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# International Folklore Festival *Baltica '88*: the Return of Latvian Folk Music from Exile

# Starptautiskais folkloras festivāls *Baltica '88*: latviešu tautas mūzikas atgriešanās no trimdas

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**Summary** Since 1987, the International Folklore Festival *Baltica* has united the three Baltic States – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – and has been studied in the context of 20th-century Baltic folklore and national awakening under Soviet occupation (Bendorfs 2021; Bertran 2023; Šmidchens 1996, 2014). This article continues previous research by focusing on the festival's importance for Western Latvian exile folklore ensembles. In 1988, *Baltica* offered exiled Latvians the first opportunity to perform in Soviet Latvia. This study examines the participation of Latvian exile folklore ensembles in the *Baltica* festival before Latvia regained independence, analyzing period press and participant memories, with emphasis on the folklore ensembles that took part in the 1988 festival – *Kolibri* (USA) and *Vilcējas* (Sweden). The period reveals how Latvian exile communities, formed after the Second World War, maintained and re-established contact with occupied Latvia, influencing folklore revival on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

**Kopsavilkums** Kopš 1987. gada notiekošais festivāls *Baltica* apvieno visas trīs Baltijas valstis – Lietuvu, Latviju un Igauniju, un līdz šim tas pētīts 20. gadsimta Baltijas folkloras un nacionālās atmodas kontekstā padomju okupācijas apstākļos (Bendorfs 2021; Bertran 2023; Šmidchens 1996, 2014). Šis raksts papildina līdzšinējos pētījumus, akcentējot festivāla *Baltica* nozīmi Rietumu trimdas folkloras ansambļu vidū. 1988. gada festivāls bija pirmā reize padomju okupācijas laikā, kad trimdniekiem bija iespējams muzicēt savā vai savu senču dzimtenē. Rakstā pētīta trimdas latviešu folkloras ansambļu dalība festivālā *Baltica*, pirms Latvijā tika pilnībā atgūta neatkarība, analizējot tā laika presi un folkloras kustības dalībnieku atmiņas un izceļot folkloras ansambļus, kas piedalījās 1988. gada festivālā – *Kolibri* no ASV un *Vilcējas* no Zviedrijas. Aplūkotais vēstures periods atklāj, kā pēc Otrā pasaules kara izveidojušās trimdas latviešu kopienas uzturēja un atjaunoja kontaktus ar okupēto Latviju, ietekmējot folkloras atdzimšanas procesus abpus dzelzs priekškaram.

## Introduction

One of the most significant turning points in the Latvian folklore revival of the 20th century was the International Folklore Festival *Baltica*. It became an event that proved the ability of the Baltics to self-organize and established a broader understanding of folklore revival as a process, which was acknowledged by intellectual authorities of the time (Zālīte 1988c; Klotiņš 1989; interview, Stalts 2018). *Baltica* was first organized during the final stage of the Soviet Union's existence. The first festival took place in 1987 in Lithuania and became a yearly tradition rotating among the three Baltic States. *Baltica '88* – the first event in Latvia – was a life-changing experience for both local folklore revivalists and Latvian folk music practitioners in exile in the West, to whom it offered a first-time opportunity to perform in their or their parents' occupied homeland behind the Iron Curtain.

This article touches on the subject of migration – a painful topic in the history of the Republic of Latvia that has reduced the size of the Latvian nation during various historical periods, especially after the Second World War.[1] In the 1940s, significant Latvian communities formed in the Western world as Baltic refugees found permanent homes after fleeing the country during the war and spending years in displaced persons (DP) camps.

While various terms have been used to describe these communities, this article uses the term 'exile' to refer to Latvians abroad prior to 1991, aligning with the view that the exile period ended with the full restoration of Latvia's independence. Researchers such as Maija Krūmiņa (Krūmiņa 2020/2021: 62) also follow this principle. Another option is the term 'diaspora', which is more precise when referring to Latvians abroad after independence, when the exile community transformed into a diaspora, as its members and their descendants could safely return to a democratic state without fear of repression.

The term 'diaspora' also aligns more closely with the Soviet-preferred term 'emigration', which is not favored among Latvians in the West and has often been used by those who believe that only deportations to Siberia qualify as 'exile' (Freimanis 2004: 66). By definition, 'exile' *(trimda* in Latvian) refers to a form of punishment or deportation (Ceplītis 1991: 628; Karulis 2001: 1061), but this article

1 The estimates of displaced Latvians after the Second World War vary, ranging from 140 000 to 201 000 people, which amounts to up to 10% of Latvia's pre-war population (Haas 2023: 123). To these figures should be added the number of Latvians deported to Siberia under the Soviet regime – approximately 15 400 in 1941 and 42 125 in 1949 (Bleiere 2024, 2025).

specifically focuses on Latvians who fled during the Second World War and later resettled in countries such as the USA, Canada, and Australia.

