

Decolonial Paradigm in Magazine *Avots* Literary Translations in 1987

Girts Vikmanis

Department of Languages and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Daugavpils University, Latvia

girts.vikmanis@du.lv

Abstract: In the second half of the 1980s, the polemical literary magazine *Avots* created a cultural space that reflected and encouraged the transition from a colonial to a postcolonial society in the Latvian SSR. The magazine functioned as a hybrid space in which decolonial processes and practices of resistance unfolded. At that time, Latvia remained under Soviet occupation; yet Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost*¹ and *perestroika*² sought to liberalise Soviet totalitarian rule. Meanwhile, Latvia's Third Awakening had begun, and its developments were increasingly visible in the society. The editorial of magazine employed Gorbachev's reforms to legitimise bold editorial decisions – evident notably in the publication of foreign literature – and approached translation as a form of resistance against Soviet ideology and its privileged aesthetic of socialist realism. Drawing on the author's compiled database of publications in *Avots* in 1987, quantitative findings and the case studies highlight the magazine's decolonial orientation and its departure from the official Soviet agenda and literary canon, thus enriching literary polysystem in Latvia.

Keywords: magazine *Avots*, decolonial paradigm, practices of resistance, literary translations, foreign literature

Introduction

The youth literary magazine *Avots* (1987–1992) can be regarded as a distinct decolonial phenomenon. Although the concept of a youth literary magazine originated within the Soviet nomenklatura, and the ruling establishment expected the new publication to disseminate communist ideas, the reality proved the opposite.

The publishers of *Avots* were the Central Committee of the Leninist Young Communist League of the Latvian SSR (Komsomol) and the Writers' Union of the Latvian SSR. *Avots* maintained a substantial circulation: beginning in January 1987, it reached 100,000 copies per month, of which 85,000 constituted the Latvian edition and the remaining 15,000 comprised its Russian counterpart, *Rodnik*. At its peak, the combined monthly circulation reached 147,000 copies (Konste 2021). Magazines with the same initial structural concept were published in Estonia under the titles *Vikerkaar* and *Raduga*.

The Editor-in-Chief throughout almost all years of publication was the journalist and writer Aivars Kļavis, who was motivated to seize a historical opportunity to influence public sentiment and foster pro-independence processes within Latvian society (Kļavis 2021: 127). He recruited promising young intellectuals, who were committed to liberty and resistance.

Following the impact of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, initiated in 1986, a pervasive uncertainty regarding what was illicit and what was legitimate became evident throughout society (Kļavis 2025). This ambiguity affected anti-establishment activists and representatives of the Soviet state apparatus alike, including censors and members of the nomenklatura.

Each issue of *Avots* comprised 80 pages, featuring journalistic articles alongside Latvian and foreign literature. The publication was structured around key sections including 'Literature', 'Culture of the 20th Century in Latvia', 'At the Intersection of the Arts', and 'Contemporary Commentary'. Through these texts, the magazine disseminated ideas of resistance and liberty, thereby fostering decolonial processes within society. As a mass communicator, *Avots* set the public agenda³, while its editorial staff acted as gatekeepers⁴, selecting the literary works and journalistic articles to be published. Every selection was a statement in itself, operating in the hybrid conditions under oppressive Soviet rule.

In the theoretical framework the author explores the decolonial paradigm, key concepts of cultural translation, and employs the Polysystem theory. Furthermore, the operational environment of the Latvian literary scene in 1987 is highlighted, contextualising the impact of Soviet occupation and censorship.

In the empirical section of this article, the author focuses on translations published during the magazine's inaugural year, 1987. As *Avots* editor Guntars Godiņš recalls, during the first half of particular year the editors were still required to submit the magazine's layout to censors of the Soviet censorship agency *Glavlit* for prior approval; however, by the final months of 1987, practical control had been lifted (Godiņš 2025).

The research material, comprising all publications in *Avots* along with their characteristics, has been compiled into a database and analysed using the approach of Descriptive Translation Studies. Four qualitative case studies have subsequently been selected for in-depth analysis, focusing on bard lyrics translations by Boris Greneshchikov and Bruce Springsteen, drama play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett and Franz's Kafka's story *In the Penal Colony*, seeking the statement of these works in the Latvian context of 1987.

The Decolonial Paradigm and Developments in the Baltics

Starting from the mid of twentieth century, prominent postcolonial scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha examined social processes within former Western European overseas colonies from the perspective of power relations between colonisers and the colonised. Later – in the 2nd half of 20th century and beginning of the 21st century scholars from Baltic states started to observe the Soviet occupation as a colonial situation.

Decolonisation represents a transitional movement from a colonial to a post-colonial society. In *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, edited by scholars Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, decolonisation is described as follows: 'This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved.' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2008: 56) In this respect, decolonisation is both a political and a personal process through which subaltern groups and individuals seek to dismantle the power structures imposed by colonisers – a process that unfolds both physically and mentally.

What realities can be observed in societies undergoing decolonisation? It is a process without fixed temporal boundaries: it begins under colonial rule, yet the attainment of political independence does not necessarily signify its completion⁵ One of the phenomena generated by colonial rule is a cultural fusion in which elements of both the colonisers and the colonised become embedded within one another. This phenomenon – hybridity – is described by American literary scholar Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority). (Bhabha 1994: 159)

Manifestations of hybridity can be observed across culture, literature, architecture, social relations, translations and other domains. It is unviable to speak of a ‘pure’, monolithic culture, as hybridity emerges directly from the rule of the coloniser, producing diverse hybrid phenomena that reflect the intermingling of cultures. E.g., the Latvian literary scholar Benedikts Kalnačs, highlights – the Soviet system created a new hybrid social group in its governed territories – the so-called ‘Russian-speakers,’ which in Baltics were in opposition to the local population (Kalnačs 2019: 259).

As decolonisation constitutes a process of dismantling attributes by coloniser, it is significant to pay attention to the concept of decolonial option by Argentine semiotician and literary scholar Walter D. Mignolo. The essence of decolonial option is – to think, act and create a knowledge outside Western Eurocentric modernity and its established structures of power. In *Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of Decoloniality* Mignolo stresses that former Western colonies remain influenced by cultural attributes and power relations imposed by colonisers – among which are ideas and paradigms of Western knowledge and education systems rooted in Enlightenment and Modernity concepts, Christian traditions, capitalism and Western ideologies. (Mignolo 2010: 310).

