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## **‘Our Birches, Our Trees’: Naturalisation of Belonging at the Estonian Borderland**

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*This paper critically interrogates the symbolic meaning of ‘nature’ for the sense of belonging of Russian speakers in Estonia. Drawing on the ethnographic research conducted in the borderland city of Narva, I dissect different ways in which space like nature or natural landscape enables Russian speakers to challenge the state-enacted boundaries of community belonging and to re-inscribe themselves into both local and national landscapes as rightful members of Estonian society. This, as I demonstrate, occurs contrary to the exclusionary ways in which Estonian national entrepreneurs use geographical symbols to construct ancestral homeland with authentic ‘culture’ based on ‘otherness’.*

One sunny but chilly morning in March 2017, Raisa, a 66-year-old pensioner, and I decided to go for a walk in Narva. We met nearby the Narva Castle, a favourite place of many locals and tourists, and then made our way past the River Promenade, past the ‘Dark Garden’, moving always further and further away from people and the surrounding buildings. Reminiscing about her childhood, her parents and favourite places in the city, Raisa suddenly cited an excerpt from a poem to me:

*В пресветлой Эстляндии, у моря  
Балтийского,  
Лилитного, блёклого и неуловимого,  
Где вьются кузнечики скользяще-  
налимово,  
Для сердца усталого — так много  
любимого,  
Святого, желанного, родного и  
близкого! [...]*

*In the brightest Estonia, by the 'lilitnyi',  
faded and elusive Baltic Sea,  
Where the sliding grasshoppers are  
winding up,  
There is so much loved, holy, cherished,  
near and dear – for the weary heart! [...]*

(excerpt from the poem by Igor Severyanin 'Baltiiskie Kenzeli' (1914), translated by the author of the monograph)

For Raisa this excerpt represented a container of a wide spectrum of feelings she associated with Narva and Estonia in general. At the core of her feelings lied memories of a particular place nearby the river, where she spent most of her childhood years, playing with her friends, catching butterflies, collecting flowers in the summer and acorns in the autumn. This place of her childhood, Raisa grew convinced, affected considerably her personality, her love for the nature, not just any, but Estonian nature, fresh Estonian breeze, cold but beautiful Estonian sea. Although she felt deeply affected by post-Soviet social, political and economic restructuring, which sidelined her and other Russian-speaking dwellers as remnants of the Soviet past, Raisa turned to nature to construct her own alternative images of herself and of the place she inhabits. As she pointed out to me later, nature plays an important unifying role as a place that knows no boundaries between different ethnicities, between different inhabitants of Estonia: 'in nature there are no division, they are all artificially established. Rivers, forests they all unite and connect, whereas life embedded in socio-political context often divides'.

The morning stroll with Raisa represents one of the occasions when I observed the intrinsic connection between the world of nature and the everyday experiences of Russian speakers at the borderland city of Narva. Not only did nature and its material attributes – trees, hills, stones, creeks – have a kindly and relaxing effect on the individuals. More importantly, it carried a deeper symbolic meaning to Russian-speaking Narvans and their sense of belonging, which this paper sets out to unlock. As such, the aim here is to scrutinise different ways in which ideas of nature are crystallised in the narratives of Russian speaker, their experiences of fitting in and negotiating place within the larger Estonian collective. How do Russian speakers in Narva re-inscribe themselves through 'nature' into the national landscape of Estonia that in the process of nation-building has largely excluded them? How is 'nature' used to negotiate boundaries between 'in' and 'out' and to construct worlds of which Russian speakers are a legitimate part? How is 'nature' implicated in their understanding of home and belonging?

