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## **The History of Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter and Its Relations with Young Latvian Writers in the Soviet Era**

### **Viļņas jauno literātu sekcijas vēsture un attiecības ar latviešu jaunajiem literātiem padomju laikos**

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**Atslēgvārdi:**

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## Summary

Since the beginning of the Soviet period, the authorities paid particular attention to the control and "education" of the new generation of writers by organizing conventions for beginning authors, establishing literary circles and young writers' chapters at schools, universities, and editorial departments, and organizing writing competitions and camps for newcomers. One of the most important institutions in Soviet Lithuania for educating the new writing generation formally was Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter (*Vilniaus jaunųjų rašytojų sekcija*), a subdivision of the Writers' Union. It was important in terms of debut and (non)integration into the literary field, as involvement in its activities was almost a necessity if one wished to become a member of the Writers' Union and to start publishing their books. As the conditions of the field started changing in the 1960s, Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter eventually began to renounce its initial goals and started focusing on discussions regarding literary aesthetics, criticism, genres, generations, and other issues unrelated to politicized discourse. One of the significant aspects of the Chapter's activities was its relations with Riga Young Writers' Association (*Rīgas jauno literātu apvienība*). Even though such collective connections among the "brotherly republics" were officially promoted by the Soviet regime, young writers could use them to network, widen their perspectives and accumulate social as well as cultural capitals.

## Kopsavilkums

Padomju Savienībā kopš tās pirmsākumiem varas pārstāvji pievērsa īpašu uzmanību rakstnieku jaunās paaudzes kontrolei un "izglītošanai", organizējot iesācēju literātu sanāksmes, dibinot literāros pulciņus un jauno autoru sekcijas skolās, universitātēs un preses izdevumu redakcijās, kā arī rīkojot literārus konkursus un nometnes iesācējiem. Padomju Lietuvā viena no svarīgākajām iestādēm, kas formāli nodarbojās ar jaunās rakstošo paaudzes izglītošanu, bija Viļņas jauno literātu sekcija (Rakstnieku savienības apakšnodaļa). Tai bija liela loma autora debijā un (ne)integrācijā literārajā vidē, jo iesaistīšanās sekcijas aktivitātēs bija gandrīz obligāts priekšnoteikums katram, kas vēlējās iestāties Rakstnieku savienībā un publicēties. 20. gs. 60. gados, kad apstākļi šai jomā sāka mainīties, Viļņas jauno literātu sekcija pamazām atteicās no saviem sākotnējiem mērķiem un pievērsās diskusijām par literāro estētiku, kritiku, žanriem, paaudžu atšķirībām un citiem ar politisko diskursu nesaistītiem jautājumiem. Viens no Jauno literātu sekcijas darbības nozīmīgākajiem aspektiem bija attiecības ar Rīgas jauno literātu apvienību. Kaut arī šos kolektīvos kontaktus starp "brālīgajām republikām" oficiāli veicināja padomju režīms, jaunie autori tos varēja izmantot, lai tīklotos, gūtu plašāku perspektīvu un uzkrātu gan sociālo, gan kultūras kapitālu.

## Introduction

In order for the authorities to control various areas of the public life more easily, the Soviet regime established and maintained a dense network of state institutions that obligated various social and professional groups to live up to the regime's expectations. In the said network, a special role was allocated to artists – especially writers – since they, deemed to be “engineers of the soul”, had to use their works as tools for bringing forth the image of the new socialist “reality”. In order to control them, special literary institutions<sup>1</sup> were being established, the central among them being the Writers' Union. Overseers of the regime paid special attention to young beginning writers, because it was particularly the youth that could potentially bring about riots and other changes unfavorable to the Soviet regime. According to Loreta Jakonytė, despite the fact that young writers had already been distinguished as a separate group in pre-Soviet Lithuania, “the distinct attention towards debutants and the desire to control and educate them was brought to Lithuania by the occupying power, following the transferal of the supervisory measures practiced in the Soviet Union” (Jakonytė 2015: 115). (Here and elsewhere – translations by the author of the article.)

In the entire Soviet Union, the same model of controlling and educating young writers was applied. Schools and higher education institutions founded literary circles, and each Writers' Union had a special Chapter and a Commission dedicated entirely to the work of young writers. The latter also participated in various competitions, camps, and internships designed specifically for them and regularly consulted with literary advisors. However, this practice did vary to some degree. For example, contrary to its Lithuanian counterpart, Riga Young Writers' Association<sup>2</sup> (*Rīgas jauno literātu apvienība*) continued its activities after Latvia had regained its independence and formally disbanded only in 2007. Meanwhile the Young Authors' Association (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Junger Autoren*) of the German Democratic Republic was dissolved as early as 1974 in order to, according to Axel Reitel, reduce the excessive division between “young” and “senior” writers: its elimination as a separate structural unit helped to reform the whole system of applying for membership in the Writers' Union (Reitel 2007: 75–114).

From sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's<sup>3</sup> methodological viewpoint, the institutions dedicated to young writers' development can be interpreted as collective participants

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1 Literary institutions of the Soviet Lithuania have been discussed by Rimantas Kmita (Kmita 2019).

2 The situation of young writers in the Soviet Latvia has been studied in Signe Raudive's master thesis (Raudive 2017).

3 Wider application of Bourdieu's model while researching the Soviet literary field is discussed in one of my articles (Vasiliauskas 2018).

of the field. They regulated the rate of young writers' debut and integration into the literary field. Some of them experienced prolonged stay at the said institutions, received harsh criticism for their works, and were not allowed to publish books. Meanwhile, others were able to establish themselves inside the institutions more quickly, became members of the Writers' Union and took part in the official literary life with more ease.

