

Agnese Zviedre\*

# Examining the Representation of Intellectual Disability during the Soviet Times and after Regaining Independence in Latvia: a Case Study of Children's Care Home No. 2, Baldone\*\*

## IZVLEČEK

PREUČEVANJE PODOBE MOTENJ V DUŠEVNEM RAZVOJU V ČASU SOVJETSKE ZVEZE IN PO PONOVI OSAMOSVOJITVI V LATVIJI: ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA DOMA ZA OTROKE ŠT. 2, BALDONE

*V preteklih desetletjih so medijski in kulturni narativi pomembno vplivali na politične diskurze in pogosto prikazovali idealizirane podobe posameznikov s privlačnimi lastnostmi, da bi podprli cilje in ideale socializma. Znanstveniki, ki proučujejo invalidnost in se osredotočajo na vzhodnoevropski kontekst, ugotavljajo, da so bili v času Sovjetske zveze invalidi v likovni umetnosti in medijih pogosto prikazani skozi posebne narative, ki so poudarjali motive junaštva, sočutja in skrbi. To podobo je močno oblikovala sovjetska ideologija, na kateri so temeljili družbeni miti, ki so dajali prednost telesnemu blagostanju in produktivnosti kot temeljnima pogojema za sodelovanje v družbi. Posamezniki, ki niso ustrezali tem standardom, so bili diskvalificirani in diskriminirani ter posledično izključeni iz vizualne kulture in medijev.*

\* M.A., PhD student at the Art Academy of Latvia, [agnesezviedre@duck.com](mailto:agnesezviedre@duck.com); ORCID: 0009-0004-0516-4626

\*\* The article is based on a paper presented at the first international conference of the project J6-S0189 *Systems of Care and Education for Children with Sensory Disabilities in the First and Second Yugoslav State*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

Namen tega prispevka je raziskati, kako sta se podoba in dojemanje otrok z motnjami v duševnem razvoju v Latviji razvijala od sovjetskega obdobja do sodobnosti. Predstavljen je pregled zgodovine Doma za otroke št. 2 v mestu Baldone. Članek vsebuje tudi analizo podobe ustanove in prikazovanja otrok z motnjami v duševnem razvoju v tiskanih medijih od odprtja te ustanove leta 1969 do njenega zaprtja leta 2019. Vse medijske reference, ki se nanašajo na to ustanovo, so temeljito preučene, da bi osvetlile ideološke narative, ki so se pojavljali in spreminjali skozi desetletja.

*Ključne besede: invalidske študije, Vzhodna Evropa, ideologija, podoba*

## ABSTRACT

---

Over the decades, media and cultural narratives have significantly influenced political discourses, often depicting idealised representations of individuals with attractive characteristics to further the aims and ideals of socialism. Scholars in disability studies focusing on the Eastern European context have observed that during the Soviet era, individuals with disabilities in visual arts and media were frequently portrayed through specific narratives that emphasised themes of heroism, pity, and care. This portrayal was profoundly shaped by Soviet ideology, underpinning the social myths prioritising physical well-being and productivity as fundamental preconditions for societal participation. Individuals who did not conform to these standards faced disqualification and discrimination, leading to their exclusion from the visual culture and the media.

This paper seeks to investigate the representation and perception of children with intellectual disabilities in Latvia, tracing the evolution from the Soviet era to contemporary times. It outlines the history of Children's Care Home No. 2 in Baldone and analyses the representation of the institution and the depiction of children with intellectual disabilities in the printed media from the establishment of the institution in 1969 until its closure in 2019. The article also thoroughly examines all media references to the institution to reveal the ideological narratives that have emerged and transformed over the decades.

*Keywords: disability studies, Eastern Europe, ideology, representation*

---

## Introduction

---

Until recently, the history of intellectual disabilities in Latvia has been largely overlooked, much like the marginalisation of individuals within this community. However, in 2022, the Latvian National Museum of Art inaugurated a new permanent

photography exhibition titled “12 Photographers / 125 Photographs / 10 Series.”<sup>1</sup> The featured works included the documentary series “Children’s Care Home No. 2. Baldone” (1991) by the Latvian photographer Aivars Liepiņš’s, portraying children with intellectual disabilities residing in the institution. This exhibition represented a significant milestone, as it was the first instance in which the Latvian National Museum of Art allocated space to discuss the representation of disability in Latvia.

As institutions of memory, museums collect, preserve, contextualise, and present tangible and intangible artifacts from the past and present to the public. As museums mainly present the dominant ideology,<sup>2</sup> recent discussions have increasingly emphasised the need to include narratives from marginalised communities in museum collections, exhibitions, and displays. Scholars and activists in disability studies have pointed out that the representation of disability in Western museums often lags behind that of other minority groups.

To create conversations about the diversity of bodies and minds in our societies, it is vital to include narratives of marginalised groups and discuss the context of certain representations that can legitimise or exclude certain historical narratives. For example, Richard Sandell pointed out that, through the representations of the “real”, museums can evoke significant emotional responses from visitors and provide empirical evidence that supports their narratives.<sup>3</sup> Museums are responsible for initiating discussions on various social issues, or they will perpetuate the prevailing narrative regarding the invisibility of disability.