In the past decades, the notion of 'belonging' has become increasingly central to any discussion of prominent issues related to minority integration and cultural diversity, not only in the post-Soviet countries, but equally so in the rest of the world. Following Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011: 201), who has produced one of the most comprehensive efforts to theorise and categorise the notion, belonging means 'an emotionally-charged social location' that connects people with common values, relations and practices together at a certain place and time. Although the notion of belonging can be expressed in relation to a variety of social and spatial terms, 'place' is considered to play the central role (Antonsich 2010; Fenster & Vigel 2006). Floya Anthias (2013: 7), for example, argues that belonging in the modern world always stands in relation 'to something outside the self', to a place in both the social and geographical sense. Antonsich (2010) too endorses the importance of people's emotional relationship with places for a sense of belonging. According to him, to understand belonging it is to understand how individuals come to be emotionally attached to a place (Antonsich 2010: 646). Place, in turn, can represent both imagined and real locations inhabited and appropriated through the ascription of personal meanings and feelings (Cresswell 2015; Low 2017). It is an embodied relationship with the world through which individuals and groups interact with the surrounding socio-spatial realities.

In the context of post-Soviet countries and Estonia specifically, the researchers far too often focused on the top-down processes that define space and society, what Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) frames as 'politics of belonging'. Special attention has been dedicated to the state- and nation-building projects and minority policies introduced by the governments (Agarin 2010; Pettai & Hallik 2002; Schulze 2010, 2018) or to the impact of those policies upon identities and integration patterns of Russian speakers (Laitin 1998; Vihalemm & Masso 2003). Only a handful of studies explore individual belonging of Russian speakers through their relationship with places (Barrington et al. 2003; Duvold 2006; Nimmerfeldt 2011). Scholars who undertook the endeavour of unpacking 'belonging' focus, however, only on the notion of territoriality bound to a national level or concentrate predominantly on the ideas of community and identity as the defining aspects for attachments. The accounts of these studies remain overly deterministic whereby Russophone population is either seen as collectively 'not belonging' to their country of residence based on their Russianness (Duvold 2006) or 'not belonging' to any country at all, alienated and lost (Nimmerfeldt 2011). This research, in contrast, offers a more nuanced account of life and experiences of the Russophone population in Estonia. It demonstrates complexities, ruptures and convergences in their narratives while scrutinising

how individual Russian speakers articulate personal belonging through engagement with a place called ‘nature’.

While acknowledging the role of the state and country’s elites in producing places ‘from above’, this study joins a growing body of literature that seeks to approach the notion of belonging from the less visible everyday scale (Kesküla 2015; Laszczkowski 2016; Pfoser 2017; Seliverstova 2017). Furthermore, I build on research that, in the words of Bronwyn Wood (2014: 217), attempts to ‘give voice to marginalised groups and pay attention to spaces previously rendered invisible’ in the debates on belonging. Drawing on empirical evidence from Russian speakers in the borderland city of Narva, this paper contributes to the complex meanings of ‘nature’, as a place, both near and far, where complex social relations are acted out. The main objective is then to dissect different ways in which ‘nature’ is being used in the individual narratives to negotiate belonging and to construct ‘worlds’ of which Russian speakers are a part amid exclusionary discourses on membership in the Estonian nation.

In this paper, the empirical material stems from 27 semi-structured interviews conducted from February to April 2017 with city-dwellers between 18 and 66 years old. I met the respondents through a technique of a snowballing (with a maximum of one subsequent referral per respondent) through personal contacts, on the streets, or with help of the Narva College. In addition, I attended *Keelekohvik*, or language café – the informal meetings organised by the Integration and Migration Foundation (MISA) for people seeking to improve their Estonian language skills. To complement the data, this work relies also on a dozen unrecorded talks that emerged from the ethnographic practices of ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998; Ingold 2004), that is sharing with my participants the experiences of various places by strolling through the city, visiting their homes, and having numerous conversations about life outside the formal interview structures.