To make a difference, the key attitude is to employ epistemic disobedience as an essential decolonial practice. In *Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom* Mignolo notes: ‘Epistemic disobedience leads us to decolonial options as a necessary pathway to dwelling in borders, engaging in

border thinking and engaging in de-linking; for de-linking means to change the terms and not only the content of the conversation.’ (Mignolo 2009: 177).

Regarding the Baltic states in 20th century, attention must be directed towards another hegemonic and colonial centre of power – the USSR. In 1940, the USSR occupied the three independent Baltic states, oppressing their cultures, and forcing them to revolve within Moscow’s orbit—the hegemonic imperial centre that dictated the rules.

The Estonian literary scholar Epp Annus, in *Between Arts and Politics: A Postcolonial View on Baltic Cultures of the Soviet Era* emphasizes: “occupation” of the Baltic states by a foreign power (the Soviet Union) was followed by the gradual institution of a colonial matrix of power’ (Annus 2016: 2).

In terms of the decolonial paradigm, the primary object of epistemic disobedience and delinking for Baltic nations was Soviet discourse, through which the establishment attempted to project an image of progressiveness while competing with the West. Soviet discourse theoretically, when seeking parallels with Western categories, ‘is the discourse of Enlightenment and civilizing mission; it supports an effort to enforce value systems that are progressive according to the standards of its era’ (Ibid: 4).

Scholars (Annus 2016), (Tlostanova 2010) characterise Soviet claims of a ‘civilising mission’ as highly contestable, given that the Baltic nations possessed a rich cultural history, well-established confidence in their national identity and Western orientation. During the occupation these traits established a distinct difference within the USSR, where Baltic cultural traditions and social atmospheres were noticeably more liberal than in other Soviet republics. Latvian literary scholar Maija Burima notes, the Baltic countries during the Soviet period acquired a public reputation as ‘the West of the USSR’ (Burima 2022: 42).

Differing levels of development are likewise addressed by the Circassian postcolonial scholar Madina Tlostanova in *The Imperial-Colonial Chronotope: Istanbul-Baku-Khurramabad*, noting that similar dynamics existed under the predecessor of the USSR – the Russian Empire, when the coloniser was less developed than Europeanised people in Baltic countries. (Tlostanova 2010: 262)

The different levels of development between the Soviet colonial power and the Baltic nations, also stated the Latvian historian Gatis Krūmiņš stated in the podcast *Course of Inequality* on Latvian cultural news-site *Satori.lv*:

We were occupied by a country that was much less developed than us. What did the USSR do with the educated population of this relatively well-developed territory? They drained as much out of us as possible. There is another paradox here: we are usually taught that producing and exporting more makes people better off. However, in our case, producing more with imported labour and other production segments makes things worse. (Krūmiņš 2026)

Annus highlights different decolonial and resistance practices following the Stalin era: the development of a national modernism that celebrated individualism, instead of Soviet modernism that put emphasis on collectivism. Among these practices were also hybrid forms permissible under Soviet rule – historical science fiction, mythological protagonists in the visual arts, and arrangements of folk melodies in music – all of which helped to sustain national discourse. Annus stresses that the process of transculturation, through which the attributes of colonial power were adapted and transformed, served to affirm the continuity and meaning of the oppressed national culture (Annus 2016: 7–8).

The deeply rooted Western orientation of the Baltic nations encouraged people to seek out and experience popular culture from the free Western world. E.g. in the 1980s, residents in Northern Estonia were able to receive television signals and watch Finnish television, which broadcast popular Western series and shows, such as the American series *Dallas* and the British program *The Benny Hill Show* (Ibid. 2016: 6).

Among other examples of decolonial and resistance practices was environmental activism, such as the press campaign in Latvia during the early 1980s against the construction of a new hydroelectric power plant on the Daugava River. Similarly, the Latvian press campaigned against the construction of an underground metro network in Riga, which threatened a large influx of migrant workers from other Soviet republics, that could foster the russification.

Translating the Cultures and Resistance

In the context of decolonial and resistance practices we must speak about the nature of translations. The translation of literature is inevitably entangled with ideology and politics, given that the translator's role is not purely linguistic.

Rather, the translator acts as a mediator between the source culture and the target culture, embedding these dynamic relations within the translated text.

The Italian semiotician and writer Umberto Eco, in his work *Experiences in Translation* argues that the translator's primary aim is to achieve the functional equivalence of the text and to interpret it in order to render it meaningfully within the target culture. (Eco 2008: 44–45).

This requirement implies that the translator must possess, as Eco observes, an encyclopaedic knowledge of the cultures between which he or she operates, including familiarity with cultural references, social practices, habits, and rituals. Translation likewise serves as a means of importing new ideologies, literary styles, and aesthetic movements into the target culture, thereby influencing existing traditions and stylistic norms. As Eco highlights an example:

Humboldt was the first to speak about the way in which a translated text can change the target language, one paramount example of this being Luther's German translation of the Bible. Certain translations have obliged a given language to express thoughts and facts that it was not accustomed to express before; (..) the translation of Heidegger into French has radically changed, over recent decades, the French philosophical style; (..) (Eco 2008: 21)

Eco's insights resonate with the political and hybrid character of translations. Both the British cultural historian Peter Burke and the Latvian translation scholar Ieva Zauberga deploy the term 'hybrid texts' when discussing translations (Bērks 2013),(Zauberga 2016). In *Cultural Hybridity*, Burke also speaks about nature of translations:

The adaptation of a foreign text to local circumstances oscillates between plagiarism and imitation: a well-known example from the Renaissance is Nicolas Faret's *The Honest Man* (*L'Honnête Homme*, 1636), which can be viewed both as a plagiarism of Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier* (*Il Cortegiano*, 1528) and as a free adaptation. (Bērks 2013: 25)

The traces of politics and ideology from literary texts exist by default: when an author constructs narrative relationships and fictional worlds, he or she inevitably incorporates lived experience as an individual situated within specific political systems and socio-economic conditions. The same applies to translators and translated texts, which function as cultural landscapes of foreign societies.

In this respect writers and translators act within the literary polysystems of their respective languages and cultures.

The Israeli translation scholar Itamar Even-Zohar, in his influential work *Polysystem Studies*, conceptualises translated literature as an integral component of every culture's literary system. Within the literary polysystem (Even-Zohar 1990: 47–48), translated literature may occupy two principal positions:

A central position – occurring when translated literature becomes a primary channel for introducing new literary models, genres, and poetic languages. This typically happens when a national literature is relatively young, structurally weak in comparison with neighbouring literatures, or undergoing a crisis or transitional phase.