The exhibition did not elaborate on the context of these photography series or the history of disability in Latvia. This raised questions and suggested that the dominant knowledge and perceptions of intellectual disability in Latvia had to be examined. The representations of disability shed light on the dominant ideology and the societal understanding of what is considered “normal” and “abnormal”, as well as on the relationship between the able-bodied and the disabled. When Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1944, the laws and ideology of proper Soviet life were also enforced on Latvian citizens. Nevertheless, each Soviet state implemented rules differently, especially the Baltic countries, which maintained a strong dimension of nationalism in the visual arts, culture, and media. Such deviations from the dominant ideology can be seen in the visual arts. In the Soviet Union, social realism glorified the prevailing ideology and created an illusion of a contented life through various propaganda techniques. Elita Ansonē, a Latvian art historian, observed that these depictions of “happy Soviet people” were subject to strict oversight and functioned as repressive mechanisms imposed by the Artists’ Union and the Academy of Art.<sup>4</sup> However, in 1957, the first

1 On 19 February 2022, the Latvian National Museum of Art opened a new permanent exhibition titled “12 Photographers / 125 Photographs / 10 Series”, dedicated to the history and development of photography in Latvia from the 1960s to the 1990s. The exhibition, which remained open from 2022 to 2024, was curated by the Latvian art historian Elita Ansonē.

2 Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (New York: Verso, 2021), 25.

3 Richard Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2006), 137.

4 Elita Ansonē, “Socialist Realism: An Instrument for Constructing Communism,” in Elita Ansonē, ed. *Mythologies of Soviet Land. International Scientific Conference Compendia* (Riga: Latvian National Museum of Art, 2008), 70.

examples of the so-called “Harsh style” emerged. This artistic style was developed to counter social realism by utilising the more modernist formal approaches to portraying social realist themes, thus introducing more expressive colours and brushstrokes. Latvian art historians interpret this movement as an effort to modernise social realism in the local contexts, therefore distinguishing it from its expression in the other Soviet regions.<sup>5</sup> This development underscores the variability of rule implementation and ideological adherence across various areas, particularly in regions away from Soviet Russia’s central authority.

Similarly to the history of disability in Latvia and Eastern Europe, little information is available on intellectual disability in Latvia. To examine this period’s prevailing perceptions and ideologies, the present article focuses on printed media, which provides historical examples and prominent preconceptions. On many occasions, disability studies scholars pointed out that ideas about disability and “normality” were circulated through the media and deeply embedded, thus governing the very cultural assumptions, and that the representations of disability in the media played a significant role in moulding the public perceptions of disability.<sup>6</sup> Numerous studies demonstrated that the media were one of the primary sources of information regarding mental health issues in many countries, thus not only forming the individual understanding of mental health and illness but also shaping societal attitudes towards people with mental health issues. Teodor Madlenov highlighted that both the Western capitalist system and the Soviet system, influenced by a medical-productivist view of disability, shaped how disability was represented in the media and everyday life.<sup>7</sup> This viewpoint entrenched dissociated, distanced interpretations of the lived experiences of disabled individuals and perpetuated the stereotypes portraying the disabled as incapacitated and inferior. The texts published in the media can be more than a mere reaffirmation of the hegemonic status quo. The framework includes the dominant and resistant articulations of the dominant order concerning dis/ability.<sup>8</sup>

The paper at hand examines how children with intellectual disabilities have been portrayed and perceived in Latvian printed media from the Soviet era to the present day. It focuses on the case study of Children’s Care Home No. 2 in Baldone, considers the existing research on the representations and propaganda regarding disability in Eastern Europe, focuses on intellectual disability, and considers the potential deviations from propaganda in real-life implementation. The paper will primarily focus on the leading concepts of disability and its representations in Eastern Europe. It will also provide an overview of the history of Children’s Care Home No. 2 in Baldone. Finally, the article will analyse how the institution and its resident children were represented

---

5 Ibidem, 74.

6 Tina Goethals, Dimitri Mortelmans, Hilde Van den Bulck, Willem Van den Heurck, and Geert Van Hove, “I am not your metaphor: frames and counterframes in the representation of disability,” *Disability & Society* 37, No. 5 (2022): 746.

7 Teodor Mladenov, “Postsocialist disability matrix,” *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 19(2), (2016): 7.

8 Susan Vertoont, Tina Goethals, Frederik Dhaenens, Patrick Schelfhout, Tess Van Deynse, Gabriela Vermeir, and Maud Ysebaert, “Un/recognisable and dis/empowering images of disability: a collective textual analysis of media representations of intellectual disabilities,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 39, No. 1 (2022): 7.

in the printed media from the Home's establishment in 1969 until its closure in 2019. It will thoroughly examine all references to the institution in the printed media to illuminate the ideological narratives that have emerged and evolved over the decades.

## Researching Disability in Latvia during the Soviet Times

Disability studies as a field of research are gradually evolving in Latvia. Numerous scholars are examining the various social and political factors that marginalise individuals with diverse bodies and minds. However, exploring disability history in Latvia remains an emerging academic discipline. Individual researchers have investigated specific aspects of the historical exclusion of people with varying conditions. The Soviet occupation of Latvia, beginning in 1944, has significantly shaped this research, leading to much of the historical analysis being framed within the context of Soviet history and Eastern European experiences. This approach often highlights the similarities in the legislation and regulations enacted during that time. Nonetheless, there is an increasing recognition of the need to decolonise recent history, emphasising the importance of focusing on local narratives and engaging in localised research.

