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Popular Music in Lithuania in the 1990s: a Reflection of Wider Problems and Systemic Shifts¹

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Memories of the 1990s in Lithuania conjure up a range of different emotions. On the one hand, there was the upsurge of optimism and joy following the restoration of the country's independence and the achievement of long-awaited freedom through both peaceful means and bloodshed, as well as the opening up of the country to the West and the new opportunities (in terms of work, studies, travel, etc) this entailed. On the other hand, the 1990s were also a gloomy period: anxiety and poverty caused by economic blockades and other persistent economic problems, the insecurity brought on by unfettered capitalism and the resulting proliferation in organized crime; overall, the decade was tainted by myriad political, social, and economic problems. Moreover, the political-social climate had inevitable repercussions for the cultural plane: it is not for

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nothing that culture is called a mirror of society, reflecting the current issues of the time – both triumphs and challenges.

Some sociologists tend to regard the last decade of the 20th century as a traumatic time both for Lithuania and the other countries of the former Soviet bloc² – both because of sudden and abrupt changes and the failure of the much-anticipated bright future to materialise overnight. This may be one of the reasons why, unsurprisingly, the period in question has received less attention in Lithuanian culture than, say, the second half of the 1980s, which was characterised by an increasing sense of freedom, or the euphoric years of the *Sąjūdis*. However, for some time now, a general “revival” of interest in the 1990s has been underway. This revival first begun to gain momentum abroad at the beginning of 2010,³ and eventually took root in Lithuania several years ago. This “nostalgia for the 90s” in Lithuania was perfectly illustrated by the success of the exhibition *The Origin of the Species: 1990s DNA* (held by MO Museum from 05.10.2019 to 20.03.2020), attended by over 140,000 people, and fragments of which are constantly shared on social media, etc.

The exhibition revealed the diversity and ingenuity of the closing years of the last century, and simultaneously, their naïveté, as was also reflected in the popular music of this period. Today, the music in question is often regarded as being of poor quality (substandard recordings, banal lyrics, and naive melodies, harmonies, and arrangements). However, alongside popular and hitherto well-known (and sometimes still performed) songs, there were certain compositions that are nowadays forgotten, but which were topical at the time and offered a realistic picture of the country in the 1990s with all its wounds, struggles, and problems. Although popular music is often underestimated due to a lack of content, research has

2 Piotr Sztompka, “The trauma of social change: A case of postcommunist societies”, in *Cultural trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. by J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. Smelser, P. Sztompka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 155–195, quoted in Rasa Bieliauskaitė, Dovilė Grigienė, Jonas Eimontas, Neringa Grigutytė, “Evaluation of Changes Brought About by Independence on Three Generations in Lithuania”, in *Lithuanian Faces After Transition: Psychological Consequences of Cultural Trauma*, ed. by D. Gailienė (Vilnius: Eugrimas, 2015), 14; Karolis Vyšniauskas, “90-uosius Lietuvoje reikia sukurti”, *Literatūra ir menas*, 2014, <https://literaturairmenas.lt/publicistika/90-uosius-lietuvoje-reikia-sukurti-pokalbis-su-jurijumi-dobriakovu> (last accessed 17.07.2022).

3 Mike Crisologo, “Way Back When? The ‘90s Nostalgia Boom and Why We All Long for a Simpler Time”, *Zoomer*, 2019, <https://www.everythingzoomer.com/arts-entertainment/2019/12/05/90s-nostalgia-boom/> (last accessed 17.07.2022).

proved that this medium is capable of speaking about current events in an authentic and persuasive manner.

Lithuanian Society after the 1990s

Traumatic shifts in the post-Soviet period

In any society located in a definite space-time, certain ideas of social life begin to dominate. According to certain theories⁴ from a retrospective point of view, the music that is created and circulates at a certain time and in a particular space is able to reveal the meanings of various relationships: between people, between people and a nation, people and a community, people and a place, between people and an environment, etc.

Although the restoration of the Independence of the Republic of Lithuania in 1990 brought the nation its long-sought freedom, not all of the changes were positive. The transition from one system (socialist) to another (capitalist) was not smooth, let alone rapid: the process was sometimes understood in terms of an period or an era, for example, the *transition period* or the *post-Soviet era*.⁵ Irmina Matonytė described this specific span of Lithuanian history as the period of time required to overcome the transition from one economic system to another; democratization, the creation of a free market, modernization, etc. were the phenomena that were routinely important to this process.⁶ The following criteria were proposed for assessing whether the transition was successful: the issue of citizenship, which was no longer a source of tension, stable and rising economic indicators, the marginalization of anti-systemic political parties, etc.⁷ The author also suggested calling the 1990s *the post-Soviet period*, as the term denoted a "historically and culturally

4 Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), quoted in Andyn Benett, "Identity: Music, Community, and Self", in *The Routledge reader on the sociology of music*, ed. by J. Shepherd, K. Devine (New York, London: Routledge, 2015), 143, 146; Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), quoted in Andyn Bennett, "Identity", 146; Martin Stokes, "Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music", in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. by M. Stokes, (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 1–27, quoted in Andyn Bennett, "Identity", 143–144.

5 Irmina Matonytė, *Posovietinio elito labirintai* (Vilnius: Knygiai, 2001), 20–21.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

unique period of time,” as opposed to the “antihistorical” and universally applied *transition period*. We also accept this designation, because the post-Soviet period includes particular characteristics of society and social life that were typical of it for specific reasons.

One might have thought that a social transformation involving a shift from a system forced upon a populace to one that was actually desired by it ought to have been accompanied by positive changes and positive states. And yet in reality, major social changes – albeit for the better – can lead to major difficulties that can be emotionally challenging if not traumatic. In fact, potentially traumatic events are not necessarily negative – they can also be caused by some kind of success or other positive social changes that are unplanned and occur suddenly, unexpectedly, and on a large scale.⁸ The collapse of communism was precisely such a case: the people of former Soviet states enthusiastically embraced their newly gained independence, but the consequences, both economic (unemployment, inflation) and social (corruption, crime, and declining status), were distressing for some groups in society.⁹ According to Piotr Sztompka, cultural trauma was most powerfully manifested in the disintegration of a collective identity, and to overcome this trauma, it was necessary to find an interpretation of the past that restored a distorted identity.¹⁰ Sociologist Jurijus Dobriakovas also talked about the 1990s as a traumatic experience in Lithuania and hypothesized that the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were accompanied by a strong emotional uplift, supported by the *Sąjūdis* and rock marches.

