Constantin Katsakioris has probably published the most articles about African and Arab students in the Soviet Union in several different languages, including French, German, and Russian. In “The African Student Movement in the Soviet Union during the 1960s: Pan-Africanism and Communism in the Shadow of Nation-States” he concentrates on the Federation of African Students in the Soviet Union (Federatsia Afrikanskykh Studentov v Sovetskom Soiuze, FASSS), an organization that brought together students from various African countries studying in the Soviet Union. Through it, Katsakioris discusses the trans-imperial and Pan-African mass student movement in the Soviet Union during the 1960s. Previous research on the...
topic has tended to concentrate on African students in the Soviet Union\(^2\) or the wider socialist bloc\(^3\), but little research has been dedicated to African student organizations. In this sense, Katsakioris’s work is an important addition to his previous scholarship and a valuable part of the wider discussion on Soviet public diplomacy aimed at other regions of the world.\(^4\)

As Katsakioris points out, in most Western European states the African student population often reflected the recent colonial past between these two continents, which created a situation where most of the African students from French-speaking ex-colonies would study in France, while English-speakers would opt for the United Kingdom, and Portuguese-speakers for Portugal (111-112). Katsakioris notes that the Soviet Union was a different case, as it attracted students from many different countries with its free education and state ideology that differed from that of the West. Thus, the African student community in the Soviet Union was truly multi-national in a way that was not comparable to any Western European state. The varying reasons for


studying in the Soviet Union were also reflected in the students’ experience: while some of them remained faithful Marxist-Leninists, for others their years spent in the Soviet Union created a sense of disillusionment with socialism (111). As Katsakioris notes, the political situations and state of bilateral relations with the Soviet Union varied greatly from one African state to another, which had a major influence on the students’ experiences and even their opportunities to study in the Soviet Union. Creating a general image about African student activism in the USSR is thus a challenging task due to the fluctuating nature of political life and state of international relations in different African states.

In this article, Katsakioris aims to tackle this challenge by concentrating on FASSS, which he views as a democratic organization free from governmental control (110). He uses the memoirs and published accounts of the student activists themselves alongside Russian archival material as his main sources.(112). The African students arrived in the Soviet Union with various scholarships offered by the Soviet state or various Soviet organizations and universities. They came from different countries, with different backgrounds and political orientations, which was also reflected in their activities and interests while in the country. The Africans in the USSR and in other countries of the Eastern bloc were also significant in terms of numbers, as by 1967 for every two African students studying in Western Europe there was one studying in a socialist country (112-116). Within FASSS the different political views of activists from different countries influenced the activities of the organization and the discussions taking place within it. The key themes that the organization negotiated in the Soviet context included anti-imperialism and Pan-Africanism. However, by the second half of the 1960s, the work of FASSS eroded, as Katsakioris argues, mainly due to the involvement of both the African states and the Soviet government. Also the Chinese Maoist influence had a significant influence in the development of FASSS; Katsakioris analyzes the development of the organization starting as a Pan-African project that was first taken over by Maoist students, followed by pro-Soviet activists (112).

When the first students from Sub-Saharan Africa arrived in the USSR in the late 1950s, there was an interest in forming a common student organization for them. While the first attempts to create such an organization were deemed bourgeois and nationalist by the Soviet authorities, in 1962 FASSS was founded by activists who were trusted by the Soviet Union to conduct useful political work among the students. The first Executive Committee of the organization was fully pro-Soviet and rejected the Chinese rhetoric of an active revolution by supporting the policy of peaceful coexistence between the Soviet Union and the West. At the same time, the organization invited all African students to participate in its activities without making a distinction between North and Sub-Saharan Africa, which was also new compared to earlier attempts to form a common student organization for all African students, as in these earlier organizations only students from Sub-Saharan Africa were encouraged to participate. In the beginning the organization received funding from the USSR to participate in international student events, but soon it faced a serious crisis due to being challenged by a competing Ghanaian-led student organization, the Pan-African Students’ Union (PASU). As a result, the majority of the founding members abandoned the organization (117-119).

