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GUN-BRITT KOHLER

INSIGHTS INTO THE BELARUSIAN LITERARY MARKET
(1905-1932)

1. *Introduction*

In 1857, the Belarusian writer Vincènt Dunin-Marcinkevič (Wincenty Dunin-Marcinkiewicz) published in a volume titled *Dudarz białoruski, czyli wszystkiego potrosze* (The Belarusian Bagpiper, or a Little of Everything) a Polish-language narrative poem with the title *Kłopoty literackie* (Literary Worries; Dunin-Marcinkevič 2008). Therein, the first-person narrator reports in a cheerful tone on the difficulties he faces as the author of a literary work written “in the peasant manner” (“pa chłopsku”; 65), i.e. in the Belarusian language, in publishing and distributing such a work (see Kisjalëva 2021). The Minsk bookseller to whom he wants to sell the manuscript offers him bad terms, saying that no one knows him except the “peasant rabble” (“kmièci tłuszczà”; 65). With difficulty, the author-narrator manages to raise the money he needs for printing elsewhere. When the book is printed, he again turns to the bookseller to sell it, but again his conditions are unacceptable. Other attempts to bring the book “into the world” also fail: the noble urban society is not interested in this kind of reading.¹ The discouraged author finally takes forty copies and travels to the countryside to visit noblemen for recreation. In this circle, which knows and cultivates the Belarusian language, traditions and customs and lives in close relationships with the ‘common people’, his works are appreciated. When he leaves again after some time, he has sold his books and received money for 100 copies (90).

(¹) The work is denounced as “foul flub” (“bazgranina”; “plugawstwa”; 68), which is “at best suitable for reading among coachmen” (“Toż chyba do czytania pomiędzy furmany”; 68). Unless otherwise noted all translations are mine (G.-B.K.).

Dunin-Marcinkevič's poem thus gives an account of (his perception of) the conditions of production, distribution and reception of Belarusian literature around the mid-1850s.

The poet Uladzisłaŭ Syrakomlja (Władysław Syrokomla), to whom *Kłopoty literackie* were dedicated, commented sceptically on this aspect of the poem: “Niewiem czy przystała tego rodzaju publiczna spowiedź, z codziennych kłopotów, przez które przechodzimy” (Syrokomla 1861: 178).² At the same time, however, he confirmed Dunin-Marcinkevič's vision of an alliance between the writer and “Belarusian citizenry” as a perspective for freeing the author from dependence on the bookseller:

Lepszą i chlubniejszą od księgarskiej i mecenasów opieki, jest opieka jaką ogół czytającej publiczności ze współczuciem udzieli swojemu wybranemu pisarzowi, opieka jaką właśnie znalazł autor u Białoruskiego obywatelstwa. [...] Niechno ogół obywateli naszych załatwi się z kwestją swej młodszej braci, niechno zawiązawszy się w handlowe i rolnicze spółki wyzwoli się od żydów, a pewni jesteśmy, i nas piszących wyzwoli z pod opieki księgarzy. [...] Wierząc w ducha zbawczego obywatelskiej assocjacji, czekajmy cierpliwie [...].³

In Syrakomlja's time, the implementation of such a model of a corporate Belarusian literary market was hardly possible – the part of the social elite interested in literature written in the Belarusian language (still disdained as a peasant dialect) was tiny, the circle of authors too small, and the political framework conditions too difficult.

By the end of the century, however, the “Space of Possibles” (Bourdieu 2011) of Belarusian literature had expanded (see Kohler 2018). From 1905 onwards, in the course of the national movement, a Belarusian literary market emerged, namely a regular production,

⁽²⁾ I don't know if a public confession of this kind about the daily troubles we experience is appropriate.

⁽³⁾ Better and more glorious than bookstores and patrons of care is the care the general reading audience compassionately gave to their chosen writer, the care the author has just found with Belarusian citizenship. [...] Let the general public of our citizens deal with the question of their younger brothers, let them be freed from the Jews, having established themselves in commercial and agricultural companies, and we are sure that they will free us as writers from the care of booksellers. [...] Believing in the salvific spirit of the civic association, let us wait patiently.

distribution and consumption of literary texts written in Belarusian and relating to Belarus. This literary market changed radically in the first third of the 20th century in interaction with social, economic, political and ideological factors.

This article attempts to trace these changes and, in particular, to answer the question of how the institutional and organisational profile of the Belarusian literary market changed.⁴ Literary market, in a narrower sense, means the “meeting of supply and demand” (Schütz 2005: 266). In a broader sense, however, it is about the “literature business”, namely the “totality of institutions, instances and persons, as well as their interrelationships, that form the framework conditions for the production, distribution and reception of literary texts” (Richter 2011: 7; see Plachta 2008). The theoretical background is provided by the theory of the literary field developed in Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Rules of Art* (Bourdieu 2011). Even though the concept of the market is not explicated there, it still plays a decisive role – roughly understood as “market of symbolic goods” in which cultural and economic value attributions take place according to two antagonistic logics (anti-economic vs. economic logic) in opposing modes of production and circulation (Bourdieu 2011: 141-176). From this perspective, the ultimate aim is to gain insights into the nature of the literary field, which allow making statements about its autonomy status (*sensu* Bourdieu). Dorleijn’s and van Rees’ systematic distinction between “material production”, “distribution” and “symbolic production” (van Rees 2012: 27; see Dorleijn - van Rees 2006) enables operationalisation and allows to describe what Erhard Schütz called an “irritated relationship between literature and the market” (Schütz 2005: 268), i.e. the peculiar position of literature “between the state and the market” (see Sapiro 2003).