During the Soviet occupation of Latvia, dislocated Latvian communities came together to preserve their culture and provide a Latvian environment and education for future generations. The community activities of exiled Latvians in the West have been noted and researched by various scholars across different fields – musicologist Arnolds Klotiņš (Klotiņš 2022), literary scholar Eva Eglāja-Kristsone (Eglāja-Kristone 2016), literary scholar Inguna Daukste-Silasproģe (Daukste-Silasproģe 2002, 2007, 2014, 2019, 2023), folklorist Inta Gale-Carpenter (Gale-Carpenter 1996, 2007, 2016), among others, covering a wide range of topics, from questions of ethnic identity to analyses of specific musical traditions.

This paper contributes to the field by comparing different aspects of the folklore revival in Soviet-occupied Latvia and in democratic countries. The article aims to give a deeper insight into the *Baltica* festival by assessing its significance among Latvian folklore revivalists in Western exile and emphasizing how it fostered unity between folklore ensembles from Latvia and abroad. This is achieved by analyzing the participation of folklore ensembles from the West in *Baltica '88 – Kolibri* from Boston, Massachusetts, USA, and *Vilcējas* from Stockholm, Sweden. Both participant impressions and opinions, as well as reflections in the festival – published in both the Latvian SSR and the Latvian exile press – have been reviewed to draw conclusions about how the participation of Western Latvian groups and the festival were represented on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Other sources for this research include the festival's printed materials such as booklets, interviews, and video documentation that reflect *Baltica '88* and reveal the Western participants' repertoire, performance, and impressions of visiting Latvia.

## Between Authenticity and Arrangements: Folklore Revival in Occupied Latvia and the Western Exile

As in other parts of Europe, the Baltic States experienced a revival of folklore in the second half of the 20th century. While activities that meet the definition of folklore revitalization[2] had already taken place in Latvia several decades earlier (Bendorfs 2021: 219–220), from the 1970s onward, it was not only a rebirth of traditional culture but the

2 *Revitalization* is a way of cultural preservation where the link with the original context of the tradition has been lost, and the term was first offered by the American-Canadian anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace (Wallace 1956).

emergence of a broader movement. This movement was driven by a shared desire to discard the layer of Soviet folklore in music and broader Soviet political policies (Boiko 2001: 114).

To differentiate between these two worlds, the search for authenticity became a key criterion for folklore revivalists (Weaver et al. 2023: 63). A line was drawn between authentic folklore and arranged folk music. Over time, when referring to their research and revival activities, folklore practitioners began using the term *folkloras kustība* (folklore movement). Guntis Šmidchens has conducted a remarkable study on this topic across the three Baltic States (Šmidchens 2014, 2017), while Valdis Muktupāvels's research highlights specific approaches to the search for authenticity in Latvia (Muktupāvels 2011: 76–87).

The folklore policy in Soviet Latvia involved the activity of staged folklore ensembles and events that represented the official ideology. Every event's scenario had to be reviewed and approved by the authorities and was required to contain a certain dose of propaganda. The unique features of local culture were dissolved in the vast Soviet glorification machine. Despite – or perhaps as a direct result of – these circumstances, the popularity of revitalizing traditional culture through other means grew. More and more folklore ensembles were formed each year, diversifying the folklore repertoire and "making heritage a part of individual life" (Muktupāvels 2011: 76).

In the Baltic States, this tendency developed into a movement against Soviet artistic folk aesthetics, which Latvian folklorists and revivalists describe as mendacious, artificial, manipulated, staged, exquisitely artistic, folkish, pseudo and falsified (Boiko 2001: 115; Klotiņš 1989: 48; Muktupāvels 2007: 93, 2011: 73; interview, Rancāne 2018; interview, Reizniece 2018).

Latvian ethnomusicologist Vilis Bendorfs emphasizes events that encouraged people to learn unarranged folk songs as they were originally sung (Bendorfs 2021: 219–222). Anda Ābele, who had played the *concert-kokle* (a modernized Soviet version of the traditional Latvian box zither *kokle*) for many years, felt the urge in the 1980s to switch her focus to the authentic musical tradition and took every opportunity to obtain sheet music or folk song texts in their raw, unarranged form (interview, Ābele 2020). Helmī Stalte, the leader of one of the key ensembles, *Skandinieki*, has expressed that it is precisely the "raw" folk songs that carry the power of the nation:

> We wanted to get closer to that pure source because everything was so ornamented and arranged. We understood that if we at least slowly get closer to the pure source, it will give the song a whole other power. It will return that power, which we could then give back to everybody in all the regions (interview, Stalte 2022).

