

THE EARLY PRAGUE SPRING: ANALYSING THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF MODERNIST ASPECTS ACCORDING TO THE EXAMPLE OF THREE PIANO CONCERTOS BY THE “PRAGUE GROUP” OF COMPOSERS

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ABSTRACT

The interwar period brought about a number of modernist tendencies in the heterogeneous cultural context of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which is particularly salient in the works of the young composers belonging to the so-called “Prague group.” Having completed their studies, dozens of composers and conductors, including Ljubica Marić (1909–2003), Stanojlo Rajičić (1910–2000) and Milan Ristić (1908–1982) contributed to the establishment of the new movement in the conservative milieu of interwar Belgrade. After World War II, socialist realism became, in effect, the only approved style for the artists of the period. However, only a decade after the Tito–Stalin split, modernist tendencies reappeared full-blown in the output of Yugoslav composers. It is therefore of the greatest interest to analyse and present the way in which modernist music managed to find its way back to Yugoslav composers, performers and audiences in such a short period of time (the 1950s). To do so, we have chosen three piano concertos, written at the very beginning, in the middle, and at the very end of this period. This overview

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would not have been possible if we had analysed works belonging to other genres, as most had already been established in the pre-war period. However, it is also safe to conclude that the limitations on the Yugoslav scene were not imposed only by political authorities, but also by the conservative tastes of its audience and society, which were already in place before WWII.

KEYWORDS: Prague group, piano concerto, socialist realism, modernism

1. INTRODUCTION

In Europe, World War II caused profound changes on the political, economic, military and cultural planes, making the unity of the continent impossible. The rift between East and West, which became deeper in the post-war years, caused the dropping of the so-called Iron Curtain in the mid-1940s, dividing the continent in half. The newly established Socialist Yugoslavia naturally aligned itself with the Eastern bloc.³ However, ideological disputes between Tito (Josip Broz Tito, 1892–1980) and Stalin (Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, 1878–1953) led to the exclusion of Yugoslavia from the Eastern Bloc as early as 1948. This created a significant anomaly in the new polar world structure which lasted for several decades, and which made a tear in the Curtain. Socialist or state realism came into existence out of the belief that it is necessary for art to be subjected to the politics and ideology of a society. However, the idea of socialist realism, which began to spread in Serbian art immediately after the War, and which had already become dominant by the early 1950s, was not extreme in comparison to the situation in other communist countries, owing to the ideological conflict between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.⁴

3 After the end of World War I, Yugoslavia was formed as a kingdom headed by the Karadorđević Dynasty. The monarchy essentially collapsed with the Axis occupation of 1941; during World War II, the country also witnessed a revolution and a civil war, with the Communist Party led by Josip Broz Tito emerging victorious.

4 Ivana Vuksanović notes that socialist realism remained the dominant style until 1951; after ideological constraints loosened, neo-classicism emerged as the most moderate and least conflicted with the demands of the socialist understanding of art; after 1955 modernism was becoming increasingly prominent (unless, of course, neo-classicism is understood in this context as a modernist orientation, which is how many musicologists see it). Expressionism was particularly prominent in the works of the “Prague students”, but was usually combined with their pre-war style; from 1960 on, the stylistic profile of concertos became more or less consistent (see Вуксановић 2007: 520–521). Vesna Mikić also remarks that it was in 1951 (the year that Dobrica Ćosić published the novel *Daleko je sunce* [*Far Away is the Sun*]; Petar Lubarda had his solo exhibition; and Milan Ristić’s Second Symphony was premiered) that “it became evident that a ‘new age’ of Serbian art had begun, which was initially fraught with debates and clashes between the proponents of realism and the representatives of modernism in literature” (Mikić 2006: 270). Hence it should be borne

Hence, we shall attempt to demonstrate the development of this so-called *second turn* in Yugoslav music in the 1950s on the example of three compositions of the same genre by different authors – Stanojlo Rajičić (1910–2000), Milan Ristić (1908–1982) and Ljubica Marić (1909–2003).