A first step outlines general quantitative factors and normative framework conditions of the four development phases. The second and third steps will examine material production, symbolic production and distribution of the first and fourth phases.

⁽⁴⁾ The article summarises some results of an ongoing research project on the Belarusian literary market in the first third of the 20th century, based on archival documents (BDAMLiM and NARB in Minsk), in cooperation with Pavel Navumenka (Minsk).

2. *Four phases*

The period under investigation covers the years 1905 to 1932. These threshold dates are fixed by cultural-political events, each of which permanently changed the literary scene in Belarus: the initial spark for the development of the Belarusian book and literature market was the legalisation of printing in Latin script by Nikolaj I. in 1905.⁵ The Communist Party's decree on the restructuring of literary and artistic associations in 1932 marked its end – or at any rate a new stage in the process of its increasing “Gleichschaltung”.⁶

These almost three decades may be (heuristicly) subdivided in four phases:

1. 1905-1915: the emergence of the literary market until the outbreak of World War I;
2. 1915-1921: the phase of disintegration until the founding of the BSSR and the Peace of Riga;
3. 1921-1932 (1939): the ‘atomised’ market in the Second Polish Republic, as well as simultaneously;
4. 1921-1932: literature and the literary market between differentiation and planned economy in the BSSR.

Interestingly, the ‘type’ of archival documents preserved in each case allows assumptions on the profile and functioning of the literature market in the individual phases. Thus, the high presence of orders, invoices and lists, but also of statutes and contracts in the first phase points to a high degree of self-organisation as well as a low-threshold and efficient distribution system in which contact between consumers and producers is relatively close. In the second and third phases, on the other hand, correspondence with authorities, courts and the police predominate, providing information about the strict control

(⁵) This seems paradoxical. At the beginning of the 20th century, the social and cultural elite – mostly the (Catholic) szlachta, which had been polonised since the 18th century and among which the national movement was now gaining popularity – was closer to the Latin than to the Cyrillic alphabet.

(⁶) This decree liquidated the most powerful literary organisation of the time, BelAPP, and decreed the foundation of a unified writers' association. All remaining literary groups and literary magazines were subordinated to its organising committee (see *Ab perabudove* 1932).

that inhibits the production of literature and print, respectively. For the fourth phase, in turn, minutes, decisions and resolutions, reports, plans, calculations and official correspondence are typical. This evidences the strong intertwining of literature and the state, a high degree of infiltration of the literary business by state organs, and a largely professionalised and infrastructurally developed but increasingly dependent market.

2.1. *Quantitative aspects*

In quantitative terms, the literary market developed in different ways in the four phases.

Between 1906 and 1914, 63 titles of original artistic literature were published (out of the total output of 162 books in Belarusian with a total circulation estimated at just under 400,000 copies; see Aleksandrovič 1968: 207). This means that in the first phase, an average of seven literary titles appeared annually; the share of literature in total book production during this period was just under 40 per cent.⁷

In the second phase, between 1915 and 1921, 50 titles of artistic literature appeared out of the total production of 265 books. The output of literary titles thus remained at an average of seven literary titles p.a., while the share of literature in total book production fell to just under 20 per cent (see Aleksandrovič 1968: 207; *Letapis'* 1928). However, Belarusian authors actively published in (quantitatively increasing) periodicals, especially towards the end of the 1910s. Although these were not literary periodicals (and mostly short-lived), literature had a firm place within them.

In Western Belarus between 1922 and 1932, the annual literary book production remained barely above the level of the previous phases, with an average of eight titles per year (with strong fluctuations).⁸ The share of literary publications in the total Belarusian-language output here is around 30 per cent.

(7) Without translations.

(8) The total number of literary book publications determined on the basis of Jerzy Turonek's inventory (see Turonek 2008: 289, 307-317) amounts to 91 titles. They also include translations and reprints of publications from the first phase.

In the same period, book production in the Belarusian language in the BSSR amounted to 5742 titles; it rose continuously from 26 (1922) titles to 1300 (1932) titles (see Nikalaeŭ 2011: 211).⁹ However, the share of Belarusian literature in this total production can only be determined very approximately; with about 35 titles per year,¹⁰ it was probably only around 10-12 per cent and thus much lower than in the previous phases.¹¹

So literary book production, which experienced a significant upswing in the first decade and a half of the 20th century, stagnated between World War I and the end of the Polish-Soviet War, and subsequently in the Second Polish Republic, and hardly developed in quantitative terms. It increased significantly in the BSSR, where it grew to about four times the size of the previous phases or the parallel West Belarusian phase. However, it is precisely here that the significance of literature within the overall production decreased massively. The literary market did not grow with the overall book market: it had only marginal significance in quantitative terms.

2.2. Normative framework

The framework conditions for the development of the literary market changed several times in the course of the first third of the 20th century (see Koler - Navumenka 2020: 106-107).

(⁹) At the beginning of the 1920s, Russian-language book production was still significantly higher than that in Belarusian. From 1925 onwards, due to the Belarussisation policy, the share of the Russian language decreased significantly. The total output in all languages (Belarusian, Russian, Yiddish, Polish, Lithuanian, etc.) reached its absolute peak in 1932 (1.520 titles, 1.300 of them in Belarusian). At that time, the total annual circulation was about 10 million copies (see Nikalaeŭ 2011: 211, 220).

(¹⁰) This estimate is derived from the number of total copies of artistic literature in the years 1924/25 to 1928/29 mentioned in the 5-years-report, which was 559.500 copies with an average individual print run of 3.200 copies. (see *Knihaspis* 1929: XIV).