In this context, Bourdieu's term *illusio* which defines the faith in the meaning of literary activities and an interest in participating in the literary game<sup>4</sup>, gains more relevance. Even though the said faith was undoubtedly nurtured in the informal circles that were created further away from the official rituals (e.g. gatherings of smaller groups of peers, reading each other's works, indulging in the bohemian way of life, etc.), participation in the aforementioned institutions also had an impact on the level of writers' *illusio* – it could increase or decrease it, raise doubts as to the prospects of one's participation in the literary field or, on the contrary, encourage one to participate more actively. Having these and the aforesaid things in mind, it seems significant to research not only the developing activities of the Writers' Union but also the history of its subdivisions, dedicated to young writers making their debut. Even though, at first glance, the functioning of such institutions may seem self-explanatory, only after collecting sufficient amounts of information and analyzing the latter one can fully understand the relation between ideology and attention to text aesthetics inside such institutions and the impact they had on the development of young writers.

Thus the aim of this article<sup>5</sup> is to descriptively reconstruct the model of the institutional network of young writers in the Soviet Lithuania by concentrating on the historical dynamics of one of its central institutions, Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter. The article is based on various sources (documents, publications in the Soviet press, memoirs<sup>6</sup>, interviews, etc.) typically used in similar studies. These sources may be divided into the four following groups: archival documents (various protocols, verbatim reports, personal files and so on); recollections and ego-documents; press publications (in newspapers, magazines and almanacs); and specially prepared semi-structured interviews.

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4 According to Bourdieu, “[the literary] game makes up the *illusio*, the investment in the game by the informed player who, possessing a sense of the game because made by the game, plays the game, and thereby makes it exist” (Bourdieu 1995: 290).

5 This paper is partly based on my PhD thesis, which I have defended in the autumn of 2021 (see: Vasiliauskas 2021).

6 Memoir sources can be divided into two groups: the first being the texts written in the Soviet period (diaries and letters), and the second encompassing recollections and autobiographies published after Lithuania regained its independence.

While reconstructing the history of this branch of the Writers' Union, I aim to distinguish the most important directions of its activities, briefly discuss their development, identify the more active members, and examine the practices of participating in this institution as well as attitudes towards the latter from a today's perspective. In order to assess the real impact of Soviet control (inertia and dysfunctions), the final part of the article focuses on one particular aspect of the Chapter's activities: the creative collaboration with the Latvian Young Writers' Association (*Rīgas jauno literātu apvienība*), which corresponded to the Communist Party's directive to cultivate the friendship and international relations among the "brotherly republics".

It is hoped that this paper will contribute to a better understanding of the place of this institution in the whole field of Soviet-era Lithuanian literature, as well as provide an impulse for potential comparative studies analyzing, for example, the similarities and differences between the institutions that "supervised" young writers in different republics of the Soviet Union.

## **The model of young writers' institutional (self-)development network**

In the occupied Lithuania, systemic gathering of young writers began shortly after the end of the war. In 1945, the **Soviet Writers' Union of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic** with headquarters in Vilnius was formally established under the USSR Union of Writers. Not long after that, **Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter** began its operation, followed by the **Commission for Work with Young Writers** in 1947. Schools and higher education institutions opened their literary circles, the most important among which was the one in Vilnius V. Kapsukas University.

The supervision of the young writers was centralized. Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai, and Panevėžys chapters, circles, or literary conventions were frequented by representatives of Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter and/or the Writers' Union, as well as by political figures (representatives of the Leninist Young Communist League of Lithuania and the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party). The most significant directives and recommendations (for instance, to organize national conferences for young writers) were sent from Moscow and then practically applied in Lithuania. Trips to other republics and creative internships were also organized and their results presented during the meetings of the Chapter. Upon becoming members, young writers put effort into utilizing the privileges (including the

implied privileges) of the membership. With the hopes of receiving monetary benefits, traveling allowances<sup>7</sup> and tools necessary for their job (e.g. paper and typewriters), they applied for acceptance in the Literary Fund themselves. The more active ones could even be put on an apartment waiting list<sup>8</sup>.

The procedure used in Soviet Lithuania to control young writers and their entrance into the literary field can be called *the institutional network of young writers' (self-)education*, where "education" refers to the fact that the Soviet system aspired to create an "army" of loyal writers ("engineers of the human soul"), and "self" signifies the situations where, instead of obeying the orders of the system, young writers searched for ways to use the aforementioned network for more authentic creative endeavors.

This network can be viewed as a model that represents certain steps of the initiation into the literary field: the first step, which can be called "**early initiation**", is related to school (in this case, the important factors include the role played by the teachers, the existence of literary circles at schools or editorial departments of local newspapers, young writers' competitions, camps and publications, and columns in mainstream media specifically aimed at the younger audience). The second step – "**middle initiation**" – is related to the academic environment and literary circles at universities or other higher education institutions, as well as the cultural climate of the city where studies take place, and writers as authority figures that one can encounter while studying. The third step – "**(non)establishment**" – is linked with the Writers' Union (a membership that officially certifies a writer's status). This entire model was supervised by an extensive censorship<sup>9</sup> apparatus and the KGB.