One of the most comprehensive studies on disability in Eastern Europe is the collective monograph titled "Disability in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: History, Policy, and Everyday Life". The book consists of twelve chapters exploring various historical and contemporary research topics related to different regions and countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The contributions made by the authors and editors are significant and provide a foundation for further evaluation of the local context. Two of the articles are also relevant in the context of researching the representation of children with intellectual disabilities during the Soviet times in Latvia – Agita Lūse and Dace Kamerāde's contribution "Between Disabling Disorders and Mundane Nervousness" and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov's article "Heroes and Spongers: The Iconography of Disability in Soviet Posters and Film."

In the context of Latvian history regarding the representation of disability, the researchers Agita Lūse and Dace Kamerāde offer essential insights into Soviet psychiatry.<sup>9</sup> Although their article addresses both the Soviet era and contemporary society, it does not explicitly examine the representation of individuals with congenital intellectual disabilities.

In contrast, the article authored by the Russian disability studies scholars Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov investigates the portrayal of disability in Soviet films and posters from the 1930s until the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> The

9 Agita Lūse and Dace Kamerāde, "Between disabling disorders and mundane nervousness," in Michael Rasell and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova, eds., *Disability in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: History, Policy, and Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 125–54.

10 Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov, "Heroes and spongers: The iconography of disability in Soviet posters and film," in Michael Rasell and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova, eds., *Disability in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: History, Policy, and Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 84–124.

authors elaborate on how the narratives and representations of diverse bodies have transformed over the decades. Nonetheless, their research predominantly centres on depicting war veterans and individuals with physical disabilities rather than the intellectually disabled. Consequently, while some findings from both articles may contribute to a deeper understanding of the context surrounding Children's Care Home No. 2 in Baldone, their applicability is somewhat limited.

The article written by the Latvian scholar Stella Hermanovska analyses the representation of intellectual disabilities in Latvia. In her publication, titled "Visual Representation of Special Education: Photography Heritage in the Collections of the National Library of Latvia and the Academic Library of the University of Latvia", she explores three photo albums from special education institutions, published in 1862 and 1923. Analysing these albums through the lens of Michel Foucault's concepts of power relations, she examines the contents, structure, and visual and verbal narratives conveyed through the accompanying texts and photographs.<sup>11</sup> However, the article provides insight into the representations of children with physical and intellectual disabilities only before World War II.

The prevailing consensus among disability studies scholars examining the Soviet Union is that the societal attitudes, along with the enforced laws and regulations, were fundamentally demeaning to individuals with diverse physical abilities. These individuals were frequently marginalised, institutionalised, and segregated from the broader society. Scholars focusing on the Eastern European context have highlighted that during the Soviet era, representations of individuals with disabilities in visual arts and media were often framed through specific narratives that underscored themes of heroism, pity, and care.<sup>12</sup> These portrayals were significantly influenced by Soviet ideology, predicated on social myths emphasising physical well-being and productivity as essential for social participation. Those who did not conform to these standards faced discrimination and disqualification.

The narrow definition of the ideal Soviet body, as propagated through official channels, further perpetuated these stigmas. A notable illustration of the ideologies regarding individuals with disabilities during this period occurred in 1980 when a Western journalist queried a Soviet representative about the country's participation in the Paralympic Games. The representative remarked: "There are no invalids in the USSR!"<sup>13</sup> This statement has been frequently cited to exemplify the officials' perception of their citizens and underscores the stereotype characterising disability as abnormal or deficient. The Soviet regime's desire to project an image of strength and unity meant that it was reluctant to acknowledge the existence of individuals with disabilities, as this could have been perceived as a weakness. The irrationalities inherent in

11 Stella Hermanovska, "Visual Representation of Special Education: Photography Heritage in the Collections of the National Library of Latvia and the Academic Library of the University of Latvia," in Katrīna Teivāne and Alise Tifentāle, eds., *Proceedings of the National Library of Latvia 9 (XXIX): Mapping Methods and Materials: Photographic Heritage in Cultural and Art-historical Research* (Riga: National Library of Latvia, 2022), 71–93.

12 Iaraskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, "Heroes and spongers. The iconography of Disability in Soviet posters and films," 30.

13 Валерий Фёдоров, *В СССР Инвалидов нет!* (Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd., 1986), 34.

this ideology and its attempts to control the population continue to have profound implications even today.

Like the Western capitalist societies, ableism was deeply embedded in Soviet Union culture and ideology. The social myth surrounding able-bodiedness suggested that a person's value was determined by their ability to work. This belief emerged with the mechanisation and industrialisation of society, and it influenced the societal perceptions of what constituted a healthy body, which emotions were acceptable, and what cognitive abilities were considered "normal" and "expected".<sup>14</sup> Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova notes that the development of cities, science, and industries led to the commodification and standardisation of the human body.<sup>15</sup> Within this framework, disability was often viewed as a deviation from the norm that needed to be controlled.

In Soviet Latvia, disability was reduced to ability or inability to work, and its assessment was heavily medicalised. The system for categorising people with disabilities was established in three groups based on the extent of their impairments. Despite the system, it was still a collective expectation that everyone had to contribute to the socialist system. Consequently, organisations such as the Association for the Blind and the Association of the Deaf set up Training and Manufacturing Enterprises during the 1950s to employ individuals with vision or hearing impairments. This initiative resulted in the creation of community-based centres in the vicinity of factories, offering the employees local housing, cultural activities, and sports opportunities. In Latvia, some of these facilities were located in the city centres.

