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Tracing the Influence of the Folklore Revival on Lithuania's National Independence Movement

Izsekojot folkloras kustības ietekmei uz Lietuvas nacionālās neatkarības kustību

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Summary The article explores the connections between the Lithuanian folklore revival movement, which emerged in the 1960s, and the Lithuanian national independence movement of the late 1980s. Using resource mobilization theory, it seeks to identify tangible links and resources that connected these two movements, rather than focusing on psychological or abstract symbolic ties. Based on over 100 oral history interviews conducted by the author and colleagues, the article reconstructs the history of the folklore revival in Lithuania and identifies specific empirical mechanisms through which it influenced the national independence movement. First, it highlights the role of folklore in the rise of environmental and heritage protection movements. Second, it underscores the importance of the folklore festival *Skamba skamba kankliai* in the establishment of the Lithuanian Reform Movement *Sąjūdis* in June 1988. Third, it examines the involvement of leaders from the ethnocultural movement in *Sąjūdis*. Lastly, it discusses the role of folklore ensembles in mass rallies from 1988 to 1991.

Kopsavilkums Rakstā tiek pētītas saiknes starp Lietuvas folkloras atdzimšanas kustību, kas aizsākās 20. gs. 60. gados, un Lietuvas nacionālās neatkarības kustību 20. gs. 80. gadu beigās. Izmantojot resursu mobilizācijas teoriju, rakstā identificētas konkrētas saiknes un resursi, kas savienoja šīs divas kustības, nepaļaujoties uz psiholoģiskām vai abstraktām simboliskām saiknēm. Pamatojoties vairāk nekā 100 mutvārdu vēstures intervijās, ko veikusi autore un viņas kolēģi, rakstā rekonstruēta Lietuvas folkloras kustības vēsture un identificēti konkrēti empīriski mehānismi, ar kuru palīdzību tā ietekmēja nacionālo neatkarības kustību. Pirmkārt, rakstā uzsvērta folkloras loma vides un mantojuma aizsardzības kustību tapšanā. Otrkārt, uzsvērta folkloras festivāla *Skamba skamba kankliai* nozīme Lietuvas reformu kustības Sajūža izveidē 1988. gada jūnijā. Treškārt, rakstā iztirzāta etniskās kultūras kustības līderu iesaistīšanās Sajūdī. Visbeidzot, tajā apspriesta folkloras ansambļu loma masu mītiņos no 1988. līdz 1991. gadam.

Introduction

Both in the public sphere and in academic literature, it is often suggested that the folklore revival movement in Soviet-era Lithuania led to the Singing Revolution of late 1980s, which overthrew the Soviet regime and brought about Lithuanian independence (see e.g. Šmidchens 2014; Davoliūtė, Rudling 2023).

Symbolically, the connection seems obvious. However, the folklore movement was, after all, non-political; moreover, folk culture during the Soviet era was creatively used by the regime to consolidate popular support and construct a new collective identity for the Soviet nations (Putinaitė 2019).

So did folklore and folklorists really play a decisive or significant role in the events of the anti-communist revolution? Is this link between the folklore revival of the late 1960s and the national "revival"[1] of the late 1980s merely symbolic, or is it real, tangible, and demonstrable through empirical methods?

This paper analyzes the specific empirical mechanisms through which the folklore movement influenced the national revival in Lithuania during 1988–1990, and examines the links between the folklore movement and the Lithuanian Reform Movement *Sąjūdis*, founded in June 1988. The article is based on more than 100 oral history interviews conducted by the author and her colleagues between 2009 and 2018 with activists of the ethnocultural movement and leaders of *Sąjūdis*. It builds on the author's previous works on the origins of *Sąjūdis* (Kavaliauskaitė, Ramonaitė 2011) and the ethnocultural movement in Soviet Lithuania (Ramonaitė 2010, 2015; Ramonaitė, Kukulskytė 2014), focusing here specifically on the connections between the folklore revival movement[2] and the establishment and activities of *Sąjūdis*.

The theoretical approach of the article is based on resource mobilization theory (McCarthy, Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983; Edwards, McCarthy 2004) and the relational approach to collective action and social movements (Diani, McAdam 2003). These theories assert that certain material or non-material resources – such as funding, meeting spaces, leadership, organizational skills, celebrity endorsements, pre-existing social networks, and the capacity to build alliances – are crucial preconditions for the

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1 "Revival" ("Atgimimas" in Lithuanian) is a commonly used term in Lithuania for the period 1988–1991.

2 The folklore revival movement *(folkloro sąjūdis* in Lithuanian), sometimes referred to as the "urban folk movement" (Nakienė 2012), is part of a broader ethnocultural movement, consisting of closely intertwined networks of folklorists, hikers, and regional studies activists (Ramonaitė 2010; Ramonaitė, Kukulskytė 2014).

emergence and success of a social movement. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on identifying tangible links and resources, rather than psychological factors (such as emotions) or abstract symbolic connections (such as "national spirit" or "national self-consciousness"), which are often emphasized in historical accounts of the 1988-1991 events (e.g. Bauža 2000).

The article is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the data and methodological challenges in researching cultural resistance during the Soviet era. The second part presents the folklore revival and the formation of a broader ethnocultural movement in Lithuania in the late 1960s. The third part analyzes the specific mechanisms and links between the folklore movement and the national independence movement. It examines several ways in which folklore revivalists influenced the national movement: the impact of folklore on the emergence of the Lithuanian green movement and heritage protection initiatives; the crucial role of the Folklore Festival *Skamba skamba kankliai* in the founding of *Sąjūdis* in June 1988; the participation of ethnocultural movement leaders in *Sąjūdis*; and the role of folklore ensembles at mass rallies between 1988 and 1991.