(¹¹) The catalogue of the state publishing house, which had a near-monopoly in the field of literature, lists 18 literary titles in Belarusian under the heading "artistic literature" for 1925, 26 for 1926, 35 for 1927 and 58 for 1928 (see *Knihaspis* 1929). The numbers may be higher since literary publications may also figure in other rubrics.

In the first phase, the Belarusian area, completely incorporated into the Russian Empire, was subject to Russian law. Various “provisional laws”,¹² strictly but very clearly regulated the procedure for founding a periodical or a publishing house; they also regulated censorship (nominally abolished in 1905, but de facto still in existence), which did not attach any particular importance to literary texts and only intervened in a few cases deemed politically relevant. In these cases, in addition to the author, those persons “guilty of printing the pamphlet in question” were also prosecuted. The censorship authority had only a control function: its decisions had to be confirmed by the courts (see Bljum 2009).¹³

During the second phase, the situation is confusing due to the precarious political circumstances: at first, the war censorship of the Russian Empire, introduced with the outbreak of World War I, granted the censor far-reaching powers (he decided on “what is harmful to the Russian state”), but was of little literary relevance. In 1917, the provisional government liquidated the censorship apparatus and established the Book Chamber and the Press Review Bureau. In Ober Ost region, the decrees of the Commander Ober Ost were applied from 1915 onwards. Here, periodicals and books were subject to pre-censorship, which checked for militarily and politically relevant content. The import and distribution of print products of all kinds were also subject to strict control. The “Buchprüfungsamt Ober-Ost”, established in 1916, controlled production and import; the local police handled the book trade. Under Polish occupation in the former Russian partition territory, the decree for provisional press regulations ap-

(¹²) In fact, from 1904 onwards, Russian legislation was undergoing a process of transformation, which stimulated the book and periodical industry through various facilitations. For example, the obligation to pay a deposit was abolished, and the procedure for founding periodicals was simplified (see Bljum 2009).

(¹³) The proceedings against the works *Dudka belaruskaja* and *Smyk belaruski* by Francišak Bahušėvič published in St. Petersburg are famous. The ignorance of the censorship committee in the field of Belarusian literature was demonstrated here, among other things, by the fact that legal proceedings were sought against the author, “whose whereabouts are unknown to the committee” (Golovin 1908), whereas Bahušėvič had been deceased for eight years at this point. In the case of Janka Kupala’s *Žalejka*, the matter was referred to the censorship committee in Vil’nja, but the proceedings finally were closed.

plied from 1919; it formally proclaimed freedom of printing, but in fact, introduced post-censorship. It regulated the procedures for the licensing and registration of periodicals as well as the confiscation procedure. Everything could be confiscated on the basis of the penal code, but confiscation required court involvement or confirmation.

The conditions for Western Belarus within the Second Polish Republic reveal an obvious discrepancy between formally granted freedom and de facto restrictive practice. According to the Peace of Riga and the Constitution (1921),¹⁴ National minorities were granted full rights, but in practice, these rights were restricted. Literary matters were regulated primarily by decrees on the press, which were revised several times, and whose targets were primarily periodicals. The control aimed in particular at economic weakening because the practice of post-censorship implied that numerous periodicals were printed, but their distribution was then banned (see Vabišičević 2012: 74). As the penal laws of Prussia, Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire applied in the respective former partition territories until 1932, the Western Belarusian area was still subject to the Russian penal code of 1903 (the so-called Kodeks Tagancewa).

In the BSSR, the constitutions of 1919 and 1927 formally placed print production “in the hands of the working class and the peasants” (in effect, there was a quasi-state monopoly).¹⁵ They formally guaranteed some civil rights such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression; however, freedom of the arts and sciences and protection of intellectual property were excluded: law did not protect literature. The concrete normative framework for literature was not systematic (Puryševa 2016: 139). It was set beyond the Constitution

⁽¹⁴⁾ The Constitution guaranteed freedom and equality of all citizens before the law (art. 95 and 96), freedom of thought, freedom of the press and printing and freedom of assembly (art. 104, 105, 108). It granted national minorities the right to preserve their nationality and language and maintain their own cultural and educational institutions (art. 109, 110).

⁽¹⁵⁾ See art. 8 (1919) and art. 10 (1927): “[...] предоставляет в руки рабочего класса и крестьянской бедноты [in 1927: крестьянства] все технические и материальные средства к изданию газет, брошюр, книг и всяких других произведений печати и обеспечивает их свободное распространение по всей стране” (*Konstitucija 1919 goda; Konstitucija 1927 goda*).

by decrees, which frequently were undergoing amendments, corrections or reinterpretations and provided regulation on three levels: 1. the establishment of a state institutional basis (the foundation of the university, the state publishing house, the Institute for Belarusian culture (later the academy of sciences), the national library, the theatres, as well as the committee for printing matters, the censorship apparatus, etc.) and the definition of their tasks;¹⁶ 2. the operative acting of these institutions as well as of certain literature-related organs of the party (literary committee, printing department), i.e. the institutional agency in literary business;¹⁷ 3. the cultural-political and ideological leadership, which to a certain extent determined the *nomos* of the literary field and business. The sole normative authority here was the party (the CK KP(b)B and the superordinate CK RKP(b), later CK VKP(b)), which governed central literary institutions (associations and criticism) with general decrees.¹⁸

Literature in the BSSR was thus subject to a hypertrophied system of over-regulation and control by the state, on which it was largely dependent (also economically).

(¹⁶) Most of these decrees were issued by the SNK and subsequently published in collections of laws and orders, as for instance, the series *Zbor zakonů i zahadaů rabočá-sjaljanskaha ũradu belaruskaj sacyjalistyčnej rěspubliki* (Collection of laws and orders of the workers' and peasants' government of the Belarusian Socialist Soviet Republic; 1925-1938). Per Belarusisation polity, from 1925 onwards, the decrees were issued in both Belarusian and Russian.