During this period, the representations of disability in Latvia in the media, culture, and art reflected a complex phenomenon characterised by being invisibly visible. As individuals with disabilities were incorporated into tailored working environments that aligned with their capabilities, the local media, including newspapers, celebrated the successes and accomplishments of the community members in various fields, such as the arts and sports. However, these media outlets would frequently overlook the inequalities and comprehensive realities faced by individuals living and working within these communities. As a result, it can be concluded that the media often functioned to promote the successes of the Soviet Union, potentially obscuring critical narratives concerning the authentic experiences of people with disabilities.

After Latvia regained independence, disability remained largely invisible in everyday life, media, and art. The present discourse surrounding intellectual disabilities continues to be plagued by deeply ingrained stereotypes and stigmas, which can be traced back to the Soviet era and Soviet ideology. The official ideology created a particular representation of people with intellectual disabilities to differentiate the proper Soviet citizen from the Other<sup>16</sup> and a proper Soviet lifestyle and decision-making from the non-Soviet ones. Tom Shakespeare pointed out that prejudice was interpersonal

14 Mladenov, *Postsocialist disability matrix*.

15 Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, "Heroes and spongers. The iconography of Disability in Soviet posters and films," 67.

16 Agnes Zviedre, "Social Critique of the Soviet Regime in Ivars Poikāns' Works from 1987 till 1990: A Disability Aesthetics Perspective," *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 32, No. 01+02 (2023): 152–68.

and implicit in cultural representations, language, and socialisation.<sup>17</sup> The Latvian public still tends to associate psychiatry with the stigmatising conceptions and practices of the Soviet period.<sup>18</sup> Although Latvia ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010, conversations regarding the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in society are developing slowly.

---

## Representation of Children's Care Home No. 2 in Baldone in the Printed Media

---

Children's Care Home No. 2 Baldone was established on 28 March 1969 as an institution dedicated to rehabilitating and providing social care for children with intellectual disabilities aged between 4 and 18. Contrary to the prevailing notions surrounding the depiction of disabilities in media, the institution was referenced in approximately 80 articles published between 1965 and 2000, with 16 articles containing detailed descriptions of the institution, its residents, and the societal perceptions of children with intellectual disabilities. While the portrayal, in most cases, reflects ideological narratives and serves propaganda purposes, it highlights the prevailing understanding of what constitutes normalcy. This perspective continues to influence the public discourse about mental health and intellectual disabilities in contemporary society.

In 1965, news regarding Children's Care Home No. 2 in Baldone was first reported in two newspapers. One article mentioned the construction of a facility for social care, while the second one provided a more in-depth context for the need for such a building. The second article highlighted that, despite the emergence of a new Soviet generation exhibiting good health, many children and adolescents could not attend regular educational institutions due to illnesses, accidents, or other factors.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the government planned to construct a boarding facility to accommodate 240 children and adolescents with disabilities. It is noteworthy that the article did not differentiate between children with disabilities and those without. It focused on children who could not attend school for various reasons. The author did not elaborate on why such situations occurred, nor did he medicalise the reasons.

Even though the author underscored the importance of caring for all Soviet citizens, particularly the youth, which would ultimately shape future generations and foster a healthier society, this representation could have contributed to a specific form of invisibility regarding disability. Brenda Bruggemann and her colleagues provided particularly relevant examples within the domain of learning disabilities, illustrating that efforts designed to "assist" often ended up reinforcing the political structures that

---

17 Tom Shakespeare, "Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?," *Disability & Society* 9, No. 3 (1994): 296.

18 Lüse and Kamerāde, "Between disabling disorders and mundane nervousness," 126.

19 Darba Balss, "Ielūkosimies rajona nākotnē: Bērnu pansionāts Baldonē," 22 January 1965, 4.



perpetuated the subordination of individuals with disabilities rather than effectively dismantling them.<sup>20</sup> From one perspective, this representation was not exclusionary; simultaneously, it was. The prevailing narrative appeared to support an ideology aiming to demonstrate the system's effectiveness while promoting collective engagement in pursuing an envisioned utopia. However, the author employed language that underscored the necessity of segregating certain children from their peers. This approach illustrated an ideological dichotomy between what was classified as normal and what was regarded as abnormal. While the article might have implied the existence of diversity within society, it simultaneously indicated that individuals who did not conform to established norms had to be placed in separate institutions.

Two types of articles were published during the 1970s. The first type, primarily published during the first half of the decade but also later, discussed how the state used the money to assist infirm children in Children's Care Home No. 2.<sup>21</sup> The language used in the articles expressed compassion and highlighted the state's efforts to enhance the children's lives. However, the second type of article, which started appearing in the mid-1970s, shows the shift in portraying institutionalised children. During this period, the Socialist Party and the government set abstinence as the norm of Soviet people's lives to actively promote the anti-alcohol movement. One of the tools was to show the consequences of alcohol consumption, and one example of scaring people was to use images of people with intellectual disabilities. To propagate the proper socialist, healthy, and hardworking lifestyle, a narrative was created that alcohol usage led to children with disabilities.