Data and Methodological Approach

Historians working on the Soviet era note that research on this period faces specific methodological challenges (see e.g. Streikus 2009). One of the major problems is that ideologization and (self-) censorship render many written documents unreliable. Official records – ranging from statistical data to minutes of organizational meetings – were often fabricated or falsified (Ramonaitė 2015: 23). The entire Soviet press was censored, making it unlikely to contain information about non-systemic movements. Even personal diaries were frequently subject to self-censorship due to fear of potential repression by the regime, and thus may not provide an undistorted account of the period's realities.

It is particularly problematic to investigate activities and practices that did not align with the ideology of the Soviet regime and were under close scrutiny by the secret services. This applies not only to overt dissident activities – those openly opposing the regime, about which considerable material can be found in KGB files – but even more so to activities that skirted the boundaries of legality or were carefully concealed from the regime's view. In Soviet Lithuania, there were many such activities and gatherings, ranging from the Catholic underground to youth subcultures (Kavaliauskaitė, Ramonaitė 2011). In our previous work, we have referred to such formations as "self-subsistent society" – that is, organizations or social communities established without state interference and that avoided the regime's ideological agenda (Ramonaitė, Kavaliauskaitė 2015). Though not overtly political, these groups

functioned as "islands of freedom" or "free spaces" (Polletta 1999), disrupting the regime's monolithic control and, by virtue of their independent nature, arousing the suspicion of the authorities.

Such gatherings often employed "unobtrusive practices" (Johnston, Mueller 2001) or "camouflage tactics" (Ramonaitė 2015), aimed at remaining unnoticed by the regime by disguising their activities as legal and officially acceptable. For example, in Lithuania, hiking clubs operated under the guise of officially permitted and even promoted tourist clubs, while pursuing their own non-systematic agenda – such as cleaning up ancient mounds,[3] commemorating historical dates and figures significant to Lithuania's independence, or visiting sites hidden or neglected by the Soviet regime. These clubs often falsified their official reports to align with what the authorities expected: they might deliberately misrepresent hiking routes or include staged photographs, such as posing at the grave of a Soviet partisan (Ramonaitė 2015). These deceptive tactics make any use of archival material without the contextualization provided by eyewitness accounts highly problematic.

Because of these methodological challenges, this study has primarily employed the oral history method, based on testimonies of direct witnesses. Specifically, it uses interviews from three oral history collections gathered by the author and her colleagues from Vilnius University, preserved in the Archive of the (Post)Soviet Memory Center: the *Sąjūdis* Project Collection, the Invisible Society Collection, and the *Ratilio* Collection.

The *Sąjūdis* Project Collection includes more than 300 interviews with *Sąjūdis* pioneers and activists from various self-sufficient social groups, including the ethnocultural movement, collected between 2009 and 2011. The Invisible Society Collection comprises 96 interviews conducted between 2012 and 2015 as part of the project *Invisible Society of Soviet Era Lithuania: The Revision of Distinction Between Soviet and Non-Soviet Networks.* The *Ratilio* Collection contains 42 interviews with leaders and members of *Ratilio* folk ensemble, collected between 2010 and 2018.

When using oral history sources, other specific methodological challenges were also taken into account. One of the most important issues is that in oral history interviews, the informant's narrative is inevitably influenced by cultural memory (Assmann 2011) and present-day attitudes. With the change of political regime after 1990, and the accompanying shift in memory politics, people may adapt their

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3 Mounds or hillforts (*piliakalniai* in Lithuanian) are important archaeological and cultural heritage sites in Lithuania, dating back to the Bronze Age. These earthworks were often used as fortified settlements or defensive structures, typically located on natural hills or elevated areas. Neglected during the Soviet era, they are now valued not only for their historical significance but also as symbols of national identity and pride.

narratives to better align with current views or attempt to "embellish" their accounts by presenting themselves as fighters against the system. I was aware of these potential issues and sought to verify the narratives by juxtaposing different individuals' accounts of the same organizations and events, as well as by consulting additional archival material.

Folklore Revival Movement in Lithuania

The folklore revival movement in Lithuania can be traced back to the first mass expeditions in regional studies, which began in the 1960s.[4] After Stalin's death, regional studies or local heritage studies (*kraštotyra* in Lithuanian; *kraevedienie* in Russian) were allowed and even promoted by the regime to stimulate grassroots Soviet patriotism (Davoliūtė, Rudling 2023).

In 1961, the LSSR Regional Studies Society (*LTSR Kraštotyros draugija*; since 1965 – *Monument Preservation and Regional Studies Society*) was established in Lithuania (Seliukaitė 2010). In 1963, young activists of the society led by Norbertas Vėlius organized the first so-called "complex expedition" in Zervynos, an impressively authentic village in the southeastern part of Lithuania.

Amateur regional studies activists – students from various disciplines such as history, linguistics, medicine, natural sciences, art, and music – collected rich ethnographic material. Based on this work, the book *Zervynos* was published in 1964 (Milius 1964).

Later, these expeditions grew into a vibrant regional studies movement. Summer expeditions, organized mainly in the archaic villages of eastern Lithuania, attracted hundreds of students who were inspired by the traditional lifestyle and the sincerity of rural people – communities that had been relatively untouched by the Soviet regime – as well as by the charisma and informality of the expedition leaders themselves. As Jonas Trinkūnas, one of the key figures of the ethnocultural movement, remembers:

> It was the most wonderful time, because the village was still so rich and traditional. Can you imagine – for example, in Guntauninkai, a village near Tverečius, Adutiškis, we collect songs in that village, we write them down, we communicate with people, and then we arrange a party. The whole village gets together, the whole village. The women bring cheese, milk, we sit on the lawn. We all have a party, dancing, singing songs. We sing folk songs together. It was a wonderful time (interview, Trinkūnas 2011).

