In Search of the Analogues of Public Opinion and Public Sphere in Soviet Lithuania

Valdemaras Klumbys

ABSTRACT    Taking Lithuania as an example this article analyses whether western-style public opinion (or its equivalent) could exist in Soviet society. Referring to historic and linguistic data it can be stated that the clearest distinction from the western analogue was the fact that in Lithuania as well as the rest of Central and Eastern Europe there was a difference between the public (mostly understood physically) and the social community (understood as an entity capable of existence a physical public).

This article also presents a theoretical model of the analogue of the public sphere in Lithuania. Its design facilitated the differentiation of informal and overt spheres (the main criteria for the differentiation being interference by the regime, the degree of formalisation and the amount of disseminated information). The most politicised areas in the spheres were distinguished: social space in the informal sphere and unofficial overt opinion in the overt sphere.

It is maintained that the only way for the members of the social sphere to spread social opinion and help it embrace more extensive strata of society and retain the integrity of the social sphere was to enter the overt sphere and express that opinion more or less explicitly. This situation explains the fact that for the most part members of the intellectual elite and those who were in close relations with them could be members of the social sphere.

In addition it is also maintained that circumstances forced intellectuals to comply, stay away from resistance and underground or dissident activities as only deeper involvement in the Soviet system and official Soviet overt space made it possible for them to vocalise more unofficial matters important to society than would be allowed normally in the official overt space strictly controlled by the regime. This situation was harmful to the ethics of intellectuals and encouraged not two-mindedness but three-mindedness manifesting discrepancies not only between a person’s real system of values and his actions and words in public but also his thoughts expressed in the social sphere.

The article also emphasises that this model of behaviour failed to safeguard the integrity of the social sphere and social discourses as its members and advocates were gripped by fear and thus refrained from overt expressions of opinion. The above can be considered as the most significant difference from the public sphere of classic western pattern.
An analysis of Soviet society and its structure as well as deeper research of the methods by which it functioned raise certain questions without which it is impossible to appreciate the specifics of certain processes in Soviet Lithuanian society and accurately characterise and examine them. One of the questions is whether public opinion similar to that of western democracies existed in Soviet Lithuania. Its existence would allow us to consider society and its active members as an independent political agent at least in the domestic affairs of the USSR. The existence of public opinion indicates the emancipation of society from the authorities and the regime, the prevalence of independent thought and opinion, and, at the same time, action.

Such freedom requires certain social conditions. Public opinion can only be formed in a certain sphere facilitating its independent formation and expression free of any constraints imposed by political authorities. In Soviet times models of behaviour in public, especially in the areas related to vast audiences (media, official events), endured restrictions imposed by censorship and fear of victimisation as well as unwritten rules providing for what could be said in public and how. Thus, a public sphere corresponding to the model of democratic western societies was unthinkable in Soviet Lithuania. However, an insight into the history of the formation of public sphere in the West suggests analogues between discussions in clubs, societies, salons, bureaux de esprit popular in the eighteenth century and activities of informal groups in the Soviet Union. The main similarity was the possibility to express overtly your opinion with little chance of punishment. Yet there are quite a few dissimilarities, more than enough to raise the question whether it is possible for unofficial networks of communication to form a space resembling the classic public sphere in its functions.

The answer to this question lies in analysis of interaction between informal and formal networks of communication, of the sphere of the power of the regime and the public under its control. Results of the analysis are presented in diagrammatic form. Its general features are applicable to the whole of the USSR, yet details are important and at first sight, small differences determined different

---

1 Analysis was carried out in Chapter 2 of the author’s unpublished dissertation: ‘Lietuvos kultūrinio elito elgsenos modeliai sovietmečiu’, University of Vilnius, 2009, pp. 82–108.
methods of operation of public opinion, its influence and intensity. Thus the appropriateness of the model discussed below to other Soviet societies requires separate analysis. I will proceed with a description of the interrelation between the networks of communication and spheres in Lithuania.

Classic public sphere, according to H. Arendt and J. Haberman, ranges between private and public authority spheres. Those also existed in Lithuania yet there was no solid space between them. The serious constraints imposed by the regime in public and its aspirations to have people’s lives under total control were the prime reasons for this situation. In the post-Stalin period, the practice of intrusion into private lives was virtually abandoned. However, connections that transcended the boundaries of communication between family members were observed. The better the formalisation of various affinity groups the stricter was the surveillance of their relations by the regime and the more pressure was put on members of such groups whenever they transcended permitted boundaries.