In 1976, the Latvian film director Ivars Seleckis was commissioned to create a short documentary about the consequences of alcohol abuse. The film, titled "Mirror of Thirst", was filmed in Children's Care Home No. 2 Baldone. The director contrasted happily drinking young people, abled-bodied athletes participating in competitions, happy young families, and the cultural and scientific development in the Soviet Union, underscored by Beethoven's Ode to Joy, with horrific scenes depicting the consequences of alcoholism – i.e., children with physical and intellectual disabilities. The "documentary" was grotesque, and, as David Hevey put it using a term he coined for this purpose, it "enfreaked" these children and disability.<sup>22</sup> This could be associated with Dan Goodley's conceptualisation of Disablism, which refers to the oppressive practices of contemporary society that threaten to exclude, eradicate, and neutralise the individuals, bodies, minds, and community practices that fail to fit the capitalist imperative.<sup>23</sup> These images emphasise specific physical differences at the expense of all other traits, constructing some individuals as the extreme Other, generally perceived

20 B. J. Brueggemann, L. F. White, P. A. Dunn, B. A. Heifferon, and J. Cheu, "Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability," *College Composition and Communication* 52, No. 3 (2001): 373.

21 Darba Balss, "Mūsu pamatlikums mūsu dzīvē, Pansionāts – slimo māja," 27 March 1979.

22 David Hevey, "The Enfreakment of Photography," in Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader 4th Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

23 Dan Goodley, *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism* (London: Routledge, 2014).

to be beyond the range of ordinary human appearance.<sup>24</sup> As the film propagates the compulsory abled-bodiedness,<sup>25</sup> these images exclude a specific group and represent it as not even human. Displaying what to avoid suggests that one should strive to be different.

An anti-alcohol propaganda campaign involving organised teachers' excursions to Children's Care Home No. 2 Baldone was devised.<sup>26</sup> The initiative aimed to raise awareness of the detrimental effects of alcohol abuse, particularly on children's welfare and development, among young adults. Later on, teachers would bring their students to Children's Care Home No. 2 Baldone to show them, especially young women, what would happen if they ever consumed alcohol. An article by the Baldone High School vice-headmistress stated how important it was to bring children to this excursion and teach them the proper life of Soviet citizens.<sup>27</sup>

Researchers Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov have pointed out that starting from 1985, due to Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika policy, the government opened discussions on subjects previously considered taboo, the stereotypes rooted in culture and the representation of people with disabilities by abolishing many official prohibitions.<sup>28</sup> Analysing the printed media and information about Children's Care Home No. 2 Baldone, it could be seen that during this period, intellectual disability was used in propaganda even more often in anti-alcohol campaigns. The number of articles describing these teaching practices increased in the mid-1980s. The motto of one of the teachers who would bring her students to Children's Care Home No. 2 Baldone was "It is better to see it once than discuss it ten times."<sup>29</sup> The teachers who wrote the articles and reported Children's Care Home No. 2 visits justify it as a wish to protect the younger generation from mistakes.<sup>30</sup> The key reference and justification was that the studies showed that women who had ever drunk alcohol were responsible for children with intellectual disabilities.<sup>31</sup> The article did not provide specific details regarding the studies supporting these claims.

Various publications have demonstrated that during the 1980s in Soviet Latvia, the topic of intellectual disability was incorporated into public discourse. Nonetheless, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson pointed out, the representation of disability structures most likely shaped rather than reflected reality. The way we imagine disability through images and narratives determines the shape of the material world, the distribution

24 Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2010).

25 Crip theorist Robert McRuer pointed out that able-bodied identity and heterosexual identity are compulsory and linked in their mutual incompatibility and are the basis on which all identities supposedly rest. – Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness, and Queer/Disabled Existence," in R. Garland-Thomson, B. J. Brueggemann, and S. L. Snyder, eds., *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (New York: MLA Publications, 2002), 88–99.

26 *Padomju Druva* (Cēsis), "Aktīvi veicināt," 17 November 1987.

27 *Skolotāju Avīze*, "Novēlot nozīmē – zaudēt" 31 October 1979.

28 Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, "Heroes and spongers. The iconography of Disability in Soviet posters and films," 50.

29 *Padomju Ceļš* (Ogre), "Bērni bez bērniņas," 17 December 1985.

30 *Komunisma Ceļš* (Bauska), "Apturēt klūmīgo soli," 1 February 1986.

31 *Laiks*, "Kropļie bērni," 25 October 1986.

of resources, our relationships with one another, and our sense of ourselves.<sup>32</sup> The subject of intellectual disability was often utilised as a propaganda tool, particularly regarding alcoholism, which was frequently cited as a contributing factor to disability. Throughout this period, children living in the institution were not discussed or considered as individuals but were instead used as characters in propagandistic materials.

Anti-alcohol propaganda is what Tobien Siebers calls the ideology of ability, which defines the baseline by which humanness is determined by establishing the measure of body and mind that grants or denies human status to individuals.<sup>33</sup> This perspective influenced nearly all judgments, definitions, and values regarding human beings. Due to its discriminatory and exclusionary nature, it creates social positions that exist outside of society and critique its scope, particularly the perspective of disability.