4 Although smaller-scale regional studies expeditions had taken place earlier, the Vilnius University regional studies research group, led by ethnologist Vacys Milius, was particularly active. This group also contributed to the establishment of the Regional Studies Society in 1961 (Mardosa 2016).

Inspired by these expeditions, the local history club *Ramuva* was established in Vilnius in 1969, with the participation of many well-known figures, such as the poet Marcelijus Martinaitis and Veronika Janulevičiūtė-Povilionienė, who later became Lithuania's most famous folklore performer. In 1970, Vilnius University *Ramuva* was founded on the initiative of Jonas Trinkūnas. Both of these organizations were involved in organizing further expeditions, arranging lectures, evening events, meetings with prominent people, and gatherings with village singers (Mačiekus 2009). All these activities attracted large audiences and helped popularize authentic folklore.

The popularity and spontaneity of *Ramuva* activities, as well as their links with dissident and underground activists, brought these organizations into disfavor with the KGB. The Vilnius City *Ramuva* was forced to close down in 1971, but the Vilnius University *Ramuva* remained in operation. Thanks to its long-time leader Venantas Mačiekus, it was able to maintain formal loyalty to the regime without losing the non-conformist content and style of its activities. Later, Vilnius *Ramuva* activists established the Folk Song Club (later renamed the *Raskila* ensemble), which operated for a time at the Trade Union Palace and then privately in subsequent years (interview, Matulis 2010; interview, Burauskaitė 2014). Thus, the activity did not disappear, but rather changed its forms of existence.

At the same time, folklore ensembles began to emerge. In 1968, the first city folklore ensemble was founded – the Vilnius University Folklore Ensemble *Ratilio* (originally called the Student Ethnographic Ensemble). The ensemble was established by Aldona Ragevičienė, concertmaster of the University Choir, together with a group of students from the Faculty of Philology (Ramonaitė, Narušis 2018). The ensemble emerged almost spontaneously, as various circumstances aligned.

Perhaps the most important prerequisite for the emergence of this phenomenon was the fact that, at that time, the singing tradition was still very much alive in Lithuanian villages, especially in Dzūkija (the southeastern part of Lithuania), but also elsewhere. Young people who came to Vilnius from the countryside to study had a strong desire to sing. In their memoirs, many recall singing at the university – during breaks between lectures, in the student canteen, in dormitories, and at all kinds of parties (Nakienė 2016). The lecturers also shared a longing for the singing village and, rather than forbidding it, supported this student practice.

As one of the pioneers of the *Ratilio* ensemble recalls:

> Apparently, it was the aforementioned desire to sing our songs that first pushed me into the ensemble. After all, from the very first year, even the smallest gathering – what will be, what won't be, and there will be songs. Now it is unthinkable. We used to have coffee in the student café and sing, sing, sing [..] Especially that singing during the breaks between lectures. It's interesting that the lecturers used to like

> it too... I'll never forget once when the linguist Jonas Balkevičius, who was the dean of the faculty at the time, a great man, came to give a lecture, and we were singing in the balcony. He came through the door and stopped and listened... We were a little confused. 'It's fine,' he said, 'sing, you might be late for the lecture' (cited in Giedraitis 2014).

Another reason for the establishment of the ensemble was the conscious effort of professors of the time to promote interest in ethno-culture. The ethnomusicologist Jadvyga Čiurlionytė, a sister of the famous Lithuanian composer Mikolojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and professor at the Conservatory (now the Academy of Music and Theatre), was particularly influential. She was also the teacher of *Ratilio*'s first two leaders, Aldona Ragevičienė and Laima Burkšaitienė.

The students of the Faculty of Philology were also impressed by Norbertas Vėlius, as well as the literary and folklore scholar Donatas Sauka and his brother, the folklorist Leonardas Sauka (Giedraitis 2014).

Around 1967, feeling a strong inclination to sing and having been taught by their teachers to appreciate folk culture, a group of philology students organized themselves into an informal "shepherd's choir", occasionally performing at student events. They enjoyed singing but lacked a leader. At the same time, Aldona Ragevičienė, who did not feel comfortable working as a concertmaster of the university choir, aspired to mentor her own artistic group (Giedraitis 2014).

The inspiration to establish a folklore ensemble came from the celebration of the centenary of the renowned Lithuanian writer, poet and philosopher Vydūnas, held at Vilnius University in 1968. During this commemoration, several university choristers, including the aforementioned Veronika Povilionienė, performed a selection of authentic Lithuanian folk songs under Ragevičienė's direction. After seeing this program, Jadvyga Čiurlionytė encouraged Aldona Ragevičienė to continue this work and to create more folklore programs (interview, Povilionienė 2010; interview, Razmukaitė 2018).

Encouraged by the success of the performance, Ragevičienė posted an announcement at the university about the formation of an ethnographic ensemble. Upon seeing this announcement, the singers of the "shepherds' choir" came to meet Ragevičienė at the designated time. This marked the founding of an ensemble that would later become one of the most renowned (and still active) folklore ensembles in Lithuania – the *Ratilio* Ensemble. Most importantly, this initiative set a precedent for creating ensembles that performed authentic folklore in an urban setting. Following this example, other ensembles soon began to form in Vilnius: *Sadauja* in 1971, *Poringė* in 1973, *Dijūta* (then known as the Ethnographic Ensemble of the Academy of Sciences) in 1979, *Ievaras* in 1979, and *VISI* in 1980 (Nakienė 2016: 102).