All these typical<sup>10</sup> steps were supposed to lead a writer towards their first book. However, fiction publishing in Soviet Lithuania was monopolized. Self-publishing

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7 For example, in 1947 a young writer Jonas Rozga requested the Literary Fund to cover his expenses of traveling to a Crimean sanatorium. However, the request was denied due to "comrade J. Rozga's lack of significant contribution to Lithuanian literature" (LALA 34. f., 1. apr., 33. l., 77 lp.).

8 E.g., the prominent poet Donaldas Kajokas (born in 1953) received an apartment while he was the chairman of Kaunas Young Writers' Chapter (Kajokas 2019).

9 The censorship in Lithuania and Latvia have been thoroughly discussed by Streikus (Streikus 2019: 737–762).

10 Of course, future writers were not obligated to make all the said steps, but not joining the Writers' Union meant that almost all doors to the official literary field remained closed.

(*samizdat*) aside<sup>11</sup>, the only official option available to young authors was to publish their books through the State Fiction Publishing House (which was renamed *Vaga* in 1964).

Each of these closely intertwined steps had a formal hierarchy, at the top of which were heads and chairpersons of institutional units, more active old-timers with bigger symbolic capitals, employees of editorial offices (responsible for cultural and literary columns), advisors, organizers, and members of commissions. In the informal (internal) hierarchy, interpersonal relationships, mutual assessment, present/potential symbolic and social capital were among the things that were important. It was specifically through this internal hierarchy – implemented during socialization – that the circles of like-minded individuals and groups of “us” vs. “them” were formed. Eventually, the participants of the field would ascertain whose opinion was noteworthy and whose was not<sup>12</sup>.

## **From the dark post-war period to the relatively bright late Soviet era: tracing the history of Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter**

Even though Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter operated sporadically already in 1940, it truly started its long-term activities on 7 February 1946<sup>13</sup> when the first list of members was compiled, the first chairman poet Kostas Kubilinskas<sup>14</sup> (1923–1962) and the board were elected, and the goals as well as bylaws were discussed. The members decided to meet weekly,

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11 Vilius Ivanauskas summarizes that most writers “[w]ith the exception of Tomas Venclova, did not join the dissident movement and did not produce *samizdat* literature. Underground literature in Lithuania neither copied the model of Moscow intellectuals nor had the same idols. The existing configuration in Soviet Lithuania whereby even opposition poets and writers were part of institutional processes and gained the status of official writers illustrates the fact that the UW [Writers’ Union] embodied a particular configuration” (Ivanauskas 2014: 656).

12 For example, when talking about Kaunas Young Writers’ Chapter, Donaldas Kajokas claims: “There were some leaders whose opinion mattered to me. Others constituted background noise” (Kajokas 2019).

13 The Young Writers’ Chapter also existed for a few months in Kaunas in 1941, with poet Eduardas Mieželaitis as its chairman.

14 A prominent poet, known for his children’s poetry. In 1947, he was recruited by MGB (a Soviet security agency) and started collaborating with the Soviet authorities.

organize literary events and visit the literary circles of smaller towns. The main activities of the Chapter were as follows:

- Discussions of the creative work and first book manuscripts;
- Organization of literary events and trips and attendance of those organized by others (including the camps for creative youth organized by the Leninist Young Communist League of Lithuania and the all-union congresses in Moscow);
- Development and maintenance of relations with other Chapters and circles, with young artists in other fields and young writers from other Soviet republics (mostly the neighboring ones – Latvia and Estonia);
- Collaboration with senior writers;
- Integration of young critics and translators into the Chapter’s activities;
- Initiation of the new generation into the literary field (by discussing and assessing their texts and positions of the candidates, allocating the symbolic capital);
- Promotion of publishing and literature in general (participation in radio and TV programs, visits to literary competitions for school students and so on);
- Ideological training (reports and discussions of political topics, collaboration with collective farms and the like);
- Formal administrative activities (chairperson’s reports, board elections and distribution of responsibilities).

From the very beginning, the Young Writers’ Chapter became a “hoop” that one had to jump through in order to participate in the public literary life and to gain the title of a “Soviet writer”. However, in the difficult postwar period more informal initiatives (such as the Monday meetings in Eduardas Mieželaitis’s apartment<sup>15</sup>) emerged, while the officially sponsored and politically supervised network weakened. Vilnius Chapter, although central in the republic, did not function as its founders had hoped: the beginning of its activities was plagued by public complaints about poor conduct during meetings as well as failures to implement plans, and press reports (full of slogans and ideological babble) that emphasized the members’ low interest in activities, “remnants of a decadent spirit”, and the need to visit various enterprises, factories, and plants in order to report on the “building of Socialism”. Some of the young people embraced these activities enthusiastically and demonstratively; others refused, at least in part, to submit to the new parameters of literary activity and were sanctioned and/or expelled from the list of members.

Every year, the Chapter organized a number of meetings where the texts written by its members were discussed, presentations were made (usually on ideological

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15 According to Elena Baliutytė-Riliškienė, “the young people used to gather every Monday in Mieželaitis’s apartment where it was possible to talk more freely, without having to write minutes” (Baliutytė-Riliškienė 2019: 68). Eduardas Mieželaitis (1919–1997) was a prominent poet with an established position in *nomenklatura*, a Lenin Award winner and a long-time chairperson of the Lithuanian Writers’ Union (1959–1970).



topics, e.g. “How to Eliminate the Lag of Topics on Collective Farming”), and the writings of the authors most praised and idolized by the Soviet system were analyzed (e.g. those by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy and others). During the meetings, offers were made to assist and consult the Chapter’s weaker writers. Meanwhile, if a first book manuscript of a certain member received positive feedback, the board used to urge the State Fiction Publishing House to publish it. See, for instance, a letter written on 3 April 1952 to Albinas Žukauskas, editor-in-chief of State Fiction Publishing House, by the literary critic Vytautas Kubilius (1928–2004):

On the 2nd of April, during the meeting of Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter, Br. Mackevičius’s collection of poems *In Formation* was discussed. The young poet’s first collection was highly appreciated by the Chapter members. A decision was made to request the administration of the State Fiction Publishing House to start preparing the collection for publishing immediately. In order to assist the author, his collection must be reviewed as soon as possible, and the editing process should soon follow (LALA, 34. f., 1. apr., 288. l., 9 lp.).