The 1990s brought a change in this narrative. After Latvia had regained independence, various marginalised groups and communities gradually entered the public discourse of the former Soviet republics. As the research on the queer history of the Baltic states shows, this process was gradual, as the very concepts of social activism, civil society, and sexual diversity had yet to be introduced.<sup>34</sup> An interview with a psychiatrist published in 1990 shows that the system and representation of intellectual disabilities were flawed. For the first time, the interviewer asked whether it was confirmed that around 1981, some 6,578 children attended special schools because their mothers had used antibiotics or alcohol, as the propaganda materials suggested.<sup>35</sup> The psychiatrist explained that not all children who attended special schools needed to do so. Schools were often more interested in maintaining high ratings and eliminating students who learned more slowly. According to newspaper articles published in 1990, journalists started reassessing the propaganda used before.

During the 1990s, non-governmental organisations from abroad arrived in Latvia to evaluate the situation, while activists travelled to Europe to gain experience. For example, the director of the Latvian “Save the Children” organisation, Inguna Ebela, commissioned Latvian photographer Aivars Liepiņš to create a series of photographs portraying the children living in Baldone’s Children’s Care Home No. 2. She wanted to showcase a few photographic collections from Latvia, depicting the lives of children from various social minority groups. According to the artist, he aimed to portray the real-life situations and lives of the children without building any additional narratives or representations. In 2020, the Latvian National Museum of Art acquired the photography collection, showcased in 2022 at a permanent photography exhibition titled “12 Photographers / 125 Photographs / 10 Series”. The Latvian photography researcher Līga Goldberga pointed out that photography could be considered a surrogate memory, an extension of the senses, an object of memory, an archiving machine,

32 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Disability and Representation,” *PMLA* 120, No. 2 (2005): 522–27.

33 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

34 Kārlis Vērdiņš and Jānis Ozoliņš, “Melancholic sons and dying mothers: queerness in (post-)Soviet Baltic fiction,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* (November 2024): 1–16.

35 *Atmoda*, “Baldones Bērnu pansionātā,” 28 August 1990.

or even a memory prosthesis.<sup>36</sup> This photography series was initially created to document the situation at Children's Care Home No. 2 in Baldone, serving as an example which could be shared internationally. Over time, it became a part of the collection kept within a memory institution, acting as a memory prosthesis. In both instances, the most crucial aspect was the nature of the memory carriers that these photographs represent and the narratives they are yet to convey in the future.

Throughout the 1990s, various organisations from Sweden and Norway were actively involved in assisting children with disabilities and promoting a new understanding of their needs. Mental disability rights advocates in Latvia consequently focused on reducing discrimination and prejudice among the general public.<sup>37</sup> Through education and other necessary resources provided by Swedish and Norwegian organisations, there has been a notable shift in the perception of institutionalised children with intellectual disabilities. For instance, an article published in 1997 highlighted the efficacy of pedagogical and inclusive educational methods that allow children to develop various abilities.<sup>38</sup> Thus, these organisations' efforts have significantly improved the quality of life for children with disabilities in Latvia while challenging the traditional beliefs about their capabilities. Simultaneously, from the disability studies perspective, these representations coincide with the narrative of pity and care. Colin Barnes has noted that charities often market individuals with disabilities as dependent and in need of salvation through the kindness and sensitivity of others.<sup>39</sup> The representation creates icons of pity, in need of care, incapable of looking after themselves and requiring charity to survive.<sup>40</sup> The focus is on the benefactors who fulfil their moral duty to help others. Tobin Siebers has identified the symbolism that categorises specific populations and individuals as requiring assistance and depicts them as inferior and disqualifying.<sup>41</sup> He underscores the significant role that disability plays in this symbolism, as it has a longstanding history of being utilised to perpetuate discrimination, inequality, and violence.

In the 2000s, slowly and gradually, the public media discussed the possibility of a deinstitutionalised understanding of intellectual disability. The information on Children's Care Home No. 2 became scarcer. A few individual blog posts were published about the institution's operation and encouraged society to support it. Since 2015, Latvia has been implementing a deinstitutionalisation project, which envisages replacing large institutional care centres with community-based social services and family-oriented services. Children's Care Home No. 2 Baldone operated until 2019 when it was closed due to unsatisfactory technical conditions.

36 Līga Goldberga, "Atmiņas averss un reverss: fotopastkartes Latvijas Nacionālās bibliotēkas Konrāda Ubāna Mākslas lasītavas atklātņu kolekcijā," in Katrīna Teivāne and Alise Tifentāle, eds., *Proceedings of the National Library of Latvia 9 (XXIX): Mapping Methods and Materials: Photographic Heritage in Cultural and Art-historical Research* (Riga: National Library of Latvia, 2022), 161.

37 Lūse and Kamerāde, "Between disabling disorders and mundane nervousness," 133.

38 Neatkarīgā Rīta avīze, "Bērniem vajag cerību un labestību," 24 May 1997.

39 Colin Barnes, *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People* (Krumlin: Ryburn Publishing, 1992).

40 Tina Goethals, Dimitri Mortelmans, Hilde Van den Bulck, Willem Van den Heurck, and Geert Van Hove, "I am not your metaphor: frames and counterframes in the representation of disability," *Disability & Society* 37, No. 5 (2022): 750.

41 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 60.

