Folklore: Memories, Politics, Heritagisation

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Despite many similarities, the understanding and treatment of the folklore movement differs between the various post-socialist countries, both in the conceptualisation of the phenomenon and in the vocabulary used. This paper presents different examples of the practices of the folklore (revival) movement in post-socialist countries. Both memory and auto-ethnographic studies are included.

• **Keywords**: folklore activity, revival movement, socialism, post-socialism, folklore studies, heritagisation

Razumevanje in obravnave folklorne dejavnosti se med različnimi postsocialističnimi državami kljub številnim sorodnostim razlikujejo tako v konceptualni zasnovi fenomena kot v uporabljenem besednjaku. V prispevku so prikazani različni primeri praks folklornega (preporodnega) gibanja v postsocialističnih državah. Pri tem so vključene raziskave spominjanja in avtoetnografskih študij.

 Ključne besede: folklorna dejavnost, preporodno gibanje, socializem, postsocializem, folklorne študije, dediščinjenje

Introduction

Slovene folklore studies have in the past decades only partially been involved (e.g. Babič, 2009; Habinc, 2009, 2014; Klobčar, 2014; Kunej R., 2020; Kunej D., Kunej R., 2019; Poljak Istenič 2011, 2013) in the developing field of research on folklore activities and, more broadly, heritagisation in the post-socialist period (e. g. Creed, 2011; Kürti, Skalnik, 2009; Stavělová, Buckland, 2018; Testa, 2023), despite sharing similarities in the processes of democratization of the political system and social life with Eastern and some Central European countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This is a gap we are to some extent trying to fill with the present issue of *Traditiones* which addresses folklore, especially folk music and dance, memories, politics and heritagisation in the post-socialist milieus. Despite divergent definitions of post-socialism, which, unlike Western capitalist countries, has socialism embedded in the consciousness, traditions, and culture of its societies (Stavělová, 2023: 22), especially in terms of its end (e.g. Brandstädter, 2007; Bryant, Mokrzycki, 1994), the issue at hand considers post-socialism broadly across time. We are also including folklore activity during the socialist period, as it is of relational importance for understanding the dynamics of change in post-socialism. Here, a predominant notion is the state-regulated functioning

of folklore activities (especially folklore ensembles¹) during socialism, which also influenced the development and modification of folklore phenomena themselves. We trace the dynamics of change in the sphere of folklore activity after the collapse of the one-party system and up to the present day. In our research, we include the question of memory and commemoration, as well as contemporary policies of heritage making.

Some of the authors of research published in this issue have experienced these changes in person, and some have been actively involved in, and even partly shaped the process through their roles – as members of folklore groups/ensembles, members of juries and other bodies influencing folklore activity, or as members of folk revival music groups.

In our introductory text, we thus outline the main questions – referring to content and methodology – that arise when studying so-called folklore activities and the changes in their functioning after the democratisation of the political system in this part of Europe. Based on people's respective environments, the practices of a nationally delimited space and, consequently, our vocabulary, the namings and understanding of folklore activities differ. For some, the term folklore activity (or also folklore movement) implies organised activity within institutions, others understand the phenomena more broadly, beyond structurally organised engagement of folklore ensembles; often depending on geopolitical and sociocultural factors affecting the individual.

Thus, it is evident from published findings on this phenomenon that, despite similar sociopolitical upheavals after 1989, the academic vocabularies in English are not identical across the countries. In Latvian, the term "folklore movement" (folkloras kustība) is used alternatively to "folklore revival", which began at the end of the 1970s and points to the initial social-political aspirations of the Latvian folklore revival, especially when it became part of the Baltic Singing Revolution that led to the independence of the Baltic countries from the Soviet Union. The question is whether and when the 'movement' phase ended, whereas the Latvian name for the post-revival phase is still under discussion. Authors have decided to keep the initial "folklore movement" designation because it is an important identifier for the revival community (Weaver et al, 2023: 48). A comparable phenomenon in Moldova is termed the "folkloric movement" (mişcarea folclorică) by Jennifer R. Cash (2012).