Some of the young people imitated the imperative elements of Socialist Realism, i.e. the new rules of participation in the field or the *nomos*<sup>16</sup>, very straightforwardly. Thus the meetings resembled a monotonous performance during which the actors changed roles, but did the same things over and over again by repeating the same ritual practices. In 1953, poet Algimantas Baltakis (1930–2022), then chairman of the Chapter, stated:

Our meetings are often grey and uninteresting. We tend to talk about the most elementary things, things we have heard hundreds of times before. The only difference between meetings is often the fact that during one of them, Peter is “agitating” John, while during the other, John is “agitating” Peter on the same issue. Not only the young writers, but also the older ones have developed a harmful habit of rehashing the same things – like a broken record. If someone says something better or makes a mistake, and somebody else speaks up about it, this topic will travel from one meeting to another, from one newspaper to another, from one conversation to another endlessly (LALA 34. f., 1. apr., 287. l., 117. lp.).

The main authority of the Chapter, the board (comprising nine people, two of which were the chairman and the secretary), was elected during annual debriefings<sup>17</sup>.

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16 *Nomos* is Pierre Bourdieu’s term for the specific norms of a given field that regulate the actions of actors. Although, according to Bourdieu, they are usually not publicly declared but simply collectively understood by the participants in the field (Bourdieu 1995: 223–227), in the Soviet empire they were declared, emphasized in public discourse and controlled by the monopoly of political power (non-compliance with the *nomos* could lead to severe sanctions or, especially in the early Soviet era, to elimination from the field).

17 In the minutes of the meetings, such areas of the Chapter’s activities as *quantitative growth, political education of members, organizational work, support of senior writers*, etc., which demonstrate the structure of ideological education, are emphasized.

During these meetings, the chairperson presented an annual report and, together with other members, discussed plans and tasks of the upcoming year. The work of the Chapter was evaluated from an “industrial” viewpoint – i.e. by estimating its artistic production (books and publications) per year and assessing its active participation in the literary life. All members used to receive episodic letters from the chairman, demanding to provide information about their creative activities<sup>18</sup>. Those who wanted to become members had to meet the official requirements which included providing recommendations from two other participants in the field, having some works published in the mainstream media, and submitting a motivational-biographical application.

The most active members of Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter during the early Soviet period (Mykolas Sluckis, Jonas Avyžius, Vytautas Kubilius, Antanas Jonynas, Adolfas Sprindis, Tatjana Rostovaitė, Alfonsas Maldonis, Algimantas Baltakis (from 1952), Justinas Marcinkevičius (from 1953) and others) used the Chapter to network and to establish themselves in the Writers’ Union (where they soon secured senior positions) and in the literary field in general. Vilnius Chapter started receiving requests from representatives of libraries and editorial offices to organize literary events in smaller towns and to evaluate texts written by members of local literary circles<sup>19</sup>. The atmosphere in the Chapter and the scope of indoctrinating beginner authors at that time are evident from the memories of J. Marcinkevičius, who was one of the most prominent poets of the 1930s generation (along with Baltakis and Maldonis):

On 6 May 1953, I became the member of Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter. On 5 October 1954, I was elected its chairperson, and two weeks after that – the secretary of the Komsomol Organization of the Writers’ Union. Under my leadership, neither the Chapter nor the Komsomol organization did anything special. At that time, creative reports and discussions of first books were popular and often attended not only by members of the Chapter and the Komsomol organization, but also by litterateurs from higher education institutions – especially universities – and by journalists from youth media. We urged the writers to be active and appreciate not only books but also

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18 An example of such a letter: “In order to maintain the communication with its members, the Board of the Young Writers’ Chapter of Vilnius Region requests to receive regular information about your work – what you are writing at the moment, your previously published pieces, and assistance you are in need of [...]. As a member of the Chapter, you have the duty to organize a local young litterateurs’ circle. It must operate under the editorial office of the local newspaper and gather the strongest litterateurs in your district [...]. Please inform the board about how the procedure of organizing literary circles in the district is implemented” (LALA, 34. f., 1. apr., 288. l., 4. lp.).

19 A letter from a library in Panevėžys to the secretary of Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter (4 April 1947): “We invite and hope to see you at our literary-art event. The entire community of Panevėžys – workers, pupils and working intelligentsia – are waiting for you to come. Hopefully, not in vain” (LALA 34. f., 1. apr., 38 l., 104. lp.).

separate poems, short stories and feature articles as well. At that point, the Writers' Union only had about fifty members – maybe that was the reason why we didn't feel a particular division between beginning and senior writers. One could say that we all enjoyed the same rights. [...] There was a particular word: combativeness. It sat at our meetings, spoke from the podium, interfered in our assessments, was stern and, unfortunately, not always fair (Marcinkevičius 1986: 24).