## Conclusion

The depiction of Children's Care Home No. 2 in Baldone from its establishment in 1969 to its closure in 2019 provides insight into the evolving societal attitudes toward disability. Analysing the Latvian printed media from the 1960s until 2019 and the representation of Children's Care Home No. 2 Baldone and the children living in it, it is possible to agree with Tom Shakespeare's point that disabled people are "objectified" by the cultural representations promoting the assumptions that disabled people are passive, akin to animals, mere objects rather than subjects.<sup>42</sup> The history of intellectual disabilities in Latvia, particularly in relation to the representation of children with disabilities, is profoundly connected to the ideological narratives stemming from the Soviet era and their enduring impact on contemporary Latvian society. Initially framed as part of Soviet propaganda, disability was often employed as an ideological tool, particularly in campaigns against alcohol consumption.

Throughout the period under consideration, the narrative and representation of Children's Care Home underwent significant evolution across various decades. In the beginning, before the institution was built, articles had patronised people with disabilities. Children had often been seen as lacking certain cognitive abilities, justifying the forms of charity and paternalism that had reinforced the power of non-disabled individuals. Until the mid-1970s, this perception, rooted in the notion of care, had also contributed to a narrative supporting the exclusion of children with diverse bodies and minds.

Starting from the mid-1970s and until the end of the 1980s, the narrative of intellectual disability was associated with anti-alcohol propaganda, which emphasised not the children themselves but rather their parents, particularly their mothers. While this aspect has not been thoroughly explored in this article, it could benefit from an examination through a feminist lens.

Since the Latvian independence, there has been a gradual shift towards a more nuanced understanding of disability. This change has been driven by international advocacy and the efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The involvement of foreign NGOs has been particularly significant, as they have provided charity and shared valuable knowledge in the field.

A significant turning point in this evolution occurred in 2022 with the exhibition at the Latvian National Museum of Art, which highlighted the works of Aivars Liepiņš and initiated a broader dialogue regarding the representation of disability within Latvian art and culture. Despite the notable progress achieved – primarily through deinstitutionalisation and enhanced recognition of disability rights – the legacy of Soviet-era ideologies and the continued marginalisation of individuals with intellectual disabilities revealed that further advancements are still necessary.

One of the primary concerns regarding the portrayal of Children's Care Home No. 2 is its utilisation for specific propaganda or narrative purposes. Disability was often

42 Shakespeare, "Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?," 287.

represented as a cautionary example of what should be avoided. A prevalent issue was the patronisation of individuals with disabilities, reinforcing the ableist standards of normalcy. The existing articles fail to focus on the unique personalities and interests of the residents within the institution. A thorough analysis of the printed media and reports on intellectual disability also exposes a lack of discussion regarding the criteria used for the admission of various children, the rationale behind labelling them as different, and the circumstances they face upon reaching adulthood at the age of 18.

In the printed media, children during Soviet times, as well as after Latvian independence, were visibly invisible. Even though at least one article was published about Children's Care Home No. 2 each year, the authors focused more on medical aspects rather than social barriers. Children became characters without characteristics, names, and personalities, used only as propaganda tools. The articles expose the reality of propaganda and the understanding of what the citizens should be or behave like.

In critically examining the historical and media portrayals of individuals with intellectual disabilities, Latvia has the opportunity to advance toward a more inclusive society that fully acknowledges and values the diversity of human abilities. It is imperative to investigate historical narratives to comprehend the origins of existing beliefs about disability, evaluate their relevance in contemporary contexts, and explore strategies to modify these perceptions to foster a more equitable future.

## Bibliography

---

### Literature

---

- Ansone, Elita. "Socialist Realism: An Instrument for Constructing Communism." In Elita Ansone, ed. *Mythologies of Soviet Land. International scientific conference compendia*, 66–77. Riga: Latvian National Museum of Art, 2008.
- Barnes, Colin. *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People*. Krumlin: Ryburn Publishing, 1992.
- Brueggemann, B. J., L. F. White, P. A. Dunn, B. A. Heifferon, and J. Cheu. "Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability." *College Composition and Communication* 52, No. 3, (2001): 368–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/358624>.
- Фёдоров, Валерий. *В СССР Инвалидов нет!*. Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd., 1986.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Disability and Representation." *PMLA* 120, No. 2 (2005): 522–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486178>.
- Goethals, Tina, Dimitri Mortelmans, Hilde Van den Bulck, Willem Van den Heurck, and Geert Van Hove. "I am not your metaphor: frames and counterframes in the representation of disability." *Disability & Society* 37, no. 5 (2022): 746–64. 10.1080/09687599.2020.1836478.
- Goldberga, Līga. "Atmiņas averss un reverss: fotopastkartes Latvijas Nacionālās bibliotēkas Konrāda Ubāna Mākslas lasītavas atklātņu kolekcijā." In Katrīna Teivāne and Alise Tifentāle, eds. *Proceedings of the National Library of Latvia 9 (XXIX): Mapping Methods and Materials: Photographic Heritage in Cultural and Art-historical Research*, 157–72. Riga: National Library of Latvia, 2022.
- Goodley, Dan. *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising disablism and ableism (1<sup>st</sup> ed.)*. London: Routledge, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203366974>.

