зваблення їжею з українським смаком* [Seduction by Food with Ukrainian Flavor] [Klopotenko 2020].

Albeit in a humorous way, Oleh often criticizes me for engaging with Soviet food heritage in a way that he finds to be "too much," especially my celebration of New Year with two distinctly Soviet-era salads known as *Oliv'ie* [Olivier] and *Shuba* [Fur Coat or Herring under a Fur Coat]. For me, the salads communicate a sense of nostalgia for the taste of my childhood and youth. Oleh sees my annual obsession with the salads as nothing other than a part of my identity that he finds to be disturbingly too Soviet. While preparing a meal for his family celebration of New Year's Eve in 2020, he purposely excluded all traditional Soviet dishes associated with the holiday and cooked several items featured either in Klopotenko's book or on the chef's website. Oleh phoned me on 31 December 2020 while cooking and said: "Як ти спробуєш зробити ці канапки, ти навіки забудеш про 'Олів'є' і 'Шубу'" [If you try to make these canapés [referring to a

specific recipe by Klopotenko], you will forget about *Oliv'ie* and *Shuba* for the rest of your life." Clearly, Oleh's family table on New Year's Eve was consciously imparted with a distinct political flavor. The dishes communicate a direct connection with the political activism of resistance that makes folklore and politics virtually indistinguishable.

Concluding Remarks

In Ukraine, borshch is no longer just borshch. Cultural activists have moved the dish from family tables, incorporating it into the borshch ritualesque. At the political level, the dish now operates along two axes. One is what political scientist Braden Ruddy calls "gastrodiplomacy" [2014] while the other is its opposite, gastroanimosity. While Ruddy's concept deals with the role of national foods in international relationships, in the Ukrainian case, beets cross internal borders. They help to build internal alliances, while simultaneously reinforcing gastroanimosity toward external threats.

It is only with historical distance and a relatively stable socio-political situation that we are able to view regional heritage in the positive terms of cultural diffusion or reciprocity. When stability is undermined, and when it occurs in close historical and emotional proximity to the destabilizing force, the meanings of heritage may shift. In the case of borshch, the idea of ownership pushed the notions of cultural diffusion or reciprocity to the margins. The claims of ownership of the dish are directly related to the recent loss of possession of physical territory. When military forces are insufficient, culture generates alternative means to claim ownership or, as anthropologist Galina Lindquist would put it, "alternative forms of hope" [2005: 9]. In response to the significantly more powerful army of its opponent, Ukrainian cultural activists brandish borshch as a symbolic political weapon of resistance against external aggression. Borshch tastes the same as it ever has, but is imparted with new layers of meaning. (6)

Furthermore, the current borshch discourse in Ukraine shows that politicized food can sometimes follow a cyclical trajectory, moving from family tables to resistance initiatives and back to vernacular settings. This supports Del Negro's idea that folklore cannot be treated as a distinct entity. It is the institutionalization of the vernacular that appears to play an important role in the transformation of the meaning of a piece of folklore. The recognition of borshch at the government level, the official inclusion of the dish in the list of intangible cultural heritage, and the involvement of top-raking politicians in the borshch ritualesque significantly contributed to a shift in meaning at some family tables at least. The institutionalization of select forms of vernacular culture and their formalization via official government channels and acts appear to impart the vernacular family table with a new idea of heritage ownership. The matter is serious. The fight over the origin of borshch, while it may appear humorous to outsiders, communicates unlaughter to those who reside in close geographical and emotional proximity to all the actual problems that the dispute represents. It is not really about beets at all.

NOTES

1 Unless directly citing sources that use other spelling variants, I transliterate Ukrainian placenames from the official Ukrainian spelling. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Ukrainian and Russian are my own.

2 This paper is a revised and extended version of my part of the presentation "When Beets Cross Borders: Contested Meanings Of *Borscht*" co-written with my colleague, Jillian Gould. The paper was presented at the 2021 International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) Congress as part of the panel "Contested Food Heritages" organized by Håkan Jönsson, Maja Godina Golija, and Ester Bardone. I focused on the current Ukrainian-Russian dispute over borshch while Professor Gould explored the meanings of the dish within the Jewish North American diaspora. I significantly benefitted from our collaborative work as well as the panel discussion that followed our presentation. I am also thankful to Jeanmarie Willoughby-Rouhier and the two anonymous reviewers who helped me to strengthen this work.

3 The concept of gastrodiplomacy was first introduced by political scientist Braden Ruddy [2014].

4 Pokhlyobkin's dictionary has been digitized and is available in electronic forms on multiple Russian-language platforms.

5 Beeman's definition is in line with the incongruity theory of humor, which is considered to be one of the most influential approaches to the study of humor. For a brief comprehensive summary, see Morreall [2020].

6 "Humble" traditional foods changing meanings under the influence of contextually-specific socio-political processes is a rather widespread phenomenon [see, for example, Everett 2007; Tye 2011; Lewis 1989; Pilcher 2012].

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