After Nikita Khrushchev denounced the Stalin's cult in 1956, ideological restrictions became looser. Nevertheless, the meetings retained their declarative Soviet rhetoric, and those who opposed it were condemned.

Censorship and editing practices were also discussed during the Chapter meetings or less formal conversations afterwards. For example, the poet Jonas Jakštas (b. 1931), who worked in the editorial office of the *Švyturys* magazine from 1957 to 1963, recalls how the then editor-in-chief Alfonsas Bieliauskas (1923–2018) banned the printing of a poem by the younger generation poet Judita Vaičiūnaitė (1937–2001), which contained the lines “[.] fates, like traffic lights, / here change their colours – red, yellow, green [...]” [colors of the flag of independent Lithuania – SV]. This incident was later discussed in the Chapter: “A meeting of the Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter took place soon after. Judita had apparently already told someone that I had rejected her poem (and of course why). The young poets started to make fun of me. I told them point blank who actually did it [...]” (Jakštas 1992: 58–59).

At the beginning of the 1960s, there were attempts to expand the communication with the creative youth from other artistic unions, e.g. musicians, painters and cinematographers, and these activities fell under the responsibility of the Writers' Club<sup>20</sup>. Nevertheless, the most interesting and less formalized literary initiatives came to life in the academic environment, nurtured first and foremost by students of Vilnius University. Poet and prose writer Henrikas Algis Čigriejus (1933–2016), one of the most passive members of the Chapter, whose debut happened considerably later than that of his peers due to his extraordinary position that opposed the system, did not consider the membership to have been of particular importance. In his opinion, the consultations that his friends – Sigitas Geda (1943–2008) and Marcelijus Martinaitis (1936–2013) – provided while preparing his first book were much more impactful. This proves that members of the Chapter were not expelled permanently, and their activeness in the literary field held more significance:

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20 The Writers' Club, which was established by the Writers' Union of the Lithuanian SSR in the autumn of 1945, was responsible for the promotion of literature and the organization of events with writers. In addition to the more traditional activities such as creative evenings and celebrations of writers' anniversaries, the Club's plans included exhibitions and discussions of artists (and also of publishing and book illustration); meetings with composers, geologists, and scientists from other fields; talks on various topics (e.g., “on the hygiene of a writer's work and rest” or “experimental medicine”); and trips to visit workers.

I was a member [of the Chapter – SV] until they expelled me, because I didn't publish anything [.]. Most probably, up until something like 1960, I was nowhere to be seen. So they kicked me off the list. However, when my first book was published in 1971, they kind of brought me back to the Chapter. It was OK for me to come back then. But, actually, it was both Marcius and Sigitas who had helped me publish my book – they contributed. I brought them the manuscript, I mean the typescript, and asked to mark the places I should get rid of or edit. I still have the manuscript with all their notes. I corrected a couple of things, and it got approved (Čigriejus 2015: 165).

However, even in the Chapter during the second half of the 1960s after the beginning of the Thaw there were events that were well remembered by the participants and testified to the liberation of the regime. One of the most memorable meetings was a discussion of the work of the poet Tomas Venclova (b. 1937, emigrated to the USA in 1977). Venclova's modern poetics were not warmly received by the older generation of writers loyal to the Party. Raimondas Kašauskas (b. 1934), then chairman of the Chapter, recalls:

[W]hen I just started working as the Chapter's chairperson, the sleepy literary life was invigorated by a special event – the discussion of Tomas Venclova's poems. Oh, the amount of commotion it generated!.. The poems were presented by Vytautas Kubilius who had reviewed them. They were unique and reminded of the works of such "Silver Age" Russian poets as Boris Pasternak or Osip Mandelstam, also the pre-war Lithuanian poets. In addition, Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* had been recently published, and there was a lot of outrage due to that: in factories, meetings were held to condemn the book, even though their attendees hadn't even read it... After Venclova read his poems, everybody was shocked – the youth sat quietly but showed a lot of interest, whereas some senior writers started berating and even attacking the author. You see, there was no balance of power... And we, the young ones, listened with our jaws on the floor, even though we couldn't entirely understand where this poetry was coming from (Kašauskas 2022: 151).

During the 1970s when the Chapter was joined by such charismatic, bold and more open-minded writers as Vytautas P. Bložė (1939–2016), Sigitas Geda (from 1965), Marcelijus Martinaitis and others (who later on became the most prominent modernizers of the Lithuanian poetry), the discussions during the meetings became more and more lively, more vigorous and more provocative. This change, in its turn, rejuvenated the literary life. For example, during one meeting, instead of simply giving feedback about the writings of the candidate authors, Bložė attempted to raise much broader questions about the expectations of readers and the importance of an author's individuality (LALA 34. f., 1. apr., 587. l., 8. lp.). Among others, the attitude of the famous prose writer Saulius Tomas Kondrotas (b. 1953), who later joined the Chapter, stands out. In the recommendation by the literary scholar Algimantas Bučys, written when Kondrotas joined the Writers' Union of the Lithuanian SSR, it is stated that Kondrotas disturbed "the formalism and staleness of the meetings of the Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter" (LALA 34. f., 4. apr., 104. l., 17. lp.). Reading

the minutes of the Chapter’s meetings, it seems that Kondrotas simply did not hit the mark and was looking for more critical arguments that were not tied to ideological “truths”. Today he recalls his behavior during the Chapter meetings as follows: “I tried to liven up the discussions. I was young and arrogant and said what was on my mind. And it wasn’t always praise” (Kondrotas 2018: 142).