Almost at the same time, another similar initiative emerged in Vilnius: around

1967, an ethnographic ensemble led by Povilas Mataitis was established at the State Youth Theater (Liutkutė-Zakarienė 2008). The ensemble's first concert took place in 1968, with a program consisting mainly of sung and danced *sutartinės* (traditional Lithuanian polyphonic songs). Like *Ratilio*, the ensemble aimed for authenticity and historicity – with significant attention given to the reconstruction of authentic costumes, a task undertaken by set designer Dalia Mataitienė. However, this ensemble followed a slightly different trajectory than later folklore ensembles: in 1974, it became the Lithuanian Folklore Theater of the Rumšiškes Open-Air Museum. The performances of the Lithuanian Folklore Theater were noted for their high artistic value, combining a subtle combination of loyalty to traditions with individual expression (Nakienė 2005). However, after becoming a state-sponsored representative collective, touring both within the Soviet Union and abroad, the theater gradually distanced itself from the folklore revival movement, which was much less supported by the regime.

The wave of the ethnocultural movement also reached the villages, where ethnographic ensembles began to emerge. In 1967, the Kalviai and Lieponiai ensembles were established; in 1969, the Lazdiniai and Adutiškis ensembles; in 1971, the Žiūriai, Marcinkoniai, Kriokšlis ensembles; in 1972, the Luokė ensemble; and in 1974, both the Ežvilkas Bandonya and Puponiai ensembles (Karaška 2004). A special mention should be made of the Kupiškėnai Ethnographic Folk Theatre – this collective, founded in Kupiškis in 1966, staged the renowned play *The Ancient Kupiškėnai Wedding* (see e.g. Vaigauskaitė 2016).

Many of these local ethnographic ensembles were inspired by the expeditions of the Society of Regional Studies (interview, Vaškevičius 2014; interview, Trinkūnas 2011). As Albinas Vaškevičius remembers:

> There were ethnographic expeditions, and as a result of those ethnographic expeditions, ethnographic ensembles were formed. [..] At the end of the expedition, there was always a debriefing concert. [..] We would invite all the singers from whom we had collected songs, inviting them to a concert at a cultural center or school. During the concert, we would sing and invite the old ladies who had shared their songs with us. Often, not even on the stage, but next to it, to sing together with us. We would sing one, two, three songs, and they would sing too. And then we would say: well, now you have an ethnographic ensemble (interview, Vaškevičius 2014).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the ethnocultural movement spread to other major cities in Lithuania. In Kaunas, the spirit of folklore revival was actively promoted by Veronika Janulevičiūtė-Povilionienė, who had been working at the Lithuanian Folklore Theatre in Rumšiškės since 1974, but lived in Kaunas. She frequently visited regional studies groups and led song evenings (Nakienė 2016: 115). Some of these groups later evolved into folklore ensembles. For example, the folklore ensemble *Kupolė* emerged in 1983 from a regional studies group that had been active at the Kaunas

Academy of Veterinary Studies since 1975. Others were born out of hiking clubs with strong links to the folklore movement. For instance, the ensemble *Goštauta* was founded in 1986 by members of the Kaunas Polytechnic hiking club *Ąžuolas*. Often, folklore ensembles in other cities were established by people who had graduated from Vilnius or Kaunas and had been engaged in regional studies and folklore activities during their university years, later continuing this work when assigned to other regions of Lithuania.

This folklore revival movement had a very ambiguous relationship with the Soviet regime and with the regime-promoted folk art and regional studies activities. On one hand, the fact that regional studies and folk art were encouraged and supported by the Soviet authorities provided a convenient excuse and a "safety net" for the folklore movement to develop. On the other hand, the members of the regional studies and folklore movement themselves avoided and disliked Soviet regional studies, which focused on collecting materials about Soviet partisans, the establishment of collective farms, and promoting a "Soviet folk art" style modelled on the Igor Moiseyev Dance Ensemble. As Antanas Gudelis, one of the leaders of the ethnocultural movement, explains:

> I organically dislike the *Lietuva* ensemble. [..] [All these ensembles of popular dances] were just copies of Moiseyev's ensemble. While [Jonas] Švedas[5] had done something authentic, it was still Soviet folklore. I used to call it "the folk dance of trained Lithuanian women". And everybody [in my circle] looked at it the same way. I was not alone. There was something else here – a striving for authentic things. And those authentic things were pulled from the depths. From the villages (interview, Gudelis 2010).

Non-harmonized, spontaneous, improvisational folklore was attractive to the youth of the time as a form of self-expression and an opportunity to escape Soviet uniformity and ideology. Although the authorities did not forbid the creation of ensembles, they remained cautious about them. For example, the folklore ensemble *Ratilio* of Vilnius University was shown on television and could perform on large stages (e.g., the ensemble's 15th-anniversary program was shown at the Youth Theatre Hall in Vilnius, and the then Minister of Culture attended the concert). However, the ensemble was not allowed to perform outside the USSR until 1984 (when it toured Poland and Bulgaria) and was only allowed to perform in the West for the first time in 1986 (Ramonaitė, Narušis 2018: 108).

The regional studies movement in the 1970s came under the disfavor of the KGB, especially because anti-Soviet nationalist and Catholic underground figures found a niche within its ranks. As KGB General Vaigauskas writes in his booklet:

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5 Jonas Švedas (1908–1971) was the founder and a long-standing leader of the State Song and Dance Ensemble *Lietuva*.

"From the mid-1960s until recent years, the KGB has been facing attempts by clerics and nationalists to ideologically influence young people and the intelligentsia by infiltrating the organizations (clubs, sections) of regional studies and tourism" (Vaigauskas 1986). The KGB notes state that "the objects view local studies as a legal form of carrying out organized national activities" (Tamoliūnienė 2007: 54).