According to the level of constraint and intrusion of the regime the space between private and public authority spheres can be divided into two separate spaces: informal and overt.

Naming the spaces I deliberately avoided the word ‘public’ bearing the connotation that was absent in the Soviet Union. In English, the word ‘public’ means a physical public and ideas as well as actions significant to all of the society – these meanings are accrete and cannot be separated. Thus, the use of the word ‘public’ in itself distorts Soviet reality suggesting that similar ideas were alive in the USSR as well. In the Lithuanian and Russian languages, however, ‘physical public’ and ‘social’ activities are defined employing two distinct terms: vie as and visuomeni kas in Lithuanian and publichnyi and obshchestvennyi in Russian. This suggests that an idea significant to society did not necessarily have to be public; it was possible that it did not reach the physical public and was disseminated in society by other means, secretly. This was a common phenomenon in undemocratic regimes of East Europe, which accounts for the coining of the abovementioned notions. Vice versa, publicly uttered words could have been unimportant to society and fail to reflect real intentions and attitudes of the people. This was unavoidable in the situations of repressive regimes. Besides, this area images the space between informal and public words and actions that was of high importance in the Soviet times. Thus, the word ‘public’ cannot be
precisely translated into the Lithuanian language as we simply do not have such a phenomenon as public sphere.

In my scheme, the overt space encompasses only physical activities accessible and observable for everyone who is willing can learn or see an idea or an action. The basic distinction between it and activities within the groups was the fact that there were no possibilities to limit or screen the audience. That is why this space was named overt. It covers part of the space between private and power spheres; actually all its organisations are designed by the regime and function as control mechanism for its members. The more extensive the spread of a word uttered there was, the stricter was the control imposed by the regime. The abovementioned elements together with the fact that it was almost exceptionally the regime that organised activities via the institutions under its control mark the watershed between this space and classical public sphere.

Therefore it is advisable to search for the parallel of the classic Soviet public sphere in informal space with its institutes, groups and relations, though informal but independent of the regime, which organised social life within the level between family and state independently of the regime as in the classic model of public sphere. All the said social networks and institutes operated under the cover of private life. At first sight, it may seem that it was a part of private life. However, the element that distinguishes it from private life is the method of operation in it (the constitutive networks involved not only close, private relations but also more remote ones such as blat, black market, patron-client relationship). Groups of friends were probably the fundamental structural element of this space (yet it was not alone as acquaintanceship connections, sviazi, was also of great importance).

It is evident that the majority of connections in the informal sphere were nowhere near to what was going on normally in the public sphere. The same channels can be used for the dissemination of information of different character and for performance of discre-

---

2 The relations between group (kruzhok) culture and the regime via the patron-client relationship and other features and peculiarities of Soviet groups are not taken into consideration here. This article analyses different aspects of group operation – steady discourses, which focused on the critique of the Soviet regime, nationalism, and other issues that could not be discussed in the overt space. However, it should be emphasised that this aspect influenced the same people in the same groups and at the same time as the aspiration typical of a client to informally affect the representatives of the regime in order to acquire possessions.
pant activities. For instance, the same connections could be used by both illegal economic activities (black market), blat of various manner and politicised communication. A meeting of two friends could have resulted in a deal based on blat and the critique of the regime and its politics.

Thus, overtness and its opposition (referred to as informality as one of the most obvious peculiarities of this space was the absence of formal institutions) is just one axis employed in the attempts to make out the space between private and power spheres. The other axis in this system of axes is the level of politicisation and formalisation of groups and their communication as well as the constraints imposed by the regime. Members of more formalised and politicised groups could have expected stricter victimisation and would undergo more extensive pressure from the regime.

The levels of politicisation of words and actions are of utmost importance in the analysis of both informal and formal ways of operation of the society. Politicisation in the Soviet Union was extensive as it was encouraged by the propaganda of the regime and its politics, thus a good share of culture found itself in the field of political action. On the other hand, authors in the Soviet Union practiced metaphorical Aesopian language to render political aspect to literature and culture transforming them into the scene of expression of political and national manifestations. The recurrence of the situation of the eighteenth century in Western Europe is observed as then political ideas of equality and anti-monarchic feelings found their expression in fiction including erotic novels.