These three were among the composers who returned to Belgrade from Prague, which was a mecca for the youngest generation of Yugoslav composers in the pre-war years. In interwar Belgrade, two generations of compositions were active side by side: the older, which had emerged as early as the first years of the 20th century, was of a national predilection and included composers such as Miloje Milojević (1884–1946), Petar Konjović (1883–1970) and Stevan Hristić (1885–1958); and the younger, more open to modernist tendencies and led by Josip Slavenski (1896–1955), whose leading figures were composers educated in Prague. It is customary today to divide the composers belonging to the Prague Group into the left, avant-garde wing, taught by Alois Hába (1893–1973), and the right, relatively modern wing, whose mentor was Josef Suk (1874–1935).⁵ Ljubica Marić and Milan Ristić, who belonged to the left wing, accepted atonality and athematism, experimented with composing quarter-tone music and twelve-tone technique. Conversely, Rajičić, who belonged to the right wing, although he also frequently turned to avant-garde models, did not entirely abandon tonality in the broadest sense, and therefore he stayed within the limits of traditional formal structures, without applying quarter-tone and twelve-tone systems. Although these three composers, members of the Prague Group, were among the most prominent representatives of the Serbian avant-garde, after World War II the new cultural policy caused significant changes in their work: Milan Ristić opted for the Copernican turn for clearly obvious existential reasons and accepted socialist realism by turning to neo-classicism. Rajičić also significantly moderated his musical expression, while in the late 1940s Marić abandoned her composing activities for a few years and focused on studying Byzantine music.⁶ However, this change should be taken with a grain of salt: some authors note that already in the interwar period (and particularly in the late 1930s) members of the Prague Group tended to dilute their musical language after they returned to Belgrade (Peričić, Kostić and Skovran 1969: 220, 431; cf. Peričić 1971).

In the years following the Tito–Stalin Split, censorship pressure gradually eased, allowing artists a relatively greater freedom of expression. Although this “winning of freedom” was not equally present in every genre and opus, this process is particu-

in mind that this loosening of ideological constraints – followed by the overarching transformation of style in Yugoslavia – occurred precisely at the time when the works discussed here were created.

5 Suk’s students included Stanojlo Rajičić, Predrag Milošević and Mihovil Logar (1902–1998); Hába’s students included Ljubica Marić, Milan Ristić and Vojislav Vučković (1910–1942). However, not all members of the Prague Group studied with these professors: Oskar Danon (1913–2009) was taught composition by J. Kržička, but after he returned to Yugoslavia he worked primarily as a conductor.

6 *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1948) was the last notable work by this composer before her period of ‘creative silence.’

larly evident in the concerto genre, which is the reason why we have chosen it to be the subject of this paper.

We shall analyse three compositions belonging to this genre – Stanojlo Rajičić's *Third Piano Concerto* (1950), Milan Ristić's *First Piano Concerto* (1954) and Ljubica Marić's *Byzantine Concerto* (1959) to demonstrate the modernist streak in their work.

Historically speaking, Serbian composers turned to the concerto genre extremely late. The first concerto in Serbian music (*Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*, 1903) was composed in Vienna by Petar Stojanović (1877–1955), who is also considered the Serbian pioneer of this genre; together with Stanojlo Rajičić, he made the greatest contribution to it. The reason for this is found in the fact that until the end of 19th century the musical life of Serbia was amateur-dominated and for a long time there was no full symphony orchestra (the first – the Army Orchestra of Belgrade – was formed as late as 1899: Вуксановић 2007: 517–518) and there were no professional soloists whose performing abilities and mastery of an instrument could have contributed to the evolution of the genre. In this respect, a watershed in Serbian music during the interwar period was the founding of the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra (1923), which led to a considerable increase in the number of symphony concerts, while the professionalization of music and the rise of music performance greatly contributed to the development of this genre.