A similar but different division between authentic and arranged traditional music existed in the Latvian communities of Western exile. Of course, there was no

Soviet layer in their musical landscape, but folk music arrangements for choirs, professional instrumental ensembles, and staged folk dancing were much more popular than seeking authenticity in the previously described ways. Several aspects can be identified as reasons for this. Firstly, a remarkable number of artists fled Latvia in the 1940s during the Second World War, and many among them were educated musicians – singers, composers, choir conductors, and other professionals. Longing for their homeland already in the DP camps, they continued making music, increasing through choir singing – a format that allowed more people to sing together (Klotiņš 2022: 395).

Traditional music-making could be appreciated but did not necessarily encourage professional musicians to practice it: "Folk music, sung in a traditional style, is beautiful, and has a unique amount of energy and power, it's impressive. This style of singing does not, however, fit with the concept of 'beauty' for Western classical music" (interview, Aldiņš 2025). This appreciative view, based on a particular aesthetic, is confirmed by Klotiņš's study, which reveals the high popularity of folk song arrangements in exile – both in choir and solo compositions (Klotiņš 2022: 401–402).

Additionally, despite the significant number of Latvians who escaped, at least during the first period of exile (in the DP camps), there was a limited amount of traditional music sources. When fleeing, along with practically usable and valuable things, people took with them some folklore publications, but most of them were mailed or brought to the West later, after Stalin's death, when things changed and the Soviet Union became interested in establishing contacts with the so-called "emigrated citizens of the USSR" (Eglāja-Kristsone 2016: 34–35). In 1955, the Soviets formed the Committee for the Return to the Homeland to promote repatriation, and when this did not prove fruitful, the Committee shifted its focus to popularizing a positive impression of culture in the USSR, recruiting promoters of Soviet ideology in exile, encouraging visits of cultural workers in both directions, and other agendas (Eglāja-Kristsone 2016: 34–58). This included the distribution of books and press published in Soviet Latvia.

However, publications that entered exile through the Iron Curtain had to pass through censorship and contain content appropriate to the Soviet regime. Edgars Dunsdorfs (1904–2002), one of the most important researchers and archivists of Latvian culture in exile, would mark such editions with a paper note that said "read with criticism" (interview, Liepiņa 2022). This example illustrates that the exiles did not trust the Soviet authorities, but the Committee's persistent efforts sometimes succeeded, with some exiled artists visiting their homeland with the Committee's support.

By most Latvian exile organizations, such actions were considered dangerous, unacceptable, and a potential for "communism to stick to people" (interview,

Brēmanis 2022; interview, Ozoliņš 2022), and over time this belief split families, friends, and communities, creating a divide between people on both personal and organizational levels (Eglāja-Kristsone 2016: 57).

Despite such a position and the difficult circumstances for mailing or bringing books out of occupied Latvia, over time, some managed to receive valuable sources and new publications from friends or relatives who remained behind the Iron Curtain. Most often, the sources of traditional music that became available in exile were folk music editions by the notable folklorists and composers Andrejs Jurjāns (1856–1922)[3], Emilis Melngailis (1874–1954)[4], and Jēkabs Vītoliņš (1898–1977).[5]

One of the people creatively bypassing the restrictions was Latvian linguist and folklorist Austris Grasis, who lived and worked in several places in Europe and strengthened the Western Latvian communities during the occupation period. Grasis was one of the first, if not the very first, educators who changed the way Latvian folk music was learned and performed in exile. He focused on an approach based on traditional music-making, traveling to different Western Latvian centers on several continents, giving lessons in summer schools and Latvian camps *3×3*, and calling it "the white voice" (in Latvian *baltā balss*):

> In *3x3*, I was the one who started to teach singing. In Catskills [Latvian summer camp base in Upstate New York's Catskill Mountains – I.V.Ā.], we stood from the audience on the other side of the lake and sang. I taught the white voice [..] not *bel canto,* the beautiful singing but as in folklore, from the diaphragm (interview, Grasis 2024).

He believed that it was necessary to return to traditional singing styles, even if it was not a popular opinion at the time. He also made contacts with folklore revivalists in Latvia. A significant source of information for him was the folklore ensemble *Skandinieki*, led by Helmī and Dainis Stalts – two very influential folklore revivalists who played a pivotal role in fostering and sustaining a communication network both within Latvia and among the Latvians in the West. For decades, the Stalts couple bravely stood up to the marginalization of ethnic Latvian and Livonian culture, Russification, and staged and stylized folklore, becoming one of the symbols of the folklore movement in Latvia.

In the late 1980s, Austris Grasis was in close communication with the Stalts family and spent the final pre-independence period during *Baltica '91* singing in

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3 Jurjāns, Andrejs (1894–1926). *Latvju tautas mūzikas materiāli.* Volumes 1–6, Rīga: A. Grothuss.

4 Melngailis, Emilis (1951–1953). *Latviešu muzikas folkloras materiāli.* Volumes 1–3, Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība.