Therefore, in search of the analogue of the classic public sphere we should search the acts of informal communication that were most infused with unofficial politicisation and are further referred to as social discourses. They actually were the architects of the social sphere that seems to have borne the most vivid resemblance to the classic public sphere: was independent of the regime, and self-organizing, had outgrown the private space and served as the scene for discussion of political issues important to the society. However, the resemblance ends here. The opinions expressed there could neither affect the authorities, as it is usual in democratic countries, nor reach the wider strata of society as the constraints imposed by the regime and the censorship were still present.

In fact, social discourses could circulate in society through informal channels of communication. Certain information would
travel speedily and widely this way but it was for the most part related to the conveyance and interpretation of important symbolic events. For example, according to Kazys Saja, the news that in a meeting a high-ranking official pronounced ‘Long live Lithuania!’ instead of the standard ‘Long live the Soviet Lithuania!’ spread like wildfire around the country. More complex discourses, more extensive opinions and argumentations could hardly be disseminated this way. Consequently, qualitative discussions that could have been followed by wider strata of society were impossible. Crumbs of these discussions would reach people in the shape of rumours or anecdotes. Besides, there are always fewer people willing to go deep into complex discussions.

There were quite a lot of manifestations of day-to-day dissatisfaction with the Soviet regime (especially in the 1970s and 1980s) and it is impossible to dissociate politicised communication of this manner from other types of relations. And aiming at the construction of the analogue model of public space it is also purposeless. The publicity of word is important in public space yet the majority of words uttered in informal sphere failed to gain publicity. Thus, the political aspect of the discourses should be proportioned to the possibility of at least partial publicity.

Therefore, we should revert to the overt sphere. Although it was dominated by the overt opinion shaped and disseminated by the regime there were cases of manifestation of a different unofficial overt opinion which sometimes would contradict but most frequently disagree with the overt opinion. However, due to the constraints imposed by the regime it could seldom be expressed overtly and political issues were the ones to be avoided. Discussion of the latter required resort to Aesopian language. The unofficial overt opinion comprises the abovementioned more or less overt discussions of

---

3 It resembles but does not coincide with semiprivate autonomous spaces as described in M. Silberman, ‘Problematizing the “Socialist Public Sphere”: Concepts and Consequences’, idem, What Remains? East German Culture and the Postwar Republic (Washington, 1997), p. 25.

5 V. Klumbys’ interview with Kazys Saja (Vilnius, 2004). It should be understood that the abovementioned overnight dissemination of information embraced for the most part the intelligentsia, which considered it an important sign. It is questionable whether the fact could have been of any interest to a larger part of society.
matters that were important to society but could not be disputed publicly.

However, the issues that could only be hinted at in overt space had to be raised, discussed and argued somewhere. Besides, the decipherment of the codes used in the Aesopian language that would facilitate its understanding had to be formed somewhere.4 The overt sphere could not serve the purpose as open disputes could not be organised there.5 Thus, we revert to the informal space. Yet one should not consider all conversations that occurred in it between groups of friends to be social opinion just as not all public conversations are incorporated into the classic public opinion. It is restricted by the topics of conversations and spread of opinion.

Thematically it is restricted by political and social issues. Thus, we can distinguish political and social discourses and debates in the informal space and refer to them as social opinion whereas the space where they were formed can be named social space.

However, a more important issue is that of the spread of opinion. The informal sphere was more of a private one with no media or other channels of dissemination of information except for the interpersonal communication. If social discourses were disseminated solely within the informal space there would be a highly fragmented abundance of various discourses with one discourse embracing several closely interrelated groups yet failing to spread any wider.

4 It can be stated that there were no unanimous decipherment of codes in N. Putinaitė, *Nenutrūkusi styga: Prisitaikymas ir pasipriešinimas sovietų Lietuvoje* (Vilnius, 2007), pp. 182–194. However, numerous sources suggest that certain unanimous perceptions and decipherments existed and people would share them.