The composers of the Prague Group wrote concert compositions for piano before WWII, including *Concertino* for Quarter-tone piano and String Orchestra (1932) by Dragutin Čolić and *Two Toccatas* for piano and string orchestra (1933) by Mihovil Logar. And yet, although compositions for piano and orchestra, as mentioned above, had existed before this time, Stanojlo Rajičić was in fact a pioneer of this genre: as a virtuoso pianist he was the first to write two piano concertos before and during World War II. Even though they are both characterized by a relatively modern expression, these compositions were often criticized for their underdeveloped texture – a problem that Rajičić did not solve until after the war, in his *Third Piano Concerto*.⁷

2. CONCEPT. FORM AND STYLE

These three authors differ with regard to style. According to Vlastimir Peričić, stylistic determinants of the members of the Prague Group who studied with Suk were “a symbiosis of expressionist and neo-classical or in other words expressionist and late-romantic elements” (Peričić 2000: 65). Having made his most notable contribution to the concerto genre in the post-war period, Rajičić's first work to show this change was his *Second Concerto* for Violin and Orchestra in E minor, which was premiered in October 1947 (Вуксановић 2007: 523). Hence, the moderation of Rajičić's musical

7 Interestingly, Rajičić also pioneered other works of the concerto genre: for example, in 1943 he composed the first clarinet concerto in the history of Serbian music.

$\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ della battuta precedente) ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}$)
 a tempo, ma un poco meno mosso

Example 1. S. Rajičić- *Piano Concerto No. 3*, First movement, excerpt (reduction for two pianos)

language is reflected in the more audacious usage of expressionist elements, which can be seen in his *Third Piano Concerto*. Generally speaking, this concerto is the closest to a neoromantic approach, with its strong lyrical character and technical demands reminiscent of Rachmaninov.

In the formal and technical sense, this distanced him from his *First Piano Concerto* (1940), which was modelled after the works of Franz Liszt and hence shared their single-movement form.

a: IV? V? IV? V? IV? V? V

Example 2: S. Rajičić – *Piano Concerto No. 3*, First movement, excerpt (reduction for two pianos)

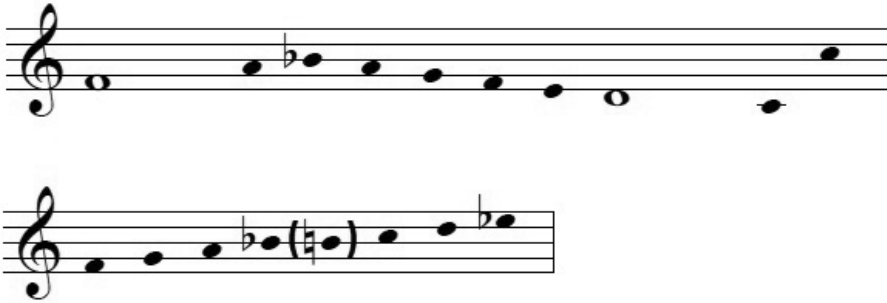
In addition, Rajičić's works became distinctly nationally oriented at this time, which – as noted by Ivana Medić in her book *Piano Music of Vasilije Mokranjac* (Medić 2004) – might have influenced the style of his composition students such as Vasilije Mokranjac (1923–1984), who would go on to become a prominent composer and an important teacher at the Belgrade Music academy. Elements of Serbian national music are also noticeable in Rajičić's *Third Piano Concerto* in an orchestral composition whose melody shows distinct traces of folk music.

Typically, the melody ends with a long second tonal degree, which is harmonized as the dominant of the basic A minor – the usual way in which composers and ethnomusicologists treated Serbian folk songs within a tonal framework ever since the time of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac (1856–1914) (the tone is marked at the end of the example 2).

On the other hand, Ristić, with his *Second Symphony* (1951) and *First Piano Concerto* (1954) made a significant step towards modernism, while leaving behind the strong influence of Hába and Schoenberg, as well as the radical and atonal language that marked his works during his student and wartime years (Peričić, Kostić, Skovran 1969: 454).

Ristić's anti-romantic concept of the concerto is best seen precisely in the third movement, which has not only the motoric character of the toccata, but also a shar-

ness and determination in the sound of the vertical alignments, which is occasionally reminiscent of Stravinsky. In this concerto he treats the piano like Stravinsky, Bartók and Prokofiev – the composers who were the first to draw attention to the percussive character of the piano in the 20th century.