It was a euphoric period, full of idealism and the hope that, once we had independence, things would suddenly be different in some miraculous way. But it soon became clear that achieving this “in another way” would take time – first of all a difficult, chaotic, and uncertain period would have to pass. (...) In many ways, the 1990s were a traumatic experience: as if one felt that the processes which contrasted too much with the vision of the Renaissance did not need to be remembered, because they had not been expected,

8 Danutė Gailienė, “Trauma and Culture”, in *Lithuanian Faces After Transition: Psychological Consequences of Cultural Trauma*, ed. by D. Gailienė (Vilnius: Eugrimas, 2015), 15.

9 Ibid.

10 Piotr Sztompka, “The trauma of social change”, quoted in Danutė Gailienė, “Trauma and Culture”, 15.

argued sociologist¹¹ when considering why the 1990s seemed to have been ignored for so long. And it was only relatively recently that nostalgia and sentiment began to give meaning to this period, in an attempt to preserve the memory of a unique period.

Economic, social, and political problems

As in other socialist countries,¹² the post-Soviet period in Lithuania was accompanied by new social problems: the above-mentioned traumatic consequences of regime change, such as unemployment, declining living standards, crime, corruption,¹³ and disillusion with democracy and the free market.¹⁴ These problems were widespread and affected a large part of the population: thus, a public opinion survey conducted in 1999 showed that as many as 81% of Lithuanians indicated that their income was insufficient to live on, while 52% suffered from significant anxiety and were in constant fear of seeing their living standards decline and falling into poverty.¹⁵ There is no denying that the principles of the free market were to blame for these concerns: the population was no longer guaranteed permanent employment, and all the responsibility for ensuring a sustainable income fell on the shoulders of the citizens themselves. Overall, the transition to a market economy was financially painful: in 2004 gross domestic product was only 56% of what it was in 1990, and almost a decade later, it was 66%, and even several years after joining the European Union in 2004, the GDP had not reached pre-independence levels (90%).¹⁶

Another cause of insecurity was increasing crime and violent crime: almost a fifth of the respondents (18%) identified it as the biggest problem facing the country, and almost half (46%) said they felt “anxiety and constant fear” at the prospect of the criminalization of society, especially in large cities.¹⁷ Among other crimes mentioned in the survey,

11 Karolis Vyšniauskas, “90-uosius Lietuvoje reikia sukurti”.

12 Danutė Gailienė, “Trauma and Culture”, 13.

13 Vladas Gaidys, “Lithuania: Transitional Fears After Independence”, in *Fears in Post-Communist Societies*, ed. by E. Shiraev, V. Shlapentokh (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 100–101, 105–106.

14 Irmė Matonytė, *Posovietinio elito labirintai*, 278.

15 Vladas Gaidys, “Lithuania: Transitional Fears After Independence”, 100–101.

16 Vladas Gaidys, “Lietuvos narystės Europos Sąjungoje poveikis socialiniam ir ekonominiam gyvenimui: visuomenės nuomonės apklausų duomenys”, in *Socialiniai pokyčiai eurointegracijos procese*, ed. by L. Kublickienė (Vilnius: Fridas, 2007), 81.

17 Vladas Gaidys, “Lithuania: Transitional Fears After Independence”, 105.

government corruption stood out, with almost half of the respondents (44%) expressing concern over this problem, while the professionals perceived to be most exposed to corruption were police officers, lawyers, and doctors, i.e. people who were mainly responsible for public order and health;¹⁸ this led to the conclusion that it was becoming increasingly difficult to trust one's country of residence. In the Soviet Union, the truth was hidden and people had little faith in the government or the system, and yet the data from independent Lithuania give the impression that the people had little confidence in their post-communist authorities, either. The absence of a dependable legal system was also evident in the fear of complete lawlessness professed by a third (34.4%) of the respondents.¹⁹ In addition, some people (approximately 13%) believed that there were domestic enemies, including KGB agents, who they believed were working inside the country against the interests of the state.

The above-mentioned economic and social problems seem to have strongly influenced public sentiment. It was not surprising, therefore, that people's confidence in both the free market and long-sought democracy declined over the course of the decade. In 1992, 80% of the respondents were in favour of creating a free market in Lithuania, but by 1997, this figure fell to 68%, and opposition increased even more sharply, from 7% to 26%.²⁰ Meanwhile, negative attitudes towards the emerging democracy peaked a year earlier, i.e. in 1996, when, as many as 73% expressed partial or complete dissatisfaction with it, compared to 52.5% in 1992.²¹ Matonytė explained this data in terms of elitism: 1) democracy and the free market did not by themselves mean a better socio-economic order, and 2) the elite tendencies observed at the time could have made the general population feel like they were hostages being exploited by those in power.²² The latter argument clearly correlated with the aforementioned problem of government corruption and also visually demonstrated the attitude of ordinary people towards those in power who abused their position, worked only for personal gain, and served the needs of a handful of powerful people, but not the needs of the general public.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 108.