5 In fact, it should be mentioned that similar debates occurred in the unofficial overt space as well. An example could be cafes and other places of informal meetings. The ‘professors table’ in Neringa Café was famous for discussions on various issues including political ones. However, the overtness of conversation in such places was limited due to the fear of agents who could report the conversations to the State Security or of the covert listening devices installed by the State Security (rumours had it that such devices were used in Neringa Café and thus the conversations were even less overt). On the other hand, physical public spaces such as parks and cemeteries were considered the safest places as they were free of bugs and one had only beware of the KGB agents there. The author’s interview with Vytautas Ali auskas (Vilnius, 2003).
The dissolutions of certain discourses of the interwar period prove that this was a common occurrence with regard to the issues to which the regime refused to make any allowances. In the 1980s young people from families attributable to the cultural elite were ignorant of the date of the declaration of Lithuania’s independence – 16 February. The only aspect that singled out this day from the rest was the fact that its observance was persecuted by the regime (thus, the regime paradoxically fostered the remains of the symbols of the interwar political discourse). The dissolution of these discourses is vividly evidenced by the fact that the lyrics of Lithuanian national anthem that had been outlawed in 1950 appeared in an official collection of poetry published in 1976 and were hardly noticed by anyone. This suggests that the interwar political discourse was so distant to the society that the regime could tolerate the publication without any fears that it would encourage anti-Soviet feelings. People were ignorant of interwar symbols because the regime had managed to supplant them from the overt sphere.

The above examples suggest that vital existence of discourses requires their access to the overt space, especially to the official overt space (mass media). Exceptionally those discourses, which had access to the official overt space, could pervade in wider strata of society and create common attitudes; the official overt space was the only medium facilitating the dissemination of collective codes, opinions and feelings. Therefore, the correlation between the social sphere and the public sphere is essential. I believe that they could not possibly exist one without the other, they were complementary spheres.

Discourses that emerged in the social sphere and were officially forbidden, their parts and codes in one or another way usually through hints and hidden forms (mostly through cultural products – fiction, opinion journalism, devices of metaphoric language) would find their way to the overt sphere, pervade in the society and create the unofficial overt opinion. However, social sphere was the space where these discourses and codes could develop freely, be read and decoded overtly and unofficially. Thus, the official overt sphere performed the function of discourse and code dissemination. The

---

7 Here comes the question whether it was a particularity of Lithuania or a feature attributable to the whole Soviet system. It is obvious that
The spirituaLitY oF st Bruno oF QuerFurt

combination of social and unofficial overt spheres is comparable to classical public sphere.

The said situation allows tracing the premier agents of the social sphere. The same people as in overt sphere interrelated by links of acquaintance and friendship (yet not only them) were active in the social sphere as well. The network of groups of friends embracing the representatives of cultural and intellectual elite, partially the intelligentsia and even a small part of the nomenclature formed the basis of the social sphere. Yet it was only intellectuals and partially the intelligentsia who could steadily act in the official overt space. Through their creative work and opinion journalism, they could reach the wider strata of society and thus disseminate the discourses and ideas raised in the social sphere. There was a repetition of the situation common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when ‘the enlightened’, the educated were creating the classic public sphere by modelling the public opinion.

Those who were active in both the official overt space and social sphere were in personal relationship with those who stayed away from the official overt space. This made it possible for the intellectuals to be aware of the attitudes prevailing in the society and make efforts to express them in the official overt space. Therefore, it would be wrong to claim that unofficial overt opinion had little to do with the larger part of society.

However, the interrelation between the unofficial overt opinion and society was not direct either. Schematically it is possible to distinguish the following communicative chain: cultural elite – the intelligentsia – the bigger part of society. That is to say, the intelligentsia served as a kind of mediator between the intellectuals and a bigger part of society. Especially this is true speaking about the explication of the implications created by the intellectuals and their rendering to the public at large. It was in the course of informal communication that the unofficial, social interpretations of texts that circulated in the official overt space were rendered (and created). At the same time, the social opinion shaped in the social sphere would reach the wider strata of society. Undoubtedly, there was certain feedback but its functioning requires separate analysis.

the above described model greatly impeded the development of resistance and alternative political space as due to the said situation the participants of the social sphere were involved in the official life and interconnected with it thus it was particularly difficult to join the underground.
The social sphere and behaviour within it was a compromise between the behaviour that the intellectuals demonstrated in the official public space (here the constraints imposed by the regime through censorship and other mechanisms of social and political control were especially intense) and their private lives (where personal opinions and individual values frequently contradicted the ones expressed in the official overt space prevailed). In the latter space, people had the opportunity to express attitudes that were not projected by the regime. This helped relieve the tension created by the disagreement of opinions voiced privately and publicly.