(¹⁷) This is also the level of copyright, which is equally regulated by a Soviet decree (1928, CIK SSSR) and Belarusian decrees (1929 and 1931, SNK BSSR). Copyright was highly ambivalent; among other things, it fixed the rates for author's fees, seemingly securing the author's rights, but at the same time undermining them as well as the dynamics of the market. It is also characteristic that the author was not necessarily the sole subject of copyright. In certain cases, the NKA could dispose of the author's work without his consent.

(¹⁸) There are only a few such general decrees, but they have a crucial impact on literary politics. The famous decree *O politike partii v oblasti chudožestvennoj literatury* (On the party's literary policy), issued in 1925 by the CK RK(b)P, and the decree mentioned above *Ab perabudove litaraturna-mastackich arhanizacyj BSSR* (On the restructuring of BSSR literary and artistic organisations), issued by the CK KP(b)B in 1932 in accordance with the decree of the same name issued by the CK VKP(b), are the most important ones.

3. *The Emergence of the Literary Market 1905-1915*

3.1. *Material production*

The emergence of the literary market took place in the context of the national movement, which formed especially in the centres of St. Petersburg and Vil'nja.¹⁹ Apart from the authors, the material production was realised by publishing houses and individual periodicals located in these places – especially the weekly newspaper “Naša niva” (1906-1915) in Vil'nja, which represented the central (also literary) communication forum and was of core importance for the creation and conceptualisation of Belarusian national literature (Vabiščević 2009; Kohler 2019a; Kohler 2021). “Naša niva” generated a number of authors, among whom about 20 were regularly active. The core of this circle consisted of about eight writers who worked in different roles in the literary field²⁰ and also had book publications. All the agents of this period were non-professionals: as a rule, authors were not paid; authors, publishers and periodicals were not – or at least not primarily – interested in economic profit. Rather, the principle of non-profit played a central role, which in economic terms was to a certain extent the prerequisite for the market to function at all.²¹

(¹⁹) The traditional Belarusian term “Vil'nja” of the toponym Vilnius is used in this article, on the one hand, to avoid the changing variants (Vil'na, Wilna, Wilno), which were politically compelling at different times. On the other hand, it is supposed to emphasise the specifically Belarusian perspective relevant to the period under study, which sees Vil'nja as the centre of Belarusian revival and as a core reference site for Belarusian literature and culture.

(²⁰) Jakub Kolas, Janka Kupala, Maksim Bahdanovič, Zmitrok Bjadulja, Cětka, Jadvihin Š., Ciška Hartny, Maksim Harëcki. They were active as poets and/or prose writers, as critics, editors and/or correspondents but did not belong to the inner circle of organisers of the national movement.

(²¹) Aljaksandr Ulasau, editor of the newspaper “Naša niva”, wrote in his memoirs in 1936: “Пачатак беларускай прэсы быў увесь на ахвярах і цяжкай начной працы. Паўтраця года мы з Антонам Луцкевічам пісалі ад вечара да раніцы. Як мы вытрымалі гэту работу, я не разумею. Моладасьць, нязломная воля і энтузіязм! Трэба было вырабляць літаратурную мову” (Ulasau 1936: 298. “Sacrifices and hard nightly work marked the beginning of the Belarusian press. For two and a half years, Anton Luckevič and I wrote from evening to morning. How we were able to keep up this work, I do not understand. Youth, an indomitable will and enthusiasm! The task was to bring forth the literary language”).

In publishing, the cooperative principle claimed by Syrakomlja in the mid-19th century dominated: most of the nine publishing houses that published Belarusian-language literature were limited partnerships whose full members – activists of the national movement – were liable with their private assets.²² Patronage also still played a role at this time. None of the publishing houses had its printing firm. The strategies of the publishing houses (as well as the periodicals) were oriented towards a maximum of accessibility. Thus, many publications were printed in two alphabets, which doubled the costs but guaranteed a broad impact;²³ the calculation of costs and circulation was based on the possibilities of the consumers. A review in 1910 underlines the economic difficulties of the market:

Вядома, як трудна ў нас выдаць кніжку: яна грошы каштуе, а нашы паэты не раз на боты не маюць; вось на паперы яшчэ могуць напісаць, але, каб выдрукаваць творы, грошы няма. Дзеся таго тыя, што выдаюць сваім коштам для нашага народа [...], заслужваюць на шчырую падзяку. Шмат маем чаго, што хацелі б друкаваць, але грошай няма, і матэрыял ляжыць, чакае ён лепшых часоў, калі тыя, што грошы маюць, поймуць што хоча быць грамадзянінам свайго краю, той павінен памагаць, каб прасвета ўзрастала і каб кніжка даходзіла да найшырэйшых мас народа. (Bul'ba 1910: 661)²⁴

(²²) At least five publishing houses, the Petersburg publishing house “Zahljane soncè i ŭ našè vakoncè” and the Vil'nja publishing houses “Belaruskae vydaveckae tavarystva”, “Naša chata” and “Palačanin”, and finally the Minsk publishing house “Minčuk” are such limited partnerships. Only one publishing house of this period (Hrynevič in Petersburg) was a private individual publisher.

(²³) “Naša niva” wrote in 1912: “[P]rychodзіlosia drukawać usio dwajakimi literami: ruskimi i łacinskimi. Časć biełarusoŭ znae adny litery, časć – druhije. Treba było dać duchoŭnuju strawu i tym i hetym. Takim paradkam košt wydańnia kožnaj knižki, kožnaho numeru hazety byŭ dwajny” (Naša niva 1912: 1. “[A]ll was to be printed in two alphabets, Cyrillic and Latin. Part of the Belarusians knew one set of letters, part the other. Spiritual nourishment had to be given to one as well as the other. In this way, the costs of publishing each book, each magazine number were doubled”).

