



Figure 1. Members of Riga folk dance community making masking nets in Riga, Latvia, February 12, 2023.

PHOTO: ARTŪRS BERGS

Latvian folklore ensembles and their initiatives against Russia's war in Ukraine

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abstract

This article delves into the folk music community of Latvia and its reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Rooted in the 20th-century folklore revival movement, during which Latvians revitalized their cultural heritage as a form of opposition to Soviet ideology, the community of Latvian folklore ensembles, musicians and enthusiasts has joined the broader civic initiative of giving aid to Ukraine and expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Since February 2022, at least 80 initiatives linked to folklore (concerts, dance events, protests etc.) have been carried out that are directly connected to gathering support for or expressing solidarity with Ukraine. The analysis of these events reveals how the folklore community engages with political issues, using folklore as a medium to express its views in the contemporary political context.

KEYWORDS: Folklore revival, protest, recontextualization, solidarity, traditional music.

During occupation by the Soviet Union, the Baltic states were subject to its communist ideology in all areas of life. Naturally, this included culture, where propaganda and censorship were implemented to a certain degree in areas such as education, performing arts, and publishing. This article focuses on Latvia, where, in response to attempts by the ruling powers to devalue traditional local culture and enforce ongoing Russification, a folklore revival movement (Latvian *folkloras kustība*) emerged in the late 1970s, culminating in the Awakening and subsequent restoration of an independent republic in the early 1990s. It was a revitalization movement¹ partly driven by political resistance, and which constantly balanced between those cultural activities that were accepted by the regime and the dissemination of anti-Soviet ideas. The movement involved musicians and enthusiasts, who engaged with traditional culture by singing folk songs, reviving and playing

traditional music instruments, exploring traditional customs, celebrating seasonal rites, and so on. Many also joined folklore ensembles, the number of which grew rapidly, reaching a total of more than 200 in the 1990s. However, during the 1990s, the movement's activities and those of folk ensembles mostly blended in with the institutional apparatus of the national cultural sector of the recently restored Republic of Latvia, providing municipally funded opportunities for those interested in folklore. With this, the motivations and experiences of the revivalists slowly changed; while the emphasis on national self-determination as one of its goals remained, the functions of folklore as a social and artistic experience also came to the fore. Today, more than 50 years since the movement began in Latvia, there are over 250 active folklore ensembles in the country, practicing traditional music, dance, and numerous crafts. Many of these ensembles involve the descendants of leaders or active participants in the movement, who either continue their parents' musical traditions or create new expressions of their cultural heritage, which was revived from the 1970s onwards and passed down to them. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, countless activities expressing solidarity with and support for Ukraine took place across the world, including in Latvia. Being part of the folklore society in Latvia and a musician myself, with time, I started to notice that among music concerts, fundraising campaigns and other support actions being carried out countrywide, there was a range of initiatives connected to traditional culture. Folklore ensembles have on their own initiative collected donations, gathered to make trench candles and weave camouflage nets, and learned Ukrainian traditional music, performing it as a way of expressing their support for the sovereignty of Ukraine. Some of these activities have also been developed in contexts other than the folklore community, involving the general public in support actions.

THIS ARTICLE explores the current activities of the folklore revivalist community of Latvia, which partly overlap with the characteristics of the 20th-century folklore movement, examining how Latvian folklore ensembles have addressed the war in their creative work following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The methodology of this article is built on autoethnography that is blended with fieldwork. Information regarding all the activities analyzed in this paper has been gathered from posts on the social media platforms *Facebook* and *Instagram*, as well as from *WhatsApp* chats. One valuable source of information has been the *Facebook* group "Ukraine's support activities within the framework of cultural events. Archive", which was created immediately after the full-scale invasion on the initiative of Latvia-based Ukrainian ethnomusicologist Viktorija Prituļaka. By February 16, 2026, more than 700 people had joined the group, and

from posts published there and on other social media channels, most of them *Facebook* pages, I have gathered information on around 80 initiatives by Latvian folklore ensembles and folklore musicians, all aimed at supporting Ukraine through traditional culture. They are diverse, mostly voluntarily organized events that have taken place in various regions of Latvia.