Thereby this social group had exclusive status both in the eyes of the society and the officials of the regime which allowed the formation and expression (and at times defence) of the opinion that was unofficial, close to feelings of the public at large and sometimes even respected by the administrative elite. This factor is of high significance as it brings it closer to the concept of western public opinion perceived as the opinion respected by those who had power in their hands.8 One Soviet-time functionary related to the sphere of culture testified to the fact that opinions expressed by intellectuals were considered. If there was a project to be piloted through the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania, a renowned intellectual would be invited to advocate for it as party officials would listen to them whereas ministers sometimes might be rebuked.9

However, as it is the case with compromises, unofficial overt opinion was only a halfway achievement of the society. The pressure imposed by the regime in the official overt sphere as well as political and national issues was at the maximum. Thus, manifestations of pure social opinion in it were extremely rare. Normally social opinion would blend with the official, ideological approach and this mixture would form the unofficial overt opinion, which could have been voiced in the overt sphere. Only part (a small one) of social opinion could find its way to the official overt sphere. Thus, only this part could influence society. At the same time, the integrity of


social discourses, the social sphere itself and the opinion independent of the regime was safeguarded only partially.

The cultural elite were for the most part responsible for the formation of social and unofficial overt opinions. However, it was fully economically and socially subordinate to the regime and thus could not escape the execution of its requirements. Double-mindedness was essential in the attempts to combine the usage of two completely different discourses (official and social – frequently though not always they were contradictory) almost simultaneously. This suggests that there were differences between not only the practice of an intellectual (his /her ‘real’ attitude) and mythology (official ideology expressed overtly in the media, congresses, and so on). 10 Participants in the social sphere practiced two types of mythology. One of them was externalised in the overt space and was intended for the regime (including the introduction of social discourses and their parts to society). It also served as the ideological indoctrination of society as official ideological values and standards were conveyed through it. After all, the Soviet regime expected perpetual public assertions of loyalty and performance of ideological rituals by intellectuals.

However, another mythology with less obvious manifestations was also present. It was required to establish or sustain one’s status among other participants of the social sphere (other intellectuals) and was very ethno-centrist and slightly anti-Soviet in character, manifesting values and standards contrasting the official ones. Non-public expression of the said standards was part of the discourse employed in the communication with other participants of the social sphere.

Social values and standards were closer to the values and standards determining ‘real feelings’. However, they were not the same. Practices of everyday life and the values and standards that underlay them differed from both mythologies and were normally aimed at material well-being. According to the social mythology, intellectuals were supposed to meet the following aims: sustain national identity, protect national values and voice independent ideas. The fact that Lithuanian nationalism survived the Soviet period in a fairly strong and united form suggests that efforts were made to embody the aims posed by the social mythology.

---

However, the only possibility for Lithuanian nationalism to survive and develop was the amalgamation of the official overt sphere and Lithuanian nationalism with the Soviet ideology as well as the compliance of the intellectuals, which allowed them to act within the official overt space. Due to the said situation, one’s compliance could have been viewed as resistance. However, the actual behaviour of intellectuals in compliance with the social mythology gradually faltered and representatives of the younger generation born in the Soviet times felt less intense pressure from the said mythology.

The situation marked by the coexistence of the two mythologies enhanced an old tendency characteristic of the intelligentsia of East Europe – the discrepancy between thought and action. Actions, especially those that occurred in the official overt space, were as if attributable to the external world dominated by the regime and thus considered bogus and constrained. It was believed that the ‘real’ person as he/she was would unfold exceptionally in private life and especially in thoughts. Thus, the alienation from the public actions could have been observed in Soviet society. The social sphere was more of a space for thoughts and particularly talks rather than actions. Therefore its participants spent much more time cursing the regime than reacting against it. A small group of people attempted to react against the regime and formed the space of political underground, even fewer resolved to act overtly originating the alternative political public space. However, there were very few representatives of the cultural elite among them. In addition, the victimisation employed by the regime prevented the spaces from consolidation.