20 Irmina Matonytė, *Posovietinio elito labirintai*, 278.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

Despite their distrust of the state, Lithuanian people cared about preserving the nation's culture and traditions. Xenophobic attitudes were also in evidence: according to a survey conducted in the late 1990s, almost a quarter of the population (23%) felt anxious about a possible "Islamic invasion" of the state,²³ and almost half of the respondents expressed concern about the loss of their culture and traditions.²⁴

Such fears have been substantiated by scientific research: the Estonian sociologist Aili Aarelaid-Tart observed a process of cultural change during this period, whereby people began saying that nothing was sacred, that the most important traditions were no longer being observed, and that things had ceased to function in the new conditions.²⁵ Aarelaid-Tart also noted in her research other similar attitudes: "Western values are unacceptable", "there are no morals left in society", or "it's impossible to survive nowadays."²⁶ These observations are confirmed by the above-mentioned statistics, which revealed an increasing negativity towards features typical of the West (the free market, democracy, immigration of foreigners), a lack of morals (corruption, criminalization), and daily hardships (unemployment, poor economic situation). On the other hand, even today, thirty years after regaining independence and in conditions of quite rapid economic growth, some of the above issues remain at least somewhat relevant (criticism of foreign immigration, xenophobia in general,²⁷ and one of the highest levels of poverty in the European Union, etc.).²⁸

23 At that time, there was a debate over whether Lithuania would be able to demonstrate sufficient tolerance of refugees and other immigrants from countries such as Afghanistan, Turkey, Somalia, etc. Lithuania had a small number of such migrants who were living illegally or whose visas had expired (Vladas Gaidys, "Lithuania: Transitional Fears After Independence", 102).

24 Vladas Gaidys, "Lithuania: Transitional Fears After Independence", 102.

25 Aili Aarelaid-Tart, *Cultural Trauma and Life Stories* (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2006), quoted in Rasa Bieliauskaitė, Dovilė Grigienė, Jonas Eimontas, Neringa Grigutytė, "Evaluation of Changes Brought About by Independence on Three Generations in Lithuania", 83.

26 Ibid.

27 Thus, according to data from a 2019 survey gathered by the Lithuanian Social Research Centre, 27.4% of the population were unwilling to live in a neighbourhood with refugees, 35.9%, with Muslims, 32.4%, with Chechens, 14.9%, with black people, and 8.9%, with persons of other races (http://www.ces.lt/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Visuomen%C4%97s-nuostatos-apklauskos-rezultatai_20191.pdf).

28 Based on the 2018 Eurostat data, Lithuania ranked third among EU member states in terms of its poverty level (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Income_poverty_statistics&oldid=440992).

Identity shift: towards the West

In addition to changes in market mechanisms and the form of governance, another factor worth mentioning is the East-to-West transition during the post-Soviet period, although in this case the transition was more identity-related. The process of becoming a Westerner, although seemingly attractive and desirable, was fundamentally difficult: first, it was necessary to bid farewell to a familiar system, which, whatever it was, provided security and was understandable – as a consequence of which everything that was familiar and to which one had been accustomed suddenly lost its meaning.²⁹ Meanwhile, Western culture and the Western socio-economic system were known mostly from hearsay and rumors, as well as from what filtered through about Western way of life from the heavily censored Soviet press and education institutions; as a consequence it was naturally difficult to suddenly adapt one's own habits and customs to Western ways.³⁰

One of these specific “Western ways” was business management, which, according to Algis Mickūnas, was embraced by Lithuanian entrepreneurs motivated by the new freedoms and the image of Western business presented in the Soviet media: a capitalist world governed by unrestricted and brutal competition.³¹ As a consequence, the freedom granted by the market economy and the image of capitalist freedom fostered during the Soviet era crystallized into the belief that one could make a living or otherwise make money by any means, including by getting rid of competitors – which created the conditions that were ripe for the emergence of the Lithuanian “mafia.”³²

Moreover, as Mickūnas noted, in addition to the social aspects of “the West”, considerable attention was also paid to material issues: thus, new products, previously unseen and never possessed were assigned special prominence; commercials for consumer goods promising a joyful and carefree life flooded various media channels.³³ Naturally, there was an increasing appetite for consumption, and this hunger, incidentally, has barely abated even today. Another issue connected with the materialistic

29 Algis Mickūnas, *Lithuania and Globalization* (Vilnius: Mykolo Romerio universitetas, 2016), 120.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 125.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 127.

elements of Western culture was that of a changing physical identity: Lithuanians not only had to learn to “think like Westerners”, but also to “look like Westerners”. Both men and women were confronted with new codes of dress and behaviour presented in advertisements. According to Mickūnas, “To be Western did not mean just accepting the philosophical principles underpinning Western life, but more specifically, ‘embodying’ the images, techniques, shapes, and styles that make one a westerner.”³⁴ Therefore, Mickūnas argued, everything that was new and contrasted with the former Soviet way of life had to be embraced, and one’s identity was increasingly defined by one’s appearance: “one’s body was an acquisition to be worn and exhibited, signifying that the wearer has become global and joined world history.”³⁵

Alongside clothing, other important factors that marked one’s arrival in the “global world” were personal manners and habits. Mickūnas noted the behaviours typical of women and men adopted from the visible image of the West: for women – very high heels, swinging hips, and “icy” facial expressions (attributes taken from models in ads), while men were expected to talk excessively loudly on their mobile phone (thereby demonstrating the fact that they could afford such gadgets, a very expensive novelty at the time. Mickūnas also mentioned another interesting detail: sometimes young people who lacked the cash for costly phones would buy toy substitutes and pretend to chat on them while walking down the street).

In addition to the newly functioning market economy, the climate of materialism, and the changes in physical image, the population was also confronted with new values promoted by the mass media: soap operas contained scenes showing explicit physical love and sexuality; television and film promoted lax morals, ridiculed the government, and exposed public scandals, while music and music videos, full of half-naked and sexualized bodies, became one of the most prominent outlets of “Western values”. Of course, it is important to bear in mind that all this mainly applied to the younger generation – many people were unable to change their ways of thinking or lifestyles and longed for the “normality” of the past.³⁶

34 Ibid., 126.

35 Ibid., 127.

36 Ibid.

The most significant objective changes of the post-Soviet period in Lithuania were higher unemployment, deterioration of the economy, rising crime and the dangers this entailed, and corruption. The consequences of the above-mentioned socio-economic changes were disillusion with the free market and democracy, a growing sense of insecurity (or even anxiety/fear), a heightened sensitivity to external risks (in the form of immigrants, state wreckers, and spies), and anxiety over threats to one's own culture and traditions. It can be argued that the latter sense of insecurity was a very natural consequence not only of immigration, but also of the shift from Eastern to Western culture and the new Western values that the younger generation was particularly keen to embrace.