- Hermanovska, Stella. "Visual Representation of Special Education: Photography Heritage in the Collections of the National Library of Latvia and the Academic Library of the University of Latvia." In Katrīna Teivāne and Alise Tifentāle, eds. *Proceedings of the National Library of Latvia 9 (XXIX): Mapping Methods and Materials: Photographic Heritage in Cultural and Art-historical Research*, 71–93. Riga: National Library of Latvia, 2022.
- Hevey, David. "The Enfreakment of Photography." In Lennard J. Davis, ed. *The Disability Studies Reader 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203077887>.
- Iarskaia-Smirnova, Elena and Pavel Romanov. "Heroes and spongers: The iconography of disability in Soviet posters and film." In Michael Rasell and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova, eds. *Disability in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: History, Policy, and Everyday Life*, 84–124. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Lūse, Agita and Dace Kamerāde. "Between disabling disorders and mundane nervousness." In Michael Rasell and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova, eds. *Disability in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: History, Policy, and Everyday Life*, 125–54. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness, and Queer/Disabled Existence." In R. Garland-Thomson, B. J. Brueggemann, and S. L. Snyder, eds. *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, 88–99. New York: MLA Publications, 2002.
- Mladenov, Teodor. "Postsocialist disability matrix." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 19, No. 2 (2016): 104–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2016.1202860>.
- Raicovich, Laura. *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest*. New York: Verso, 2021.
- Sandell, Richard. *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*. London: Routledge, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203020036>.
- Sandell, Richard, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum (1<sup>st</sup> ed.)*. London: Routledge, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203521267>.
- Shakespeare, Tom. "Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?" *Disability & Society* 9, No. 3 (1994): 283–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599466780341>.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Vertoont, Susan, Tina Goethals, Frederik Dhaenens, Patrick Schelfhout, Tess Van Deynse, Gabria Vermeir, and Maud Ysebaert, "Un/recognisable and dis/empowering images of disability: a collective textual analysis of media representations of intellectual disabilities." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 39, No. 1 (2022): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2021.1979239>.
- Vērdiņš, Kārlis and Jānis Ozoliņš. "Melancholic sons and dying mothers: queerness in (post-) Soviet Baltic fiction." *Journal of Baltic Studies* (November 2024): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2024.2424257>.
- Zviedre, Agnese. "Social Critique of the Soviet Regime in Ivars Poikāns' Works from 1987 till 1990: A Disability Aesthetics Perspective." *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 32, No. 01+02 (2023): 152–68.

## Newspapers

- *Atmoda*, 1990.
- *Darba Balss*, 1965.
- *Darba Balss*, 1979a.
- *Komunisma Ceļš* (Bauska), 1986.
- *Laiks*, 1986.
- *Neatkarīgā Rīta avīze*, 1997.
- *Padomju Ceļš* (Ogre), 1985.
- *Padomju Druva* (Cēsis), 1987.
- *Skolotāju Avīze*, 1979.

Agnese Zviedre

---

**PREUČEVANJE PODOBE MOTENJ V DUŠEVNEM  
RAZVOJU V ČASU SOVJETSKE ZVEZE IN PO PONOVI  
OSAMOSVOJITVI V LATVIJI: ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA DOMA  
ZA OTROKE ŠT. 2, BALDONE**

---

POVZETEK

---

Prispevek preučuje, kako sta se podoba in dojemanje otrok z motnjami v duševnem razvoju v Latviji razvijala od sovjetskega obdobja do sodobnosti. Vsebuje pregled zgodovine Doma za otroke št. 2 v mestu Baldone ter analizo podobe otrok z motnjami v duševnem razvoju v tiskanih medijih od odprtja te ustanove leta 1969 do njenega zaprtja leta 2019. Pri analizi tiskanih medijev je opazen premik od sovjetskih idealov k vse večjemu zavedanju o obstoju različnih narativov glede invalidnosti v javnem diskurzu. Preučevanje podobe Doma za otroke št. 2 ponazarja ideološke narative in javni diskurz v zvezi z motnjami v duševnem razvoju v Latviji.

V zgodnjih člankih, od katerih so bili prvi objavljeni leta 1965, je bila poudarjena potreba po specializiranih ustanovah zaradi naraščajočega števila otrok, ki zaradi bolezni ali nesreč niso mogli obiskovati rednih šol. Skozi diskurz o oskrbi je narativ poudarjal segregacijo. V sedemdesetih letih 20. stoletja se je prikazovanje otrok v ustanovi spremenilo. V nekaterih člankih so bila poudarjena prizadevanja države za pomoč otrokom, v drugih pa so se ustanova in otroci začeli uporabljati kot podoba kampanje proti alkoholu. V osemdesetih letih 20. stoletja je bilo opazno povečanje propagandnega gradiva, ki je motnje v duševnem razvoju povezovalo z alkoholizmom. Zato so izobraževalne ustanove organizirale obiske Doma za otroke št. 2, da bi mladim odraslim ponazorile posledice, povezane z zlorabo alkohola.

Po ponovni osamosvojitvi Latvije so se mednarodne organizacije in lokalni aktivisti zavzemali za pravice otrok z motnjami v duševnem razvoju in se borili proti diskriminaciji, spremenila pa se je tudi podoba v tiskanih medijih. Leta 2000 se je javni diskurz začel ukvarjati z deinstitutionalizacijo, pri čemer se je Latvija postopoma usmerila v skupnostno oskrbo. Dom za otroke št. 2 je deloval do leta 2019, ko so ga zaradi neustreznih razmer zaprli.