In contrast, Czech authors interpret the English term "folklore revival movement" (folklorní revivalismus) in a much broader scope. They refer to the activity of folklore ensembles as part of the post-Second World War regime's cultural-artistic mechanisms (folklorní hnutí, in English folklore movement), and their continuation of activities which are called by various names (e.g. folklorní aktivity, in English folklore activity) arising from the processes of democratization in the 1990s. They also include the

¹ For the sake of readability, we shall use the term "folklore ensemble" interchangeably with "folklore group", although we are aware of the different usages, nuanced meanings and distinctions between the "folklore group", "folklore ensemble", "folk dance ensemble", etc.

currently emerging ways of socialising in the reminiscence of the former traditional folk (and/or folklorised) dances.

In the Slovene environment today, "folklore activity" (*folklorna dejavnost*) is mainly understood as the activity related to the practices of folklore and related ensembles, which operate under the Public Fund for Cultural Activities (JSKD), the main institution for amateur cultural-artistic activities. However, especially those who are not practitioners within this segment or the creators of cultural policies, might recognise these phenomena in a much broader sense. The term corresponding to "folklore movement" (*folklorno gibanje*) is not used in Slovenia. Yet, the term "folk revival music" (*preporodna glasba*) is used to describe a musical genre which, in terms of its content, easily finds parallels in the Latvian and Moldovan movements, as well as in the embeddedness of the phenomenon in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Folklore activity under socialism

During the socialist era, which in Eastern and some Central European countries lasted from the end of the Second World War to the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, authorities paid particular attention to the organised presentation of folklore elements. In most of these countries, folklore activity was linked to the totalitarian regimes, which exploited it to a greater or lesser extent as a propaganda tool (Stavělová, 2021; Stavělová, Buckland, 2018). Since the beginning of the 1950s, it has been an instrument of the totalitarian regimes' cultural policy and a performative presentation of a "better future". Stage performances of (music and dance) folklore in particular were one of the most popular instruments for shaping the national identity and image of socialist countries. The system of authorised folk art and culture was financially supported by the authorities and allowed to exist, while also being censored and shaped in accordance with the needs and political aims of the Communist Party (Kurdova, 2023: 104). In most countries in this part of Europe, with a few exceptions such as Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, national folklore ensembles were set up for this purpose after the Second World War.

The national ensembles served to present the country at the international level, they were part of cultural diplomacy and also a model that the semi-professional and amateur folklore groups emerging in villages and towns tried to follow. These co-shaped the leisure time of individuals in the framework of (educational) cultural associations and helped "build the socialist man" through amateur artistic activities. In folklore activities, however, people were not only offered a structured way of spending leisure time and building an idealized "socialist future", but were also given, through controlled performance, an alternative form of satisfying their need for the ritual. To illustrate this, we cite examples from Slovenia during the socialist period: dancing on Easter

Monday became acceptable in a staged form but not in its primary setting (Kunej R., 2017); similarly, carol singing was undesirable in its original context (Šivic, 2014), as the celebration of Christmas was relegated to the private sphere (Klobčar, 2009). It is precisely because of political unsuitability that some folklore phenomena were pushed into the private environment, or have had to change their traditional performance venues: they sometimes took refuge in performances within cultural-artistic stage productions, thus replacing the once informal transmission of knowledge within the community with informal transmission within e.g. a folklore group.

As part of state-supported folklore activities, folklore festivals were being organised from the 1950s onwards, and in some places special infrastructure was built for them as well (e.g. in Strážnice in Moravia). Similar to other countries, organized educational programmes in the field of folklore activities were starting to be conducted in Slovenia in the 1970s, as described by Drago Kunej in his article 'The Changing Nature of Instrumental Music and Musicians in Folk Dance Ensembles' (2023). Since folk dance and the music that accompanies it "had been transferred from its traditional environment to the stage, and transformed from its primal purpose of the social dance and music event into stage presentations of 'past folk tradition' performed by folk dance ensembles" (ibid., 2023: 70), the leaders of folk dance ensembles had to be instructed to stage the most 'correct' performances.