The Russo-Ukrainian war and its impact on Latvia

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has subsequently had a profound and irreversible impact on the lives of the Ukrainian population. It has also caused significant turbulence in the security landscape of the entire region and led to a re-evaluation of Russia's long-standing cultural influence in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. Certain changes have taken place since the start of the conflict and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the European Union imposed sanctions on Russia. While Latvia, as an EU member state, supported these measures, since spring 2022 it has clearly stated its position that Russia is an aggressor state while gradually severing economic ties with its neighbor, with which it shares a 284 km-long border. The war has initiated a new wave of de-Sovietization in Latvia. Relics from the Soviet era that had become ingrained and invisible have been recognized again – such as when city councils renamed

streets² and removed Soviet monuments.³ The Latvian education system has restructured schools offering education in Russian, and a three-year transition period was implemented in 2022 so that, by 2025, instruction at preschool and elementary school levels throughout the country would be conducted exclusively in Latvian.⁴ The war has had a significant impact on Latvia's security. Before the full-scale war, the Latvian government was largely focused on domestic issues. In 2021, when the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic were at

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their greatest, the largest proportion of the state budget was allocated to social protection, with less than 2% of the country's GDP being spent on defense. This meant that Latvia was paying under the minimum contribution specified in the 2014 NATO Wales Summit Declaration.⁵ Latvia was dependent on Russia for its energy supplies, with strong business ties and regular travel between the two countries. However, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Latvians have once again begun to feel threatened by their eastern neighbor, gradually cutting ties with Russia and investing in security measures. Today, 4.9% of Latvia's GDP is allocated to security in the budget of 2026.⁶ These developments are highlighted to illustrate how the war has affected Latvia and demonstrate that its support for Ukraine is linked to concerns around its own security.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine has mobilized the people of

Latvia in support of Ukrainians on a civic level as well. Since 2022, countless initiatives have been launched, many of which are continuing today. Businesses and individuals alike participate in fundraising and in campaigns to supply military and civilian resources.⁷ In the capital of Riga, expressions of civil solidarity have visually transformed the city, with blue and yellow colors increasingly becoming part of the urban landscape since 2022.⁸ Alongside military resistance and physical armament, Ukraine and the surrounding region are also defying Russian imperialism on a cultural level. This will be examined in more detail after the next section, but first, an overview will be provided of how participants in the Latvian folklore movement in the 20th century used cultural heritage to express resistance to the ruling power.

Latvian folklore revival and political resistance

Latvians, as well as Lithuanians and Estonians, early on developed an ability to use cultural heritage as a form of resistance. The rebirth of folk songs in the Song Celebration tradition in the 19th century is an example of how events can bring people together, especially when they are used as a tool for self-determination, as in the establishment of independence.⁹ In Latvia, more than 40,000 people now take part in this celebration, which has become a cultural phenomenon whose importance in maintaining Latvian identity is undeniable.¹⁰ Another significant development was the 20th-century folklore revival movement, which played a part in liberating the Baltic states from Soviet occupation.¹¹ The folklore revival first emerged in Estonia and Lithuania in the 1960s, reaching Latvia at the end of the 1970s. It was a wave of invested focus on researching cultural heritage, driven by an urge to bring this heritage back to life. In theory, cultural revivals are connected to a dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and an urge for change that leads to activism.¹² Ethnomusicologists Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill have distinguished four types of revival efforts, one of which is political and involves acts of protest.¹³ Under communist rule, the local culture in all the republics of the Soviet Union was transformed and tailored to achieve the ideological goals of the leadership in Moscow. The cultural life of Soviet citizens was to be in line with communist ideals, and this included the glorification of Stalin. After acquiring the territories during World War II and establishing institutional governance in Latvia in 1945, the USSR took power over all cultural sectors, including folklore. During the Stalinism period (until 1953), interwar folklore research was criticized and subjected to regime guidelines, including self-criticism of scientific work.¹⁴ During this period some forms of art were degraded and included in the Soviet framework of amateur art, known as *samodejatel'nost'* (which can be translated into English as “self-activity”), within the context of which various forms of Soviet folklore were developed.¹⁵ In Latvia, the Song and Dance festival was ideologized, Soviet folk music ensembles were formed, and other means of bringing art to people¹⁶ were established, thereby enabling the regime to reach sections of society that could not be targeted by propaganda in other ways.¹⁷ Under these circumstances, from the end of the 1970s onward,¹⁸ Lat-



Figure 2. Saucējas ensemble and friends singing in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in Riga, Latvia, March 3, 2022.