Lithuanian Popular music in the 1990s: a Mirror of Everyday Life

As an integral part of social life and an active social indicator, popular music in Lithuania in the 1990s can also – in addition to the various objective indicators discussed above – be regarded as a “mirror” of that period, at least in certain areas. Paralleling changes in the economy, crime, the law, as well as in societal habits and moods, were shifts in musical tastes. These shifts were time-specific, reflecting the conditions and problems affecting the country in the 1990s.

The general dilemmas that Lithuania faced in the 1990s (*how to develop the economy?* (in the case of the government), *how to survive financially?* (in the case of ordinary people) *how to eliminate crime, corruption, and other illegal activities?* *how to become part of the West?...*) likewise affected cultural matters. According to Dobriakovas, the (sub)cultures that emerged at that time were rather clumsy efforts; despite their lack of real knowledge of Western cultural trends, Lithuanians' ignorance was outweighed by their enthusiastic adoption of Western fashions:

For a decade we had to live with a willingness to move forward and an ignorance of how to do so. It was a time when few people followed the rules because the rules were still developing. The first ravers or rappers were appearing on the streets, though nobody

knew for sure what rave or rap was. One thing was clear: it was good.³⁷

In addition, Lithuanians not only had limited theoretical understanding of Western trends, but also no practical knowledge of what this or that trend actually was:

role models were coming from the West, but it was not entirely clear how to incorporate them. For example, how could one become a fan of alternative rock in Lithuania? One only saw external things, such as photos of musicians; however, what it meant in everyday life, what way of life they conveyed, was left to personal interpretation.³⁸

This observation can be compared with Mickūnas' comment on the desire to assimilate Western fashions, behaviour, and lifestyle based only on advertisements, television, and other media channels, without the lived experience of the West.

Everyday violence and 'wild rules'

In addition to a lack of theoretical and practical knowledge, the material component also presented a hindrance. Prevailing economic deprivation led to limited opportunities both for possessing creative tools (instruments, synthesizers, etc.) and for image building. Overall, from the perspective of the present, the widespread amateurism and naïveté of the music scene of that time sometimes evokes an ironic smile, especially knowing the subsequent transformations the musicians underwent. Back in 1995 Egidijus Dragūnas, nowadays known as perhaps the worst hooligan in pop culture, released the album *Kontrolinis šūvis* [Head Shot] with the rap-hip-hop group *SEL* (Bomba Records, 1995). In the video of the song, whose title is the same as the album, the performers appeared in fashionable wide, loose-fitting jackets, worn by representatives of the above-mentioned music styles. But instead of baseball caps, the main performer wore a cone-shaped children's cotton hat. The hat and the pink jacket ironically contrasted with the rap lyrics about everyday street crime:

I saw you shooting/, you don't lift an eyebrow / You pull the trigger
with an imperceptible movement / Your hand doesn't jump
upwards / Accustomed to shots like a pianist to the keys / A head

37 Karolis Vyšniauskas, "90-uosius Lietuvoje reikia sukurti".

38 Ibid.

shot / A new victim is lying / The bullet is just waiting / To bathe in blood”.

Incidentally, it was not just the image that was eclectic – the album included compositions of different styles. Nėrius Pečiūra, the host of the programme *Back to the 90's* on the radio station *Geras FM* (an important figure in the world of music at that time, who will be discussed later) noted the reviews in the press at the time, describing the album *Head Shot* as surprising the listener with its stylistic diversity – “from the bumps of techno (...) to trash metal chords (...). The album offered both lyrical ballads and gangsta rap” (Pečiūra n.d.b).

SEL was one of a number of bands which focused on the problem of rising crime. In the song *Kiemas* [The Yard] from the album *Kaip ir tu* [Like you], the group rapped about local everyday life, in which a peaceful childhood had been replaced by one of violence:

I was born here, my young days were spent here / As young children, we were playing Indians / And when we grew up, matured, and became strong / These bloody wars started in the yard” The song is an authentic story about the author’s relationship with place and revealed the role of music as “social glue”: “We all belong to one group / We are united by the music we were listening to.

Another group that dedicated their work to the bloodshed of everyday life was the gangsta rapper group *UZI* from Klaipėda. Various sources note that their first and only album *Surišti viena virve* [Bound by One Rope] was probably the strongest rap “shot” in Lithuania at that time and left an indelible mark on the history of Lithuanian rap.³⁹ If the aforementioned *SEL* album was diverse stylistically and content-wise (from criminal to sweet teen romance), the *UZI* disc was like an ode to the brutality of life. Reviewers noted that “the teenagers from *UZI* looked like real street life professionals from the port city,”⁴⁰ talking about tough and dangerous

39 Nėrius Pečiūra, n.d. *Atgal į 90-uosius*, <http://www.gerasfm.lt/category/atgal-i-90-uosius/page/22/> (last accessed 25.09.2020); Arnoldas Remeika, “Kylanti repo žvaigždė nemėgsta ‘pizonų’ ir ‘zylių’”, in *Klaipėda*, 2004, <https://klaipeda.diena.lt/dienrastis/draugai/kylanti-repo-zvaigzde-nemegsta-pizonu%E2%80%9D-ir-zyliu%E2%80%9D-130155> (last accessed 17.07.2022); Liudas Zakarevičius, “Kadaise garsi grupė ‘EXEM’: visada jutome spaudimą kurti popmuziką, tačiau likome ištikimi sau”, in *Delfi.lt*, 2016, <https://www.delfi.lt/veidai/muzika/kadaise-garsi-grupe-exem-visada-jutome-spaudima-kurti-popmuzika-taciau-likome-istikimi-sau.d?id=72887942> (last accessed 17.07.2022).

40 Kostas Pistoletas, “Alfa.lt pristato: labiausiai neįvertintos Lietuvos grupės”, in *Alfa.lt*, 2007, <https://www.alfa.lt/straipsnis/156029/alfa-lt-pristato-labiausiai-neivertintos-lietuvos-grupes-balsavimas> (last accessed 17.07.2022).

everyday life – violence, drugs, weapons, ruthless group rules, etc. The *UZ*'s lyrics described explicit scenes of violence, and occasionally in quite a lot of detail:

I saw a snitch in the coffin, (...) BG saw him, BG caught him. He was taken outside and kicked, the fist was clenched, and the snitch was silent, he no longer had teeth, his leg was broken, this is the price he pays now, this is the price he will pay tomorrow if he doesn't stop, if he yields" (*The Snitch from Bound by One Rope*).