In the last decade, however, researchers have also recognised the ambivalence of the folklore movements within socialist systems. Daniela Stavělová in her article 'Hidden in Folklore: The Past and Present of the Revival Movement in Post-Socialist Countries' (2023), through the study of the memories of this period, establishes that in the former socialist Czechoslovakia, folklore activity was also an alternative space to everyday reality, a space in which ideas that did not fit the dominant political narratives could be realised. Folklore activity developed its own language, which allowed for a double reading of what was happening within its confines (Stavělová, 2023: 18). People who could not actualize their ideas in daily life and work situations found an alternative way to put them into practice through music, dance, and other activities related to the folklore movement (organising festivals, performances, competitions). It also operated as an infrastructure providing a temporary alternative to the contemporary society (Stavělová, 2015) whereby folklore ensembles turned into ideological weapons and became "islets of freedom" (Stavělová, 2023: 21).

Folklore activity in the whirlwind of political change

In the decades after the Second World War, folklore activity became increasingly emancipated in its practice, and the political influences were gradually losing their grip. The loosening of the strictly managed dynamics in the folklore movement was intertwined with the influences of the folk revival, which was becoming increasingly popular in the West. In some countries, most notably and resoundingly in the Baltic states – as Latvian researchers Ieva Weaver, Valdis Muktupāvels, Rita Grīnvalde, Aigars Lielbārdis, Ilga Vālodze Ābele, and Justīne Jaudzema have written in their article 'The Power of Authorities, Interpretations, and Songs: The Discourse of Authenticity in the Latvian Folklore Revival' (2023) – the approval of a new aesthetic approach to folklore performances was also being connected with "resistance to a non-democratic political regime that tried to restrict and control the movement. Latvian folklore revival became a part of a broader social movement, the Baltic Singing Revolution (1986–1991), which aimed at the restoration of independence from the Soviet Union [...], so in this case it is an issue not only about the folkloric but also the political authority" (Weaver et al., 2023: 49).

Regimes' officials thus feared the folklore revival movement. Consequently, "[p] rofessional and amateur folklorists experienced interrogations by the KGB, dismissals from work, suspensions of publications, and critical and sarcastic articles in the media" (Weaver et al., 2023: 56).

In the process of emancipation of the folklore revival in Latvia, authority of the academic experts was diminished, and public influence was largely transferred to amateur practitioners. Research, archiving, and publishing of folk music and dance traditions thus spread from public institutions to committed amateurs as well. Part of the reason for this disconnect between state-led, academic institution-based folklore activity and the newly emerging, less academically oriented folklore revival was that during the 1970s, several leading folklorists were suspected and scrutinized by the KGB, and were forced to restrain from participation in the growing folklore movement that was regarded with caution (Weaver et al., 2023: 63).

The divide was also deepened by the clash of different perspectives on folklore activities, especially around the questions of authenticity and propriety of individual folklore practices. Academic institutions and state-supported actors focused on aspects of heritage presentation exclusively, whereas folklore revival modified traditional forms in line with contemporary aesthetics and people's needs for identification, belonging, creating locality etc., regardless of possible structural and morphological changes.

In the countries that gained their independence in the early 1990s, folklore acquired the added significance as a state-sponsored activity instrumentalised for the expression of national belonging and for state promotion.

Folklore activity in the changed (cultural)political circumstances

Changes in political regimes, and in the case of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union also of national borders, redefined the "appropriateness" of folklore presentations within the national contexts as well. The truncated programme of national folklore ensembles and semi-professional folklore groups came under question as to what the renewed direction of folklore ensembles and the entire activity would be. Not only in terms of the dissolution of the national folklore ensembles (in the Czech Republic they were completely abandoned and disbanded) or the reduction of their number – in the absence of financial support, many non-professional associations found themselves in dire straits. With the transition and the collapse of large state-owned factories that had been accommodating their workers' leisure activities (folklore groups also operated within trade union cultural arts societies), and with reduced state support, many ensembles were facing financial challenges and questions of bare survival. Relations between the centre and the periphery were also re-established, where smaller groups focused solely on presenting the folklore of a narrower region or the local environment, emphasising local identities, gained prominence.

After the normalization of tensions and the fall of the socialist regimes, the folklore movement has been subjected to many innovations, especially in regards to the plurality of folklore activity modalities. Thus, in Latvia, 'authentic', 'ethnographic', and 'stylized' folklore groups coexisted, while popular music performers were understood as acceptable appropriators of folklore heritage (Weaver et al., 2023: 55). In Bulgaria, for example, "horoteques" (discotheques for traditional dances) began to emerge alongside the institutionally oriented, private ensembles and dance clubs. In the context of the recreational movement, popular interest in national folk dances has risen in Bulgaria, taking different forms, as Dilyana Kurdova illuminates in her article 'Sunday Horos in Bulgaria Today' (2023).