(²⁴) We know how difficult it is to publish a book in our country: It costs money, but our poets often do not even have money for boots; they can write on paper, but there is no money to print their works. Therefore, those who publish books for

Here, too, Syrakomlja's idea resonates, which declares the stimulation of the book market for education's sake – and thus the principle of altruism in the field of production – to be a civic duty. Following this principle, the publishers not only did not compete with each other, but they also acted in a strategically coordinated manner.²⁵ In 1913, the “Belarusian Publishing Company” (“Belaruskæ vydavec-kæ tavarystva”) was founded in Vil'nja on the basis of the publishing house of the newspaper “Naša niva” with funds from the Petersburg publishing house “Zahljane sončè”. A (autonomously operating) bookshop was affiliated. This effectively created a kind of ‘holding’, and the publishing business in Vil'nja was centralised for the sake of greater efficiency.

3.2. *Symbolic production*

Institutions of symbolic production only developed during the first phase and did not reach a professional level (see Abramovič 2004). Nevertheless, the development of the literary market in the context of the national movement was accompanied by a powerful process of consecration. Amongst others, it produced the positions of the national poet and the national classics (Kohler 2019a; Kohler 2021).

Various strategies were used in this process of production and consecration, in which the publishing houses played a part as well: In fact, in this phase of a still minimal market, the book-publication as such might be seen as an act of consecration that especially distinguished the author.²⁶ The Petersburg publishing house “Zahljane son-

our people at their own expense [...] deserve our sincere appreciation. We have many things we would like to print, but there is no money, and the material lies waiting for better times when those who have money will understand that he who wishes to be a citizen of his country must help education to grow and the book to reach the broadest masses of the people.

(²⁵) Janka Kupala's *Žalejka* was prepared for printing at the publishing house “Minčuk”, but then handed over to “Zahljane sončè...” in St. Petersburg due to financial difficulties; there were also joint publications.

(²⁶) In any case, more extensive book publications exceeding the size of brochures (the normative system distinguished between non-periodical publications of up to one printed sheet, those between two and five printed sheets and over five printed sheets – 1 printed sheet = 16 pp.).

cé” founded a book series called “Belaruskije pieśniary” (Belarusian poets) and published some works of 19th century Belarusian literature, assigning their authors the role of ‘founders’. A special strategy was the production of postcards with portraits of some authors qualified as outstanding. Finally, some publishing houses published ‘luxury editions’ of selected publications, which were produced and sold in tiny editions (usually 100 copies) at a higher price – this is also an indication of ongoing hierarchisation processes.

Among the periodicals, the weekly “Naša niva” occupied a special position in the field of symbolic production: The rubric “Paštovaja skrynka” (Letterbox), which served to answer letters, was used to comment on literary manuscripts sent in as well. Thus, authors and readers received information about evaluation criteria of literary texts (Belarusian language, originality, Belarusian character, stylistics, authenticity, literariness, etc.). The “Paštovaja skrynka” thus was a laboratory of emerging literary criticism, which to a certain extent explored the boundaries between the literary and the non-literary (cf. Abramovič 2004). From 1908 onwards, literary reviews and survey articles also appeared in the newspaper, and from 1910 onwards, the first disputes and polemics broke out.²⁷ The increasing polyphony indicates that the literary space had differentiated towards the end of the first phase and that the first ‘battles’ were emerging. The literary ‘universe of belief’ (Bourdieu 2011), which was produced particularly at the level of symbolic production, emancipated itself from the homogenising framework of the national movement and transformed itself into a force field in which struggles for hierarchy, competition and legitimacy took place.

3.3. *Distribution*

Basically, three methods were used to realise the distribution of books and newspapers: subscription or ordering and mailing; direct retail

(²⁷) The first polemic in 1910 revolved around the authenticity of the poet Janka Kupala, who stylised his lyrical alter ego as a peasant (Kohler 2019a). The second polemic in 1913 dealt with the further orientation of Belarusian literature (Mušynski 2020).

in bookshops or in the offices of the publishers or newspapers;²⁸ finally, through a network of contractual partners and agents who ensured distribution in the province and abroad. The various publishing houses cooperated closely in this: the basis for distribution to the Belarusian core area was Vil'nja, above all the infrastructure established by "Naša niva" (the correspondents). Book distribution benefited significantly from the newspaper's network because "Naša niva" distributed not only Vil'nja publications but also the production of publishers in Petersburg ("Zahljane soncë" and "Hrynevič"). "Zahljane soncë" in turn established a network of business partners, especially in cities (Vil'nja, Warsaw, Minsk, Vicebsk, Mahilëŭ, Homel', Hrodna, Slonim; see Žylunovič 1925: 119; Nikalaeŭ 2011: 42), where bookshops distributed the books on consignment. The Vil'nja publishers in turn benefited from this (and from the salespoints of the publishing house in Petersburg). The first purely Belarusian bookshop was founded in Vil'nja in 1913.

Demand was stimulated by advertising in newspapers and book publications and promoted by a system of discounts and bonuses as well as by flexible payment options (e.g. payment in stamps). The publication and distribution of catalogues with order numbers and the use of order forms also speak for the increasing professionalisation in marketing. Finally, "Naša niva" systematically propagated the foundation of village libraries on one's own initiative.