5 Vītoliņš, Jēkabs (1958–1986). *Latviešu tautas mūzika.* Volume 1, Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība; Volumes 2–5, Rīga: Zinātne.

*Skandinieki*. Such friendships were monitored, as both Grasis and the Stalts were clearly not the supporters of the regime, but somehow *Skandinieki* managed to work fruitfully. Especially after *Baltica '88*, they expressed their anti-Soviet views in the press and, when explaining the meaning of the ensemble's title, compared the Soviets as being in opposition to them:

> *Skandinieki* – those who resonate themselves, as it is said in an ancient book. And right next to it, it is mentioned that there are also such as the "unresonant." Seen through the eyes of the present day, one could say that the occupying power and its servants in our Latvia sought to turn the entire nation into such "unresonant" beings – powerless and without will (Stalte, Stalts 1989: 82).

Not once did the ensemble visit exiled Latvians and participate in significant events in the West, such as the conference of the Latvian center *Abrene* in France in 1989, which was organized by Austris Grasis and was dedicated to defining the best way for Latvia to regain its independence (Drunka 2021), or their own concert tour in North America in the 1990 (Sīmane-Laimiņa 2016: 1). During *Baltica '88*, the ensemble strengthened their ties with exiled Latvians in ways such as taking the musicians of *Kolibri* under their wing (interview, Aldiņš 2025) or accepting an American Latvian, Andris Rūtiņš, into their ensemble just weeks before the festival:

> In Munster, I learned songs from *Skandinieki* recordings, and in 1988, I celebrated *Jāņi* [Latvian Midsummer celebration – I.V.Ā.] in Latvia with my cousin. There was one group of people singing in folk costumes and another group standing and listening. I thought that *Jāņi* is not some concert and sang along. After the concert we started to talk, they were a part of *Skandinieki* and invited me to their rehearsal. I went, and everything happened! I don't quite remember that talk but it was something like: "Listen, Andris, you already know our songs, and you seem so enthusiastic about them. We will have an event in a few weeks, *Baltica*. Wouldn't you like to be part of it?" (interview, Rūtiņš 2024).

Before the 1990s, several albums of Latvian traditional music were released in Western Europe and North America, featuring interpretations of traditional tunes collected or compiled by folklorists such as Jurjāns, Melngailis, and Vītoliņš. Notable examples include the vinyl *The Latvian Folk Ensemble of New York* (Monitor Records, 1960), *Kolibri* (self-released, 1979), and the *Atskan* album by the *Atbalss* ensemble (Sutton Sound, 1982). These three records contain thematically diverse, arranged traditional vocal and instrumental music, revealing the authors' interpretations of traditional music.

One of the instrumental melodies, *Garais dancis* (The Long Dance), in *The Latvian Folk Ensemble of New York* album is described as follows: "The dance is characterized by one of the primitive melodies of which only a very few have survived in dances as compared to the much more abundant ancient song melodies. The arranger has attempted to imitate the ancient harmony in this treatment" (Šķipsna-Rothrock 1960).

This precisely describes how folk tunes were revitalized at that time in the exile – transformed from written sources into free musical interpretations. In Latvia, folklorists and revivalists continued to carry out expeditions, visiting people raised with folklore customs in different regions, thus obtaining new material and knowledge. It was clearly not possible for exiled Latvians to pursue folklore expeditions in Latvia, but some expanded their repertoire by connecting with elders who had also settled outside the occupied territory.

Ensembles such as *Vilcējas* (their artistic leader was Silvija Stroda, an Australian-born Latvian who, among other things, also knew and had played music with Austris Grasis) collected a rather large music collection from first-generation Latvians who fled the country and relocated to Sweden, the USA, and Australia (Lancere 1988b: 7). In 1987, the group released a cassette *Turku pupa* (Turkish Bean; self-released) with songs from various regions of Latvia. The choice of music is unique and not used that much in other recordings of that time.

For example, a large part of the recording consists of lullabies, songs of the Latvian naming ceremony *krustabas*, and shepherd's songs. Part of the recordings creates the illusion that the music is performed outdoors, which is achieved by the echo effect. The melodies have not been arranged, and the cassette's description indicates that folklore collections published in Latvia were used for the album (Akerberga 1995), confirming that sources were available. *Kolibri* also collected music from their predecessors; one example is Tekla Martinsone, a singer of the American Latvian choir *Rota*, who originally came from Latgale, a Latvian region with a distinctive vocal tradition and dialect. Her repertoire is used in compositions such as *Kas tur spīd* (What Shines There) and the *Rota* song from Zvirgzdiene, the latter of which is included on their debut album *Kolibri* and in the retrospective CD *Kolibri atskatās / Kolibri Reminisces* (Radio Latvia, 2009).