A peripheral or 'normal' position – characteristic of stable literary systems, in which translated literature functions as a conservative force, relying on established models and contributing to maintaining the status quo rather than influencing the development of the polysystem.

The position occupied by translated works within a literary polysystem is not permanently fixed; rather, it may shift across different levels of significance over time. Even-Zohar illustrates this variability through the example of translated Russian literature in Hebrew during the interwar period and in the years immediately following the Second World War:

What seems to be most remarkable about the new writers who perpetuated the literary tradition is that they knew hardly any Russian. They were acquainted with Russian literary models through appropriated models introduced into Hebrew either in original or in translated literature. (Even-Zohar 1990:109)

In general, translated literature facilitates the import of new styles, movements, and aesthetic tendencies into a literary polysystem, while disseminating diverse ideological frameworks within it. Even-Zohar identifies French and English literatures as examples of stable polysystems in which translated texts typically play a peripheral role.

Each literary polysystem is likewise shaped by ideology. Even-Zohar discusses the institutional control exercised by governing bodies that determine the selection of texts for translation, often by evaluating them against or in favour

of literary canon of a given culture. (Even-Zohar 1990: 37). Israeli scholar in his work doesn't speak directly about censorship, but in the context of Soviet rule, the censorship bodies could be defined as an arm that guards the Soviet official literary canon.

Taking into account the inevitable presence of political attributes in translations, they can also serve as vehicles of resistance against the ruling establishment, as covertly occurred in the USSR. From the establishment of the USSR and the introduction of state censorship in the 1920s, two distinct spheres developed: official Soviet culture and the underground world of the Soviet intelligentsia, which employed subtexts and Aesopian language to oppose the official agenda. The American translation scholar Brian James Baer notes that translators could encode resistance with choice of the translatable work, and using the footnotes, prefaces and reviews (Baer 2006: 537). Scholar further observes that literary translations played a major role in shaping public perceptions of the Western world.

Censorship as a Tool for Control

When examining the translated literature during the Soviet era, the issue of censorship must be addressed. The 1922 Constitution of the Republic of Latvia guaranteed freedom of speech and explicitly prohibited censorship. (Constitution of the Republic of Latvia 1922, art. 100). Nevertheless, censorship was introduced in Latvia in 1934 under the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis. Subsequent occupations by Soviet (1940–1941) and Nazi German (1941–1945) regimes, followed by the renewed Soviet (1945–1991) occupation, imposed stringent censorship that persisted until 1990, when the Supreme Council of the USSR officially proclaimed freedom of speech.

Censorship during the Soviet era in Latvia was administered by the Soviet institution known as *Glavlit* – The Main Administration for the Protection of Official and State Secrets in the Press. It was established in the USSR in 1922. As an instrument of totalitarian control, censorship served to regulate both public information and social consciousness. British literary scholar Samantha Sherry describes the operation of this agency in the USSR as follows:

Glavlit monitored and controlled all printed, radio and televisual material and, together with its network of regional organs had two main tasks: the

protection of classified information in accordance with the *perechen*, the list of information banned from circulation, and the control of the political and ideological content of cultural products. (Sherry 2018: 672)

From the perspective of communication studies, censors acted as gatekeepers: they determined which literary works were to be banned outright and which could be published only after substantial editing or the removal of ideologically undesirable content.

Soviet state apparatus and censorship bodies employed rigorous mechanisms to control the operational environment of the Latvian public sphere. The Latvian translologist Ieva Zauberga describes their practices and Soviet literary canon as follows:

For example, the collection of short stories by John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower*, translated into Latvian in 1982, included only four of the five stories. The translator had also translated the story *The Cloud*, but the publishers rejected it on the grounds that, for some reason, the story had not been included in the Russian translation of the book. (Zauberga 2016: 46)

Zauberga further notes Soviet translation authorities favoured authors considered 'politically reliable', such as Jack London, John Galsworthy, Charles Dickens, Archibald Cronin, and Theodore Dreiser. She stresses: the Soviet censorship system was far more cautious regarding contemporary foreign authors: 'Jerome David Salinger, John Fowles, Kurt Vonnegut were the authors which kept both readers and censors on their toes. The main methods employed by the censors to ensure complete conformity with communist ideology were deletion, toning down and the insertion of external ideological references' (Ibid:46).

These oppressive conditions produced various side effects, as citizens sought ways to circumvent restrictions, remain informed, and covertly criticise Soviet rule. One such phenomenon was the use of earlier mentioned Aesopian language. Soviet censorship also exerted a stylistic impact on creative expression, promoting the officially sanctioned genre of socialist realism. It caused a hybridity in culture and literature. Kalnačs observes in *20th Century Baltic Drama: Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options* that writers employed modernist poetic devices 'as irony, the grotesque, ambiguity, and subjectivity.' (Kalnačs 2016:30).

Among the various consequences of censorship was the illicit reproduction of prohibited literature through smuggling of books and media, *samizdat*⁶ and *tamizdat*⁷ – practices that flourished during the 1970s and 1980s. Western radio stations, most notably Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, also broadcast translations of banned literary works. (Kind-Kovács 2014)

The most damaging effect, however, was the emergence of self-censorship across multiple levels of the literary production chain. Authors, translators, editors, and publishers internalised the rules of the system to secure publication, earn a livelihood, and avoid state persecution. The Russian literary scholar Natalia Kamovnikova in quotes the experienced Russian literary translator Viktor Golyshev, who stresses the translator's responsibility:

Censorship does not start with the author, or editor, or censor, but with the translator. It is the translator who knows or assumes whether the book will be accepted to be published. Selfcensorship takes place when you decide whether to translate the book or not. (Golyshev, cited in Kamovnikova 2019:152)

***Glasnost* and *Perestroika* as Decolonial Triggers**

The societal atmosphere in the USSR and Latvia changed dramatically in 1986, when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to liberalise the Soviet system from above by initiating the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The implementation created hybrid conditions within the USSR, leading to widespread uncertainty regarding what was permitted and what was prohibited in the public sphere. It was also the time when in Latvia the Third awakening unfolded.