PHOTO: LAIMA BAUERE'S PERSONAL ARCHIVE

vian folklore revivalists – people from various professions who, driven by different motivations, had been inspired to rediscover their culture – strived to reduce the influence of the Soviets on local cultural heritage. Alongside the work of folklore researchers, which continued during the Soviet era but was heavily influenced by the regime, revivalists engaged in heritage research. Both enthusiasts and academically trained musicians studied unarranged folk music, paid attention to dialectal peculiarities, carried out private expeditions to record folklore, revitalized seasonal celebrations, restored traditional musical instruments and made folk costumes, and practiced other crafts. These activities took place in cities (Riga, the capital, soon became the center of the movement), regional centers, and rural areas. All of this was done according to certain aesthetic principles, as Latvian ethnomusicologist Mārtiņš (Martin) Boiko notes: “‘authenticity’ and ‘back to the roots’ were the catchwords of the new movement.”¹⁹ By striving for authenticity in their cultural practice, Latvian folklore revivalists clearly rejected the concept of Soviet folklorism.

While opposing the ethnic culture to the ruling power, folklore revivalists took definitive steps in political activism, joining demonstrations held to commemorate the conclusion of the



Figure 3. Members of Riga folk dance community making trench candles in Riga, Latvia, February 12, 2023.

PHOTO: ARTŪRS BERGS

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol, as well as against the construction of a hydroelectric power station on the Daugava River and other such projects.²⁰ The most outstanding expression of political resistance to Soviet rule among Latvian folklore revivalists during the occupation was the rebirth of the national flags of the Baltic republics. It occurred during and after the opening concert of the international folklore festival *Baltica' 88* on July 13, 1988.²¹ It was one of the acts that merged with other events of the Singing Revolution, with the Baltic states soon regaining their independence. Although political resistance was not the only driving force for the revivalists, it was a unifying factor, and the folklore movement in the Baltics culminated with the restoration of independence during the Third Awakening.

Singing was the most significant form of expression within the Latvian folklore movement.²² During the Soviet era, Latvian folk songs were heavily stylized to adapt them to the aesthetics of choral music,²³ while the originals, as recorded by folklore collectors, were forgotten. In an attempt to restore older singing practices, folklore revivalists devoted their attention to outdoor

singing and its characteristic multipart structure. Some of the revival's most popular songs imply a subtext about foreign domination and the desire to break free from it. One example is the song *Spīguļo, saulīt!* (Shine, Sun!), which was often performed at various events, including as the opening number at the *Baltica* opening concert in 1988, where it was the first song listed in the festival's song booklet.²⁴ In the lyrics, the narrator invites the Sun deity to shed the "black layer" and put on "the white one", a call that can easily be interpreted as a metaphor for political change. By 1991, more than 200 folklore ensembles had been founded across Latvia, practicing the aforementioned activities.

ONCE THE GOALS of the revitalization movement have been achieved, traditions can take on an independent existence unrelated to the previous goals.²⁵ After the independence of Latvia was re-established, the folklore movement transformed and reached a "new steady state" – this is a concept offered by American anthropologist Anthony Wallace, used to describe cases in which the revival no longer exhibits the previous forms of activism but a stable situation has taken hold.²⁶ As there was no longer the need to position cultural legacy as opposed to the occupying regime, the folklore movement shifted. Nevertheless, folklore practices have kept growing in popularity. Today, there are more than 250 active folklore ensembles in Latvia, which are exploring and taking care of local cultural heritage, mainly operating within the structures of municipal cultural institutions.²⁷ Unlike the amateur artistic framework during the Soviet period, today the cultural centers with which these ensembles are affiliated are only partly involved in the activities of the ensembles. In 2020, a survey²⁸ was conducted on the activities of traditional cultural ensembles (filled out by more than 100 group leaders), and the respondents' answers reveal a wide range of themes, even extending beyond the boundaries of traditional culture – for example, by incorporating musical instruments such as the guitar and ukulele into the ensemble's repertoire. Coming from a family connected to the Latvian folklore revival since the 1980s and having been actively involved in the community of Latvian folklore ensembles for the past 10 years while studying folkloristics in an academic setting, I as an author have developed observations about the revitalizers of Latvian folklore, as a community that has the ability to mobilize for political resistance, including in the contemporary context. This statement partly comes from personal experience within the community of Latvian folk musicians and is grounded in the view, associated with the method of autoethnography, that a researcher can take advantage of their involvement in the group studied and subject their own experience to analytical analysis.²⁹ Since 2022, I have been using folklore as a platform to express solidarity and support for Ukraine, but the inspiration to research this aspect of civic activity within a part of the Latvian folklore community came after becoming involved in major protests related to Latvian domestic politics in 2025, which will be mentioned again at the end of this publication. By participating in protests and charity and solidarity events while researching the folklore revival in the 1970s and the 1980s for my doctoral thesis, I started to see parallels with