Pēteris Aldiņš, one of the artistic directors of the *Kolibri* ensemble, contrary to Austris Grasis's assumption about the tendency to arrange folk music due to limited access to original sources (interview, Grasis 2024), had access to a wide range of folklore publications, and he expands on this issue by highlighting several aspects that were crucial in his creative process:

> There were certain things that I had a comfortable feeling doing but many things seemed better left to the Latvians in Latvia. Maybe this intuition came from my father, a feeling about what is right, what is wrong and where I would be very mistaken. We grew up in a different cultural setting and to me it felt false and would have been difficult for us to change our singing style. At least me and my brother felt a clear core knowledge, or sense, of what was truly Latvian (interview, Aldiņš 2025).

Overall, it can be summarized that the revival of Latvian folklore in the 20th century unfolded differently within Latvia and among Latvian exiles. The process in

occupied Latvia was characterized by attempts to achieve greater authenticity and to shed layers of Soviet ideology, and learn about the traditional contexts of folk music. On the other hand, Latvians in exile exercised the freedom of cultural expression. Despite Soviet oversight and a partly dismissive stance toward compatriots beyond the Iron Curtain, communication persisted between both sides, and the exchange of folklore sources and experiences contributed to the evolution of the folklore revival in both worlds divided by the Iron Curtain.

## The International Folklore Festival *Baltica* in Latvia until the Restoration of Independence

The folklore movement developed and merged with the events of perestroika in all three Baltic States, and in the second half of the 1980s, the idea of a uniting folklore festival was born. Notably, the initiative to create an international folklore festival came from the Soviet authorities (Klotiņš 2008: 113). The Soviet Union, as a member of the International Council of Organizations of Folklore Festivals and Folk Arts (CIOFF), whose guiding principle requires all member states to organize festivals, was criticized for only participating in festivals and not organizing any. According to Liāna Ose, Deputy Director of the E. Melngailis's Folk Arts Centre at that time, this was the reason why the *Baltica* festival was established – to fulfill member obligations and represent the Soviet Union in the council (interview, Ose 2024).

Liāna Ose was one of the key people who made the festival possible, and she points out that the person who supported the idea from Moscow and encouraged the Baltics to organize such an event was Bella Malickaja (*Белла Малицкая*) – the CIOFF representative in the Soviet Union, who was introduced to the Baltic Song and Dance Celebration traditions and believed that Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia had the potential to create such a festival. Ose also reflects that Anatolijs Gorbunovs, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet at that time, was a supporter of the festival among local politicians. He became the chairman of the organizational committee of *Baltica '88*.

Shifting the focus from politicians, Ose emphasizes writers as important figures in the organization of the festival: "Together with Jānis Peters and Māra Zālīte, we fought and made it possible that the festival would happen, and he [Anatolijs Gorbunovs] was the one who said that it would, that we can organize it" (interview, Ose 2024). It was strategically important to win not only the support of politicians. Writers, and especially poets, had great authority, and in the eyes of the nation, they were even seen as the real leaders (Eglāja-Kristsone 2016: 11).

The already mentioned Jānis Peters, a writer and chairman of the board of the Latvian Soviet Writers' Union, in the festival's booklet, between sentences praising the Soviet Union, emphasizes the power of folklore: "Latvians believe in their ancient folklore which has saved the nation from destruction. The folk song [..] has strengthened our people in political and cultural-historical feuds" (Peters 1988: 5).

Māra Zālīte, born into a family of Siberian deportees and a significant Latvian writer who implements folklore motifs in her creative work, wrote the script for the opening concert of *Baltica '88* and emotionally reflected on the festival in one of the most substantial press publications of the time, *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art) (Zālīte 1988b, 1988c). As a member of the Writers' Union, she helped to establish greater recognition of the value of the folklore revival, although it did not come without a considerable amount of struggle:

> The Ministry of Culture took a firm 'old' position and initially did not agree with the stage concepts for the festival's opening, nor with the conceptual line of the script [..]. In parallel, a polemic that reflected the essence of our conflict began in the press – the incompatibility of authentic folklore with pseudo-authentic ostentation, pomposity, and phoniness cultivated over many decades. The contradiction between the real, living, and natural, but underground folk art, and the cosmetic, mannequin surrogate of folklore (Zālīte 1988a: 3).

*Baltica '88* gathered 28 local folklore ensembles and almost as many guest ensembles. Four of them were from Estonia, five from Lithuania, two from Sweden, two from the USA, and one each from Belarus, Bulgaria, Finland, Norway, Poland, Russia, Spain, and West Germany. Among the 21 foreign folklore groups, two were Latvian ensembles – the vocal-instrumental group *Kolibri* (USA) and *Vilcējas* (Sweden). The list of participating Latvian folklore ensembles was compiled following an official audition process. This type of review concert for ethnographic and folklore ensembles was organized for the first time in 1982 (Priedīte 1982: 174).