The following comment from the accountant of the publishing company "Zahljane soncë" exemplarily summarises the functioning of the growing market in 1910:

Суполка ўжо завялікі інтэрас, каб яе можна было вяці хатнім спосабам, а як гандлёвы інтэрас яна яшчэ дужа малая і гандлёвыя расходы ў ёй бяз меры вялікія [...]. Як паказала практыка, выдання беларускія купляюцца, значыць яны патрэбны: таму то і абарот Суполкі расце роўна з лічбай выданняў, што ёсць у прадажы. Дзеля таго ўсе сябрукі і супольнікі павінны ўсімі сіламі старацца, каб барджэй рос абаротны капітал Суполкі. Яны павінны павялічываць сваю сяброўскую і супольніцкую складку, куп-

(²⁸) In 1912, the sales office of "Zahljane soncë" had 74 publications (books and pamphlets) on stock, of which about one-third (24) was its own production (see Maladaja Belarus' I 1912: 162-164).

ляць нашы выданні ў вялікай лічбе зразу для сябе і знаёмых,
што дужа важна у нас, дзе няма наладжанага гандлю кнігамі.
(Ivanoŭski 1910)²⁹

The commentary proves that the costs associated with marketing are the central financial problem and the crucial importance attached to the principle of corporation and public spirit.

4. Literary Market between Differentiation and Planned Economy in the BSSR (1921-1932)

4.1. Material production

The organisation of the newly established literary sphere in the BSSR at the beginning of the 1920s was determined by two fundamentally antagonistic, mutually dependent principles: At the level of the state organs, organisational agency was guided by the desire for maximum control of literary institutions and agents. It was institutionalised in a vertical, largely centralised apparatus headed by the party (see Puryševa 2016). But literary agency in the narrower sense was oriented towards the same kind of self-organisation that already had distinguished the previous phases. On the institutional level it is reflected in a general tendency towards the founding of literary groups and journals during the 1920s.³⁰

The carriers of material production were authors, authors' associations, literary magazines and the state publishing house founded in 1924. The number of active authors increased exponentially; cautious-

⁽²⁹⁾ The company is already too big to be run on a basis of home economics, but as a commercial enterprise, it is still very small, and the trading costs are immense [...]. The practice has shown that Belarusian publications sell, i.e. they are needed: therefore, the company's turnover increases evenly with the number of publications on sale. Therefore, all members and associates must make every effort to ensure that the capital revenue grows. They must [...] buy our publications in large numbers right away for themselves and friends, which is particularly important in our country where there is no established book trade.

⁽³⁰⁾ Among others, the groups *Vir* (1922), *Maladnjak* (1923), *Uzvyšša* (1926), *Problisk* (1927), *Belaruskaja litaraturna-mastackaja kamuna* (1927), *Ahnjacvet* (1927), *Polymja* (1927), *BelAPP* (1928) and the journals *Adradženne* (1922), *Polymja* (1922), *Maladnjak* (1923), *Uzvyšša* (1926/27), *Roskvit* (1927) as well as other journals in the periphery.

ly, it can be estimated at 400-500 authors (of varying activity and quality),³¹ of whom about 10 per cent formed that active core of authors who moved in the literary field in a longer-term and distinctive way.

During these years, writers underwent a significant professionalisation: literary publications were generally remunerated, copyright law fixed at least the economic rights of the authors, and with the Bel-dramtavarystva, an independent economic interest group came into being, which also took on the functions of a trade union, among others. Conversely, the difficult conditions under which authors worked and lived were repeatedly lamented. The writer Zmitrok Bjadulja, one of the most astute and critical observers of the literary business of his time, emphasised the low fees paid by the state publishing house in a tedious procedure (Bjadulja 1928).

The central function of the literary associations, each with a different profile, lies in the institutional bundling of literary forces and the mediation between authors on the one hand and the state, respectively the party, on the other. In fact, they structured the field, primarily through their debates and literary journals (see Kohler 2016). As ‘first publication forums’, these journals contributed significantly to the quantitative and qualitative differentiation of literary production (“Maladnjak” in particular was a forum for the ‘critical mass’ of young authors). Also, they were the central place where literary criticism differentiated itself.

At the beginning of the 1920s, various – mainly corporately organised – publishing houses emerged in the BSSR, which were gradually centralised by the state and transferred to the State Publishing House (BDV) in 1924 (see Nikalaeŭ 2011). With its foundation, book production was concentrated in one publishing house, which had a *de facto* monopoly – at least in the field of artistic literature.³² From

(³¹) The high number results from the intensive active recruitment of literary forces in Minsk and in the periphery, especially by the mass association “Maladnjak”, which lists 500 members in 1926 (Maladnjak 1926: 5). Based on the publications in the three major literary journals “Polymja”, “Maladnjak” and “Uzvyšša”, one can assume that there were about 300 authors – although this also includes people with only one or a few publications (Kohler 2019b).

(³²) There were no niche publishers. This function in some cases fulfilled individual literary magazines.

1928, the BDV operated according to a five-year plan. As a state trust, it had two opposing functions. On the one hand, it was supposed to generate an effective, centralised market structure; on the other hand, it primarily had to fulfil the orders of the party and the state, which, however, were not guided by market principles. It led to persistent economic problems for the BDV itself and ultimately distorted the market.

One of the central strategies for promoting material production was the creation of low-threshold publication organs through which first-time authors gained access to the literary field and market. This consideration applies to the magazine “Maladnjak” and so-called ‘literary pages’ in or to literary supplements to more prominent newspapers. Another strategy was the promotion of thin book series with works by young authors. On the part of the authors, self-organisation in literary groups can be seen as a strategy to form peer groups in the face of increasing competition, which also provided certain protection against the grip of the party (at least until 1928).