However, not all changes in folklore activity can be attributed solely to the change in the political system. Technical progress, the rise of social networks and therefore new ways of communicating and transmitting knowledge have also had an impact on the questioning of transmission and the search for its new modes. This is not to highlight the recent challenges offered by emergent AI, though they represent a new breakthrough in communication, including in folklore, from a technological point of view.

By opening up to the Western capitalist world and market logic in general, folklore becomes a marketable commodity, while the commodification of folklore activity helps individuals survive economically. In doing so, they often no longer draw on folk traditions, but on the acquired knowledge and traditions of folklore groups instead.

In the context of what we have written so far, it should be also borne in mind that above all, folklore groups and ensembles have been throughout their existence, in addition to their ascribed functions, a space for weaving often lifelong interpersonal bonds, and also the communities offering a sense of acceptance and security to people of various ages and backgrounds.

The specificities of researching folklore activity in post-socialist countries

If the activities of folklore groups in the early 1980s were still firmly set in the hands of the cultural policies and of the state institutions that directed folklore activity and the functioning of cultural-artistic associations in which most folklore groups generally operated, the first harbingers of new change in the field of folklore and its contemporary guises were precisely the musicians; with musical ensembles that broke away from the established musical configurations of folklore line-ups and sought inspiration in those individuals and groups who explored their expressivity in folk content, rather than in 'high' (Western European) music-and-dance stage aesthetics.

It was the musical folk-revival that was the basis for the dance revival, starting with the Hungarian *tánzhás*, which then tends to resonate in the other post-socialist countries only in the 21st century (cf. Feinberg, 2018; Kolačkovská, 2023; Kunej R., 2023; Taylor, 2021). This is a departure from the representational function carried by folklore groups towards a more inclusive participatory experience of folklore activity in the 21st century.

The denominations of the performers also require reflection at the turn of the millennium. Are they modern folk singers/musicians, folk song recreators, folk song singers? Are members of folklore ensembles now renamed into folklorists? How should we rename the researchers of contemporary musical folklore, then, when in the emic perspective the term 'folklorist' has acquired new meaning, denoting either a member of a folklore group or a folk-lover, rather than a scholar of folklore? Folklore researchers, on the other hand, scrutinize the repertoire, the actual dance/music culture of the participants, and question what is happening beyond the limelight of the stage and representations, what goes on when engaged communities participate in folklore activities. In the 21st century, folklore activity wants to free itself from the shackles of the stage and theatrical laws to discover its own authenticity, often building on the work of folklore ensembles; and yet it conversely also wants to get even closer to the stage-performance process, by intervening in folklore, by merging it, mixing it, and superimposing it with other artistic expressions.

We also draw attention to the terminology that was particular to the post-socialist countries. Faced with the hegemony of the English language, scholars grapple with the difficulty of translating what they have learned into English, which has not had the same experience of building a "socialist working people" through cultural politics. The most prominent example is precisely the institution of the folklore ensemble/group, part of the broader institution of cultural-artistic associations: encompassing spontaneous, amateur, but also directed and regularly practised leisure activities (cf. Buchanan, 2006: 133). Paradoxically, original terms in the national languages are sometimes more familiar and informative for other scholars of folklore activity in (post-)socialist milieus than their (often impermanent, sporadic) English translations. At the terminological

level and beyond, folklore activities were, and are, both similar and diverse in different countries despite the common socialist essence.

The challenges of transition and the new times in cultural policy were first addressed by foreign researchers, which can also be understood as a search for the exotic on the other side of the Iron Curtain, i.e. in the area that became more accessible and less dangerous for English and American speakers after the fall of socialism. What resonates most in contemporary ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology are in fact books (e.g. Buchanan, 2006; Cash, 2012; Feinberg, 2018; Shay, 2002) resulting from the research endeavours of the Anglo-American authors' exploration of this space, the '(post)socialist folklore fascination' they cultivated in relation to it. Ironically, postcolonial studies linger hegemonically in the persistent use of English as the lingua franca.