The group's lyrics reflected the themes of American gangsta rap – murder, drugs, misogyny, etc. *UZI*'s songs are full of savage imagery, e.g.

Late at night in January, someone didn't come back, a good family father didn't come home, one leg found in a lake, and other never to be seen. His head hanging from a tree – the head of the family" (*Padaryk tu tą, ką turi padaryti* [Do What you Have to Do]).

The group also openly rapped about other criminal activities, such as the drug business: the song *Boso bizz* [Boss Biz] was about a "boss" who had been traveling to Asia "not as a tourist" for twenty years to feed "hungry people", because "everyone wants to relax and disconnect from the world". The song elevated the powers of marijuana and personified it ("my moll is Mary Jane" (one of the many slang terms for marijuana).

Just as was the case with *SEL*, locality was also an important theme in the songs of *UZI*, only in the latter case it was expressed in authentic local slang. During his radio programme, Pečiūra quoted what the media said of the group at the time: "In their lyrics, *UZI* abandoned excessive swearing and employed the authentic slang used by many Klaipėda rappers – hoppers" Quite a few sources highlight the strong and active hip-hop culture of Klaipėda (its members used to refer to themselves as hoppers), and the city had a popular meeting point for that subculture, the club *Senoji prieplauka* [The Old Pier], where freestyle rap sessions were held until late at night. According to the group's producer Matas Petrikas, he, together with *UZI*'s members, was looking for ways to convey "the atmosphere of Klaipėda's young hip-hop fans" and to separate the rap of *UZI* from the Vilnius-based projects *SEL* and *ŽAS*.⁴¹ One of their essential tools was a language enriched by the spirit of the local culture and community, which helped to express both nativity and emotional credibility: "we saw the need to seek authenticity and destroy the

41 Liudas Zakarevičius, "Kadaise garsi grupė 'EXEM'".

boundaries of the Lithuanian language, to find support in local slang and a real and imaginary dialect.”⁴²

Another group that rapped about the hardships of everyday existence was ŽAS from Vilnius. The group’s first album *Ū-ŽAS* [the Russian word for horror] touched on such topics as street crime, poverty, and drugs. The violence that pervaded everyday life was best conveyed in the song *Pabudome ir kelkimės* [We Woke up, Let’s Rise up]. The title was an obvious allusion to the famous song from the *Sąjūdis* period, i.e. the Hymn of Rebirth, recorded at the time by Rolandas Paulauskas and the *Ažuoliukas* Choir. Paulauskas’ anthem, dating from the earliest days of Lithuanian Independence, called on people to stop crying, moaning, and hiding and to take matters into their own hands if they wished to achieve the freedom they desired (“The dawn has broken – we woke up, let’s rise up!”). However, ŽAS’s version mocked this rallying cry that sounded so inspiring at the time, investing it with a new meaning to reflect the new reality that had not brought the expected happiness and prosperity: “Get up, get up, brothers and sisters, Lithuania’s spring of crime greets you. Such are the times”). The ŽAS rapped against a menacing musical background. In newly independent Lithuania, people were stirred not by hope but by gunshots (“You wake up at six in the morning from shooting in the yard”), and the natural state was injustice: the story of a poor guy with his ear cut off and an eye gouged out concludes with the words “you can’t be angry, there are no laws in this world”) The ŽAS song *We Woke up, Let’s Rise up* basically reflected the mood of Lithuanian society at the time – a loss of faith in democracy and justice and a fear of crime-ridden everyday existence.

Other songs on the album touched upon the experiences of drug use (the song *Per žoles į žvaigždes* [Through the Grass (Drugs) to the Stars] spoke about the pleasures of smoking marijuana), or impoverishment (the song *Jis gyvena stotyje* [He Lives at the Station] painted a picture of a homeless person: a man who used to live a normal family life appears on the street, begging for money, and his biggest pleasure was alcohol). In a lyrical triphop-style composition called *Žasai rimti, bet negerti negali* [ŽAS are Serious Guys, but They Can’t Help Drinking], the group demonstrated their empathy with those doomed always to be down on their luck – the homeless driven into extreme poverty, those who had lost hope, who had died, etc. Compared to *SEL* and *UZI*, ŽAS’s album was more amusing and

⁴² Ibid.

light-hearted, as evidenced by the song titles (*If You Don't Drink Milk, You Won't Die of Milk, Through the Grass (Drugs) to the Stars*) and their performance style characterised by gentle irony.

Disillusion with the government and a narrow-minded society

In addition to everyday crime, Lithuanian popular music at the time dealt with topics considered hitherto unsuitable. Western freedoms resulted in songs about drugs, sex, and prostitution as well as criticism of the government, etc. Liberal Western attitudes not only began to penetrate the lifestyle, values, and outlook of Lithuanians, but also the creative content of their music. It is important to note, however, that even before independence, punks⁴³ were known for their bold, avant-garde content, rebelling against the Soviet system and spreading the spirit of freedom.

