

## **Introduction II: Shifting Literary Culture since Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: The Baltic Paradigm**

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Two special issues of *Letonica* have been published under the title *Shifting Literary Culture since Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: The Baltic Paradigm*. Following *Letonica* No. 51 (see Eglāja-Kristšone, Oga 2023), this issue of *Letonica* delves into various aspects of cultural, literary, and artistic developments during the period of Stagnation. This issue continues to navigate the intriguing terrain of Baltic literary and cultural expressions during the Brezhnev Era, a period marked by a unique mix of political rigidity and cultural dynamism. It explores themes ranging from gender roles and socialist ideals to cultural policies, education, and memory discourse, thus unraveling the complex layers of Baltic societies in this era of transformation. Each article provides a distinct perspective, enhancing our understanding of the historical, cultural, and expressive intricacies of this period in the Baltic states.

Recent scholarly work has reimagined the societal landscape during Leonid Brezhnev's lengthy tenure (1964–1982) as a vibrant and "happening place" (Bittner 2017), starkly contrasting with the previous views of this era as only stagnant. For instance, Alexei Yurchak has stressed that the term "Stagnation", denoting the stage between the Thaw and *perestroika* and prominently associated with the Brezhnev Era, only gained recognition in hindsight, emerging during Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms after the conclusion of Brezhnev's rule, as the socialist system underwent rapid transformation. In other words, the conceptualization of the late 1960s and 1970s as a distinct historical period during Brezhnev's tenure as the party's general secretary also arose retrospectively during *perestroika*. The discourse of *perestroika* brought to light previously unknown facts about the Soviet past, critically articulated long-known but unnamed realities, and contributed to the formation of certain myths coloured by the revolutionary ideas and political agendas of the late 1980s. Many binary categories describing the collapsing system gained prominence in this revolutionary context. However, some of the roots of these binary categories extend much further, originating in the broader "regimes of knowledge" established during the Cold War when the entity of "the Soviet bloc" had been articulated in opposition to "the West" and as distinct from "the Third World" (Yurchak 2013: 7). Rather than a

period of Stagnation, it is now seen as a dynamic time characterized by various and often contradictory developments.

The cultural policies under Brezhnev, though more conservative than during Nikita Khrushchev's time, did not revert entirely to a strict enforcement of Socialist Realism. Nevertheless, the spectrum of acceptable artistic expression was narrowed, and the regime was harsh on dissident intellectuals. Yet there was a space for significant nonconformist thought within the established order. As William Tompson observes in his book *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev*, "[a] growing number of writers and scholars found themselves able to operate within a nebulous zone that lingered, albeit precariously, between the confining orthodoxies of official ideology and the overt opposition to the regime that constituted dissent" (Tompson 2014: 98–99). He describes this as an ideological "twilight zone", a space of emerging thought that eventually laid the groundwork for later reforms.

This issue of *Letonica* features diverse contributions. In the realm of drama, Aušra Martišiūtė-Linartienė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) scrutinizes the context surrounding the staging of the first two Lithuanian plays of the Theater of the Absurd, particularly exploring the dramatic experiences of the Soviet times, the communication methods employed by playwrights, and the evolution of dramatic expression since that time (Martišiūtė-Linartienė 2023, this issue). Edīte Tišheizere (Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia) sheds light on theater as a form of subtle resistance against political and social norms. Visual metaphors used in the productions conveyed messages differing from the explicit text, with scenography playing a crucial role. One can observe certain parallels and common features in Soviet and Western theater during this time, and comparison of different research concepts reveal shared elements in theater theories (Tišheizere 2023, this issue).

Dāvis Eņģelis (Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia) examines the musical landscape of Soviet Latvia through the lens of the almanac *Latvian Music*, showing how musicological thought contextualized musical experiences during the Soviet occupation. Spatial metaphors emerge as significant, as they were used to assess newly created compositions, reflecting philosophical, psychological, or emotional depth (Eņģelis 2023, this issue).

Mārtiņš Mintauris (National Library of Latvia; University of Latvia, Faculty of History and Philosophy) takes a historical approach, exploring the situation in Latvian novels of the late 1960s by analyzing two works by Alberts Bels. These novels are seen as indicators of the cultural and political milieu, especially in regard to the reception of Bels's published novel and the conditions that prevented the publication of the second one (Mintauris 2023, this issue). Kaspars Zalāns (Universität Greifswald)

investigates the works of Latvian post-modernist Marģeris Zariņš, looking at how Zariņš used postmodern techniques to criticize and deconstruct the framework of the Soviet regime and Socialist Realism (Zalāns 2023, this issue).

Johanna Ross (Tallinn University) explores gender roles in Estonian novellas for girls during the Stagnation period, analyzing the so-called Silja series by Silvia Truu and examining how it reflects and challenges contemporary discussions on gender roles (Ross 2023, this issue). Sigita Kušnere (University of Latvia) investigates the role of literature in shaping the image of an ideal socialist woman during the late Socialism, emphasizing the contribution of literature to disseminating socialist principles and promoting the “socialist way of life” (Kušnere 2023, this issue).

Solveiga Daugirdaitė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) explores cultural life of the USSR in the 1960s as seen through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir’s memoirs, highlighting the changing cultural policy during that period (Daugirdaitė 2023, this issue). Saulius Vasiliauskas (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) delves into the control and education of new writers in Soviet Lithuania, focusing on the Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter under the Lithuanian Writers’ Union and its evolving goals (Vasiliauskas 2023, this issue). Finally, Viktorija Jonkutė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) analyzes the discourse of the past in Lithuanian and Latvian cultural press during the late 1980s and early 1990s, examining its dominant conceptions of history and perceptions of time. Her research identifies ten discursive functions of (re)constructed forms of memory, ranging from communicative/informational to political/ideological (Jonkutė 2023, this issue).

This wide-ranging exploration of cultural, literary, and artistic expressions in the Baltic region during the Brezhnev Era, as presented in these special issues of *Letonica*, offers invaluable insights into this complex and transformative period and shows how art, literature, and culture can both reflect and influence the social and political landscape of their time.

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