Local folklorists needed more time, temporal and critical distance before they started delving into this topic. In fact, such research projects are led by people who rather remember the most drastic forms of the regime in their own countries from the stories and experiences of their parents than from their own experiences, or their experience of folklore activity is limited to the late period of socialism and the transition.

This issue of *Traditiones* is therefore an attempt to give voice to the local authors whose work is embedded in the area they explore. An etic perspective is combined with the emic research while also making space for autoethnography. The researchers' embeddedness in the system and their own terrain provides a different dimension to the understanding and interpretation of the processes of folklorisation and heritagisation in the socialist period and beyond.

The autoethnographical method is employed, for example, by Zdeněk Vejvoda in his article 'The International Bagpipe Festival in Strakonice and the Transformation of the Relationship Towards the Regional Bagpipe Tradition' (2023). He uses historical sources to answer the question of how a town in the south of Bohemia has been connected to the bagpipe tradition since the 19th century. The autoethnographic method, interviews and survey analysis are harnessed to elucidate the reception of the festival among its active participants and the transformation of their attitudes towards the bagpipe tradition in the new millennium.

Folklore activity between autonomous practice and contemporary politics of folklore heritagisation

Unlike in the second half of the 20th century, new forms of folklore activities are increasingly participatory in nature and are therefore changing in form and content, favouring simpler elements with the possibility of quickly involving a broad range of interested publics. The emphasis is on the emotional aspect over more formal presentations by folklore groups (Stavělová, 2023: 46).

On the other hand, the Estonian researcher Taive Särg in her article 'The Institutionalisation of Participatory Singing since the 1960s in Estonia' (2023) uses the questionnaire "Music in my Life" to analyse the dynamics of modern participatory singing, which she characterizes as institutionalization in the framework of contemporary society. In Estonia, modernization reshaped the social organization of communal singing, which resulted in a tendency to develop a formal social structure for this activity in contemporary society.

Although they are just partly guided by authorized heritage institutions, many folklore presentations are still subject to the authorised heritage discourse (Smith, 2006). Zita Skořepová in her article "Zpěváček" Folk Singing Competition: Regional Identity and Heritage Performance in the Czech Republic' (2023) presents the ways in which children at a singing competition display (micro)regional identities and local cultural heritage. It was only in the post-socialist transformation that the competition went beyond the Moravian context and became a nationwide event with several rounds, from local to regional and national. The judging criteria follow the norms of the authorised heritage discourse, while the organisers rely on the controversial concept of folklore regions, defined by Czech ethnologists on the basis of the 19th century situation.

Music and dance folklore still retains the representative function of performing itself. In line with the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention, which has brought new terminology to the discipline, elements of the past are – once and in the present time – being selected and chosen for a better future; politically, culturally, economically. Discourses of heritage have replaced discussions of folklorism, and the notion of heritage has replaced the notion of folklore. Thus, the transmission of elements of traditional folk culture from the pre-industrial era remains a constant in the folklore movement, just as spontaneous entertainment as interaction between dancers and musicians has been a constant since the beginning of folklore as well. There has always been a certain discrepancy between what folklore ensembles set on the stage and what they left to perform under the stage, in spontaneous entertainment after the performance. The embodied knowledge gained from participation in a folklore ensemble can thus be useful for performances in many other contexts (Stavělová, 2023: 23). Some contemporary manifestations of folklore activity, which already showcase their sustainability, do not always correlate with the activities supported by the state policies. However, people nevertheless identify with them and carry them out mainly for their own sake, with or without financial support, and with or without the support of cultural policy.

The present discussions in this thematic issue of *Traditiones* thus reveal the similarities arising from related cultural-political systems, while the individual studies at the same time point out the specifics which derive from the implementation in the local environment, time period, and the modality of the activity. Participatory singing, dancing and musicking within and beyond folklore ensembles, organised festivals, singing and folklore competitions, and open-air dance events reflect the multifaceted

nature of folklore activity, which concurrently combines the institutional organisation and reminiscence of the past representational role, and the abundantly present embodiment and emotion that make this activity so attractive to so many. Both in socialism and post-socialism, as well as in today's moment of mass cultural production.