Latvian political scientist Rasma Karklins notes that *glasnost* directly challenged the authority of the Communist Party in the USSR: 'Traditionally, the Soviet system viewed media openness as subversive, and it was. *Glasnost* prepared the infrastructure of transition to democracy by providing democrats with means of communication about ideas and organizational matters.' (Karklins 1994: 35)

Glasnost created a climate in which Soviet citizens began to question institutions and established historical narratives. Commenting on the situation within the Soviet media during the years of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the British

historian David Satter writes: ‘They took risks, and, defending their right to express themselves freely, they played an important role in the mental liberation of the Soviet people as well.’ (Satter 1996: 283)

During the 1980s, the Singing Revolution in Baltic countries served as a vital decolonial and resistance manifestation, which was also a delinking from the Soviet rule and its realities. Citizens across the Baltic nations gathered at massive song festivals that nurtured national identity and strengthened self-esteem. In *Environment and Society in Soviet Estonia, 1960–1990: An Intimate Cultural History*, Annus emphasizes the role of Gorbachev’s reforms in fostering decolonial processes in the Baltic states:

The historical continuities are striking – in 1988, the ritual of collective singing, by kindling collective affect and binding it to nature imagery, gave voice once again to dissent and helped fortify decolonization. But this time, by capitalizing on the opportunity opened up by Gorbachev-era reforms and later also by growing political turmoil in Russia, decolonization processes in the Baltics could develop to their full potential and culminate with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania regaining their political statehood. (Annus 2025: 63)

The magazine *Avots* in 1980ies significantly changed the operational environment in literary translations. For insight about magazines contribution, developments in its publications of translations will be analysed.

Methodology

The core analytical framework of this article relies on a Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) approach, executed through the compilation of a structured publication database. This quantitative database facilitates the systematic mapping of translation practices and empirically grounded patterns (Tourney 2012).

For the purpose of analysis, a comprehensive database was compiled encompassing all publications across all 12 issues of *Avots* published in 1987. The objective was to evaluate quantitative data regarding publications, placing particular emphasis on literary translations. Each database entry records the author, title, genre, sub-genre, and page count. Where a published text represents a translation, additional parameters are catalogued: the type of translation,

source language, original title, original author's name, year of first publication, translator, and paratextual author (where applicable).

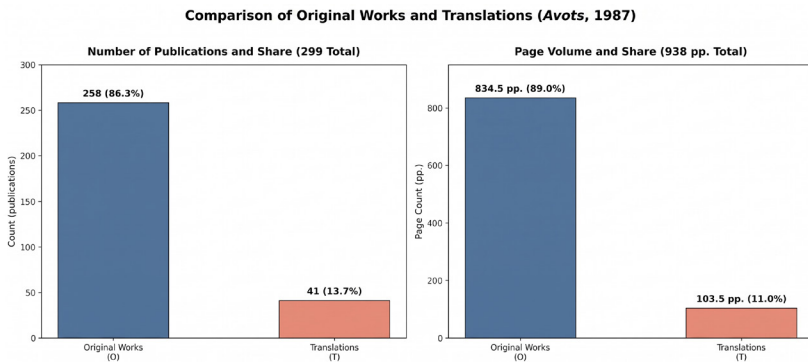
From the extracted data, both the proportion of publications across different languages and the generic diversity of translated works are highlighted. Subsequently, these empirical findings are interpreted descriptively, drawing upon Polysystem Theory and also to examine manifestations of decolonial paradigm and resistance practices.

Four case studies were selected for in-depth qualitative analysis based on the extracted data. The objective of this selection is to interpret specific publications within the socio-political context of Latvia in 1987, examining the specific ideas, ideologies, and styles disseminated through these texts.

Data Analysis and Results

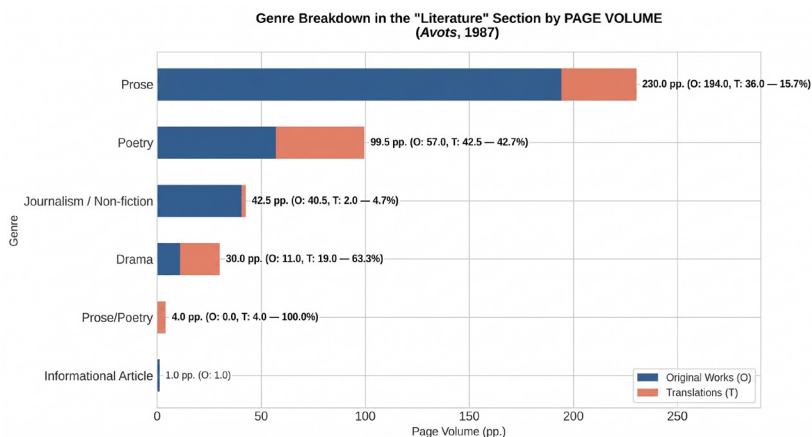
The total volume of publications in *Avots* during 1987 comprised 299 items, spanning 938 pages. Literary translations accounted for 13.7% of total publications (or 11.0% by page volume), whereas original works comprised 86.3% (89.0% by page volume), encompassing original Latvian literature and journalistic articles. The comparison is highlighted below in the Figure 1.

Figure 1



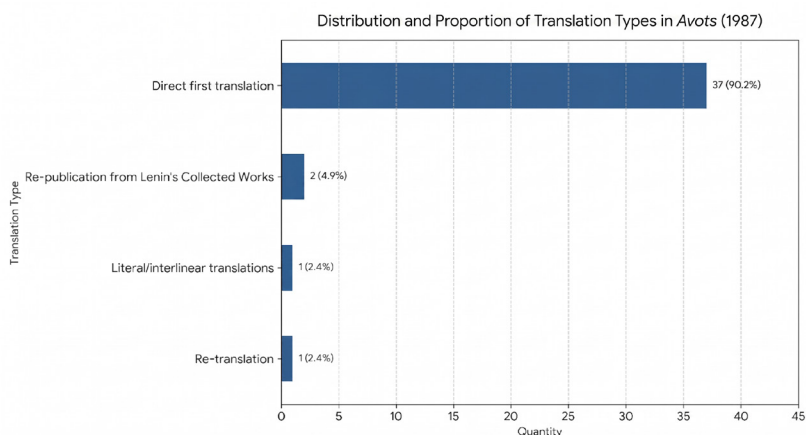
When examining the magazine's 'Literature' section specifically, original Latvian literature accounted for 77 publications (65.3%), whereas translations accounted for 41 publications (34.7%). Within this section, original material predominated in prose, whereas translated material exceeded original works in the drama genre. Figure 2 highlights the amount of published pages of originals and translations in section 'Literature' by genres.

Figure 2



Attention must be given to the official Soviet policy regarding translation. Even into the early 1980s, the translation of foreign literature into the languages of the Soviet republics was typically required the text should be already translated in Russian prior to translate it to other languages in the USSR. However, the data extracted from *Avots* regarding translations (highlighted in Figure 3) reveals that the overwhelming majority of foreign-language texts (90.2%) were translated directly into Latvian, bypassing this official mandate.