Example 3: Second and third echoi from the Octoechos

Ljubica Marić's *Byzantine Concerto* is fully based on the general principles of modernist aesthetics. Therefore, her relationship with the past is derived from her individual attitude towards it, which is typical of the 20th-century music. During the 1950s, she studied Mokranjac's version of the Octoechos, which was to become the foundation for the whole cycle of compositions entitled *Music of the Octoechos*. As Ivana Vuksanović interestingly noted, it was precisely this manner of utilizing chants from the Octoechos that "contributed to the introduction of church music into the concert scene, albeit in a strongly transformed way" (Вуксановић 2007: 525). For Ljubica Marić, this was a time of self-imposed isolation and 'creative silence,' a hiatus she used to focus on studying these archaic techniques, which were to play an important role in several of her notable works (Peričić, Kostić, Skovran 1969: 253).

Formally speaking, both Rajičić's and Ristić's concertos are close to the traditional sonata cycle, the movements organized as fast–slow–fast, and the movements themselves resembling forms from the previous periods (sonata form and ternary form).

In the first movement of Rajičić's *Concerto*, the dialogue between the piano and the orchestra in the exposition grows into a genuine battle between solo virtuosity and the most diverse orchestral colours, which vary from gentle to extremely vivid – which is all typically romantic in style.

In the second movement, *Andante*, which is a rondo-like ternary form, a recognizable theme inspired by folk music steadily grows more virtuosic and then disappears, leaving the listener surprised at the *attacca* beginning of the *Presto finale*, which is also characterized by sonata elements and scherzo style. Its gradation and Rajičić's skilful manipulation of the thematic material lead to the virtuosic climax in the Coda.

In terms of form, the first movement of Ristić's *Concerto* is a concise sonata form, in which the whole of the thematic material is already expressed in the orchestral exposition. In other words, the whole *Concerto* is written in the style of César Franck, but in a new context: there is a single motif with an individual thematic basis which

initially appears as the theme of the first movement. Later it is transformed in various ways and appears in all three movements.

It is not until the third movement that the pianist is given an occasional opportunity to show off his or her virtuosity, while in the first two movements the piano part is skilfully woven into the orchestral tissue, which means that at times it does not resemble a concerto at all, but seems to be a concerto-style symphony.

Example 4. S. Rajčić – *Piano Concerto No. 3*, First movement, excerpt from the piano part

Example 5: M. Ristić – *Piano Concerto No. 1*, orchestral exposition (main motif)

Byzantine Concerto, based on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th *echoi* of the Octoechos, consists of three movements that smoothly follow one another with no clear contrast, rhapsodic in form – which is typical of modernism. The first movement, *Sound and Resounding* [Zvuk i zvonjava] is basically a three-part form (with a coda), comprising the hexachords from the second *echos*. The second movement, *In the Shadow and Reflection* [U tami i odsjaju] is a sort of solo cadenza for the whole concerto (baroque variation form with a simple first theme), while the third movement, *Rumbling and Flare* [Tutnjava i bljesak] represents the dramatic centre of the concerto, its music overwhelming and devastating.

In line with late romantic aesthetics, the focal point of Rajičić's *Third Concerto* lies in the first movement, which is the longest and the most expressive, and which has the richest texture. Ristić is traditional enough, with the tension in the first and the last movements, while there is no such tension in Ljubica Marić's composition, because there is no sharp contrast between the movements.

The image shows a musical score for a church practice. The top staff is a vocal line in G major, 4/4 time, with lyrics in Cyrillic: "всѣ - сла - ве - не - Го - спо - ди, сла - ва - те - бѣ." Above the vocal line, there is a bracket labeled "1)" and another bracket labeled "b". Below the vocal line, there are two piano accompaniment staves in G major, 4/4 time. The first piano staff has a bracket labeled "a" and the second piano staff has a bracket labeled "b".

Example 6: The fourth *echos* in the church practice and its use in Third movement of *The Byzantine Concerto* according to Melita Milin

3. HARMONY, RHYTHM AND ORCHESTRATION

Rajičić stays loyal to classically-understood tonality, with differentiation between the major and the minor, allowing only an occasional exception. Additionally, his treatment of the piano is close to the one characteristic of late romanticism, including a powerful texture, strong dynamic contrasts and long phrases, imitation of certain orchestral instruments, such as the harp, using the whole range of the piano, and so on. What is peculiar, however, is the melodic quality and the use of chromaticism, but not in the fashion of the late romantics: he implements unusual intervallic leaps, such as downward and occasional upward leaps of a seventh, and tritone leaps, which almost acquire the quality of a *Leitmotif*:

As regards harmony, Ristić often resembles Stravinsky in his broad choice of vertical alignments, but from a technical point of view there is a great deal of poly-

honic material, especially in the first and the third movements (note Example 8), but the second movement is characterized by lighter colours, an unusual orchestration in the style of Shostakovich, and folk elements. There can be no doubt that Ristić belongs to modernism in terms of harmony and orchestration.