The records from those meetings reveal that not only did the viewpoints of the more charismatic and bolder newcomers affect and enrich the proceedings of the meetings, but they also signaled about the inner climate becoming freer and gradually losing its formal performative rhetoric.

However, following the events in Kaunas in 1972 – the self-immolation of student and dissident Romas Kalanta and the massive protests demanding the freedom of Lithuania –, the efforts to control the young writers became more intense. In 1976, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union passed a resolution “Regarding Work with Creative Youth”.<sup>21</sup> The more demanding ideological “education” was also reflected by the number of Chapter members which suddenly started growing in the 1970s. The changes in the said number were as follows<sup>22</sup>:

Year	Number of members
1961	33
1970	34
1971	37
1972	50
1975	61
1977	64
1978	72
1980	63
1981	69

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21 Literary critic Valentinas Sventickas (born in 1948), who was the Chapter’s chairperson from 1976 to 1978, claims that it brought about more attention to young writers: “The thing is that in 1976, I think, CC of CPSU passed a resolution ‘Regarding Work with Creative Youth’. That’s why I have information in my notes about the chairperson of Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter ‘having the honor’ to speak at important forums: the Writers’ Union Convention (1976), the Conference of Young Creative Workers (Art Workers Palace, 1977), the Meeting of Writers where the new USSR constitution was discussed (1977), the Plenum of the Writers’ Union Board (1978), etc. The Party did take care of us and our ideology indeed!” (Sventickas 2011).

22 The figures are not entirely accurate because they also used to change during the year, as new members were admitted or inactive members were removed (I have not been able to locate all the lists in the archives, but there is a tendency in the lists shown).

However, instead of signaling easier access, the increase in the number of members and their average age indicated “frozen” memberships, delays in publishing first or second books, and deliberate obstacles to join the Writers’ Union.

While discussing the main factors that helped to enrich the Chapter’s meetings in the Late Soviet period, **the role of the critics** must be pointed out. By providing a more comprehensive and deeper analysis of creative texts and/or by giving longer presentations, they – Jūratė Sprindytė (b. 1952), Marijus Jonaitis (Šidlauskas, b. 1953) and others – brought more vitality to the overall activities of the Chapter. The goal of these discussions – especially during the last decade of the Chapter’s existence – was to provide a broader view of the literary field, formulate tendencies of development as well as to question its tradition, social positions and standpoints.

From 1983 to 1987, the chairman of the Chapter was Vaidotas Daunys (1958–1995) – a poet and an active literary persona, who maintained a more problem-oriented and more academic atmosphere during the meetings. Not only did he undertake personal initiative, but also encouraged and supported the ideas of others as well. For example, the poet Alis Balbierius (b. 1954) associates the Chapter with the beginnings of an environmental movement that took the form of an ecological march:

And he [Daunys] organized, on my initiative, the ecological march of Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter [...]. We swam in the Žeimena and the Neris rivers. With us were Braziūnas, Daunys, me, a friend of mine who worked as an ornithologist in Cape Ventė, and Valentinas Pabrinkis (Balbierius 2011).

Prose writer Danutė Kalinauskaitė (b. 1959), who joined in 1981 (at the same meeting as Daunys), appreciates her participation in the Chapter’s activities and has expressed an opinion that, compared to the Writers’ Union, the Chapter had more power and strength in the intellectual sense, and occupied a hierarchically superior position than Vilnius University Literary Circle:

When Vaidotas [Daunys] came to head it, he raised the intellectual bar considerably. [...] What impressed me was that there were a lot of young literary scholars there: it was the kind of company that was well prepared not only for creative but also for theoretical reflection. It was elevated to a certain level, and this level came with Daunys. [...] But in terms of the preparation of its people, its intellectual level, the Chapter was way above the [Writers’] Union (Kalinauskaitė 2020).

In 1984, Daunys initiated discussions in the Chapter about the necessity to publish a new almanac of young authors’ writings. After two years, in 1986, the first issue of *Veidai* (Faces) saw the light of day.

In 1988, the third issue of the said almanac included commentary on the topic “Chapter or study?” It represented different attitudes of young authors regarding collective activities as well as the correlations between loneliness, individuality and teamwork. Kalinauskaitė, who thinks highly of the Chapter’s activities, emphasizes

the intellectual level of its discussions that were later published in the almanac: "The situation in the Chapter is well reflected by *Veidai*. The most beautiful and impressive feature of the latter was the attempts to discuss things in an essayistic manner, reflect on them from a theoretical standpoint and to formulate problems" (Kalinauskaitė 1988). Whereas literary critic Marijus Jonaitis (Šidlauskas, b. 1953) discusses the factors that unify the members and questions the necessity to upgrade the Chapter: "The idea that, in order to achieve a more radical upgrade, we should all go our separate ways and make room for our younger colleagues, is also correct. But the younger colleagues are not very eager to take our place – are we supposed to drag them here like conscripts?" (Jonaitis 1988). In addition, writer Markas Zingeris (b. 1947) has a critical outlook on the social-climbing of young authors: "[I]t seems that everybody wants to be accepted into the admired Writers' Union, instead of listening to their own voice..." (Zingeris 1988).