Fragmentation of the social space is another of its features that needs mentioning. Despite the existence of the unofficial overt opinion the social space failed to sustain the integrity of discourses without freedom of the press. Underground press in Lithuanian was way too underdeveloped to help it in the task. Groups of friends were rather secretive and certain (‘the most dangerous’) issues were kept secret even from the fellow members of the group who seemed less trustworthy. Therefore the network of the social space, which comprised such groups, was partitioned by walls of fear, distrust, informational vacuum and silence zones.

Thus, if I was to answer the questions raised in the opening paragraphs of the article regarding the existence of an analogue to the classical public sphere in Soviet Lithuania I would choose ‘no’ for an answer rather than ‘yes’. Yes, there were informal communicative
networks, which formed virtual spaces, and opinion independent of the regime that was occasionally taken into consideration by the administrative elite but these were qualitatively different phenomena from the classic public space. Can it be stated that Soviet society remained silent at all times and failed to influence the decisions made by the administrative elite? Certainly not. Social opinion was influential in certain fields. Yet it still was the influence of inferior on the superior rather than action of an independent agent.

Santrauka

Ieškant viešosios nuomonės ir viešosios erdvės analogų sovietinėje Lietuvoje

Dr Valdemaras Klumbys is a lecturer at the Faculty of History, Vilnius University. Major academic interests: Soviet times, culture, the intelligentsia, compliance, resistance, Soviet time memories and memories in the Soviet times, interpersonal communication, Soviet propaganda and ideology. He has published articles published in Lietuvos istorijos studijos, Genocidas ir rezistencija, Lietuvos etnologija, Inter-studia Humanitatis, Colloquia and article collections. Articles appear in Lithuanian magazines, newspapers and internet sites.

Email: klumbys@gmail.com

IE KANT VIE ŠOSIOS NUOMONĖS IR VIEŠIOSIOS ERDVĖS ANALOGŲ SOVIE TinĖJE LIETUVOJE

Valdemaras Klumbys

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje, remiantis Lietuvos pavyzdžiu, aiškinamas, ar galėjo egzistuoti vakarietiška viešoji nuomonė (ar jos atitikmuo) sovietinėje visuomenėje. Remiantis istoriniais ir kalbiniais duomenimis, teigiama, jog Lietuva labiausiai nuo vakarietiško analogo skyrėsi tuo, kad čia, kaip ir visoje Vidurio Rytų Europoje, egzistavo skirtis tarp viešumos (kuri suprasta daugiau kaip fizinis viešumas) ir
visuomeniškumo (jis suvoktas kaip galintis egzistuoti ir be fizinės viešumos).


Teigiama, jog visuomeninės erdvės dalyviai tik patekdami į viešąją erdvę ir joje bandydamai daugiau ar mažiau atvirai išsakyti visuomeninėje erdvėje besiformavusią visuomenės nuomonę galėjo šią nuomonę paskleisti visuomenėje, kad ši apimtų platesnius jos sluoksnius ir išliktų daugiau ar mažiau virsta. Tokią padėtį lemė, kad daugiausia intelektualinio elito atstovai ir su jais bendradavusieji galėjo būti visuomeninės erdvės nariai.

Kartu aiškinama, jog tokia padėtis skatino intelektualus prisitaikyti, nesipriešinti, nedalyvauti poigrindinėje veikloje, nes tik tvirtai įsitarkę į sovietinę sistemą, sovietinę oficialią viešumą jie galėjo režimo priežiūrai kontrolējo oficialiojoje viešumoje pasakyti daugiau visų visuomenei įtenkinantys ir neoficiozinių dalykų. Tokia padėtis skatino intelektualų moralę ir stiprino net ne dvimintę, o trimintę, kai nuo realių žmogaus vertybių skyrėse ne tik veiksmai ir kalbos viešumoje, bet ir mintys, išreiškinamos visuomeninėje erdvėje.

Taip pat straipsnyje pabrėžiama, kad toks elgesys vis dėlto neapsaugo visuomeninės erdvės ir visuomeninių diskursų integralumo, nes jos narius ir reiškė jas kaustę baimę, neleidusi laisvai reikšti savo nuomonės. O tai ir yra didžiausias skirtumas nuo klasikinės vakarietiškos viešosios erdvės.