And in fact, these organizations included quite a few underground figures who used the networks of local studies and hiking groups for underground activities and the recruitment of new people. For example, Algirdas Patackas, a famous underground activist and later a political prisoner, took part in regional studies expeditions and had links with *Ramuva*, while Alfonsas Vinclovas, who published *samizdat* books, participated in the Folk Song Club. In Kaunas, the political prisoner Povilas Butkevičius, Vytenis Andriukaitis, who attempted to create an underground university, Šarūnas Boruta, a member of the underground movement of Eucharistic Friends, and the brother of the editor-in-chief of the most famous underground publication, *The Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, were all associated with the ethnocultural movement (Ramonaitė 2010, 2015).

The KGB tried to dismantle the emerging, more dangerous networks of the ethnocultural movement by closing clubs or preventing them from being established. For example, Jūratė Eitminavičiūtė Dručkienė, a course mate of Jonas Trinkūnas, attempted to establish a Regional Studies Centre in Kaunas, but the KGB immediately blocked the initiative (Trinkūnas 2010; Tamoliūnienė 2007). Between 1973 and 1978, the Kaunas Polytechnic Institute (KPI) had an active regional studies group until it was forced to close under KGB pressure (interview, Vaškevičius 2014). However, the same people were able to continue their activities in other ways. For instance, some of the former members of the KPI regional studies group founded the Musical Folklore Group in 1974 at the Rumšiškės Open-Air Museum near Kaunas. When this group was also forced to shut down, its members moved to the regional studies club *Tėviškė* at the Institute of Physical Technical Energy Problems, which became an important center of self-sufficient society in Kaunas, closely monitored by the KGB (interview, Andriukaitis 2010; interview, Butkevičiūtė-Jurkuvienė 2010).

The greatest repression of the regional studies movement came during the so-called "regional studies case" (*kraštotyrininkų byla*) in 1973, in which Šarūnas Žukauskas and Vidmantas Povilionis (later the husband of folk singer Veronika Janulevičiūtė), who had been involved in regional studies and hikers' activities, were convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and of reproducing and distributing underground literature,[6]

6 Povilionis was sentenced to two years in prison and was imprisoned in a camp in Mordovia (Matulevičienė 2007), while Žukauskas was sentenced to six years' imprisonment and was held in a strict regime camp in Perm (Gelžinis 2020).

and Jonas Trinkūnas was expelled from the university. More than 100 participants of the folklore and regional studies movement were questioned during the trial. However, the movement itself was not suppressed, but continued to develop and grow until the very beginning of the Singing Revolution in 1988 (Ramonaitė 2011).

It can be argued that the folklore revival movement in Lithuania that emerged in the 1960s had a dual character. One part was connected to the national and Catholic underground and, as such, was engaged – at least indirectly – in political activities. The other part remained essentially apolitical but somewhat distant from "normal" (Yurchak 2006) Soviet society. The political character of the movement was more pronounced in Kaunas than in Vilnius, and this had an impact on its relationship with *Sąjūdis*, as we will see in the next section.

The Role of Folklore Revival Movement in Regaining Independence

This section explores whether, and in what specific ways, the folklore movement influenced the Singing Revolution that began in Lithuania in 1988. The main driving force behind the peaceful mass revolution in Lithuania was the grassroots movement *Sąjūdis* (the equivalent of Popular Fronts in Estonia and Latvia), founded in Vilnius in June 1988. Within a few months, it had spread throughout Lithuania, attracting around 200,000 members. Even more people became involved in mass rallies and other events, the most notable of which – the Baltic Way in 1989 – is estimated to have involved around 0.5 million Lithuanians (Laurinavičius, Sirutavičius 2008: 342).

Both the emergence of *Sąjūdis* as a social movement and the mass mobilization in Soviet Lithuania appear quite puzzling, considering that Soviet society is generally characterized as atomized, passive, and conformist (Streikus 2011; Putinaitė 2007). According to resource mobilization theory, grievances alone are not sufficient for a social movement to emerge; resources are also necessary – especially pre-existing social networks and non-systemic ideas.

In the following part of the article, I will examine whether and how the ethnocultural movement that had been developing since the 1960s contributed to the mass mobilization of the late 1980s. Specifically, I will analyze what kinds of resources the folklore revival movement provided to the Singing Revolution and how they were used.

As Edwards and McCarthy (2004) state, the resources of social movements can be divided into several types: moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material. Moral resources, according to Edwards and McCarthy, are those that give the movement authority and legitimacy (e.g., the support of prominent

individuals). Cultural resources include ideas, cultural identities, specific knowledge, and tactical repertoires, as well as cultural production such as music, literature, and film. Social-organizational resources refer to social networks and organizations – what is often referred to as social capital. Human resources include labor, experience, skills, and expertise. Finally, material resources consist of money and physical capital.

In the following subsections, I will present four main ways in which the folklore revival movement contributed its resources to the national revival: through its direct connection with the Green and heritage protection movements, through the folklore festival *Skamba skamba kankliai*, through specific leaders who participated in *Sąjūdis*, and through singing practices.

The Emergence of Green and Heritage Protection Clubs

Although it is generally agreed that the Lithuanian Reform Movement *Sąjūdis* played a key role in the regaining of independence, even before its establishment, the heritage protection and the Green movements – which were founded about a year earlier – were also crucial (Čepaitis 2007; Laurinavičius, Sirutavičius 2008). These movements, which later joined *Sąjūdis* with youthful vitality, were the first harbingers and catalysts of change. The ecological protest march they organized in Lithuania in the summer of 1988 (28 July – 5 August), which carried the Lithuanian tricolor flag across the country and thus signaled the beginning of political change to ordinary Lithuanians, facilitated the transition toward independence.