Prior to that, only performances by staged music ensembles were formally evaluated. However, in 1978, with the help of Liāna Ose, who at the time was working in the Ministry of Culture, *Skandinieki* participated in such an event as a vocal ensemble. Later, folklore groups were integrated into this system and evaluated by experts from Melngailis's center and the Folklore Sector of the Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences (the name then used for what is now the Archives of Latvian Folklore) (Lancere 1988a: 3). Foreign ensembles were invited to take part in *Baltica '88* by the organizers, who reviewed their applications, but a certain role in organizing the participation of the ensembles *Kolibri* and *Vilcējas* was played by Latvian exile organizations such as TILTS.

If one of the dominating ideas of the folklore movement in Latvia was confidence in the power of song against Soviet rule, then it was mirrored in several

activities of the *Baltica '88* festival, including the appearance of all three Baltic national flags in the festival's opening concert.

Although the 1980s in the USSR was a time when barriers – both literal and ideological – began to crash, decisions such as openly displaying the carmine red-white-carmine red flag were still dangerous, and the leaders of the movement could not guarantee that there would be no unpleasant consequences. The thought of the possibility of regaining independence was still very fragile, but the people were determined – they took self-made or, since pre-war times, carefully preserved attributes symbolizing independent Latvia into the Riga Sports Palace, where the opening concert of *Baltica '88* took place on the 13th of July, and bravely walked in (see Figure 1 and 2).

After the concert, flags were carried through the main street of Riga to the Monument of Freedom and further into the Old Town (see Figure 3). While the Soviet press published photos avoiding the appearance of Baltic national symbols, exiled newspapers emphasized the renaissance of these flags with pictures and stories. These events have a lasting footprint in memory to this day: "In those times it was something unbelievable, daring – a feeling like a closed bag is finally opened. Unstoppable" (online comment, Pārupe 2023); "The Sigulda folklore group also had the national flag in 1988. Besides, it was a special one – saved from independence times [..] under a wooden floor in the sauna" (online comment, Skuja 2023). In her reflections on the opening day of the festival, Māra Zālīte wrote: "While scientists still argue, the nation greets these flags. I see more crying faces than laughing ones. These are the sacred tears of joy, these are the tears of hope that our people cry" (Zālīte 1988b: 7). Vilis Bendorfs emphasizes the political significance of these events with a somewhat poignant phrase: "The 1988 festival had more carmine red-white-carmine red flags and tears of happiness than folklore" (Bendorfs 2021: 222), indicating that the experience of political change was more important to many than an attentive revival of traditional music.

Propaganda praising the Soviet regime appeared most frequently in the press at that time, and the festival's official communication – such as booklets, newspapers, and brochures – was no exception. In the booklet of the *Baltica '87* in Lithuania, there is a statement claiming that the political regime had substantially benefited traditional heritage: "Under socialism, national cultures of Soviet republics have flourished. Traditional forms of folklore have been revived" (Baltica 1987: 10). However, in reality, it did the opposite. There was a demand for content that would create a positive impression of the Soviet regime, and the local folklore of occupied nations was often altered or constructed, including the insertion of praise for regime symbols (see Ķencis 2019). In the introductory words, the chairman of the festival's

Figure 1 and 2. Baltic national flags at the opening concert of *Baltica '88*. Personal archive of the *Kolibri* ensemble.


Figure 3. Latvian flags at the Monument of Freedom after the festival opening concert, July 13, 1988. Photo from the collection of Alfrēds Stinkuls, LFK 2264, 354

organizing committee, Minister of Culture of the Lithuanian SSR Jonas Bielinis, writes that the festival is being held "on the eve of the 70th Anniversary of the Great October Revolution" (Bielinis 1987: 4). It is an excellent example of attempts to misrepresent the motives of cultural activities in a non-democratic environment.

After *Baltica '88*, it was decided that it was necessary to establish an organization to manage the festival more independently. In 1989, folklore societies from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia united and founded the folklore association *Baltica*. In the same year, it applied for membership in CIOFF. The organization's statutes required that only independent states could become members, but despite this, in 1990, the association *Baltica* was accepted and included in the organization's list of members. The reason for this may be that many Western countries, including Canada, did not initially recognize the occupation of the Baltic States. Regardless, this was an important show of support for the Baltic States in the process of regaining independence. Special support was expressed by the Nordic folklore organization NORDELEK. Following this crucial step, the next festival in Latvia took place in 1991, with many important representatives from CIOFF visiting Latvia to express their support in person.