4.2. *Symbolic production*

The problematic profile of the literary market concerning the far-reaching influence of the party in the literary field is perhaps most evident at the level of symbolic production because consecratory literary institutions did not emerge despite the developing market: the party organs had the consecratory power. The Institute for Belarusian Culture (transformed into the Academy of Sciences in 1928)³³ was an institution that played a role in the field of symbolic production, but only to a limited extent. It was responsible for the (few) complete editions of works by Belarusian authors (Janka Kupala, Jakub Kolas, Maksim Bahdanovič, Ales’ Harun). The nomination of writers as full members or staff gave evidence of their symbolic capital. Apart from this, however, the Institute’s literary department hardly played a role in symbolic production.³⁴

(³³) The reconsecration of the national poets Janka Kupala and Jakub Kolas as ‘people’s poets’ in 1925 and 1926 was carried out by the SNK, and the convertibility of symbolic capital into economic capital was undermined by the allocation of a lifelong pension (see Kohler 2021).

(³⁴) Interestingly, it was precisely Maladnjak, the group least equipped with

Literary criticism developed (towards the end of the decade, about 20 critics were regularly active), but it was distorted: Marxist criticism, explicitly promoted by the party from 1926 (see *Proekt 1926*), hypertrophied the role of the ideological factor and destroyed literary criticism as a literary institution. In fact, literary criticism in the 1920s functioned as an instance of symbolic production only within the group segments. Zmitrok Вjadulja, who had already resignedly stated in 1924: “Няма крытыкі [...] крытыкі пастаронняй, бес-тэндэнцыйнай, строгай [...] – няма” (“We have no criticism, [...] an impartial, non-tendencious and rigorous criticism [...] does not exist”); Вjadulja 1924: 428), stated in 1928:

Калі б хто зацікавіўся класці слоўнік выразаў некаторых крытыкаў, дык там знойдзецца багаты працэнт такіх брыдкіх лаянак, што дзіва бярэ, як яны праскочылі ў друк. [...] Здравой крытыкі ў нас пакуль што няма. Ёсць крытыка групавага характару. Кожны групавы крытык бачыць у членах сваёй групы выключна пралетарскую ідэалогію, а ў іншых – буржуазную. Такога характару крытыкі толькі прыносяць шкоду нашай літаратуры. (Вjadulja 1928: 467-468)³⁵

The dominance of the ideological is also evident in the fields of literary studies, literary history, and in the expanding area of education (literature teaching). Here again, the party line dominated; in 1926, for example, Maksim Harëcki was forced to ‘rewrite’ his *History of Belarusian Literature*, first published in Vil’nja in 1919, before it was replaced in 1928 by a textbook by the literary scholar Michail Pijatuchovič, which met the ideological standards.

On the other hand, the market increasingly worked with references to symbolic capital. It is recognisable in the BDV catalogues, which list annotations, quotations from reviews and comments on authors.

specific literary symbolic capital, that was located at the Institute and financed through its budget.

(³⁵) If someone wanted to compile a dictionary of the expressions of some critics, one would find there a high percentage of such ugly invectives that one wonders that they were printed. [...] Healthy criticism does not exist in our country so far. We have group criticism. Every group critic sees proletarian ideology only in the members of their group and bourgeois ideology in the others. Critics of this kind only do damage to our literature.

4.3. *Distribution*

The BSSR placed distribution under state care and control and subsequently centralised and professionalised it. Distribution combined retail and wholesale, the basis of which was the BDV network. In addition to the warehouse and major bookstores in Minsk, it comprised branches and bookshops in the district and county towns as well as smaller sales outlets and agents in the periphery. In addition, BDV used the network of the consumer cooperative Belkoopsajuz (general shops and sales outlets) in rural areas, and from 1927 it also participated as a shareholder in the Belarusian branch of the union-wide public company “Book for the Village” (“Kniha – vëscy”), thus gaining the opportunity to use post offices and mobile postal services in the countryside for distribution. Mobile trade was also practised in the village (mobile stalls at markets, book and mail delivery services).

The five-year plan of 1928 shows that institutions with a multiplier function – libraries of various types, reading rooms (“Chaty-čyтал’ni”), people’s houses (“Narodnyja damy”), the so-called “Čyrvonyja kutki” (organisations in factories and enterprises) and clubs – played a central role in distribution. In 1928, there were about 6000 establishments of this kind nationwide, and it is to this “collective buyer” that 80% of literary production was directed, while only 20% of the production was for the private buyer in the retail trade (cf. Šipillo 1928). Thus, out of 3000 copies of a publication (which was the typical print run), only a maximum of 600 copies reached the retail trade. The conclusion is that the individual reader interested in literature played a marginal role in the calculations and planning of BDV, because the distribution of production to the “collective buyer” was more or less random.³⁶

This disassociation from the concrete reader was also deplored by the authors. In 1929, the satirist Kandrāt Krapiva spoke of a “Chinese wall” between writer and reader:

[П]ісьменьнік дае пэўную літаратурную прадукцыю, нехта гэту прадукцыю спажывае, але хто і як спажывае, чым спажывец за-

(³⁶) At the same time, there were repeated complaints that books were too expensive. So-called ‘mass literature’ was sold at reduced prices with high counter-financing costs; no such measures were taken for artistic literature.