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Foklora: spomini, politike, dediščinjenje

V socialističnih državah je bila folklorna dejavnost v veliki meri instrumentalizirana in državno regulirana. Poimenovanja in razumevanje folklorne dejavnosti ali folklornega gibanja v postsocialističnih državah Vzhodne in Srednje Evrope se kljub podobnostim razlikujejo.

Predvsem odrske uprizoritve (glasbene in plesne) folklore so bile med najbolj priljubljenimi instrumenti za oblikovanje nacionalne identitete in podobe socialističnih držav. Oblast je finančno podpirala in omogočala sistem avtorizirane ljudske umetnosti in kulture, obenem pa ga je tudi cenzurirala ter ga oblikovala skladno s potrebami in političnimi cilji. Državni plesni ansambli so predstavljali državo na mednarodni ravni, bili so del kulturne diplomacije, hkrati pa tudi model, ki so mu skušale slediti polprofesionalne in ljubiteljske folklorne skupine, ki so nastajale po vaseh in mestih.

Vendar je bila folklorna dejavnost več kakor to. V nekdanji Češkoslovaški je bila s specifičnim jezikom, ki je omogočal dvojno branje, alternativni prostor vsakdanji realnosti, prostor uresničevanja idej, ki niso ustrezale dominantnim političnim narativom. Rahljanje reguliranih dinamik v folklornem gibanju se je sčasoma prepletalo z vplivi preporodnega gibanja. V baltskih državah se je folklorni preporod povezoval z uporom nedemokratičnemu političnemu režimu in postal del širšega družbenega gibanja Baltska pojoča revolucija (1986–1991), ki si je prizadevalo za neodvisnost od Sovjetske zveze. V državah, ki so na začetku 90. let 20. stoletja pridobile samostojnost, je folklorna dejavnost postala pomembna za izražanje pripadnosti in za državno promocijo.

Spremembe političnega režima in v primeru razpada držav nove državne meje so na novo definirale »ustreznost« prezentacij folklore. Na novo so se ustvarila razmerja med središči in obrobjem; ob poudarjanju lokalnih identitet so postajale vse pomembnejše manjše skupine. Po sprostitvi in dokončnem padcu komunističnega režima so v folklornem gibanju začele soobstajati različne modalitete ('avtentične', 'etnografske' in 'stilizirane' folklorne skupine, zasebni ansambli in plesni klubi ipd.). Spremembe v folklorni dejavnosti niso bile zgolj posledica spremembe političnega sistema, pač pa so nanje vplivali širši dejavniki, tehnični napredek, razmah družbenih omrežij idr.

Folklorne skupine so bile ves čas svojega obstoja tudi pomemben prostor spletanja medosebnih vezi ter sprejetosti in varnosti. Poleg tega je v folklornih skupinah vedno obstajalo nenapisano pravilo o tem, kaj je za na oder, in tem, kar je ostalo pod odrom ali za spontano zabavo po nastopu.

Izzive tranzicije in novih časov v kulturni politiki so najprej začeli obravnavati tuji raziskovalci, domači folkloristi so potrebovali več časa, časovnega in kritičnega odmika, preden so se začeli ukvarjati z njimi. Raziskovalni etski perspektivi je bila dodana emska, glas je dobila avtoetnografija. Z raziskovalčevo vpetostjo v sistem in lasten teren je dodana drugačna razsežnost razumevanja in interpretacija procesov folklorizacije in dediščinjenja v socialističnem obdobju in po njem.

Nove oblike folklornih dejavnosti so vse bolj participativne narave in se zato oblikovno in vsebinsko spreminjajo ter dajejo prednost preprostejšim elementom, da se lahko hitreje vključi širši krog zainteresiranih. Pri tem je poudarjen predvsem čustveni vidik pred bolj formalnimi predstavitvami. Participativno petje, plesanje in igranje v in onkraj folklornih skupin, organizirani festivali, pevska tekmovanja in tekmovanja folklornih skupin ter plesi na prostem odsevajo mnogoplastnost folklorne dejavnosti, ki v sebi obenem združuje institucionalno organiziranost in reprezentacijsko vlogo ter možnost utelešenja in izražanja čustev, zaradi česar je ta dejavnost tako privlačna za mnoge.