Punk bands remained active throughout the 1990s; although they no longer had to fight against the Soviet system, other problems became relevant: the current government, the commercialization of music, etc. Thus, in 1992, the alternative rock band *Svastikos, sukitės greitai* [Swastikas, Spin Fast] performed a notorious song called *Atbėgo kariūnai, sušaudė Brazauską* [Cadets Came Running and Shot Brazauskas Dead], in which the phrase was constantly repeated with the sound of gunshots in the background. Interestingly, various commercial radio stations broadcast the controversial song. Another aggressive song aimed at a specific politician was *Sudorok Šleževičių* [Do away with Šleževičius] (1996), performed by the band *Turboreanimacija* and considered to be one of the most characteristic punk anthems of that time. It attacked the

43 The Lithuanian punk movement was born in Vilnius at the beginning of the 1980s and gained momentum in the second half of the decade. Probably the most prominent figures of the scene were Nėrius Pečiūra-Screwdriver and Vikintas Šimanskas-Icicle. In 1986, they formed the country's first punk band, *WC*, and in 1987–1989, organised punk rock festivals in *Alumnatas* Courtyard of Vilnius University. Pečiūra was the leader of the rock group *Už Tėvynę (UTV)* [For the Homeland (UTV)], Šimanskas, as well as of the bands *Genocidas Raudonajam Interventui (G.R.I.)* [Genocide for the Red Interventionist (G.R.I.)] and *Emocinis karas* [The Emotional War]. Other bands forming the punk movement included *Dustas-nuodai* [DDT is a Poison], *Erkė maiše* [Mite in the Bag], *33 % kiaulių pakeliui į Vatikaną* [33% of Pigs on their Way to the Vatican], *Šiaurės kryptis* [The North Direction], *Katastrofa* [Catastrophe] (from Panevėžys), *DAAP* (from Kaunas) and other. One striking feature of Lithuanian punk music and culture was its patriotism; punks supported the idea of a free Lithuania even before the emergence of the *Sąjūdis*. Šimanskas argued that, "in reality, the punk movement began earlier than the *Sąjūdis*. We welcomed that movement with similar ideas that were already in our hearts." (Antanavičius 2018).

then Prime Minister of the Republic of Lithuania Adolfas Šleževičius: “A liar will come to his last day, Do away with Šleževičius, otherwise he’ll do away with you”. To quote the then member of the group Kastytis Minkauskas, the writing of the song was motivated by a perceived lack of justice after the Prime Minister implemented reforms that were unfavorable for pensioners, and also by the banking crisis, during which Šleževičius withdrew his deposit from his bank just before it collapsed.

Turboreanimacija, one of the most prominent punk rock bands at the time, boasted a repertoire of songs with destructive themes, such as exaggerated glorification of alcohol consumption (*Tik alus išgelbės mus* [Only Beer will Save us], *Oi sunkiai sunkiasi alus* [Oh How Hard the Beer Flows], *Dabar aš noriu tik alaus* [All I Want Now is a Beer], *Alus* [Beer], *Dar liko nenugertas butelys* [A Bottle is still Left Unattended]; a critique of universally cherished institutions and values (*Meną šalin* [Down with the Arts], *Sportas yra šūdas* [Sport is Crap]; and anarchist ideas (*Anarchijos idėja* [The Idea of Anarchy], *Tegul ateina laisvė blogiui* [Freedom to Evil], *Kontrkultūra jėga* [Counterculture is Power]). The group openly declared war against mainstream culture: “We are old opponents of art, calling for total nihilism and the complete destruction of all art that was before us as well as the elimination of parasitic behaviour in society. I sympathize with counterculture and its manifestations.”⁴⁴ Criticism of the government was an important topic: *Turboreanimacija* reflected the negative public mood and declining faith in democracy and state justice. As a former member of the group Linas Kriaučiūnas put it, “In fact, in the first years of Independence, we did not see any difference between the Soviet era and the new state. Everything was messed up and corrupt. One flag had replaced another, yet basically the same faces were still in power. They all looked the same to us.”⁴⁵ They made their views of the government most explicit in the song *Mėšlas – valdžia* [Manure is Power] (1997): “In my eyes you are the enemy, the freedom of others is not important to you, lazy, hypocritical, and stupid – your scene will be catcalled, manure is in your head, power is in your mind, manure is power”.

44 *Turboreanimacija*, “Kontrkultūra – jėga”. Track 11 on *Play Loud*, Self-released cassette, 1992, <https://www.pakartot.lt/album/play-loud/kontrkultura-jega> (last accessed 17.07.22).

45 Ignas Baurėnas, “Turboreanimacija: visuomet svajojome surengti pankroko festivalį Vingio parke”, in *Manomuzika.lt*, 2016, <https://manomuzika.lt/2016/11/turboreanimacija-visuomet-svajojome-surengti-pankroko-festivali-vingio-parke/> (last accessed 17.07.2022).

Another rock band to lambast social inequality and problems was *Bix*, which had formed in 1987 and began enter the limelight during the 1990s. To quote the band's leader Saulius Urbonavičius-Samas, the newly formed band wrote high-octane, (auto) ironic, and at the same time meaningful songs in the hope of "liberating people" from an oppressive, uncertain and unstable environment (Zilnys 2017). *Bix* mocked narrow-minded people, their philistine tastes, and consumerism, and also employed autoirony (e.g. *Sušikta profesija* [The Fucking Profession] (1995) was a sarcastic song about hungry and impoverished musicians). *Vagis* [A Thief] (1996) addressed a number of social issues. One of these was rampant crime, in particular theft: the hero of the song complains about someone stealing his "girlfriend", his "motorbike", his "tape recorder", and his "car"; however, the hero's gang takes violent revenge: they caught the thief, twisted off his head, and "ripped his ass to shreds". At the same time, the song highlights the decline in values and the absence of solidarity in society (*lietuvis lietuviui – vagis* [a Lithuanian was a thief to another Lithuanian], and anti-nationalist attitudes (*važinėjo po rusyną* [drove around Russian lands]: *rusynas* [Russian lands] has a derogatory meaning). Finally, the song highlighted the band's attitude to art and revealed its hostility towards mainstream music: "he listened to terrible, disgusting pop music."

Like punk rockers, *Bix* promoted the ideas of freedom via the themes discussed above, which are commonly considered awkward or unusual for the professional stage. Despite their obnoxious and rebellious image, typical of underground performers, the band were hugely popular (not only in Lithuania, but also abroad, where they mostly performed for a while, only giving concerts in their home country a couple of times a year). As Urbonavičius said,

during the revival period, people were open, and they accepted our music, which was complex and difficult to comprehend". (...) *Bix* was a group with a shard of glass in its hand – speaking and singing sarcastically about Lithuania as a country where villagers made "moonshine", wet their pants, and scattered in the woods.⁴⁶

46 Ramūnas Zilnys, "Bix' lyderis Samas – apie šlovę, skurdą, alkoholį ir sniegą išsisiotą Lenina", in *Lrytas.lt*, 2017, <https://www.lrytas.lt/zmones/muzika/2017/11/15/news/-bix-lyderis-samas-apie-slove-skurda-alkoholi-ir-sniege-issisiota-lenina-3461579/> (last accessed 17.07.2022).