Allegro risoluto $\text{♩} = 88$

Example 7: S. Rajičić – *Piano Concerto No. 3*, First movement, piano exposition

Example 8: M. Ristić – *Piano Concerto No. 1*, First movement, excerpt (clarinet, bassoon and French horn)

The image shows two musical excerpts, labeled 'a)' and 'b)', for a piano part. Excerpt 'a)' consists of two staves of music. The upper staff features a melodic line with eighth notes and rests, marked with a '6^{ma}' above it. The lower staff provides harmonic accompaniment with chords and triplets. The tempo marking 'sempre marcato' is centered below the staves. Excerpt 'b)' also consists of two staves, showing a more rhythmic and melodic development with various note values and rests.

Examples 9a and 9b: Lj. Marić – *The Byzantine Concerto*, Third movement, excerpts from piano part

On the other hand, however, it is noteworthy that only Ristić's *Concerto* has a genuine traditional virtuoso solo cadenza.

With Ljubica Marić, harmony emerges as a result of the parts moving freely, rather than from a conscious decision to create a harmonic flow. Motifs originating from the same *echos* that run through each movement ensure their thematic unity, while the modal character of the melodies ensures the unity of all three movements. Within the rhapsodic form, diatonic tonal segments distinctly alternate with more dissonant, almost atonal ones.

All this contributes to the creation of a special atmosphere, which is both archaic and modern at the same time.

Unlike Rajičić's and Ristić's *Concertos*, which are characterized by very clear and neat rhythmic patterns, Ljubica Marić employs much more complex and less stable ones, as well as polyrhythm, in order to achieve a more flexible, loose rhythmic structure. What is more, Marić practically treats the piano as a constituent part of the orchestra, which means that at times the percussive character of the piano comes to the foreground.

Another peculiarity of the piano part is the fact that it is written in the treble clef, with the upper range of the piano being dominant. Therefore, the piano part sounds slightly poor at times, since the lower resonances are missing. Although the piano part does not have a dominant melody in the traditional sense, skilful pedalling produces an incredible effect, which demonstrates the composer's knowledge of the instrumental characteristics of the piano and her competence in putting them to use. There is no sharp differentiation between the hands in the piano part – both are equally important and have similar material, which is another significant difference in comparison to the concertos by Rajičić and Ristić.

The image displays a musical score for an orchestral excerpt. The score is arranged in a system with eight staves. From top to bottom, the staves are labeled: Cor. (Cornet), Tr. (Trumpet), Trb. (Trumpet/Bass), Tb. (Tuba), VI. I. I (Violin I), VI. II. II (Violin II), Vle. (Viola), Vlc. (Violoncello), and Cb. (Cello). The music is written in 3/4 time. The Cor. part has a dynamic marking of *p* and includes a fermata. The Tr. part features a triplet of eighth notes and a sixteenth-note triplet. The Trb. part has a triplet of eighth notes. The VI. I. I part is mostly rests. The VI. II. II part has a dynamic marking of *p*. The Vle. part has a dynamic marking of *p*. The Vlc. part has a dynamic marking of *p*. The Cb. part has a dynamic marking of *p*. The score includes various musical notations such as rests, notes, and dynamics.

Example 10: Lj. Marić – *The Byzantine concerto*, first movement, excerpt

4. CONCLUSION

The apparent cultural freedom that characterized the Yugoslav system, and which we have tried to explain in this paper, advanced gradually. Although the split with Eastern Bloc politics occurred in the late 1940s, as already stated in the introduction, the authorities were obviously reluctant to allow an immediate cultural “Westernization,” which is visible in the stylistic and technical characteristics of the chosen compositions. At first it seemed that socialist realism as the only proclaimed and sanctioned style would outlive the split with the Soviets. However, ten years later, more liberal modernist tendencies became dominant in the works of Yugoslav artists once again.