*Baltica* is an event of great vitality – to this day, it remains the largest folklore festival in the Baltics, with the most recent festival taking place in Latvia in 2025. It was the 37th time that *Baltica* was held, gathering various Baltic folklore groups and guests united by traditional music and crafts from around the world. The festival has remained significant for Latvians abroad. In 1991, three more exile folklore ensembles came to Latvia – *Dūdalnieki* and their dance group *Dižie* from West Yorkshire, UK; *Ķelnes prāģeri* from Cologne, Germany; and *Teiksma* from Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. The folklore ensemble *Dūdalnieki* (founded in 1983 in West Yorkshire) points to *Baltica* as an important event in the group's development: "The first trip to festival *Baltica* in 1991 was very emotional and gave the drive for further action" (Dūdalnieki 2013: 2). As a member of the group reflected on television after the 1991 festival, during the Soviet occupation years, *Baltica* had served as confirmation that "it has been worth it to come together all these years" (LTV 1991).

## Latvian Folklore Ensembles from the Western Exile in *Baltica '88*

Not only did exiled Latvians have a certain suspicion toward their compatriots living in Latvia; Latvians on the communist side of the Iron Curtain were also cautious about Westerners. Events of the kind and scale of the *Baltica* festival could have two effects – either to unite Latvians living in Latvia and in exile or to highlight the circumstances that distinguished the two groups from each other (Bertran 2023: 111–112; Gale-Carpenter 1996: 96). *Baltica '88* became an example of the former. The week-long festival, with its rich cultural program in various regions of Latvia, provided an environment where tradition could be brought closer to its original context, shedding layers of Soviet propaganda and narrowing the distance between folklore ensembles and their audiences (Klotiņš 1989: 49).

The same can be said about bridging the distance between Latvia and Latvians in exile. Regardless of the differing perspectives on exiled Latvians within Soviet Latvian society, the festival's organizers, participants, and audience warmly welcomed them. In greeting speeches and press articles, exiled Latvians were viewed as part of the broader Latvian community: "A million and a half songs and a million and a half Latvians. About 200 thousand of them emigrated to the West. Today, in this festival, we greet them – our kin from foreign countries – as well" (Peters 1988: 6); "Then our natives from Boston sang – the folklore ensemble *Kolibri*. Salty waters are between us but not in our hearts" (Miesnieks 1988: 4); "Come our own people from foreign lands" (Brila 1988: 12); "One sister sings in Riga, the other sings in Boston" (Laiks 1988b: 8).

Referring to Latvian exile ensembles, unity and a shared sense of strength are recurring themes in articles and interviews. When asked what she would take away from the festival in Latvia, Laura Padega, one of the members of *Kolibri*, replied in a television interview: "Certainly the sincerity, enthusiasm, and the hope and strength that people have now. It is very important for me to see that, and we are very happy to experience it" (LTV 1988).

*Kolibri* was founded in 1976 in Boston by Latvian brothers Mārtiņš and Pēteris Aldiņš. Their father, Valdis Aldiņš, came from the Selonia region and had received a musical education in Latvia before the war. While temporarily living in DP camps and later after settling in the USA, he led Latvian choirs. The Aldiņš brothers grew up surrounded by arranged choir music and had access to their father's excellent collection of traditional music sources. During the Soviet occupation years, the family maintained contact with relatives in Latvia and received music publications from Valdis's brother: "I was especially interested in the materials of Melngailis and Vītoliņš – there were more unfamiliar tunes there with dialects, and it fascinated me" (interview, Aldiņš 2025). Mārtiņš played the *kokle* in the Latvian Folk Ensemble of New York, and later Pēteris also learned to play the *kokle* from its artistic director, Andrejs Jansons.

*Vilcējas* was formed a little later – in 1982 – and, as already outlined in the previous section of this article, they focused on the restoration of the ancient sound in folk songs. According to Silvija Stroda in an interview after the group's first concert in *Baltica '88*, reviving traditional singing in exile comes with a set of difficulties related to the inaccessibility of land:

> We are missing such a base as your ensembles have – our song comes from books, but the connection to the locality, the attachment to the place – we lack that. I would like to hope that we could go to Kurzeme and hear – yes, it sounds like this here, go to Latgale and Zemgale and hear – it sounds like that here. We have to think a lot to make the song sound right (Lancere 1988b: 8).

The challenges she described coincide with the words of Pēteris Aldiņš, who adds that in authentic folk music, besides the connection to the place of origin, the context of the tradition is also important: "In Melngailis's collection I found a section of shepherd's songs. We staged it in America, but I refused to show it in Latvia because we did not grow up with chickens and goats, we were never sent out to herd cattle" (interview, Aldiņš 2025).