Figure 3



These empirical findings indicate a clear departure from the established Soviet translation canon, decolonising the translation practices. The editorial of *Avots* independently selected texts for translation without seeking approval from the Soviet institutional bodies, frequently pioneering previously forbidden or sensitive authors, genres, and stylistic movements within the Latvian literary polysystem, thereby challenging the norms imposed by Soviet colonial rule.

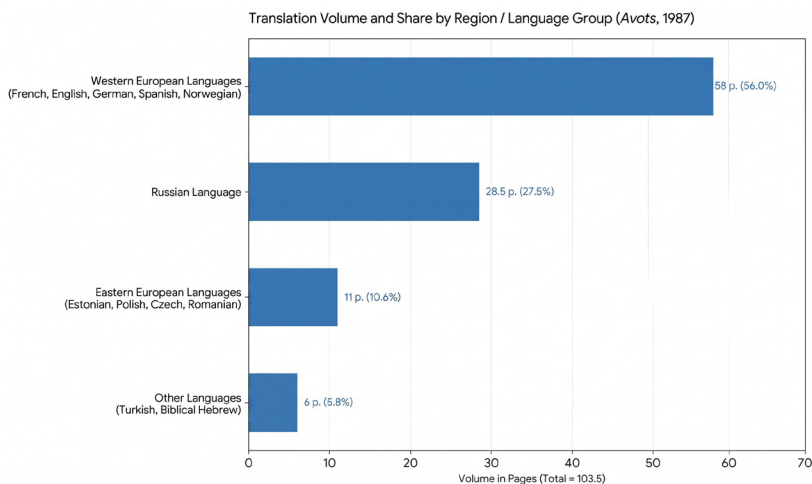
Translation also served as a vehicle for articulating alternative cultural values. In this context, language choice was of critical significance. In the USSR, Russian functioned as the official state language and was utilized by state institutions, including repressive apparatuses. Promoted as the *lingua franca* for inter-ethnic communication across the Soviet republics, the Russian language was attribute of Soviet hegemony.

Figure 4 shows: in 1987, while Russian was the single most frequent source language by publication count, Western European languages collectively predominated when aggregated by page volume (58 pages, or 56.0%, compared to 28.5 pages, or 27.5%, for Russian). Furthermore, translations from Russian had the second-shortest average length per publication (1.58 pages), whereas translations from Estonian averaged 5.0 pages per publication.

The orientation toward Western European literature demonstrates the deliberate efforts of *Avots* to introduce novel genres and aesthetic movements

– such as Modernism, Postmodernism, Existentialism, and the Theatre of the Absurd – into the Latvian literary polysystem. Additionally, the publication of works from Central and Eastern European languages (e.g. Estonian, Polish, Czech, and Romanian) represents a distinct decolonial stance. In 1987, Central European nations within the Warsaw Pact had a subaltern position relative to the Soviet imperial centre; publishing their literature signalled a shared aspiration to break free from Soviet ideological control.

Figure 4



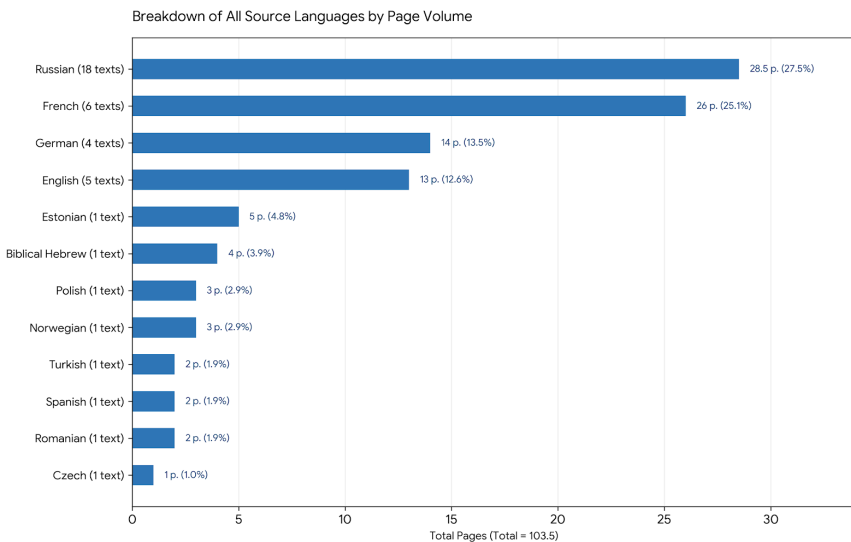
Crucially, translations from Russian in *Avots* were not intended to disseminate official Soviet propaganda. On the contrary, these selections featured Russian poets living in Latvia, historical classics such as Igor Severyanin, young poets from Kirov oblast, and notable counter-cultural figures. Significant milestones included song lyrics by prominent Soviet bards: rebellious Vladimir Vysotsky, underground rock icon Boris Grebenshchikov, and Georgian humanist Bulat Okudzhava. Through these publications, alternative socio-political attitudes and resistance sentiments were communicated.

Even the publication of texts by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin marking the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution constituted a subtle decolonial strategy. *Avots* selected specific writings in which Lenin criticized party bureaucracy.

By utilizing canonical Marxist-Leninist texts to critique contemporary Soviet governance, the editorial leveraged official state ideology to validate contemporary critiques under *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