At the same time, this was the key reason behind our decision to focus on the genre of piano concerto. As it was ‘uncharted territory’ for these composers, they approached the piano concerto from various stylistic ‘frameworks,’ which allows us to gain insight into an overview of the stylistic tendencies of Serbian composers in the 1960s; this would have been much more difficult in the case of other genres, particularly those that had been mastered in the pre-war period.

Another reason for this choice lies in the individual differences between the selected composers and their respective compositions. On one hand, Stanjlo Rajičić never strayed far from modernism (neo-classicism), with noticeable romanticist elements. Also, as indicated above, it should be noted that at this time he had a predilection for a national orientation and Serbian folk music, which is also reflected in this concerto. On the other hand, after a few years of relative stylistic ‘reticence,’

Ristić eventually returned to his modernist models and developed an 'anti-romanticist' concept of sorts, which still retained a clear and distinctive form as well as themes treated in a manner reminiscent of César Franck. Ljubica Marić's *Byzantine Concerto* was certainly the most avant-garde of these compositions – a work which, generally speaking, ranks among the most remarkable in Serbian music. After a few years of her 'creative silence', her works successfully combined this old and partially forgotten tradition with the legacy of the avant-garde, which she had encountered during her studies in Prague under Alois Hába.

Naturally, this re-establishment of modernism had not yet reached the expressive freedoms typical of the Western composers of that time, but it should be noted that even in the decades that followed a number of more conservative critics questioned whether the use of contemporary artistic means was justifiable. However, Yugoslav authorities of the time were not the only ones to blame for this state of affairs: it has been recorded that before WWII composers educated in more 'liberal' environments such as Prague met with a rather cold reception after their return to the more conservative milieu of Belgrade. Hence they had no choice but to dilute their musical expression. The rise of socialism in the late 1940s only contributed to the existing 'unfriendly' attitude. However, although avant-garde tendencies became very prominent in some countries of the Eastern Bloc (such as Poland and even the USSR), Serbian composers can certainly be said to have been the first to venture into this field in the period after WWII and enjoyed much more freedom than their counterparts in the countries of the Warsaw Pact.

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МАРИЈА ГОЛУБОВИЋ И НИКОЛА КОМАТОВИЋ

РАНО ПРАШКО ПРОЛЕЋЕ: АНАЛИЗА ПОНОВНОГ УСПОСТАВЉАЊА МОДЕРНИСТИЧКИХ АСПЕКТА НА ПРИМЕРУ ТРИ КЛАВИРСКА КОНЦЕРТА КОМПОЗИТОРА „ПРАШКЕ ГРУПЕ“

(САЖЕТАК)

Период између два светска рата је донео бројне модернистичке тенденције у хетерогени културни контекст Краљевине Југославије, што је нарочито приметно у стваралаштву млађе генерације композитора, припадника тзв. „Прашке групе“. По окончању студија, десетине стваралаца и диригената, као што су Љубица Марић (1909-2003), Станојло Рајичић (1910-2000) и Милан Ристић (1908-1982) доприносе успостављању нових стремљења у конзервативном миљеу међуратног Београда. После Другог светског рата, социјалистички реализам постаје фактички једини дозвољени музички стил. Међутим, свега десетак година после разлаза Тита и Стаљина, модернистичке тенденције се у пуном замаху враћају у стваралаштво југословенских композитора. Стога је од изузетног значаја анализирати и приказати начин на који су југословенски композитори, извођачи и публика за тако кратко време (током педесетих година двадесетог века) поново прихватили модерну музику. Сходно томе, изабрали смо три клавирска концерта, написана на самом почетку, средином, односно на крају референтног периода. Овакав „пресек стања“ не би био могућ да смо се одлучили за дела која припадају другим жанровима, који су се већ били усталили у предратном периоду.

Ипак, може се слободно закључити да ограничења југословенске сцене нису наметана само од стране политичких ауторитета, већ је на њих утицао и конзервативни укус саме публике и друштва, што је био случај и пре Другог светског рата.

Кључне речи: Прашка група, клавирски концерт, социјалистички реализам, модернизам