It was the Greens and the heritage protection movement that had a very direct link to the folklore revival and the broader ethnocultural movement, which, in addition to folklorists and regional studies activists, also included hiking clubs (Ramonaitė 2011). The Green movement in Lithuania is closely related to the heritage protection or monument protection (*paminklosauga* in Lithuanian) movement, as two of the main Green clubs – the Atgaja Club in Kaunas and the Aukuras Club in Šiauliai – positioned themselves as both heritage protection and ecology clubs. On the other hand, these movements were also somewhat separate: the Young Heritage Protectionists' Club and the Talka Club in Vilnius identified themselves only as heritage protection clubs, while the Žemyna Club in Vilnius and the Žvejonė Club in Klaipėda identified themselves only as environmental clubs. Of all these clubs, Talka, Atgaja and Aukuras had direct links to the ethnocultural movement (Kavaliauskaitė 2011; Kulevičius 2011).

The Talka Club was founded in April 1987 in Vilnius under the auspices of the

Lithuanian Cultural Foundation (whose chairman, the renowned geographer Česlovas Kudaba, was also involved in the regional studies movement – not as an active participant, but as an important patron). The aim of the club was to mobilize the public to save cultural treasures and monuments through very concrete actions – clean-ups (interview, Songaila 2010). However, the club soon began to organize not only clean-ups but also protests against the destruction of cultural monuments in Vilnius, Kernavė, and elsewhere. The original founders of the club were heritage specialists and activists from the public Faculty of Monument Protection of the People's University, but they were soon joined by another group connected to the folklore movement: members of the folklore ensemble of the Faculty of History of Vilnius University, led by Vytautas Musteikis. One of them, Gintaras Songaila, soon became the head of the Talka Club (Kulevičius 2011).

The Atgaja Club was founded in Kaunas in July 1987 as a heritage preservation club, following the example of the Vilnius Talka, which they had learned about through networks of folklorists, hikers, and local historians (Kavaliauskaitė 2011: 259). Saulius Gricius, the founder and ideological leader of Atgaja (like other Atgaja pioneers), was closely tied with the ethnocultural movement: he was a participant and, at one time, the leader of the Kaunas Polytechnic's Hiking Club *Ąžuolas*; he was in contact with Jonas Trinkūnas; and he used to visit the house of Veronika Povilionienė and Vidmantas Povilionis in Kaunas, where a kind of "tea club" was operating. He also participated in the Rumšiškės seminar, organized around 1987, where many activists of the ethnocultural movement took part. Thus, the first and most important core of the Atgaja Club was made up of participants in the ethnocultural movement, although it was later joined by a wide variety of people, such as artists, punks, heavy rockers, and other "informals". As Gricius himself acknowledged, the idea of the Atgaja Club emerged during the Midsummer festival, while wearing national costumes (cited in Kavaliauskaitė 2011: 259).

The Atgaja Club drew from the ethnocultural movement not only human resources (members and leaders) but also ecological ideas. Saulius Gricius claimed that it was through folklore that he realized the importance of nature in the Lithuanian worldview: "After studying ethnology and folklore, I realized that the spirit and lifestyle of a Lithuanian is natural and green" (cited in Žemulis 2021). According to him, "It is impossible to overestimate the significance of folk song for our culture. It is the songs, tales and stories of the ancients that are the basic science of nature conservation that everyone should listen to" (cited in Žemulis 2021). He also read the works of the famous ethnologist Marija Gimbutienė and was interested in the abilities of old Baltic pagan cultures to live in harmony with nature (Kavaliauskaitė 2011: 259). Preserving nature was also one of the main ethical

principles of the hiking clubs, as stated in the famous Punios Treaty[7] of the hikers (Ramonaitė 2011).

Finally, the Atgaja Club drew organizational skills from the ethnocultural movement. It was their leaders' experience in hiking and their knowledge in regional studies that allowed them to plan the 1988 ecological protest march across Lithuania on an impressive scale (Kavaliauskaitė 2011: 262). Singing folk songs was one of the important unifying activities for club members. Many of the club's activities were linked to folklore and local history: they organized folklore evenings and popularized folk songs among people who had previously been unfamiliar with folklore.

The Aukuras Club, founded in Šiauliai in early June 1988, is also closely linked to the folklore movement (Kavaliauskaitė 2011: 235). Its ideological leader, Rimantas Braziulis, was an active member of the folklore and regional studies movement and one of the founders of the *VISI* folklore ensemble in Vilnius in 1980. After finishing his studies in Vilnius, he moved to Šiauliai and established the Patrimpas Folklore Club. The club organized expeditions, folklore evenings, and folk celebrations. It was the members of the Patrimpas Club who formed the core of Aukuras (interview, Braziulis 2010). Through Braziulis, the Aukuras Club immediately had links with the Atgaja and Talka Clubs: Musteikis from the Talka Club had also participated in the *VISI* ensemble (Musteikis 2010), and Braziulis knew Saulius Gricius through Jonas Trinkūnas (interview, Braziulis 2010).

The activities of the Aukuras Club revolved mainly around the protection of the Kurtuvėnai Landscape Reserve. According to Jūratė Kavaliauskaitė, it was the preservation of the ethnic landscape that has become the central feature distinguishing Aukuras from other green clubs. The members of the club not only organized protests but also invited members to participate in clean-ups and revived the symbolic topography of the landscape – they cleaned up the Bubiai Mound, the Rebel Hill, and other historical monuments. They also revived ethnographic festivals by organizing *Rasos* (the Midsummer Festival) and reviving *Užgavėnes* (Shrove Tuesday), which had been banned during the Soviet era (Kavaliauskaitė 2011).

