

THIS IS THE SINGING REVOLUTION:



*The Essential Tracks,
All in One Resistance*

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What is The Singing Revolution?

Between 1987 and 1991, a revolution took place in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. With the Baltic Way as its most historically remembered feature, the Baltic countries' people literally joined hands, paving the way for the reclamation of their sovereignty from the Soviet Union. The Baltic Way, also commonly known as the Baltic Chain, was one of several noteworthy events taking place in the Baltics during this period. If one were to witness this chain back in 1989, they would notice one particular feature: the people were not just showing their resistance, they were also singing it. The revolution between 1987 and 1991 was coined, The Singing Revolution, back in 1988 by Estonian activist Heinz Valk. As expected, this name reveals the primary feature across the three countries that were resisting authoritarianism and fighting for their independence. Through singing protest songs in particular, the people of the Baltics strengthened their national identity and thus, their resistance from their occupier, which would eventually contribute to their independence.

Music and resisting authoritarianism

What is the role of music in resisting authoritarianism? I argue that it is an important feature in the creation of a national identity. Music

and national identity can for example be rooted in a shared tradition, including songs that people sing during celebrations such as Christmas or Midsummer. These songs have been sung for decades or even centuries, and singing them immediately creates a connection between the participants. It can also be historically significant, for example through the existence of national anthems. As events such as the Olympics show, there is a strong connection between national pride and national anthems- after all, when an athlete receives a gold medal, they will play their country's anthem. Furthermore, the language of the song itself further cements the feeling of national identity. Singing songs in someone's native language, particularly protest songs, contributes to a feeling of togetherness with the people who share the same language. This can be seen on a national level, as I will explain in the following paragraphs, but also on a smaller level with minority languages. These songs can strengthen the feeling of national identity, but they do not necessarily mention nationalistic sentiments in the lyrics itself. While it is not uncommon for historically significant songs in particular to be clearly nationalistic, the shared feeling of a national identity is more important than the text itself.

The Baltics Are Waking Up

As this article's title already suggests, I wish to highlight several songs which were essential in The Singing Revolution. These songs can be di-



vided into two sections: protest songs that were created for the revolution, and songs that turned into protest songs despite not being created with the revolution in mind.

The first song I will discuss, arguably considered the anthem of this revolution, is a rock song titled “The Baltics Are Waking Up”. This song perfectly encapsulates the power of music in resisting authoritarianism: it brought people together and became representative for their shared goal of independence. This song was, unsurprisingly, created as a protest song for the revolution. One of its most powerful elements is that it has lyrics in three different languages: Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian. This protest song created a feeling of both national and shared identity. People could feel pride in the representation of their own language and nation in the song, as well as experience a feeling of sharing this space with

the other languages, and thus the other Baltic countries. The national identity did not just consist of the nation- it also included the region, the Baltics. In the lyrics of the song, this sentiment of a shared identity and thus shared goal of resistance returns as well: the countries are referred to as ‘three sisters’ who have to stand up for and defend themselves. In the lyrics, these sisters have been travelling together for many years, and they almost fall asleep after fighting for centuries and ‘sacrificing ancient honour’. However, the song encourages these sisters to wake up. The lyrics even call out the country’s names individually, specifically asking them to wake up and defeat the sea by ‘the will of freedom’. The allegory is obvious, yet effective. It references the historical struggles that the Baltic countries have faced, and calls them out individually while also reassuring the feeling of a

shared goal. It had the desired effect as well: The Baltics Are Waking Up became the anthem of The Singing Revolution, capturing its essence in 5 minutes and 32 seconds. This was the song that was heard on the streets when people were holding hands and creating The Baltic Way. I highly recommend watching a video to further understand the feeling that this song conveys. The many videos and images of The Singing Revolution with this protest music playing in the background truly shows the power of a shared identity in resisting authoritarianism.

Protest music and history

Certainly, “The Baltics Are Waking Up” is a perfect example of a protest song fulfilling its purpose. Similarly, songs with titles such as the Estonian song “Eestlane olen ja eestlaseks jään” (“Estonian I Am and Estonian I Will Be”) or the Lithuanian one “Pabudome ir kelkimės” (“We Woke Up, Now Let’s Get Up”) reach their intended goals of creating a sense of national identity and a feeling of a shared goal of resistance against authoritarianism. These songs, among many others, were created specifically during and with the purpose of being performed in The Singing Revolution. However, there were also songs which are less obvious as protest songs upon first sight. These are songs that turned into protest songs because they also created a feeling of national identity. For instance, the Latvian song “Saule, Pērkons, Daugava”

(“Sun, Thunder, Daugava [river]”) was heavily inspired by the poem “Daugava” written by famous Latvian poet Rainis. The song, composed as a choir song, was already performed several times before it turned into an anthem of

the revolution. I believe there are two reasons for this song to have turned into a protest song: firstly, the historical significance. Rainis is considered one of the most influential Latvian historical figures, both in literature and in Latvian nationalism. Using an influential figure as a source for this song therefore creates a connection to the shared history between the Latvian people. Secondly, the song, like many of Rainis’ poems, relies heavily on patriotic symbolism and therefore creates a strong feeling of nationalism. For instance,

the lyrics include lines such as “Latvia was laid down by the Sun” and “The sun ordered God, to dig out the Daugava”. Using this creation myth, the song emphasises the importance of the existence of Latvia as an independent place rather than as a part of the Soviet Union. The song was even considered to become the new Latvian national anthem, truly showing its importance in the Latvian national identity.


Similarly, the Estonian song “Minge(m) üles mägedele” (“Let’s Go Up To The Mountains”) was also inspired by a poem by Estonian poet Mihkel Veske. This poem was then turned into a song by Alo Mattiisen, and subsequently became part of the so-called “Five Patriotic Songs” of the Singing Revolution. While the song was specifically created to be a protest song, it was not the intention of the poet when it was written in the 19th century. Like “Daugava”, it shows the significance of cultural history in national identity, and therefore in

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resisting authoritarianism as well. After all, this history belongs to the Baltic people rather than the Soviet Union.

Music and revolution: an (academically) underrated duo

When thinking about resisting authoritarianism, people will often conjure up images of violent revolutions- a literal resistance by resisting arrest, resisting to back down in the face of danger. I do not wish to reduce the significance of these revolutions and the sacrifices many people make while resisting authoritarianism. However, I wish to highlight the importance of studying (popular) geopolitics/culture as an inherent part of this political discourse as well. Music has the power to become a symbol for (nonviolent) resist-

ance as can be seen thanks to The Singing Revolution. Cliched as it may be, the power of music and culture as a whole cannot and should not be underestimated. They are a tool for creating a shared identity, whether national, such as feeling as an Estonian, or international, the feeling of belonging to the Baltics as a whole. The Singing Revolution consisted of songs that highlighted this identity through factors such as a shared language, history, tradition, or a combination of more than one of these. The songs discussed in my article are only a few highlights of the repertoire that is available to find online, and I highly recommend listening to them. This is the music that helped the Baltic states show that they resist authoritarianism, and which would lead to them gaining their independence. Music can be revolutionary, and I believe it should be studied as such. 

About Bente van Leijden



Bente is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Russian, Eurasian and East European studies at the University of Helsinki. She previously received a Bachelor's degree in International Studies from Leiden University and a Master's degree in East European studies from the University of Amsterdam. Her main interest is in the role of popular culture in political discourse in the Russian/Eurasian region and particularly the role of culture in revolutionary movements. She is also interested in memory studies, (socio)linguistics, and heritage studies.