the folklore movement in the political resistance context. While today the people of Latvia do not need to stand up for their own sovereignty as they did in the Soviet era, ever since the first weeks of the full-scale war, the confidence and determination to help Ukraine, expressed through traditional culture, has been noteworthy among folklore enthusiasts, musicians, and participants in folklore ensembles in Latvia.

This article aims to address the research question: How does the Latvian folklore community, rooted in the revival movement of the 20th century, activate and become engaged in political questions in the contemporary context, by reapplying strategies from the 1970–1990s to current events? As research methods, I am using autoethnography to collect and analyze data, while the study is based on the literature on music revival movements, and applying the theory that cultural revivals are fluid and can adapt in response to political and social changes.

Recontextualization of cultural heritage in acts of protest and expressions of solidarity

The war has undoubtedly had the strongest influence on local customs in Ukraine. Examples of ritual revitalization include *provody v armiyu* (проводі в армію), a series of rituals for escorting someone to the army that is still a preserved tradition in rural areas. The initiation ritual is performed by Ukrainian traditional musicians in cities and shared on social media.³⁰ It is being researched by folklore scholars such as Anna Nikolaeva,³¹ a Ukrainian ethnologist and host of the *Poroblno* (Пороблено) podcast, which discusses the initiation ritual in its series along with other topics relating to military rituals.³² Particular funeral traditions from various regions that have been brought back to life and recontextualized to fit the current circumstances have been researched by Ukrainian scholar Inna Shvorak.³³ In the *Baltic Worlds* special issue on music and war,³⁴ Shvorak described how the current revitalization of historical Cossack folk songs, a traditional musical instrument (*trembita*), and lullabies have all become part of modern-day funeral rituals.³⁵ However, the military conflict has also impacted cultural events outside Ukraine. Although Latvia does not share a common border with Ukraine, the war has been perceived as something very close. Along with the security challenges posed by this war, which have been outlined in one of the previous sections of this article, this can be explained by the fact that both of the countries have shared experience of Soviet occupation and Russian imperialistic ambitions within this structure.

COUNTLESS ACTIVITIES expressing solidarity and support for Ukraine, including events in Latvia, have either taken place online or are mirrored on the Web, as it is one of the characteristics of this era. The information relating to the activities analyzed

in this paper has been gathered from posts on social network platforms *Facebook* and *Instagram*, as well as from *WhatsApp* chats. However, the activities themselves were mostly on-site events. Most of the information was found in the *Facebook* group “Ukraine’s support activities within the framework of cultural events. Archive”,³⁶ but since 2022, activity in it has significantly decreased and information not directly related to cultural support activities has been published more frequently, making data processing more complicated. The advantage of being part of the Latvian folk music enthusiast community myself was useful for me, as an author for collecting data and information. I have participated and initiated or co-organized some of these activities, describing the experience in a researcher’s diary.³⁷ This reflective personal narrative has helped to formulate how the war has impacted developments within the Latvian folk music community and shifted its participants’ perception of its repertoire, for example with regard to Latvian war songs. Some initiatives, such as self-organized protest demonstrations held in front of the Russian embassy or learning Ukrainian folk songs in folklore ensembles or groups of particular revivalists, were neither announced as public events nor mirrored on social media. One can therefore merely presume that the total number of events and their impact is higher than what’s summarized here. It should be borne in mind that expressions of solidarity cannot be measured and included in simple statistics. The summary included here was compiled by attempting to group publicly announced events or statements, but gestures of support such as the inclusion of the colors of the Ukrainian flag in ensemble communications (which, incidentally, is still a widespread phenomenon in the folklore community) were left out of the research data this time.