The Unexpected Connection Between *Sąjūdis* and the *Skamba Skamba Kankliai* Festival

The Lithuanian Reform Movement *Sąjūdis* (then known as the Lithuanian Movement for Perestroika) was founded on 3 June 1988, when the *Sąjūdis* Initiative Group was formed in Vilnius

7 The Treaty of Punia was signed in 1966 in the Punia Forest by the most prominent hiking leaders in Lithuania. It outlined the key principles of hiking activity and ethics.

during an event at the Academy of Sciences. The event, which was formally devoted to discussing amendments to the Constitution of the Lithuanian SSR, served – as planned – as the occasion for founding *Sąjūdis*, following the example of the Popular Front of Estonia. The founding itself was not easy and was made possible by a series of fortuitous circumstances, one of the most important being the folklore festival held the week before (Kavaliauskaitė, Ramonaitė 2011).

The inspiration for *Sąjūdis* came from Ivar Raig, a member of the Popular Front of Estonia, and academician Mikhail Bronstein, who attended an economists' conference in Vilnius on 26 May 1988. After the conference, Raig spoke about the Popular Front of Estonia and urged Lithuania to follow its example. At the Institute of Economics, such ideas were met with fear rather than enthusiasm (interview, Medalinskas 2009). However, Alvydas Medalinskas, then a postgraduate student of economics who had contacts from his own background, asked Raig to stay in Vilnius for at least one more day and decided to organize a meeting with a more receptive audience. Organizing a meeting in one day without modern technology might seem like an impossible mission, but Medalinskas was helped by the fact that the *Skamba skamba kankliai* Festival was taking place in Vilnius at the time.

The festival has been held annually in Vilnius since 1974. Although it was originally founded as a festival of stylized folk music, it eventually evolved into a festival of authentic folklore and became a counterpoint to stylized folk art (Ričkutė 2017) – a kind of refuge for a self-sufficient society. What distinguished it from other official Soviet-era events was the absence of Soviet posters, slogans, and official ceremonies – there were simply authentic songs and dances, often continuing spontaneously into the night. The festival is held every year on the last weekend in May, not only in concert halls but also in the courtyards and streets of Vilnius' Old Town, without any tickets. It was therefore common for the members of the intelligentsia, students and others seeking to escape the official culture of the time – even those not necessarily part of the folk movement – to stop by, at least for a short while.

As Medalinskas himself recalls – although he was not a participant in the folklore movement – he had planned to go to the festival that evening and suddenly had the idea that this was where he might find people who could help him organize an alternative meeting with Raig. And indeed, within an hour at the festival, he met people from the Talka and Žemyna Clubs who helped him secure a room for the meeting and invite others to attend the gathering with Raig on 27 May (interview, Medalinskas 2009). It was at this spontaneously organized meeting that the decision to create *Sąjūdis* a week later was made, and an organizational group was formed to secure a hall, gather an audience, and, most importantly, ensure that the members of the *Sąjūdis* Initiative Group would be trustworthy individuals. This fortunate

coincidence reiterates the importance of the social networks of a self-sufficient society as essential resources for the emergence of a new social movement.

People of the Ethnocultural Movement in *Sąjūdis*

Although folklorists played a decisive role in the founding of *Sąjūdis* (Gintaras Songaila was one of the five members of the organizational team created on 27 May), the *Sąjūdis* Initiative Group itself – consisting of 35 members – did not include many representatives of the ethnocultural movement. In fact, only Songaila can be considered a true representative of the folklore movement within the central initiative group.[8]

However, there were others connected to the ethnocultural movement: first of all, the aforementioned professor Česlovas Kudaba, who was a patron of the regional studies movement; Algirdas Kaušpėdas, who had connections with Veronika and Vidmantas Povilionis; and one of the leaders of *Sąjūdis*, Romualdas Ozolas, who had participated in the *Ramuva* expeditions (interview, Gudelis 2010). Vytautas Landsbergis also had some ties to the folklore revival movement – his son, V. V. Landsbergis, was at that time participating in the *Ratilio* ensemble, which had been recommended to him by his father (interview, Landsbergis 2018). As mentioned above, Medalinskas also had acquaintances among folklorists.

However, the most important leaders of the ethnocultural movement were not included in the Initiative Group for several reasons. First, they were unknown to the wider public, while the central initiative group aimed to include prominent figures (well-known poets, writers, and journalists) to ensure *Sąjūdis*'s popularity and make it more difficult for the regime to repress the movement. Secondly, in order to legalize itself, *Sąjūdis* was formed under the banner of perestroika supporters. As a result, dissidents, underground activists, and others already under the government's "magnifying glass" were avoided. The most politically active people of the ethnocultural movement were under KGB surveillance and therefore deliberately avoided direct involvement with *Sąjūdis*. Nevertheless, they remained close to the movement and supported it in various ways – without stepping into the front ranks (interview, Vinclovas 2010).

The situation in Kaunas, the second largest city in Lithuania, was quite different. People from the ethnocultural movement and the related Catholic underground formed one of the most important nuclei of the Kaunas movement, which

8 Before becoming a leader of the Talka Club, he was a hiker and a member of the folk group of the Faculty of History of Vilnius University.

determined the much more unsystematic character of this group (Bartkevičius, Bulota 2011). The *Sąjūdis* Initiative Group of 42 people was established in Kaunas on 10 June 1988. It included two significant figures of the ethnocultural movement, both former political prisoners – Vidmantas Povilionis and Algirdas Patackas (the latter, in particular, became one of the most important leaders of Kaunas *Sąjūdis*). The leader of the Atgaja Club, Saulius Gricius, and folklorist Saulius Dambrauskas were also part of the Initiative Group (Bartkevičius 2009). Later on, the much more radical wing of Kaunas *Sąjūdis* had a considerable influence on the goals and methods of action of the broader *Sąjūdis* movement.