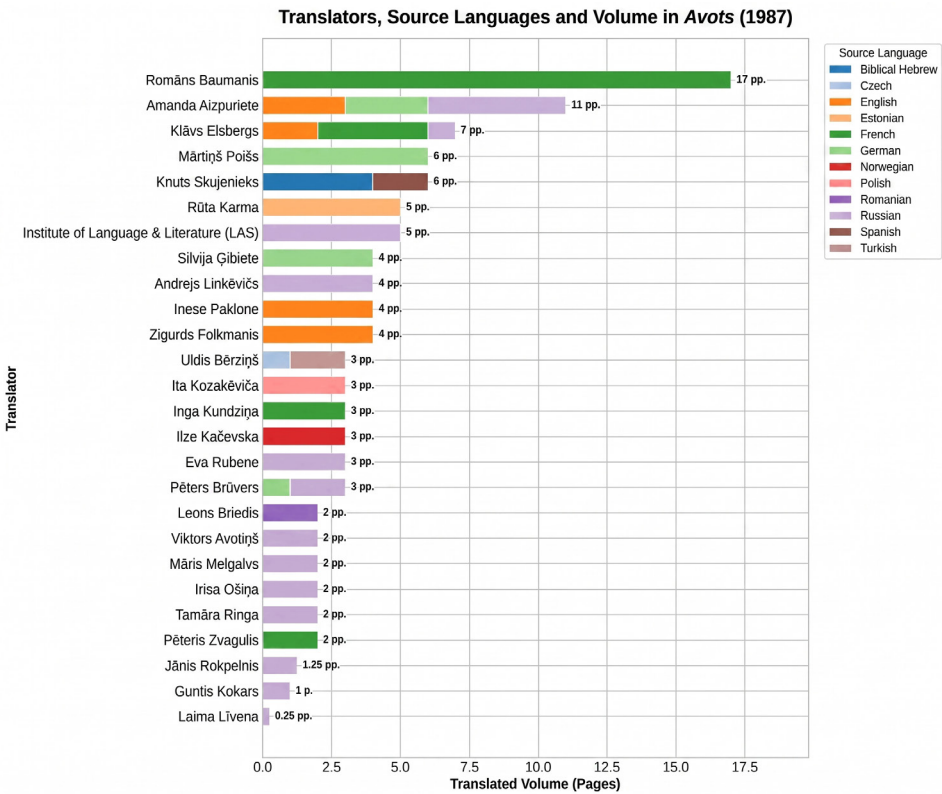
By single languages the 2nd place by page count was translations from French, which could be explained with publication of play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, song lyrics by chansonnier George Brassens and essay *Prometheus in the Underworld* by existentialist writer Albert Camus. The focus on French literature could be explained with contribution of magazine's editor of Department of literature Klāvs Elsbergs. The 3rd most translated were the works from German, including the modernist and dystopian Franz Kafka, Herman Hesse with his philosophical and on the Oriental style and poetry by expressionist Georg Trakl.

Figure 5



Furthermore, *Avots* served as an important platform for emerging Latvian poets and writers to develop their craft as literary translators. Figure 6 shows the page amount by each translator and employed languages. Key figures such as Amanda Aizpuriete, Klāvs Elsbergs, Knuts Skujenieks, Pēters Brūvers, and Uldis Bērziņš translated from multiple source languages, establishing themselves as prominent cultural mediators. As translation scholar Ivars Šteinbergs (2022) notes, literary translators exercise considerable agency through their selection of texts. Within the framework of *Avots*, these translators acted as cultural ambassadors and gatekeepers, expanding the horizon of Latvian literature and offering a window onto Western world and literature.

Figure 6



Case Study 1: Boris Grebenshchikov and Underground Rock Culture

Expressions of resistance to Soviet rule are prominently reflected in the publication of song lyrics by the Russian rock musician Boris Grebenshchikov in the September 1987 issue of *Avots*, translated into Latvian by poet Amanda Aizpuriete.

Introducing Grebenshchikov's work into the Latvian polysystem served as an act of political and cultural alignment with the Russian counter-culture and dissident movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Grebenshchikov, who began his career in the Leningrad underground music scene and distributed his work via *samizdat*, was regarded as a key public intellectual by generation of the *glasnost* era.

His 1982 song *Until the Jazz Starts* ('Пока не начался джаз') conveys an pervasive atmosphere of existential anxiety over a potential escalation of the Cold War and the arms race ('star wars') into kinetic conflict. The lyrical protagonist of the particular text is afraid of the "jazz", that could be a description of a sudden development, he seeks refuge, that could be found in relations and intimacy with protagonists partner (*Stay by my side/ Cover me until the jazz starts.*).

Karu tur neatceras.

Piekto diennakti ballējas.

Virtuves krāni jautrības gāzi dēvē.

*Par zvaigžņu kariem plāpā
pensionāri tramvajos.*

Nejauj man iet.

Stāvi klāt.

*Pasargi mani, kamēr nav sācies
džezs.*

(Grebenshchikovs 1987:27)

No one remembers the war there.

*They've been partying for five days
straight.*

Kitchen taps spew the laughing gas.

*Pensioners chatter about star wars
on the trams Don't let me go.*

Stay by my side.

Cover me until the jazz starts.

*(Back-translation by Vikmanis
in 2026)*

The imagery juxtaposes surreal, mundane observations with existential thinking, capturing the mood of the 1980ies and reflecting a profound alienation from official Soviet reality and waiting for something better and more alive.

Case Study 2: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the Theatre of the Absurd

In November and December 1987, *Avots* published Samuel Beckett's absurdist play *Waiting for Godot* (17 pages), translated by Romāns Baumanis. Originally written in French in 1952, the play represents a cornerstone of 20th-century drama. In the context of late-1980s Latvia, the perpetual, unfulfilled waiting of the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, could function as an allegory for the empty promises of Communist ideology and the stagnant expectation of a utopian future that never arrives.

To prepare the audience for this literary departure, Baumanis published an introductory essay on the theatre of the absurd, emphasizing themes of avant-garde aesthetic and deconstruction:

‘One cannot speak of a ‘complete’ severing of ties with the past, even though this is the fundamental principle theoretically espoused by this theatre. Nor can it be said that this tendency to ‘break with the past’ is a feature specific to the Theatre of the Absurd. It is the foundation of all modern art. One can speak of a NEW TRADITION’.

(Baumanis 1987: 18–19)

Publishing Beckett was an act of epistemic disobedience. By replacing the state-mandated doctrine of socialist realism with absurdism, *Avots* challenged the linear narrative of Soviet ideology, demonstrating that artistic truth could be deconstructed and critically re-examined. It also was a departure from Soviet literary canon.

Case Study 3: Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* and Dystopian Totalitarianism

The publication of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* (translated by Mārtiņš Poišs) introduced Latvian readers to Kafka's critique of technocratic, totalitarian brutality. Although translator strategically framed Kafka's work in his introductory paratext as an exposure of fascist atrocities – conforming to acceptable Soviet critical tropes – the subtext clearly invited readers to reflect upon the Soviet system itself, including the Gulag state and bureaucratic oppression:

‘Soviet Germanists have also made their own contribution to the study of Kafka's work, for the exposure in literature of the horrors wrought by fascist and totalitarian dictatorships cannot be complete without Kafka's works.’
(Poišs, 1987:14)

The leading protagonist in the story is The Traveller (represents the Enlightenment, Western liberalism and neutrality), who arrives in the penal colony, and he observes as process of execution of Condemned. Traveller is met by Officer, who is responsible for the complex and technocratic execution apparatus (symbolize systemic bureaucracy and totalitarianism). The Officer is an allusion of the old order and dogma, and also displays the matter of totalitarianism. The passive, oppressed and obedient individual is represented by Condemned. The Soldier guards how the Condemned is enchained – the Soldier is an allusion of law enforcement in totalitarian societies, following the rules by the establishment.