There are **five main types of activities** that I was able to summarize from the *Facebook* archive group, and from other social media profiles and the webpages of folk ensembles. They are 1) protests; 2) fundraising for Ukraine; 3) initiatives connected to Ukrainian music; 4) other Ukrainian traditions;

and 5) support events such as concerts and others (see Chart 1). In this breakdown, the term “protests” refers to initiatives in which folklore ensembles and other musicians have gathered at demonstrations to express their condemnation of the war. Under the group of “others” are initiatives such as an invitation for Ukrainian citizens to join Latvian traditional culture learning events;³⁸ a public invitation for Ukrainians to join a Latvian folklore ensemble;³⁹ an announcement that another ensemble is learning Ukrainian language and traditional music;⁴⁰ and other such initiatives. Some of the examples cited fall into more than one category, and in the list of the activities they have been assigned to the category whose characteristics are primarily related to an initiative. Most such cases are fundraising efforts integrated within broader support initiatives, predominantly folk

“SOME OF THE REVIVAL’S MOST POPULAR SONGS IMPLY A SUBTEXT ABOUT FOREIGN DOMINATION AND THE DESIRE TO BREAK FREE FROM IT.”

music concerts. Also, Ukrainian music appears in other categories, being involved in support concerts and song repertoires used in protests. Most of the initiatives mirrored in the Facebook group “Ukraine’s support activities within the framework of cultural events. Archive” took place in 2022, but there are some folklore ensembles and other entities that have kept supporting Ukrainians and Ukraine’s defenders with their concerts and by collecting donations. By compiling the activities archived both within the group and elsewhere, a total number of 80 initiatives were identified. Of these, 71% or 57 different activities were created by folklore ensembles, with the others carried out by private persons or families of folklore revivalists, as well as by popular music groups, musicians, and cultural organizations. However, it has to be noted that, since social networks were the main source of information for this study, there might be some activities, especially those taking place in the regions, that have not been included.

THE MOST COMMON form of folklore in these initiatives is song. It was also the most popular form of folklore revived from the 1970s and 1980s. Songs hold a special place in Latvia’s intangible cultural heritage, as one million folk song lyrics and 300,000 melodies have been preserved and are stored in the Archives of Latvian Folklore to this day.⁴¹ War is one of the themes widely explored in Latvian folklore, and has remained present in the repertoire of Latvian folklore ensembles, every year gaining special attention in November, the month in which Latvia’s Independence Day is celebrated. The ongoing war in Ukraine has created a new context for the ancient narratives found in those materials about war, the lives of soldiers, and those left behind. The repertoire is diverse and has been recontextualized and performed in settings differing from their original context – war songs are sung in protests in front of the Russian Federation embassy in Riga, in solidarity demonstrations, and on Ukrainian national holidays and days of remembrance. As the Russian embassy became a place for broader society to express their opposition to the war in 2022, Latvian folklore musicians and whole ensembles also went there, protesting through singing. The chosen songs were about war and soldiers parting from their loved ones, which is a popular subject in Latvian folklore records. But in some songs, the message of resistance can be found through metaphorical symbols. For example, the song *Tumsa, tumsa, kas par tumsu* [Darkness, darkness, what about the darkness], sung in one of the first protests in 2022,⁴² is about how a dark evening is not an obstacle in bringing home a brother’s bride. In the protest context, “darkness” refers to evil power and tragic times for Ukraine. Another song, which is also reflected in the context of protest on the internet, is a Latvian springtime multipart song in the Latgalian dialect, *Nakyukoji, dzaguzeite* [Cuckoo, don’t sing] – again, a song that

is not thematically related to war but involves a message of parting and change. Additionally, the character and symbolism of the cuckoo bird is recognizable in both Latvian and Ukrainian culture, and in many other cultures of the region. *Nakyukoji, dzaguzeite* was sung to express support by a group of protesters – singers from various folklore contexts – in front of the Ukrainian embassy in Riga on March 2, 2022.⁴³ In this study, documentations of five singing protests staged in February and March of 2022 were analyzed. They were organized by or featured at least four folklore ensembles and other folklore singers and were carried out in front of the embassies of Russia and Ukraine in Riga, after being covered in social media.⁴⁴