Thanks to their worldview, *Bix* could be defined as a punk band: according to Eric Hannerz, punk culture (or any other subculture) revolved around three axes – difference (how did one want to be different, and from what?), freedom (what were they trying to achieve and why?), and action (how, why, and where did they want to assert their difference and freedom?).⁴⁷ *Bix* possessed all three – they wanted to be different from the prevailing political and social environment, they spread ideas criticising and mocking society through open and uncensored texts, and engaged in long-term and consistently creative projects through which they expressed their ideas. However, the *Bix* phenomenon was interesting in that punkism contradicted the mainstream (the definition of punk was the absence of any signs of mainstream, so a punk could never be part of the mainstream),⁴⁸ and yet its mainstream popularity was undeniable.

Pop: not just romance

On the other hand, in general, the dividing line between underground and mainstream music seemed to blur during these years, at least in terms of popularity. The Top 10 songs of 1990, chosen by the audience of the Lithuanian Radio Youth Music and published in the newspaper *Lietuvos aidas* [Echo of Lithuania] in December 2006, come as a surprise, since the list included compositions and groups that would normally be categorized as outside the mainstream. Such songs included *Šmėkla* [Spectre] performed by the metal band *Katedra* [The Cathedral], *Lietus, išplaunantis akis* [The Rain Washing Eyes] by the heavy rock band *SBS*, and *Rožės* [Roses] by the godfather of punk Pečiūra. Pečiūra, who made it into the Top 10 at the time, said that some people were really shocked by the results: “I got into the charts, and this was unfathomable to some people, some artists, who may have overidealised the ‘purity’ of the underground.”⁴⁹ However, it would seem that audiences in Lithuania at that time, deprived many underground bands of their “purity”, because their songs, in which they espoused freedom of speech (including liberal values) reflected their desired turn to the West.

47 Erik Hannerz, *Performing Punk* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 36.

48 Ibid., 196.

49 Mindaugas Peleckis, “Nėrius Pečiūra-Atsuktuvus apie undergroundo ‘skaistumą’, Černobylių ir eksperimentininkų žaidimą su ugnimi”, in *Minfo.lt*, 2018, <https://www.minfo.lt/zmones/straipsnis/nerius-peciura-atsuktuvus-apie-undergroundo-skaistuma-cernobyli-ir-eksperimentininku-zaidima-su-ugnimi> (last accessed 17.07.2022).

The fact that underground performers competed with “real” popular culture almost on an equal footing may have led to the liberalization of pop music content. One might speculate whether the latter’s increasingly openness of expression and, at the same time, simpler execution (lower requirements for performance and sound equipment, etc.) led to a gradual decline in the popularity of (punk) rock and other underground styles.

Around 1996, the trips abroad ended (...), and a pop wave exploded in Lithuania; phonogram groups touring culture centres became popular. There was no room left for rock music, because it had become simply too expensive – after all, it was live music that required good equipment”

said Urbonavičius.⁵⁰ And, indeed, in the second half of the 1990s, Western-influenced mainstream *eurobeat* began to take off in Lithuania, which was simple in terms of music (customary harmonic, melodic, and structural patterns) and contrasted sharply with experimental sound. On the other hand, despite the naive musical expression of this new popular style, the lyrics could sometimes be surprisingly open and reflect life at the time.

Thus it was that in the second half of the 1990s, the dance band *Karališka erdvė* [Royal Space], which earned fame through its songs *Karalių paslaptys (Iš lėto leidžiasi saulė)* [Secrets of the Kings (A Slowly Setting Sun)] and *Šokių karštligė* [Dance Fever], and which wrote banal songs about young love, friendship, and dancing, also sang about prostitution. The lyrics of *Verslas* [The Business] (1996) contained the words: “Although you’re a beauty, you don’t think about who you’d be if you weren’t involved in this business.” The issue raised in the song was that girls wanted to make money and therefore no longer cared about morals, their health, etc. (“You, prostitutes, (...) you want only one thing, you want money as a cow wants its hay”, “Poor, stupid girls, attacked by all sorts of diseases, it’s scary to even touch you”). A later song, *Apgavai* [You Deceived me] (1998), presented a second-person story about a girl lured into the trap of prostitution – a guy (“he’s a pimp, he tries to hook you”) praised her beauty and promised her a job as a model abroad, when in reality the girl was sold into sexual slavery in a filthy brothel: “You’ll fall

50 Ramūnas Zilnys, “Bix’ lyderis Samas – apie šlovę, skurdą, alkoholį ir sniegą ‘išsisiotą’ Lenina”.

into the mire of prostitution, (...) nothing will be left of your beauty, you'll become a stinking drug addict who can only relax with drugs." The girl was promised a bleak future without a home, family, children, or money ("all the money you're paid for your body will go to that guy because he knows how to lie"). The song was a warning to the young girls of that time to be careful and not to yield to the temptation of money, even if the country lacked prospects and the economy was in dire shape ("Of course, the opportunities here are still limited, and the job of a model is not promising")

In the 1990s, the previously censored theme of sex appeared in the lyrics of many tunes. Unsurprisingly, *Bix* sang about sex: *Sex Revolution (Neverk, mama)* [(Sex Revolution (Don't Cry, Mom)], 1991) as did the rap/hip-hop band *UZI: Paieškok kitos "skylėx"* [Look for Another "Hole"] (1996) was a detailed prelude to sexual intercourse, or *SEL: Čiulpk tu* [Suck me off] (1995) was a song about lust for an attractive girl and her active enjoyment of sex – sex was one of the main topics of rap culture alongside money and crime. There were also bold examples of this theme in pop music. In 1992–1997, in the song *Pirmoji naktis* [The First Night] (1994) by the popular group *Ekspresas*, the lyrical hero sang about his dalliance with a young and, as it turned out, innocent girl he met in a nightclub, describing his lust openly and in detail. A couple of years later, the band released the song *Antroji naktis* [The Second Night] (1996), which told the story of how the singer meets the same girl after a break and how his desire is reignited. Such blatant lyrics would even be shocking in the current Lithuanian popular music scene, let alone only five years since the end of decades-long Soviet censorship. It seems that the wild capitalism that prevailed in Lithuanian business at that time was paralleled in pop culture by a sense of wild liberation and the breaking of taboos.