Narva represents a particularly interesting site for our analysis of how Russian speakers construct their belonging through interaction with ‘nature’. The city’s Russian-speaking inhabitants (comprising over 90% of the local population) were particularly affected by Estonia’s attempts to consolidate the dominant position of ethnic Estonians in society. Most of the inhabitants arrived in Narva during the reconstruction years following the end of the WWII, as the city was almost completely destroyed by ground warfare and Soviet bombardments in 1944. The large flow of newcomers from Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union considerably shifted the ethnic composition of its population, turning ethnic Estonians into the minority group. This demographic situation has stimulated much discussion concerning the

status of Narva – whether, for example, Narva should be considered a ‘Russian enclave’. Due to its location (bordering directly Russia) and social composition Narva has been therefore largely geographically marginalised and discursively alienated from the rest of Estonia. There have been numerous attempts to ‘Estonianise’ the city after the collapse of the Soviet Union through the erection of monuments and organisation of new commemorative activities. These, however, have only been partly successful and in the eyes of many Estonians, Narva remains not quite ‘Estonian’.

Despite the official political projects to decompose the old Soviet narratives and landscapes of the city, which turned Narva into the so-called ‘zone of abandonment’ (Stoler 2013: 9, 23), this paper demonstrates complex ways in which Russian speakers seek to re-inscribe themselves into the national landscape. To advance the argument, the paper proceeds as follows. First, I will critically survey the relevant debates on the conceptual meaning of the word ‘nature’ and its complex link with human culture, national identity and belonging. In particular, I will discuss how ‘nature’ has been used in different cultures as a symbol around which feelings of national belonging have been generated. I will then provide a detailed account of how inherited landscape myths through their power over mapping the ideas of homeland and nation have been linked to ‘politics of belonging’ in the context of Estonia. Since belonging of individuals in its essence is a social practice, it is necessary to understand how national myths grounded in ‘nature’ are implicated in the bordering practices of Estonian state which can include or exclude individuals, legitimate or reject one’s membership in a community. As such, in this section I demonstrate how by drawing on ‘nature’ national narratives in Estonia become dangerously linked to the primordialist ideas of rootedness in the soil, authenticity and exclusivity from the ‘others’ who seemingly do not share the same connection to the natural terrain.

At the same time, natural landscape does more than simply serve this negative exclusionary function, for it also allows Russian speakers, who often do not fall into the official national accounts of ‘Estonianness’ to construct the ‘alternative social visions and configurations’ (Ong 2011: 12). The last empirical section will, thus, dissect different ways in which ‘nature’ is used by Russian speakers in the process of re- and de-bordering, that is challenging and negotiating definitions of space as ‘own’, ‘desired’ or ‘alien’.

*Nature and Society: Imagining Nation through Nature*

‘Nature’ is a complicated word filled with different meanings and represented differently across cultures and times.<sup>1</sup> It is not simply the world out there – the physical environment which exists separately from humanity. Instead, natural, as in case of the spatial, is historically and socially constructed (Massey 1984: 7). This is not to say that the non-human world is purely an idea with no concrete referents out there – quite on the contrary. But what we understand as the natural world, Cronon (1995: 25) writes, is closely entangled with our own values and assumptions so that the word ‘nature’ often reflects both the things we label as that word (e.g. trees, rivers, lakes) and ourselves situated in those things.

Although, historically the social and the natural were often torn apart and dichotomised, with nature coming to be defined as passive, non-agent world out there, in the past decades scholarly accounts have clearly recognised that the ideas of nature are fundamentally intertwined with dominant ideas of society. Not only is nature constituted through a variety of socio-political process but so is the social validated and legitimated through appeals to nature and the natural (Macnaghten & Urry 1998: 15). In other words, landscapes that on their surface seem uncontaminated by humanity are often turned into human symbols and cultural icons, which we use as repositories for values and meanings. As the British literary critic Raymond Williams (1980: 67) once remarked, ‘the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history’. It reveals much about conceptions of national identity and belonging.

