



Reading Poetry as Dialogue of Cultures is a project dedicated to several questions which, in short, can be described by following issues:

1. To what extent is the concept of a literary canon relevant to Swedish readers?
2. How does the reading of Russian poetry in Sweden depend on political and social contexts?
3. What are the entry points for engaging with Russian poetry in Sweden?
4. What forms of actualization of Russian poetry exist in Sweden?

The project employs a multifaceted methodology for data collection, including:

1. Participant observation at literary events.
2. Semi-structured interviews with various poetry readers.
3. Content analysis of Swedish press materials from 1960 to 2024.

Over the course of the project, 25 interviews with poetry readers were conducted, and 3 seminars, 1 lecture, and 4 cultural events were observed.

Interviews and meetings with participants:

- Academic staff from Stockholm University (Department of Slavic and Baltic Studies, Finnish, Dutch, and German), Uppsala University (Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies), and Lund University (Centre for Languages and Literature). The target group included professors (lecturers, translators, and interpreters), students, and administrative staff.
- Diplomatic professionals involved in Russian-Swedish relations.
- Swedish journalists specializing in Russian studies, including former reporters in the Soviet Union and literary critics.
- Bookstore employees from Interbok (<https://interbok.se/>).
- Members and scholars associated with The Sverker Åström Foundation.

Participation in Lectures and Seminars Related to the Research:



- “Between the West, Ukraine, and Russia: Identities, Myths, and Traumas in Post-Soviet Russian-Language Literature and its Reception in Nordic Criticism” (November 5, Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies (IRES)). Seminar. Speaker: Olga Engfelt, Ph.D. in Philosophy, literary scholar, author, and publicist.

- “Russia and the West in Russian Philosophy and Post-Soviet Literature” (November 11, IRES). Lecture. Speaker: Olga Engfelt, Ph.D. in Philosophy, literary scholar, author, and publicist.

- “Empire between Ideology and Critique” (November 12, IRES). Seminar. Speaker: Evert van der Zweerde, Professor of Social and Political Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands.

- “900 dagens” (December 11). Film screening and discussion at “Zita” Cinema, Stockholm. Panel discussion participants: Irina Sandomirskaja (Södertörn University), Jessica Gorter (film director), Malcolm Dixelius (journalist, producer, and writer), Karin Grelz (Stockholm University).

- Book presentation and concert by Belarusian poetess Svetlana Ben: “Iz jamki zemljanoj” (January 10, Estniska huset, Stockholm).

Work in Archives:



- The archive of the Royal Swedish Library (search for mentions of Soviet-Russian poets in newspapers from the 1960s to the 2020s).

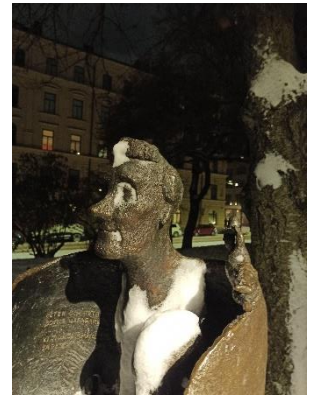
- The Nobel Committee Nomination Archive (search for mentions of Bulat Okudzhava’s name among nominees for the Nobel Prize in Literature).

Presentation of Scholarship Results:

- 11th International Scientific Conference dedicated to the creative legacy of Bulat Okudzhava and the round table “Bulat Okudzhava and His Literary Environment in the Digital Age: ‘Voz’mjomysya za ruki, druž’ya!’” (November 16, State Memorial Museum of Bulat Okudzhava). Report title: “Readers, Listeners, Friends: Perception of Bulat Okudzhava.”

1. To what extent is the idea of a literary canon relevant for the Swedish reader?

For Russian readers of fiction, the concept of a literary canon is closely tied to Sweden, primarily through the Nobel Prize in Literature. This award holds immense prestige in Russia, being the most recognized accolade for writers and poets, despite the fact that many laureates are not endorsed by the government or the current political regime. The term “tradition” frequently appears in the Nobel Prize citations for Russian writers (see the award wordings for Bunin, Sholokhov, and Solzhenitsyn). Sweden actively preserves traditional values in art. This raises an intriguing question for Swedish readers: What is the significance of the literary canon’s tradition?



For Russian poetry readers, the history of literature is divided into three distinct eras: the Golden Age (19th century), the Silver Age (the late 19th century and the first two to three decades of the 20th century), and the contemporary era, which begins with the sixties (1960s–1980s) and includes the works of Russian-Soviet poets and their successors.