Publication of particular work is an act of culture translation – it imports the styles of modernism and totalitarian dystopia to the Latvian literary polysystem. In 1987 *Avots* alongside published historical memoirs regarding Soviet occupations and deportations, Kafka's narrative served as a powerful critique of totalitarian rule and citizen compliance. It was also a statement of epistemic disobedience with clear allusion about life in the totalitarian system.

Case Study 4: Anglophone Bards and Anti-Establishment Dissent

In 1987, English represented the fourth most translated language in *Avots* by page count. Translations focused prominently on Anglophone musicians and bards known for anti-war and anti-establishment positions, including John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and Bruce Springsteen. Initiated in January 1987 with Klāvs Elsbergs' translations of Lennon and McCartney, this series legitimised Western popular music as serious cultural expression.

In November 1987, *Avots* published Inese Paklone's translation of Bruce Springsteen's 1984 song *Born in the U.S.A.*, the excerpt is given below, highlighting the mood of the War in Vietnam:

Brālis man pret Vjetkongu cīnījās.

Tie vēl turpat, brāļa nav.

Viņam bij mīlotā Saigonā.

*Man paliks foto: abi apskāvušies
stāv.*

(Springstīns 1987:32)

*My brother fought against the
Viet Cong.*

*They're still there, but my brother
isn't.*

He had a sweetheart in Saigon.

All I have left is a photo:

*the two of them standing there,
embracing*

(Back-translation by Vikmanis
2026)

In the particular song the US military intervention in Vietnam is criticized and shown sad reality of veteran's life. The two main plots in this song comprise the critics of the workers conditions and criticism of war, where Springsteen portrays the veterans experience in it, as traumatic and the trauma continues also after the returning home. The publication in Soviet context invites to use allusion and criticize the USSR for waging the war in Afghanistan in 1980ies and ask about life of those who returned home, without Soviet pathos of patriotism.

In the scenery of lyrics by Springsteen – the factories, highways and industrial landscapes are present, as well it could be also in the USSR, which establishment tried to portray themselves as industrial nation. Springsteen's text also is an appeal for readers of *Avots* to criticise the workers life in the USSR. The whole scenery and narrative for Springsteens lyrics were opposite to the Soviet praised style – socialist realism, replacing it with the attempt to critically assess the live of the veteran, worker and also inmate.

Conclusions

Literary translations published in magazine *Avots* were used to disseminate the decolonial, protest and antiestablishment moods in the USSR. Publications employed the epistemic disobedience and seeking for the knowledge outside the Soviet official styles and narratives. In the hybrid conditions created by the *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies by *Avots* used publications of translated literature to import in the Latvia unknown unknown aesthetic styles and movements.

Author's compiled database reveals deliberate diversification away from the imperial centre – data shows departure from the official Soviet discourse and its previously established rule that text of foreign author at first must be translated in Russian. These were also a matter of epistemic disobedience that systematically undermined the Soviet censorship and cultural dominance.

Although the most translated works was from Russian, it was lesser than translated texts by pages from Western European and Eastern European language. The vast majority of authors translated from Russian wasn't linked with the Soviet establishment and its agenda, instead there were praise of popular culture e.g. among the publications were bardic texts by rebellious Vladimir Vysotski, humanist Bulat Okudzhava and rock musician from the underground scene Boris Grebenshchikov.

Avots acted as a shopwindow to the West importing its aesthetic styles and vocabulary into Latvian literary polysystem, enriching it and fostering the translators work. Publications of Anglophone bardic texts also was a statement of decoloniality and resistance – there have been chosen the bards that are known for their anti-establishment and ant-war stance. Publications, where the Western realities are criticized, using allusions was an act of epistemic disobedience, and invitation to criticise the Soviet rule and policies e.g. the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

The import of different Western styles, sentiments and ideologies was also evident by publishing the absurdist drama *Waiting for Godot* by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett translated from French, but the publication of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* from German is an act of importing Western existentialism, dystopia and criticism of totalitarianism into Latvian literary polysystem.

Quantitative analysis of translations in *Avots* in 1987 shows the deliberate policy of magazine's editorial to enrich the Latvian literary polysystem. During the hybrid period of *glasnost* and *perestroika* and parallel development of Third awakening in Latvia, the translated literature, that previously had peripheral position, became one of leading forces in the literary polysystem. *Avots* had a significant contribution in this process, employing the resistance to Soviet censorship by choosing to translate sensitive or forbidden works of literature. Magazine with choices of translations displayed the epistemic disobedience to Soviet discourse and attempted to delink from its realities, seeking for the knowledge outside the colonial matrix of power by the USSR.

Pictures



Photo1. Cover of *Avots* July 1987 issue by artist Andris Breže

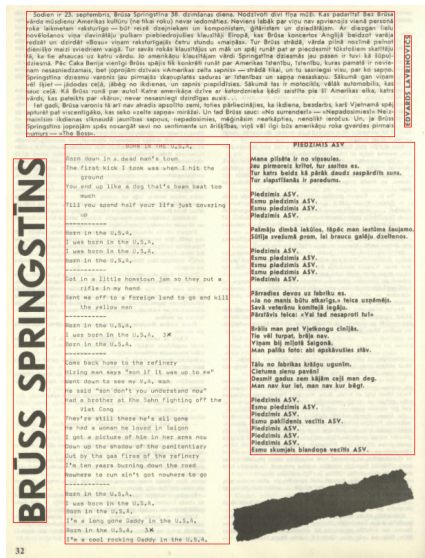


Photo 2. Page with translation of song lyrics by Bruce Springsteen in November 1987

Notes

¹ 'Openness' from Russian

² 'Rebuilding', also 'Restructuring' from Russian

³ The term agenda setting refers to the foundational Agenda Setting Theory in communication studies. For further discussion, see: <https://www.communicationtheory.org/agenda-setting-theory/>, accessed 1 August 2026

⁴ On the concept of gatekeeping, see the Gatekeeping Theory in communication studies, which describes how information is selected and filtered before reaching the public. It is closely related to the process of agenda setting. For further discussion, see "Gatekeeping Theory," Communication Theory, accessed 1 August 2026 <https://www.communicationtheory.org/gatekeeping-theory/>.