даволен і што-б ён хацеў, каб было іначай, – вось гэтага пісьменьнік і ня ведае, бо прадукцыя гэта, па тэхнічных умовах, ідзе не пасрэдна ад спажыўца, а праз дзясяткі пасрэдніцкіх рук, і якраз толькі рук; бо найчасьцей гэтыя пасрэднікі зусім ня думаюць аб збліжэньні пісьменьніка з чытачом і нават ня ведаюць, што ўласна яны даюць спажыўцу. (Krapiva 1929: 97)³⁷

Thus, it becomes apparent that the seemingly impressive upswing of the literary market in the BSSR was not so brilliant: the regulation and control of the market by the party and the state provoked problems on various levels. Finally, they degraded the ‘market of symbolic goods’ to a ‘sham market’.

5. Results

With regard to the four phases, the results of the study can be briefly summarised as follows.

In the first phase, a Belarusian literary market develops – starting from a double centre (Vil’nja and Petersburg), not fully-fledged but largely independent, bearing almost all the necessary agents and functional conditions (literary language, publishing, literary authors and reading public, various segments and a functioning distribution network), but at the same time remaining weakly institutionalised. Literary criticism develops insufficiently in this phase; the concept of literature remains narrow and utilitarian in the context of the national movement. The fact that literature is understood as a ‘common cause’ in the emerging ‘universe of belief’ and presupposes altruism undermines the principle of competition, which only begins to assert itself towards the end of the first phase. In this respect, the literary market remains hybrid – but it transforms from a ‘regional’ to a ‘national’ market, for which, as the distribution structures show, intensive and direct contact with the recipient is of central importance.

(³⁷) The writer gives a certain literary production, and someone consumes this production. But who consumes it and how, what the consumer is satisfied with and what he would wish for differently the writer does not know, because due to technical circumstances, the production does not go directly from the writer to the recipient, but through dozens of mediating hands – and only hands. Most of the time, these intermediaries do not think about the rapprochement of writer and reader and do not even know what they are actually giving the consumer.

The characteristic of the second phase is the destruction of the established structures by the cataclysms of the years 1914 to 1921. The literary forces are scattered, the former 'leadership circle' and its structure are shattered into individual splinter groups that latently compete or conflict. Due to the disappearance of the centres of concentration, the market is largely suspended; the producers are left to their own devices and have to function outside a solid structure (each on his own). The literary agents, therefore, form alliances with (competing) political or politically interested centres of organisation in various places – and in this way, foundations are laid for the further development of the market from 1921 onwards in two different, fundamentally antagonistic systems. On the level of symbolic production, however, a canonisation push can be observed (also connected with the efforts to establish a school system), which aims to sustain the cultural capital accumulated in the first phase.

After the incorporation of almost half of Belarusian territory into the Second Polish Republic, the West Belarusian agents endeavoured to reactivate the structures and strategies from the first phase by founding publishing houses, printing houses and periodicals. However, due to the restrictive politics of the Polish authorities, to the internal disagreement of the organisations and their leaders at the institutional level regarding political orientation (which represents a clear difference from the first phase), and not least due to the widespread absence of active authors, these efforts had little success. Despite immense activism, the literary market remains limited and unstable. It functions essentially on the basis of numerous (mostly short-lived) periodicals. It will only consolidate in the course of the 1930s with the withdrawal of the 'older' activists and the emergence of a new generation of authors.

In the BSSR, the development of the literary market, especially in the first half of the 1920s, was meant to be stimulated by a massive institutionalisation push, by Belarusisation and the measures to liquidate illiteracy, and was additionally favoured by the liberal New Economic Policy: literary production in Belarusian language increased significantly. At the same time, the party intervened in the literary space and market in a sustained and increasingly systematic manner, progressively guiding and controlling literature. The emergence of a

critical mass of authors and texts secured the differentiation of the market and stimulated the principle of competition (reflected, among other things, in antagonistic literary groupings). However, on the level of material production, the competition was undermined by the monopoly of the state publishing house. On the level of symbolic production, it was subverted by the increasingly ideological profile of literary criticism. The distribution structure and production planning revealed the almost complete loss of contact with the individual reader (and demand), who had marginal significance compared to institutionalised “collective consumers”. The literary market, largely financially dependent on the state, degenerated to a politically controlled sham market.

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Osservazioni sul mercato letterario bielorusso (1905-1932)

Il mercato letterario bielorusso, inteso sia come mercato dei libri in lingua bielorusa che, in senso più lato, nell'accezione del termine tedesco "Literaturbetrieb", ha ricevuto sino ad ora poca attenzione critica. Questo mercato è cresciuto a un ritmo

sorprendentemente rapido subito dopo la Rivoluzione russa del 1905 nell'ambito del movimento nazionale bielorusso. In un contesto politico molto precario, tuttavia, è passato velocemente a una fase di stagnazione, per poi svilupparsi, dopo il 1921, in maniera opposta all'interno di due sistemi antagonisti (ascesa e declino nella Repubblica Socialista Sovietica Bielorussa; stagnazione e risveglio nella Bielorussia occidentale, parte della seconda Repubblica di Polonia). Questo articolo condensa i risultati di un'ampia analisi d'archivio condotta dalla prospettiva teorica del campo letterario (Bourdieu) per studiare i profili istituzionali e organizzativi del mercato letterario bielorusso tra il 1905 e il 1932. Se ne considerano gli aspetti quantitativi e se ne fornisce una descrizione del contesto legale, con particolare attenzione alle specifiche istituzioni e alle strategie della produzione materiale, di quella simbolica e della distribuzione tra il 1905 e il 1915, così come negli anni Venti (RSSB). Queste osservazioni sul campo letterario bielorusso hanno lo scopo di mostrare come il mercato letterario non potesse funzionare autonomamente e fosse destinato a rimanere, nella migliore delle ipotesi, un "mercato ibrido".

Keywords: Belarusian literature, literary market, field theory, literary institutions, first third of the 20th century.

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