What, then, constitutes the Swedish reader’s understanding of literary eras in Sweden?

Based on the interview results, three key periods emerge for the modern Swedish reader: The Romantic Era (Erik Johan Stagnelius, Gustav Fröding), Modernism (Karl Werner Aspenström, Gunnar Ekelöf, Edith Södergran), The Contemporary Era (Tomas Tranströmer, Åse Berg).

The most frequently mentioned poets in the interviews were Tomas Tranströmer and Gunnar Ekelöf, both of whom bridge the Romantic and Modernist eras in their works.

One can identify the following Russian authors as the most significant for Swedish readers: Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Blok, Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Gennadiy Aygi, and Joseph Brodsky . Among contemporary authors, informants mentioned Lev Rubinstein, Anna Gorbunova, Maria Stepanova, and Yuli Gugolev .

The concept of a literary canon holds considerable influence in Swedish society. This is supported by both the interview results and a major research project entirely dedicated to the issue of the literary canon in Sweden: “The Literary Canon in Sweden – Consensus and Conflict in Educational Policy, Public Debate, and Pedagogical Practice” . This project involves Magnus Persson, Professor of Literature with a didactic focus at Malmö University, and Ylva Lindberg , Professor of Education with a focus on language and literature didactics at Jönköping University.



However, the research findings suggest that, unlike Russia, Sweden does not have a clearly defined canon of literary education. Respondents in Sweden (ranging in age from 22 to 84) confirmed that Swedish schools do not require children to memorize national poetry. Furthermore, the current school curriculum places little emphasis on Swedish poets, prioritizing international prose writers instead.

Unlike Russians, Swedish respondents did not discuss the literary canon as something substantial. This is particularly evident when it comes to well-known Swedish poets, who clearly do not hold the status of “prophets of the nation,” as is often the case with Russian classical poets. It can be said that poets in Sweden are less tied to the concept of national unity compared to their Russian counterparts.

2. Does reading Russian poetry depend on political and social agenda?



A small minority of respondents acknowledged that their attitude toward Russian literature had shifted due to the current political climate. However, the majority stated, to varying degrees, that politics did not influence their perception of literature. The extent of “cancel culture” directed at Russia depended largely on the individual’s professional or personal connections with the country. For instance, researchers in Russian studies, students of Russian programs, and translators of Russian fiction clearly distinguished between contemporary Russian politics and its cultural heritage. None of the respondents expressed support for Russia’s political actions.

The findings do not reveal a clear correlation between political beliefs, artistic preferences, and attitudes toward Russia in general. However, it is notable that interest in so-called opposition or “protest Russian poetry” in Sweden has increased. One Swedish literary critic noted that while her attitude toward Russian culture remained unchanged, her focus of interest had shifted. She observed that the influence of Russian poets diminishes if they are not associated with the protest agenda: “And there’s not that kind of interest in Russian poetry right now, I would say, generally, except for the ones in exile.” Another informant, a researcher from Stockholm University, pointed out that the new political situation has not altered attitudes but has changed the perspective of analyzing and teaching Russian literature. For students and young researchers, Russia’s imperialism is both a subject of interest and an ethical dilemma.

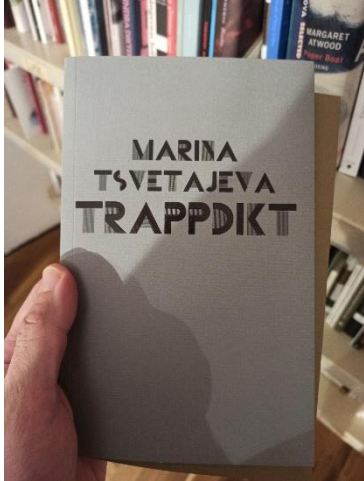
A young Swedish poet, who referenced the works of Maria Stepanova and Evgenia Berkovich, stated that her perception of Russian culture remained unchanged despite the current political situation. She explained, “The history of Russia, as I see it, has always been very violent and difficult.”

Another Swedish respondent noted that anti-war poetry is a well-established genre, adding, “Brodsky wrote like that. About this... There is a man who lies in the valley of Afghanistan.” This is a reference to Joseph Brodsky’s poem “Verses on the Winter Campaign” 1980, which, in turn, alludes to Mikhail Lermontov’s well-known poem *The Dream* (“Neath midday heat, in Dagestana’s Vale”).