Folk Songs in Mass Rallies

As shown in the previous subsections, the folk revival movement influenced both the Green and heritage movement, as well as the founding of *Sąjūdis*. But what was its influence on the Singing Revolution? Specifically, what was the connection to the songs heard at the mass rallies of the liberation movement?

The term 'Singing Revolution' originated in Estonia, where it was used to describe the spontaneous mass night singing at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds in June 1988 (Brüggemann, Kasekamp 2014). The term was later adopted in Lithuania, particularly due to the importance of rock music – Algirdas Kaušpėdas, the leader of the popular band *Antis*, became one of the important faces of *Sąjūdis*, and the Rock Marches through Lithuania became important heralds of the movement. Additionally, folk songs accompanied every *Sąjūdis* event.

Most often, these folk songs were not performed during the official parts of rallies or other actions. Instead, they would be sung spontaneously by participants afterwards – usually partisan songs, exile songs, or other patriotic pieces, though sometimes also love songs and other widely known folk songs. As Guntis Šmidchens (2014) observes, it was not so much the lyrics themselves (which were usually lyrical rather than militant), but the very practice of singing that mattered. Singing acted as a bonding force, fostering unity and a sense of togetherness.

While choral singing has deeper and stronger roots in Estonia and Latvia due to the influence of Protestantism, in Lithuania, singing folk songs remained a common practice only until the late Soviet era. As the natural tradition of village singing gradually faded, it was taken up by ethnographic and folklore ensembles that began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. The boom in the creation of these folklore ensembles was particularly intense just before the *Sąjūdis* period. As Regimantas Žitkauskas, a member of *Ratilio* from 1983 to 1991, recalls:

> When the time of *Sąjūdis*, the liberation, was approaching, all of Lithuania was 'boiling' with those folklore ensembles. Apparently, this was a form of resistance. Almost every factory had a folklore group. I myself led three folklore ensembles simultaneously and taught people to play instruments (cited in Ramonaitė, Narušis 2018: 129).

Folklore researchers estimate that in 1986, there were 782 folklore ensembles in Lithuania, increasing to 901 in 1987, of which 771 were located in rural areas and 130 in cities (Apanavičius et al. 2015: 23).

It is difficult to estimate what proportion of participants in the rallies and other activities of the Revival period were members of folklore ensembles, but their importance in inspiring spontaneous singing during these events was undoubtedly great. Although many people in society at that time could sing, and there were numerous songs well known throughout Lithuania, folk singing still needed a leader – someone with a strong voice who could take on that role. This is exactly what members of the folklore ensembles did. As Rima Užpalytė-Daugirdienė, a member and one of the leaders of the *Ratilio* folk group from 1977 to 1986, reflects on the role of folklorists:

> If you know how to sing – you have a weapon. I remember myself: a rally at the Cathedral, a sea of people, and it is enough to start – I myself started 'Oh, don't cry, my mother' (*Oi neverk motušėle*) and the whole Cathedral [square] sang, everyone sang. The ensemble gave the ability to sing, the confidence not to be afraid of an audience of thousands, and the skill to lead it (cited in Ramonaitė, Narušis 2018: 137).

Thus, it becomes evident that the folklore movement made a significant contribution to the Singing Revolution – both through cultural resources, by supporting and expanding the repertoire of widely known songs, and through singing skills and leadership, by providing individuals capable of leading songs that fostered a sense of solidarity among the masses.

Conclusions

The folklore revival movement in Lithuania began in the 1960s with regional study expeditions, during which young people – already studying in the city – rediscovered the beauty of village songs and traditional lifestyles that had remained largely untouched by the Soviet regime. Additionally, the revival was fueled by a tradition of everyday singing in Lithuania, which, although in decline, was still alive at the time.

One can agree with Violeta Davoliūte (2014) that the folklore revival movement in Lithuania was part of a broader cultural phenomenon – the "rustic turn" – which serves as a kind of counter-reaction to Soviet modernity. However, it was also a distinct phenomenon with its own specific causes. The folklore movement

simultaneously acted as a response to Soviet ideologization, to the suspension and meaninglessness of Soviet rituals (Yurchak 2006), and to the pervasive boredom that affected society (Vaiseta 2014). For the young people of the era, turning back to pre-modern rural traditions meant discovering an authentic way of life and a renewed sense of community through singing.

The energy and knowledge accumulated during the expeditions sparked a boom of urban folklore ensembles and folklore clubs, while the enthusiasm of young people and their teachers encouraged rural communities to form ethnographic ensembles. These ensembles were formally permitted by the authorities because they aligned ideologically with the regime's goals of supporting "peasant culture" or the culture of ordinary working people (notably, the Lithuanian term for folk culture – *liaudies kultūra* – has a dual meaning: "folk culture" and "working people's culture"). However, from the outset, the ethnocultural movement sought to break free from the regime's control and framework. Perhaps by coincidence, the ethno-cultural movement in Lithuania attracted underground actors, a development that in some cases lent it a non-systemic character and triggered repressive responses from the regime.

Although the ethnocultural movement was not overtly political, it had a significant and tangible impact on the national independence movement in the late 1980s. As resource mobilization theory insightfully argues, social movements do not arise out of nowhere – they require pre-existing social networks, individuals with ideas and connections, and access to organizational resources. These were precisely the kinds of resources the ethnocultural movement provided: first to the Green and heritage protection movements, and later to *Sąjūdis*. For the Green movement, folklore offered inspiration for ecological thinking, organizational experience, and a reliable network of committed individuals. For the early formation of *Sąjūdis*, it provided a space for people unbound by the system – an environment where the idea of a popular front, inspired by developments in Estonia, could take root. And for the growth and vitality of *Sąjūdis*, it contributed with the unifying power of song – bringing people together into a peaceful, cohesive, and morally uplifted community.

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