From this, it can be concluded that *Vilcējas* aimed to enrich their expertise in native music by physically being on their native land, whereas *Kolibri* worked with their own interpretation of folklore, leaving authentic music-making to Latvians in Latvia. Traveling outside the limited official tourism area of that time – which

Figure 4. *Kolibri* and *Vilcējas* during a concert in Cēsis, July 16, 1988. Photo from the collection of Alfrēds Stinkuls, LFK 2264, 345

included only the cities of Riga, Jurmala, the Salaspils memorial, and Sigulda (Starostina 2017: 69) – was another privilege that *Baltica '88* provided its participants. Even if not entirely freely, with activities in Riga and 12 regions, the festival opened access for Latvian exiles to the land of their ancestors (see Figure 4). Perhaps unrelated, but the land was also mentioned in the group's introductory text as the singers entered the stage: "The song comes across the sea back to the homeland" (LTV 1988).

Silvija Stroda shared her impressions with Latvian Television, acknowledging the connection with Latvia: "I think that we sound just as the folk song sounds here, in Latvia. We can sing along, we have the same songs, we have the same language, and at this time, there is a feeling that we can sing it freely" (LTV 1988). However, formally, until the end of the Cold War, the ensembles of exiled Latvians represented their countries of residence, not the Latvian nation. Austris Grasis, who participated in *Baltica '91*, highlights these circumstances as the biggest issue concerning the participation of his ensemble *Ķelnes prāģeri*: "They wanted, by all means, to declare us as Germans and to make us go under the German flag. Most of us were not ready to go, so we participated with some members that joined only for that time, but it

was not the actual structure of the group" (interview, Grasis 2024). In the opening procession of *Baltica '88*, *Vilcējas* managed to bypass this rule by leaving the Swedish folk dancers with the Swedish flag and adding their own flag of independent Latvia to the beginning of the procession (Akerberga 1988: 4). *Kolibri* also entered the opening concert holding a Latvian flag given to them by some of the local revivalists: "It was a politically powerful moment. Sometimes people say that music is politics, and in this case it was so" (interview, Aldiņš 2025).

Looking back at the event through various sources, it is clear that the exile ensembles were received with extraordinary enthusiasm. In Latvian Television's recording of the festival's opening concert, it is visible that after each song, people ran to the musicians and gave them meadow flowers and flower wreaths. This nonverbal action conveyed deep emotion and appreciation for their work. *Kolibri* performed instrumental music with well-crafted ensemble unity that was warmly received by the audience and reflected in the press: "All the concerts were crowded, participants received ovations, and Latvian boys carried the women of the ensemble off the stage in their chairs – each lifted by four strong male hands" (*Laiks* 1988a: 5). Regarding the heartfelt reception of *Vilcējas*, Stroda reflected: "People gifted each of us a loaf of fresh, warm, just-baked rye bread" (*Latvija Amerikā* 1988). Janta Meža, who took part in the festival with the ensemble *Savieši*, emphasized *Vilcējas* as especially memorable: "I remember them, there was a unity in their sound. I would even say that among the diaspora ensembles, they are still the one I'm most interested in listening to" (interview, Meža 2023).

To sum up, it is safe to say that *Baltica '88* reconnected Latvians from both sides of the Iron Curtain and provided exiles with the opportunity to experience their folklore in its native environment – the cities and rural landscapes of various regions in Latvia, even while still under Soviet occupation. The participation of *Kolibri* and *Vilcējas* was well received and left a strong emotional impact on both the participants and the festival's visitors, regardless of their performance style – whether striving for authenticity or blending folklore with a more modern approach.

## Conclusions

The article explores the relationship between Latvian folklore revivalists in Soviet Latvia and those in exile in the West. It contributes to previous research on the Latvian folklore movement by highlighting the activities of folklore ensembles and revivalists within the Western exile communities. In occupied Latvia, the folklore revival that emerged in the 1970s was driven by a desire to discover and experience folklore in a more authentic form. This included stripping away the layers of Soviet ideological influence in traditional music, reflecting a broader

aspiration to reject Soviet rule in all aspects of life. In contrast, the folklore revival among exiled Latvian communities in democratic Europe, the USA, and elsewhere, was shaped more by academic music traditions – both because many music professionals had gone into exile and due to limited access to traditional music sources.

Contacts between Latvian folklore revivalists on both sides of the Iron Curtain were viewed with suspicion due to Soviet interference and assumed ideological differences. However, individuals such as Austris Grasis, Helmī and Dainis Stalts managed to work around these obstacles and contributed substantially to the revival of unarranged folklore. The folklore festival *Baltica '88* brought Western exile Latvians closer to Latvia by warmly welcoming the ensembles *Kolibri* from the USA and *Vilcējas* from Sweden. It served as a first-time opportunity for such groups to perform in the Latvian SSR and to experience folk songs in their place of origin – a factor that exiled compatriots recognized as both important and lacking in their preservation of tradition.

The festival's publicity reflected the Soviet perspective, portraying the event as an initiative to strengthen Baltic culture and asserting that its revival was thanks to the socialist political order. However, in 1988, the festival turned into an exceptionally patriotic event, becoming the first public display of the national flags of all three Baltic States – bringing Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia closer to their forthcoming restoration of independence.

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