Only one university professor among the respondents directly addressed the connection between Russia’s political climate and the way Russian poetry is read in Sweden. They remarked, “I’ve spent my whole life teaching and studying Russian literature. But because of this war, I can hardly think of Russia. My Russia, the Russia I knew, is gone. So for me, it is a tremendous difference.”



3. What are the "entry points" for engaging with Russian poetry in Sweden?



In Sweden, the appreciation of Russian poetry—and poetry in general—develops organically, free from any external compulsion. However, this perception has certain implications. Pure poetry is often regarded as an interest of the privileged class, the cultural elite. For many Swedish respondents, particularly those in academic fields related to Russian studies, knowledge of the Russian language and literature serves as a marker of higher education. In contrast, Swedish poetry is often perceived as something more “local.” At the same time, Russian culture is not strictly associated with political borders but rather seen as a vast cultural universe, extending beyond modern Russia in both temporal and geographical dimensions.

The Swedish passion for Russian poetry can be traced through four primary channels: military service, diplomatic relations, education, and personal background or relationships. Several respondents studied Russian in military schools, and a notable overlap exists between the curricula of Försvarets tolkskola (TolkS, the Swedish Armed Forces Interpreter School) and Stockholm University’s Textanalys och översättning program. Both include the study of poetry and prose by Bulat Okudzhava—such as the poetry collection “Veselyj Barabanshchik” and the novel “Front prihodit k nam” —alongside works by Marina Tsvetaeva and Lyudmila Petrushevskaya.

A 70-year-old Swedish journalist recalled that the first book he read in Russian at military translation school was Bulat Okudzhava’s Veselyj Barabanshchik (published in 1966):

Interviewer: But did you start by listening to songs or reading poetry?

Informant: Reading poetry!

Interviewer: Was it by chance?

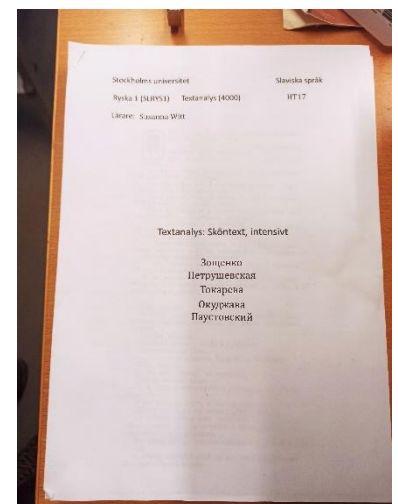
Informant: It was on our teacher’s recommendation...

A 24-year-old student at Stockholm University mentioned a short list of Russian authors he is interpreting in his evening Russian language courses: “Besides Pushkin and Tsvetaeva, these are Bunin, Tolstoy, Lermontov, and Okudzhava.”

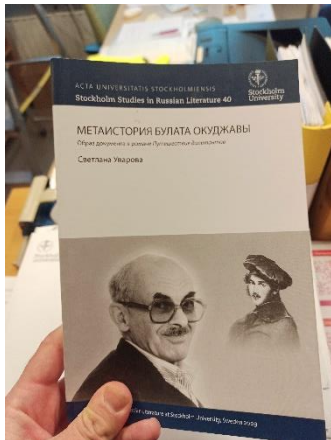
Another Stockholm University student, 22 years old, shared his experience:

“We had Russian literature, and they mentioned that there were bards, and there was this... And they said, Okudzhava. I had never heard of Okudzhava. Or no, it wasn’t even in literature class—it was in analysis and translation. We had this bookman, a textbook, and there was this...”

Thus, for decades—at least from the 1960s to the 2020s—there has been a strong tradition of studying Russian literature in Swedish universities, closely intertwined with learning the Russian language. It is particularly interesting to observe the selection of Russian texts included in academic curricula, which spans representatives of both the Golden and Silver Ages of Russian poetry, as well as writers of the 1960s.



4. What Forms of Actualization of Russian Poetry Exist in Sweden?



Actualization refers to the connection between a cultural phenomenon—in this case, a work of art—and the perception of an observer (reader, viewer, or listener), allowing the phenomenon to acquire the status of a cultural event.

I explored the forms of actualization of Russian poetry in Sweden using the example of how Bulat Okudzhava's poetry has been presented to Swedish readers.