The war has strengthened Latvians’ insight into Ukrainian culture and created a sudden boost in popularity for it in Latvia. This cultural development has been referenced in a public survey conducted as part of Rita Grīnvalde’s study of Ukrainian support activities in visual symbols in Riga – the respondents confirmed that during the war they had become more familiar with Ukrainian music, history, and cuisine, with examples of folk music appearing multiple times in their responses.⁴⁵ Posts about Ukrainian culture published in the Facebook archival group of Ukrainian support activities mostly involve traditional

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music, with other cases featuring Ukrainian dances⁴⁶ and Easter egg painting *pisanka* (писанка).⁴⁷ Looking back to the Latvian folklore movement in the past century, parallels can be drawn with efforts to explore cultural heritage as a means of non-violent resistance to oppressive regimes.⁴⁸ Among folklore ensembles, there are groups that have learned Ukrainian traditional songs. Some of them have recorded and released Ukrainian songs in studio

albums alongside Latvian music.⁴⁹ In 2024, a Ukrainian song (*Marička*) performed by folklore ensemble Upite (based in the village of Upite, located in the borderland a few kilometers from Russia) was released with a music video dedicated to the nation of Ukrainians.⁵⁰ The song repertoire acquired by folklore ensembles is diverse – ranging from war songs to songs of the Ukrainian Midsummer *Ivana Kupala* festival (Івана Купала). But the most popular song for Latvians (not only the folklore musicians) to learn has been the Ukrainian national anthem (both the official and the folk version from Kuban village), and especially in 2022 it has been sung in various situations – at protests, folklore concerts,⁵¹ and other non-formal settings.⁵² In June 2022, three folklore ensembles based in Riga carried out a singing workshop, teaching participants both Latvian and Ukrainian Midsummer songs.⁵³ There has also been a case of Latvian singers learning songs directly from Ukrainians. In August 24, 2022 a group of like-minded singers that had been learning songs from Ukrainian singer Vira Ibryamova-Sivoraksha online congratulated Ukraine on its Independence Day by singing a congratulatory song.⁵⁴ Although Ukrainian folklore gained wider popularity in



Figure 4. Rēvele ensemble and other participants of Baltica 2022 singing Ukrainian folksong in Pope, Latvia, July 9, 2022.

PHOTO: SCREENSHOT OF A VIDEO POSTED ON LAURA ŠMIDEBERGA'S FACEBOOK PAGE

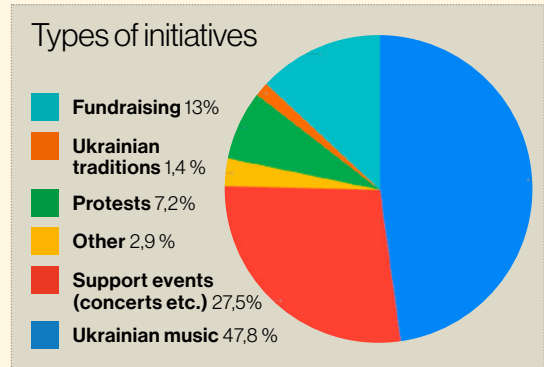


Chart 1. Types of Ukrainian support initiatives carried out by Latvian folklore revivalists and folklore ensembles.

Latvia after the full-scale invasion, some of the Latvian folklore practitioners involved in these activities already had musical connections to Ukraine before the full-scale invasion and have been revisiting the repertoire they learned from Ukrainians in the time since. One example that stands out is that of Janta and Ilmārs Mežs – participants of the Latvian folklore movement since the 1980s. In the early 2000s, the Mežs couple lived in Kyiv, where they met the Ukrainian music ensemble Bozhychi (Божичі). After returning to Latvia, they kept singing and teaching some of the songs they learned to their folklore friends. One of these songs has embarked on a special journey in the community of Latvian folklore musicians. It is *Ja ptychka-nevelychka* (Їа птичка-невеличка) [*I am a little bird*], from Pusta Hreblyā village. Janta taught the song to some friends, including members of the ensemble Saucējas, a well-established and internationally recognized traditional singing group in which she herself sings. There have also been occasions when this song has reached a wider audience. In 2015, the folk music community in Latvia heard it directly from Bozhychi, who performed it in a regional concert of *Baltica*.⁵⁵ Right after the full scale invasion, on March 5, Saucējas opened the Latgalian Culture Award Boņuks 2021 ceremony, and the event was broadcast on national television just as the aforementioned *Baltica* concert was in 2015.⁵⁶ The title of the song translates to English as “I am a little bird” and the lyrics do not convey a specific message about war, but by simply being in Ukrainian, it has embodied an association to the war. Since early spring of 2022 it has been performed by various Latvian folk singers in many protests and other public and non-formal cultural gatherings, not necessarily connected to the war. On February 24, 2025, Daina Zalāne, an active supporter of Ukraine and producer at the Culture Management Centre Lauska, made a *Facebook* post showing three members of the Latvian folklore community singing *Ja ptychka-nevelychka* after *Path of Light for Ukraine*, a commemorative and support event held at the Freedom Monument. In her post, she wrote:

Can't believe we have to sing in this context already for three years [...]⁵⁷

The song's undeniable popularity among Latvian folk musicians was proven at the *Baltica* festival in 2022. During a regional concert in western Latvia, Rēvele, a Latvian diaspora folklore ensemble from Tallinn, Estonia, invited the audience to join them on the stage and sing *Ja ptychka-nevelychka* together, thereby expressing their support for Ukrainians. In total, 14 folklore ensembles participated in the concert, and following an invitation by Rēvele ensemble leader Laura Šmideberga, singers from various Latvian folklore ensembles did not hesitate in taking to the stage, uniting in a solidarity choir of approximately 40 singers (Figure 4).⁵⁸

FOLLOWING INITIATIVES including traditional Ukrainian music, the next most popular type of initiative is that of events involving support for Ukraine. Alongside song-related activities, traditional dance events have been a relatively common platform to achieve this goal. As the dance community in Latvia, especially in Riga, is quite strong, I was able to gather information about 14 different initiatives involving or based on folk dances. Most of them were dance evenings dedicated specifically to supporting Ukraine. Riga Folk Dance Club (*Rīgas danču klubs*) has been one of the ensembles that, together with its partners, has also continued supporting Ukraine after 2022. The dance club, together with the youth folklore ensemble Kokle, cooperated for a series of events and from December 2022 to March 2023 carried out four events⁵⁹ in which participants were invited to join workshops for making trench candles and masking nets that were later sent to Ukraine (Figures 1 and 3). The workshops were followed by dancing. These and many other events' admission has been by donation. By changing the approach to charging admission fees to donations, several thousand euros have been collected during the annual International Ģikši Dance Night (*Ģikšu danču nakts*) event over the last three years (2024–2026) and were later transferred for the purchase of drones. Every year the event brings together various folklore ensembles from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and other countries. The organizers are KasTe, an active NGO that consists of folklore musicians and craftspeople. In 2025 and 2026, the NGO also held Ukrainian

dance masterclasses led by Ukrainian music ensembles that later played at the dance night.⁶⁰ In music concerts, the format of charging an entrance fee as a donation to Ukraine has also become a way of giving support.⁶¹ The ancient battle ensemble Vilkači has become one of the most active Latvian folklore ensembles supporting Ukraine. The ensemble gathers civically active men, who mainly research and perform the music of Latvian ancient warriors, and some of their events have been dedicated to supporting Ukraine, asking for donations instead of an admission fee. Since 2022, for four years already now, Vilkači have integrated a message of support into their annual Independence Day concerts, and every year they collect a couple of thousands of euros in donations that are later sent to defenders of Ukraine in the form of Christmas gifts and supplies.⁶²

Undoubtedly, the initiatives examined in this publication, among other global efforts dedicated to supporting Ukraine, spiked right after the full-scale invasion in 2022, remaining regular and popular during the first year. Based on data from social media and on initiatives I have personally learned about from other sources, since 2023 there have been less than 10 activities taking place in Latvia every year that are directly connected to supporting Ukrainians. If we try to link these occurrences with the processes of Latvian folklore revitalization in the 20th century, it should be noted that a large proportion of the initiatives listed were initiated and implemented by younger generations of Latvian folklore musicians. But revitalizers, who since the turn of the 1970s/1980s have fought for the preservation of their ethnic culture and tried to free their heritage from the influence of the occupying power, have also been involved in protests, fundraising, learning about Ukrainian culture, and expressing solidarity in other ways. One such example is the post-folk band *Ilģi* – a group whose members Ilga Reizniece and Māris Muktupāvels were among the most influential figures in the folklore movement. *Ilģi* began as a folklore ensemble striving for authenticity but later chose a different creative direction, starting to create their own folk music arrangements. Reizniece was also the first to define and adopt the post-folklore genre, using it to describe the practice of *Ilģi*.⁶³ On March 9, 2022, the band published a video of a Latvian lullaby wishing the Ukrainian children sweet dreams and a bright future.⁶⁴