Some of the young people in the Chapter opted for a passive (formal) participation strategy. For instance, the famous essayist Rolandas Rastauskas (b. 1954) recalls that he rarely visited the Chapter because, according to him, the atmosphere in the Chapter was depressing: "I remember only Vaidotas Daunys, with whom I soon became closer. I believe that he was the reason I joined the so-called 'forge of future Soviet Lithuanian writers'" (Rastauskas 2020); whereas the (former) poet Virginijus Gasiliūnas says: "I never exaggerated my affiliations, nor did I ever do anything there" (Gasiliūnas 2019). The poet Ramutė Skučaitė (b. 1931), who was on the Chapter's official list, claims: "I did not participate in any gatherings. Sometimes I think that maybe I haven't lived at all? In the sense of literary activity, of course" (Skučaitė 2015). This raises the question: to what extent such retrospective assessments are determined by the position of a particular writer in the local literary field – and by the development of the field itself?

By the end of the 1980s, the Chapter's activities became increasingly more fractured, and finally stopped altogether. In the midst of political change, the outlook on the literary institutions created during the Soviet period was also changing. The young writers' chapters lost their significance and became irrelevant. Even though the Writers' Union remained after Lithuania had regained its independence, and has been active up to this day, the functions of Vilnius Young Writers' Chapter – or any other chapter for that matter – have not been renewed.

## Relations with young Latvian writers

The promotion of literary connections among the “brotherly” Soviet republics constituted an official part of the Soviet politics. The main forms of maintaining such relations were translations and their publications (through separate columns in the press dedicated to showcasing the literature of other republics) as well as participation in literary events and festivals in other republics.

The relations between Lithuanian and Latvian writers have been extensively discussed by Kęstutis Nastopka (see: Nastopka 1971). According to him, they started during two meetings of writers – the one in Vilnius in 1952 and the one in Riga in 1956, when “for the first time after the war, delegations visited each other’s countries and established closer personal relationships” (Nastopka 1979). Signs of such creative collaboration can be found in the history of young writers’ Chapters as well.

Former members claim that the communication with the young Latvian writers – members of Riga Young Writers’ Association – was one of the most significant activities of the Chapter. It became more intense during the 1960s and the 1970s, as the writers from both countries organized joint events and trips and published mutual translations (in historical documents, such communication was ideologically called “the international education of the young generation of authors”).

The translator Arvydas Valionis, who avidly contributed to maintaining this relationship, claims that the first seeds of the collaboration with the young Latvian writers were planted in 1961, when a Latvian language circle was established at Vilnius University. The Chapter, in its turn, helped to develop and accelerate it:

Later on when we, the writers of Vilnius and Riga, started collaborating, in my opinion, it was the most incredible period that lasted for about five years. We used to exchange groups – we used to go to Riga one year, and then the Latvians used to visit us the following year. We travelled around Latvia, visited literary spots, writers’ museums, attended meetings, read translations... (Valionis 2019).

However, there are traces of an even earlier collaboration between the Chapters of young Latvian and Lithuanian authors – e.g. the almanac *Jaunieji*, published in 1957, which included the translations of poems by Arvīds Skalbe, Andris Vējāns, Ojārs Vācietis, Jāzeps Osmanis, and Jānis Plotnieks. The same year in Latvia, the newspaper *Padomju Jaunatne* (the issue of 15 December 1957) introduced the column “Words of Young Lithuanian Writers” (that, among others, presented the creative works and ideas of Antanas Drilinga, Judita Vaičiūnaitė, and Jonas Jakštas) and a small delegation of Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter, supervised by its chairman Eugenijus Matuzevičius, visited Riga. In 1958, a group of young Latvian authors came to Vilnius, and in 1959 some members of the Chapter travelled to Riga and Tallinn – funds for such trips had been acquired from the board of the Writers’ Union.



The Chapter's annual report of 1973 mentions a gift that came to be a symbol of this collaboration: "During a TV program, the Latvians pleasantly surprised our Chapter with a present – a tree branch of the Latvian poetry (a wooden carving), in the hope that it would become something like a prize for translations of Latvian poetry. We gladly turned it into a prize, which is now awarded every year for the best translation of a Latvian poem into Lithuanian" (LALA 34. f., 1. apr., 625. l., 49. lp.). The Chapter undertook not only to organize meetings with young Latvian writers every two to three years, but also to publish an annual "page presenting the work of young Latvian writers with a review article by a Latvian critic" (LALA 34. f., 1. apr., 625. l., 76. lp.) in the press. In 1980, the 5th issue of *Nemunas* included texts by the young Latvian poets Knuts Skujenieks, Māra Misiņa, Māra Zālīte, and Viktors Avotiņš. In the introduction, Zita Mažeikaitė stated that this represented "the fruit of the strengthening friendship between Vilnius and Riga young writers' Chapters" (Mažeikaitė 1980: 37). At the end of October 1983, members of the Riga Young Writers' Association – Inese Zandere, Klāvs Elsbergs, Hermanis Marģers Majevskis and Māris Melgalvs – visited Vilnius and Panevėžys. But how were these connections viewed and assessed by the writers themselves?

