
Laibach and North Korea

By Akshaye Mavinkurve

On 20 February 2023, North Korea fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles off its coast into the Pacific. As a result, tensions between North Korea and the international community were highlighted in Western media coverage. Against the backdrop of North Korea's ongoing missile testing program and the heightened tensions, it is noteworthy to comprehend the employment of soft power strategies through cultural exchange endeavours to alleviate geopolitical tensions. The following perspective discusses Laibach's performance in Pyongyang, North Korea, on 15 August 2015 as part of North Korea's "Liberation Day" celebrations making Laibach the first Western band to perform in North Korea.

North Korea

The establishment of North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), is arguably one of the most significant moments in East Asia. DPRK's domestic and foreign policies are guided by a political ideology called "Juche." Juche is a political ideology that interprets Marxist-Leninist principles to apply them in the socio-political context of the Korean peninsula (Lee, 2003). It can be defined as the application of socialist policies to maintain self-reliance, and sovereignty in administration, and build a socio-cultural national consensus. The role of art in the DPRK is to reinforce the principles of Juche to the people of North Korea.

The national creative policy formulated in the 1970s lays out the structure for artistic products and the objective of producing the art and the message it must convey. The policy mandates that songs are composed in the Korean folk style. With self-reliance being a key principle of Juche, the creative policy emphasises the importance of incorporating all elements of Korean musical tools into producing arias and music for revolutionary operas. Some well-known plays that represent the music and theatre industry include operas such as "Tell O' The Forest!" and "Sea of the Blood," which evoke themes of fighting against Japanese imperialism and following the path of Juche.

Laibach

Laibach is a Slovenian avant-garde musical group that formed in the early 1980s in Trojane, Yugoslavia, now Slovenia. Since its inception in the early 1980s, Laibach's mission has been to use art to mirror the raw mechanism of how ideology functions and ultimately how it is reflected in ideological propaganda.



[Juche Tower](#) | [Micha Braendli](#) | [Unsplash](#)

To quote Laibach, “Laibach analyses the relation between ideology and culture in a late phase, presented through art...” (Monroe & Zizek, 2005). Essentially, Laibach's music critiques how ideology is made and disseminated through the use of irony. Their music exposes the fundamental nature of ideology and its subversiveness. Laibach's early work included the creation and publishing of albums such as their self-titled album “Laibach” and “Nova Akropola.” These albums were critiqued and challenged various ideologies, particularly extremist ideologies that justify their authoritarian and oppressive policies as instruments of building national identity.

They have also worked on producing music for plays. The music in these plays reflects the absurdity of the subjects and the subject matter. Their most prominent is an interpretation of William Shakespeare's “Macbeth”, where they incorporate their industrial and electronic elements as an ironic motif to Macbeth's maximalist personality. They have also reinterpreted the works of playwright Heiner Müller in “Wir Sind Das Volk”. They created new musical elements inspired by Müller's plays and songs. In this play, Laibach incorporates an over-imposition of parade music to represent the “order and discipline” imposed on Germans by the Nazis.



[Mina Špiler performing in Pyongyang | Traavik.info | CNN](#)

Laibach in North Korea

Laibach was invited to perform in North Korea due to the lobbying efforts of Morten Traavik, a Norwegian film director who describes himself as a “cultural diplomat”. He has conducted many musical projects in North Korea and used his goodwill and diplomatic connections to provide Laibach with the opportunity to perform in North Korea. This made Laibach the first Western band to perform in North Korea. Laibach's invitation to perform in North Korea is a surprising event for those who have followed Laibach's journey. This is due to Laibach's well-known motive of using art as a tool to ironically mock grand ideological narratives. While their music might superficially seem to connect with the themes evoked in North Korean art, Laibach's use of irony through subtext is a criticism of the art created in North Korea.

However, Traavik does not find it surprising that Laibach was allowed to perform in North Korea. He believes that, like Laibach, North Korea is “misunderstood” by its critics; therefore, both can connect on a level where they work with each other's sensibilities. In Laibach's track titled “Welcome Speech,” Mr Ryu, Chairman of the Cultural Exchange Committee with Foreign Countries, criticises the music performed by Laibach as “condoning Nazism and Fascism” and “neo-Nazi in nature.”

Traavik, in an interview with Kosovo 2.0, mentions that it was a form of “trolling” that Laibach themselves perform. This symbolic interaction between Laibach and Mr Ryu shows us that, despite their superficial differences, Laibach and North Korea could be different sides of the same coin. While the world does not understand Laibach and North Korea, they understand each other, and both have provided a platform for each other to express themselves.

Due to North Korea's secretive nature, we may never get their nuanced perspective; however, Laibach's impact can be seen in the testimonials of those who attended. Laibach introduced a new musical style to North Korea and new perspectives on the role of ideology in moulding society. However, art in North Korea has been moulded by the government for so long that it is impossible to observe shifts in attitudes and perceptions of Western music and genres such as Industrial Rock. As Laibach's leader Ivan Novak claimed, “it's a small step for Laibach and a big step for humanity” This quote could be a reference to Laibach's history of breaking the boundaries of music since the 1980s, from their early albums, provoking the sensibilities of the Yugoslavian government to being banned in Russia. While the "big step in humanity" could be a reference to the global community having a better understanding of North Korea and North Koreans. Laibach's work may not have had a huge impact on North Korea, but their concert and the documentation of their experience open the eyes of people who may have had a fabricated perception of North Korea.

About the Author

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