⁵ The realities of colonial rule both are mentally and physic, and it doesn't mean that it will dismantled at one effort. Example of that phenomenon is dismantling the controversial, Soviet militarism praising monument for Soviet soldiers in Riga in 2022 – it happened after 31 years from restoration of independence.

⁶ Derived from the Russian sam ('self') and izdatel'stvo ('publishing') samizdat refers to the clandestine, self-published reproduction and dissemination of banned or dissident literature in the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War.

⁷ Derived from the Russian tam ('there') and izdatel'stvo ('publishing') refers to banned, suppressed, or uncensored Soviet and Eastern Bloc literature that was smuggled out of the USSR to be printed abroad in the West, before being covertly circulated back behind the Iron Curtain.

Sources

The database of publications in magazine *Avots* is compiled while observing all its issues in 1987. The compiling is done using the digitalized issues of magazine, which can be found in the website of Periodicals of Latvian National Library – <https://periodika.lndb.lv/>

References

- Annus, Epp. 2016. Between Arts and Politics: A Postcolonial View on Baltic Cultures of the Soviet Era. *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47, no. 1: 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2015.1103509>
- Annus, Epp. 2025. *Environment and Society in Soviet Estonia, 1960–1990: An Intimate Cultural History. Elements in Soviet and Post-Soviet History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009429368>
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2008. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203933473>.
- Baer, Brian James. 2006. Literary Translation and the Construction of a Soviet Intelligentsia. *The Massachusetts Review* 47, no. 3: 537–560. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25091117>.
- Baumanis, Romāns. 1987. No salda miega mosties...[Waking Up from a Sound Sleep]. *Avots*, no. 11: 18–19
- Bērks, Pīters [Burke, Peter]. 2013. *Kultūru hibriditāte [Cultural Hybridity]*. Translated by Deniss Hanovs. Rīga: Mansards.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Burima, Maija. 2022. Karostas ģeopolitiskās konstelācijas Andras Manfeldes romānā 'Virsnieku sievas' [Geopolitical Constellations of the Naval Port in Andra Man-

- felde's Novel 'Officers' Wives']. *Letonica* 45: 28–51. <https://doi.org/10.35539/LTNC.2022.0045.M.B.28.51.51>.
- Eco, Umberto. 2008. *Experiences in Translation*. Translated by Alastair McEwen. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt1287phw>.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar. 1990. *Polysystem Studies*. *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1: 1–268.
- Fadejeva, Ludmila, Gatis Krūmiņš, and Andris Saulītis. 2026. “Vēstures traumas Latvijas ekonomikā” [Historical Traumas in Latvia's Economy]. *Raidieraksts 'Nevienlīdzības kurss'* [Podcast 'Course of Inequality']. *Satori.lv*, January 27, 2026. <https://satori.lv/article/vestures-traumas-latvijas-ekonomika-raidieraksts-nevienlidzibas-kurss>, last accessed August 3, 2026
- Godiņš, Guntars. 2025. *Žurnāla 'Avots' nozīme Atmodas laikā* [The Role of *Avots* During the Period of Awakening]. Lecture presented at the Humanities Academy for Youth, Daugavpils University, via Zoom, March 8, 2025.
- Grebenščikovs, Boriss. 1987. Song lyrics. Translated by A. Aizpuriete, *Avots*, 9
- Kalnačs, Benedikts. 2016. *20th Century Baltic Drama: Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag.
- Kalnačs, Benedikts. 2019. Latvian Multiculturalism and Postcolonialism. In *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts*, edited by Maja Horn and Monika Albrecht, 115–130. London: Routledge.
- Kamovnikova, Natalia. 2019. *Made Under Pressure: Literary Translation in the Soviet Union, 1960–1991*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvk3gkw6>.
- Karklins, Rasma. 1994. Explaining Regime Change in the Soviet Union. *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 1: 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139408412148>
- Kind-Kovács, Friederike. 2014. *Written Here, Published There: How Underground Literature Crossed the Iron Curtain*. NED-New edition, 1. Central European University Press, 2014. DOI:10.5195/ah.2016.234
- Kļavis, Aivars. 2021. *Avota laiks* [The Time of *Avots*]. Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC.
- Kļavis, Aivars. 2025. Interview by Ģirts Vikmanis. Rīga, July 10, 2025.
- Konste, Anete. 2021. Ko uzdriktējās rakstīt žurnāls *Avots*? [What Did the Magazine *Avots* Dare to Write?]. *Kultūrdeva*, LTV1, December 5, 2021. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/kultura/kulturtelpa/ko-uzdrikstejas-rakstit-zurnals-avots.a432641>.
- Latvia. 1922. *The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia* (Satversme). Adopted February 15, 1922. English translation by Valsts valodas centrs (State Language Centre), 12, <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/57980>, last accessed August 12, 2026
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2009. Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (7–8): 159–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>.

- Mignolo, Walter D. 2010. Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality. In: *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, edited by Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, 303–368. London and New York: Routledge.
- Poišs, Mārtiņš. 1987. *Cilvēks un brīvība* [Man and Freedom]. *Avots*, no. 8: 14.
- Satter, David. 1996. *Age of Delirium: The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Union*. New Haven: Yale University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bqzs>.
- Sherry, Samantha. 2018. Notes from *Glavlit*: The Autobiographical Writing of Former Soviet Censors.” *Slavonic and East European Review* 96, no. 4: 672–703. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.96.4.0672>.
- Springstins, Brūss. 1987. [Untitled]. Translated by I. Paklone. *Avots*, no. 11
- Šteinbergs, Ivars. 2022. Translating Poetry to Resist Soviet Coloniality: Tracing the Legacy of Uldis Bērziņš. *Letonica* 45: 140–163. <https://doi.org/10.35539/LTNC.2022.0045.I.S.140.163>.
- Tlostanova, Madina. 2010. The Imperial-Colonial Chronotope: Istanbul-Baku-Khurramabad. In: *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, edited by Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, 258–268. London and New York: Routledge.
- Toury, Gideon. 2012. *Descriptive Translation Studies – and Beyond*. Revised ed. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Zauberga, Ieva. 2016. *Tulkošanas teorija profesionāliem tulkiem un tulkotājiem* [Translation Theory for Professional Interpreters and Translators]. Rīga: LU Humanitāro zinātņu fakultāte.

Ģirts Vikmanis, MA Translat., MA Comm. is a Scientific Assistant at the Department of Languages and Literature in Daugavpils University. His key academic interests are translations, decolonial processes and media studies. Scholar's track record includes a 15 years of work in media focusing on foreign affairs, defence and research. Currently scholar is a PhD student in Languages and literature in Daugavpils University.