Danutė Kalinauskaitė, who became a Chapter member on 26 March 1981, recalls the relations with the Latvians as a positive experience: "I remember our trip to Riga. [Hermanis] Marģers Majevskis, Judita Vaičiūnaitė's husband, took us to Riga to meet not only its young writers, but also the members of their Writers' Union." In addition, Danielius Mušinskas claims that the communication with the Latvians was one of the more interesting activities of the Chapter: "I remember Māra Zālīte, who became the senior editor of the *Karogs* magazine later on, also Hermanis Marģers Majevskis, who spoke Lithuanian and played the role of our representative. At that time, the chairman of the Young Writers' Chapter was Dainis Grīnvalds – I've noticed that his works are still being published in the Latvian literary periodicals." Furthermore, Virginijus Gasiliūnas has claimed: "To us, this communication with Latvians or Estonians seemed more meaningful than with the young writers from Kaunas or with the students studying literature at the Pedagogical Institute" (Gasiliūnas 2019). Moreover, more than once, during the Chapter meetings, the Lithuanians discussed the things they could learn from their neighbors' Chapter, and even suggested an idea to publish collections of Lithuanian and Latvian prose, which, unfortunately, did not come to fruition. Daunys argued: "Whether or not we will adopt the experience of the Latvian study is a matter for debate. Their profile is different" (LALA 34. f., 1. apr., 891. l., 5. lp.).

The tangible outcome of this Lithuanian-Latvian friendship was two publications – a collection of poetry by 10 young Latvian authors published in Lithuania in

1983, called *Mes atējome j šj pasaulj* (We Have Come to This World), and a collection *Ausmā dzimusi sirds* (A Heart Born at Dawn), published in Latvia in 1984:

<p><i>Mes atējome j šj pasaulj</i> (compiled by A. Valionis, introductions by K. Skujenieks), 1983 [3000 copies]</p>	<p><i>Ausmā dzimusi sirds</i> (compiled by H. M. Majeviskis), 1984 [5000 copies]</p>
<p>Pēteris Zirņītis, Uldis Bērziņš, Jānis Rokpelnis, Leons Briedis, Dagnija Dreika-Matule, Māra Misiņa, Māra Zālīte, Hermanis Marģers Majeviskis, Māris Melgalvs, Viktors Avotiņš</p>	<p>Onė Baliukonytė, Gražina Čieškaitė, Gintaras Patackas, Vidmantė Jasiukaitytė, Almis Grybauskas, Antanas A. Jonynas, Algirdas Verba, Jonas Kalinauskas, Rimantas Vanagas, Zita Mažeikaitė, Vytautas Rubavičius, Kornelijus Platelis</p>

This is just a brief attempt at reconstructing the traces of this communication, because a more conceptual analysis would require a separate and a more detailed study.

Today, this relationship can be assessed from two different perspectives – formal and informal. From a formal standpoint, such relations were encouraged by the system and their establishment was fostered artificially. But at the same time, they promoted informal communication, cultural exchange, and the expansion of literary horizons.

**Conclusions** In the literary field of Soviet Lithuania, Vilnius Young Writers’ Chapter was one of the pivotal institutions that brought young writers together and was supposed to “educate” them. When the conditions of the field started changing, the Chapter began receding from its initial goals (which became more of a façade) and started focusing on discussions regarding literary aesthetics, criticism, genres, generations and other actual issues.

Membership in the Chapter helped to accumulate symbolic capital as well as social (grouping), cultural, and economic capital (fees for events and writers’ trips; higher chances to get a flat), and also helped to legitimize the status of a writer. Statements by former members demonstrate that the official, i.e. façade-ideological purpose of the Chapter was outweighed by the aura created by the participants and their common belief in the meaning of literary activity or – in the words of Pierre Bourdieu – the *illusio*. Interestingly, some members of the Chapter chose to be active participants (e.g. D. Kalinauskaitė), while others remained passive observers / formal affiliates (e.g. H. A. Čigriejus).

The historical development of the Chapter may be briefly summarized as follows. During the post-war period, when the institutional network for supervising writers was being created in Lithuania and the said process faced certain difficulties, the Chapter's meetings were dominated by an ideological rhetoric, clichés of Socialist Realism and behaviors of putting up a façade. Young writers were often criticized for being passive (instead of the desired "combativeness") and for displaying politically disloyal conduct which was deemed inappropriate for Soviet writers. After denouncing the Stalin's cult from the end of the 1950s through the beginning of the 1960s, the Chapter's meetings started having more discussions about the aesthetic aspects of texts. The most significant stage in the Chapter's existence, probably, was the period from the middle of the 1970s until 1988. At that time, the role of young critics participating in the meetings became more prominent: their presentations and discussions generated deeper literary reflection and an overall rejuvenation of the field. During the years of Vaidotas Daunys' chairmanship (1983–1987), the Chapter's meetings, characterized by intellectual discussions as well as theoretical (auto)-reflection, became even more academic. Afterwards, the Chapter started operating in an increasingly fragmentary manner, until its activities stopped altogether and were not renewed following the regaining of the country's independence (contrary to the Latvian Chapter).

One of the most important aspects of the Chapter's activities, discussed separately in the article, was communication with young writers from other republics, especially Latvia. These relations, even though formally promoted by the Soviet regime, failed to meet the system's expectations, as they were typically employed as a convenient infrastructure to create informal relationships, distribute personal works, participate in free discussions as well as develop personal talents and aesthetic tastes. Arguably, the most important evidence of these connections were two collections of poetry translations by ten Lithuanian and ten Latvian authors, published in the 1980s.

In summary, the Chapter can be interpreted as a collective participant of the literary field in the Soviet Lithuania, which regulated the debut and initiation into the literary field in a twofold manner:

- 1) from the institutional perspective, it could help to become or prevent from becoming a member of the Writers' Union of the LSSR;
- 2) from the sociological perspective, participation in its activities enabled the accumulation of one's symbolic, cultural and social capital and helped to legitimize the identities of the participants in the literary field (i.e. writers or critics), expand one's worldview, and accelerate or delay the movement towards the center of the field.

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