ALTHOUGH THE MOTIVATION behind all the activities discussed here has come from the urge to support Ukraine during the ongoing war, these acts of solidarity are also linked to Latvians' own grim experience of Russian imperialism, and through them an unambiguous desire to continue living in a democracy has been expressed. Protest actions such as demonstrations on February 24 and gatherings condemning Russian aggression in front

of the Russian embassy are accompanied by Latvian flags, and in general a new wave of patriotism has swept through Latvian society following the outbreak of the war. New domestic political circumstances have recently emerged in Latvia, causing significant resistance within society. In the fall of 2025, the Saeima, the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, began a populist process – presumably in preparation for the next parliamentary elections in the fall of 2026 – of denouncing the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (widely known as the Istanbul Convention), voting to exit it on October 30.⁶⁵ This process sparked protests. On November 3, the decision was suspended by the President of the Republic of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs, who asked the Parliament to reconsider the law and defer it to the next Saeima.⁶⁶ Despite this decision, the public still mobilized, and on November 6, in the capital of Riga, various regional Latvian towns, and diaspora communities such as London, Paris, Brussels, Toronto, Washington and others,⁶⁷ a large protest was carried

out under the slogan “Nosargāsim Māti Latviju” [Let's Protect Mother Latvia]. According to official records, the protest in Riga gathered at least 10,000 people, making it the biggest public demonstration in Latvia since 2007.⁶⁸ Among the messages conveyed in various formats, stating that the Saeima vote would not be forgotten before the next parliamentary elections in the fall of 2026, people also included elements of folklore in their protest posters and integrated traditional symbols into their clothing, with some arriving in full

traditional costumes.⁶⁹ By focusing on the aspect of singing, the protest on November 6 was also an event that united the protesters in song. The central repertoire, compiled by the protest organizers, included both original songs promoting the idea of national independence and several Latvian folk songs.⁷⁰ Musicians and whole Latvian folklore ensembles also took part in these protests; songs that carried a message of resistance in the 1980s were adapted to the context of the current political tensions, with those involved compiling and applying satirical lyrics about specific political forces in the form of folk songs and even uniting in submitting an official letter to the president asking him not to support the parliament's decision.⁷¹

Conclusions

Rooted in the experience of the 20th century revitalization movement, the community of folklore musicians and enthusiasts in Latvia today is a dynamic group that becomes civically active in situations where culture is threatened, and which expresses its condemnation of aggression. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has subsequently sparked strong sympathy and unity within the community, which seeks to provide both

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solidarity and practical support. If these developments are compared to the 20th-century folklore movement, today's events can thus be said to have taken on a broader character linked to international politics. The previous experience with the Soviet occupation, which degraded local heritage, is a unifying aspect for Latvian and Ukrainian people. Since the outbreak of the war, Latvian folklore musicians have become increasingly interested in learning about Ukrainian culture, especially studying traditional songs, thus creating a link to the revitalization of unarranged traditional music within the folklore movement in Latvia from the 1970s to the 1990s. Recontextualizing Ukrainian folk songs as symbols of support and performing them in concerts has turned into one of the most popular forms of expressing solidarity among Latvian folklore revivalists and enthusiasts. They have united in various other support activities, whose intensity has declined but which nevertheless remain regular. These activities involve not only revitalizers, who have been involved in folklore since the 1970s, but also the younger generation. But since the fall of 2025, the role of folklore in unity and civic engagement has become particularly relevant in the context of domestic policy, due to local challenges in the political arena. Part of the community of Latvian folklore musicians and enthusiasts has come together, expressing its opposition to domestic populists in the Latvian Parliament both in a formal way as well as through its cultural heritage – adapting the folk music repertoire to the current context of political resistance. ✖

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