Another controversial theme in music lyrics was drug use. Again, such content was natural on the punk scene (e.g. songs by the punk rock band *Verslo rizikos rezervas* [Business Risk Reserve], such as *LSD* (1999), as well as in the releases of hip-hop and rap artists (*Boss Biz by the UZI* (1996), *ŽAS's Through Grass to the Stars* etc.), but, pop groups also spoke about illicit pleasures, in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. One of the most famous bands of the 1990s, *EXEM*, which entertained large crowds with *techno* rhythms, both in Lithuania and abroad (*EXEM's* videos appeared on the then popular German music channel VIVA), named one of their

electronic compositions after a psychotropic substance, *MDMA* (1997). Meanwhile, the *eurobeat*-style dance band *XXL* openly spoke about their drug experiences in more than one song. Thus, *Dūmas* [Smoke] (1995) detailed a teenager's addiction which began when he met a new friend, Sasha: "That's how it all started, and a joint (a marijuana cigarette) never left my mouth". Later, the lyrical hero revealed his physical and hallucinogenic experiences after taking the said drug: "Again I inhale sweet smoke, the whole world is floating through the fog. I go to the place where the music is playing, and when I get stoned, I feel like in a paradise;" each time he imagines being a different animal (monkey, hippopotamus, parrot, etc.). In another song by *XXL*, *Lėktuvėlis* [A Small Airplane] (1996), the band talked about the hallucinogenic effects of stronger drugs (probably amphetamines or ecstasy) and urged anyone who wanted to experience a state of euphoria to take them: "If you want to fly, swallow the pill quickly". The rest of the song's lyrics were an incoherent jumble of clearly drug-addled thoughts: "This year, radishes will wither again, long live the Zanavykai, the sun is rising, I am barefoot, I am a ripe pineapple, apricot, kiwi, bread cider, I dance like Karabas Barabas". The ambiguous reception of the *XXL*, a popular group at the time, was due to the lyrics of their songs. Yet the controversial content of their songs simply reflected contemporary issues and concerns (incidentally, not only drug use, but also the struggles and travails of various subcultures; e.g. the song *Duok j snukį* [Give him a Thumper] revolved around disagreements between hippies and the *marozai* (chavs).

Conclusions

The first post-Soviet decade in Lithuania posed many challenges for the population. After the country regained its independence, the economy deteriorated dramatically (GDP shrank, unemployment increased, and the majority of people were left without sufficient means of subsistence), increasing crime (corruption, widespread violence, organised gangs and *arceks*), and anxiety over perceived threats to national culture (posed by immigrants) and national security (a fear of internal and external saboteurs). In the middle of the first decade of independence, these factors, along with the failure of the newly free state to live up to expectations, gradually led to disillusion with the free market and democracy, while the insecurity of some

members of society was exacerbated by the turn towards Western culture and the importing of liberal values.

Music as “social glue”, capable of uniting and reflecting human experiences and infusing them with meaning, had a powerful impact in Lithuania in the 1990s. Several subcultures of popular music can be identified as dealing with the themes which reflected the spirit of the post-Soviet period,

Hip-hop and rap music were quite explicit in addressing the problem of rampant violent crime, i.e. the struggles of gangs and growing violence (in songs, it was depicted as an everyday occurrence), and the brutality of crime (the horrific details of crime were presented in detail, such as the hanging head of a dead man, scattered body parts, etc.). Moreover, hip-hop and rap performers did not avoid other previously censored topics, such as the use of psychotropic substances or sex (which were typical topics of that subculture).

Punk rock: punk songs reflected growing criticism of the authorities – both dissatisfaction with the general situation and dislike, or even hatred, of specific individuals, as well as attacking (often ironically) society for its narrow mindedness and bad taste. Punk also reflected the degradation of traditional values (a lack of solidarity, materialism, aggression, etc.), and to some extent, drug use and sexual experiences.

We can assume that the increasing openness of popular music in general also had an effect on the content of dance music. In addition to the usual naive romantic lyrics, Lithuanian pop music also included examples of textual content that responded to the realities of the time. These included crime (prostitution, violence), widespread drug use, and sex, which clearly point to an increasingly liberal society and the shift towards Western values.

The recurring themes in different subcultures of music, including issues that were of importance to the population as a whole, are a subjective expression of the realities of Lithuanian society in the 1990s, while lyrics painted an authentic (often embellished with local slang) and openly bold, albeit fragmentary picture of space-time. Despite the economic, social, political, and other problems they criticised, the creative voices of pop music testified to an embracing of liberal Western culture, and the courage to speak out on awkward, controversial topics in a critical manner (with regard to politics and society) was indicative of the growing strength of democracy in the country.

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Popular Music in Lithuania in the 1990s: a Reflection of Wider Problems and Systemic Shifts

S u m m a r y

The object of the research is Lithuanian popular music in the 1990s. This was a decade of hardship for Lithuania: the state was greatly impacted by unfulfilled hopes and painful economic, social and political problems: unemployment, poverty, crime, corruption, etc. Based on the notion of popular music as a medium of society and sociological research data, the research reveals how Lithuanian popular music artists addressed many of the problems facing the country in the 1990s and also reflected the shift towards Western culture during this period. The study focused on songs from three popular music genres (hip-hop/rap, punk rock, and dance music). Depending on the genre, the lyrics of these songs covered a broad spectrum of issues in Lithuania at that time: various types of crime (murder, violence, corruption, prostitution, drug distribution), economic and spiritual limitations, the degradation of moral values, disillusion with power, and distrust in the state, as well as an identity shift towards the West, to which musicians bore testimony through open and bold lyrics on uncomfortable, controversial, and topical issues.

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