Okudzhava is one of the founders of the *Avtorskaya pesnya* (singer-songwriter) genre, which not only gained immense popularity in the USSR and Russia but also became part of a broader global movement, including trubadurer in Sweden, folksingers in the United States, and cantautores in Spain. When Okudzhava first appeared in Sweden in 1966, Swedish readers embraced his poetry as a vehicle for humanitarian values.

Between the 1960s and the 2020s, the Swedish press interpreted his work as a reflection of resistance against war, dictatorship, and ignorance.

At the same time, interviews and newspaper sources suggest that Okudzhava has also been perceived as a semi-avant-garde poet with obscure, enigmatic lyrics. This particular esotericism is sometimes associated with the concept of the mysterious Russian soul—a notion that, rather than actualizing his poetry, contributes to its de-actualization by framing it as something distant and difficult to grasp.

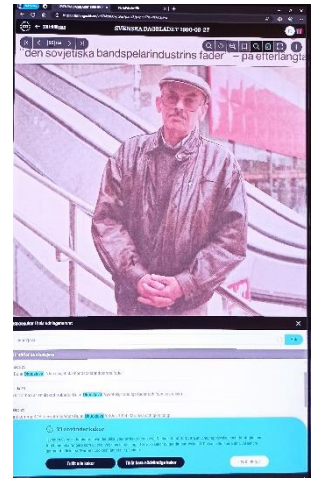
The tension between political engagement and avant-garde aesthetics (which should not be confused with underground movements) is a notable and significant characteristic of Russian literature as perceived by European readers. This paradox was aptly captured in Yevgeny Yevtushenko's famous phrase: "A poet in Russia is more than a poet." However, this notion of poetry's essence was unanimously challenged by all Swedish respondents.

In Sweden, poetry is not considered as sacred in the cultural consciousness. However, alongside a deep appreciation for Russian literature, Swedish readers sometimes develop what resembles a sacred relationship with certain authors. A Swedish translator of Okudzhava's poetry admitted that he perceives the poet as a holy figure, comparing him to Bishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu: "Okudzhava's greatest gift is his ability to forgive...". In this sense, Okudzhava emerges as a poet uniquely capable of addressing the weight of Russia's and the Soviet Union's historical legacy through his works.

Okudzhava's reception in Sweden also reveals an interesting connection to pop culture, as noted by a researcher from Stockholm University: "We worship pop artists if they are successful, which reflects a more superficial view of culture in general. We don't respect writers, thinkers, or poets as much in Sweden, and I suppose I, too, am a product of this ideology in some way. This perspective leads to a particular way of reading Okudzhava's poetry in Sweden—not as intellectual or literary work, but as that of a pop singer. This interpretation has influenced performances of his poetry, which have been presented in the style of gypsy romances by artists such as Christina Andersson, Jelena Jangfeldt-Jakubovich, and the musical group Hoppets Lilla Orkester.



Another significant aspect of Bulat Okudzhava's reception in Sweden is the academic reading of his poetry. This approach is deeply connected to the nuanced interpretation of his works, facilitated by translations from Lars Forssell, Hans Björkegren, and Malcolm Dixelius. These translations have positioned Okudzhava's poetry within the realm of high culture, reinforcing its intellectual and literary value. Interestingly, this form of engagement is accompanied by speculation regarding Okudzhava's nomination for the Nobel Prize. Björkegren, for instance, argued that Okudzhava would have been a strong contender for the prize had Swedish readers possessed a better command of the Russian language.



Finally, Okudzhava's poetry is also actualized through a more personal and localized lens, as Swedish readers find ways to appropriate his poetic experience within their own cultural framework. One respondent, for example, interprets "A Song About an Open Door" through the lens of a distinct northern Scandinavian custom:

"For me, it holds a meaning that even Bulat himself might not have intended. It is something very physical. I am a northerner—I grew up in northern Sweden. I have traveled extensively in Siberia, in the taiga and tundra, on two polar expeditions. And I know how vital open doors are."

This example illustrates how Okudzhava's poetry, while rooted in a specific Soviet context, transcends cultural boundaries, resonating with readers in deeply personal and sometimes unexpected ways.

My scholarship gave me a huge experience. I plan to use it for my further projects. Especially, it concerns an article which I am now preparing for publication in academic journals: "Actualization of Bulat Okudjava's poetry in Sweden". I am planning to publish it by the end of 2025.