In 1963, this crisis became evident, as FASSS leadership was taken over by Maoists. The new leadership gave a muted response to the African student protest on the Red Square in December 1963, which was one of the most visible cases of racial tension and student activism in the Soviet Union.\(^5\) Meanwhile, it was receiving material support from China, and the opportunity to combine the battle against racism with a leftist-oriented and autonomous Pan-African student movement was attractive for many students. On the ground, this translated into opposition against Soviet organizations and pro-Soviet African students. The situation connected to Pan-African student politics, where the differences between North and Sub-Saharan African students were also reflected in the students’ experience: while some of them remained faithful Marxist-Leninists, for others their years spent in the Soviet Union created a sense of disillusionment with socialism (111). As Katsakioris notes, the political situations and state of bilateral relations with the Soviet Union varied greatly from one African state to another, which had a major influence on the students’ experiences and even their opportunities to study in the Soviet Union. Creating a general image about African student activism in the USSR is thus a challenging task due to the fluctuating nature of political life and state of international relations in different African states.

students’ stands were significant, as the North Africans tended to face less racism and thus adapt more easily into the Soviet society, which showed in their generally more pro-Soviet attitudes (119-122). This tension between the pro-Soviet and Maoist blocs remained, and in 1965, the FASSS leadership was again changed into a pro-Soviet one, with a Moroccan student elected as the new secretary general. Later in the same year the North African students withdrew from FASSS entirely, and Pan-Africanism in general was losing popularity as its most important spokesmen in the African continent fell from power. In 1969, FASSS ceased to exist as most of its activists had returned to their countries of origin and embarked on various political careers (122-128).

In his conclusion, Katsakioris returns to his argument that both the postcolonial African states and the Soviet Union were to blame for the decline of Pan-Africanism in the USSR. He sees the Pan-Africanist political movement, as presented through the case of FASSS in 1962–1969, as a “vibrant, radical and independent movement” (129). In Katsakioris’s view, FASSS, “the biggest assembly of African student organizations ever convened,” was a successful undertaking and a significant chapter in the history of Pan-Africanism (129). Throughout the article, the tense negotiations on the positioning of the organization between Pan-Africanism, Maoism, and pro-Soviet tendencies becomes apparent. At the same time, the detailed analysis of FASSS leadership and negotiations taking place in the organization’s congresses shows the pressure that was aimed at the student activists both from the their native countries and the Soviet state administration. Analyzing the case of FASSS creates an understanding of the vibrant yet complex political situation under which the Pan-African movement was functioning in the Soviet Union. With this article Katsakioris provides a valuable new piece of analysis that complements his previous work on Soviet educational aid, African students, and the role of Soviet education in creating a new, politically active intelligentsia for the newly independent states of Africa.

The main problem of the article is the one Katsakioris addresses in its introduction: the African states of the 1960s were by no means a unified group in terms of their political stance and the state of bilateral relations with the USSR. Throughout the article the reader catches only a glimpse of the complex reality of African student politics in the USSR. Student activists from Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Uganda, Togo, Nigeria, Guinea, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo/Zaire, Angola, Benin, Senegal, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Zanzibar, Cape Verde, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Burkina Faso are mentioned throughout the text, and occasionally the narrative also moves from the Soviet Union to describe events and political developments taking place in their countries of origin. While this approach highlights the influence of political actors and developments in Africa on the political mood of the African student movement in the USSR, it also makes the article a rather heavy read. The decision to build the article around a number of political activists also somewhat distracts the reader’s attention from the Soviet political and social context in which FASSS was functioning.

This is the challenge for those who address the Soviet relations with different African states: while it is useful to address the African states as a group due to the common political atmosphere of post-colonialism, anti-imperialism and Pan-Africanism that were unifying these states in the 1960s, the differences between them and their various political developments makes it also challenging to create a balance between being too general or specific, which is the reason that many researchers have opted instead to concentrate on bilateral relations between the Soviet Union and individual African states. In the binary Cold War atmosphere, however, on many occasions the Soviet authorities certainly treated the African students from different countries as one group from which the future Soviet-minded political elites of African countries would grow, even if this group was not politically unified. Works that stress on state-level bilateral relations tend to lose this valuable perspective. Thus, Katsakioris’s article is an important addition to the existing scholarship on
African students in the Soviet Union, especially in its portrayal of different political pressures the Pan-African student movement encountered during the period of 1958–1969.

Riikkamari Muhonen, PhD, defended her dissertation on Soviet educational cooperation with the Global South during Cold War at the Central European University in 2022. After graduation, she worked as an assistant professor at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Since January 2024, she has served as the director of FinnAgora, the Finnish institute of culture, science and economy in Budapest, Hungary. She is the author of four academic articles and book chapters published in English and Finnish, the most recent one of them being a chapter on Soviet education as a contestation of Western hegemony in *The End of Western Hegemonies? Political and Cultural Contestations* edited by Marie-Josée Lavallée and published by Vernon Press in 2022.