The symbiosis between a community and surrounding natural landscape has been indeed highlighted by several scholars (Ely 2002; Schwartz 2006; Zimmer 1998). In a brief passage of his book *Crowds and Power*, Elias Canetti (1973: 169) has curiously highlighted an intrinsic defect of numerous academic attempts to define the general concept of nationality, arguing that neither language nor territory, written literature, history, form of government or the so-called national feeling, lie at the heart of conceptions of national identity. Instead, he is convinced that nations cannot do without a national ‘crowd symbol’. ‘Crowd symbol’ is the name Canetti

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of different ideas of nature(s) across time and space see, for example, Williams (1980); Epstein (1990); Macnaghten and Urry (2000). Mikhail Epstein (1990), a Russian literary theorist, for example, breaks the development of Russian natural philosophy into four distinguished periods: theological, tragical, utopian, and ecological. During the first period, that is in the 18th century, nature appeared as a manifestation of the higher powers of the divine mind, as evidence of the good will of the Creator. The second period – the 19th century – revealed a deep fissure between a man and ‘irrational’ nature, which led to the end of a coherent system within which humanity, nature and God were inextricably bound together. The first half of the 20th century, in turn, resolved the issue of discord in favour of a man: it was decided that nature should be re-educated at the hands of people and subordinated to them. Nature, thus, came to be seen as a set of instrumentalised objects on which man could operate. Finally, the fourth stage, which continues today, is confronted by a thought of the indissolubility of alliance between nature, annexed by cultural icons, and culture, which largely draws on natural text.

(1973: 75) gives to ‘collective units which do not consist of men, but which are still felt to be crowds’. Corn, forest, rain, wind, sand, fire and the sea – are the phenomena that comprehend some of the essential attributes of the nation and stand as its symbol through myths, dreams, speeches and songs. He then goes on to demonstrate how most of the European nations possess one of such symbols around which a popular feeling of national belonging could be generated. In England, Canetti (171-179) argues, it is the sea that is strongly related to the ideas of nation, while in Germany it is the forest: ‘The parallel rigidity of the upright trees and their density and number fill the heart of the German with a deep and mysterious delight’.

The importance of natural landscapes for the phenomenon of nationhood is equally noted by Anthony D. Smith (1999) in his book *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. To him, the question at the heart of any nation – ‘who are we?’ – is always closely connected with the questions of ‘where we are’ and ‘what is our place’. Official narratives of national identity do not only define the nation’s character but also delineate a special place for the nation to inhabit, a land of ‘their own’, or what Smith (1999: 16, 149-150) calls an *ethnoscape*. It is not any land, but ‘a historic land, a homeland, an ancestral land’ which is felt to ‘influence events and contribute to the experiences and memories that moulded the community’. *Ethnoscapes* are endowed with poetic and ethnic meaning through the ‘historiadisation of nature’ and the ‘territorialisation of ethnic memories’ and help bring about a sense of belonging to a specific territory and a territory to particular people:

The ethnoscape becomes an intrinsic part of the character, history and destiny of the culture community, to be commemorated regularly and defended at all costs lest the ‘personality’ of the ethnic or regional community be impugned. (Smith 1999: 151)

To foster the enchantment of national identity, national entrepreneurs lavish praise on a particular landscape tradition and pay significant attention to inculcating love for natural features of territory. Through a wide range of practices (e.g. erection of the monuments, school curricula, public spectacles, poems and arts) leaders and educators of the community ‘nationalise nature’ by endowing a distinct landscape with ethno-historical significance and ‘naturalise nation’ by ascribing certain natural characteristic to the members of the community (Zimmer 1998). Both processes, though analytically separate, are mutually intertwined and reinforce the authenticity of national culture through construction of continuity with alleged historical past as well as the creation of a sense of naturalness (Zimmer 1998: 642).

Narratives rooted in a particular landscape, according to Schwartz (2006: 17) allow ‘a national community to project a positive understanding of itself’. Without ‘the mystique of a particular

landscape', national identity would lose much of its 'ferocious enchantment' (Schama 1995: 15). At the same time, however, and this will become more apparent in the section below, the emphasis on the authentic ethnoscape for a particular nation can equally serve an exclusionary function. It becomes a mark of distinctiveness used by specific political projects or 'politics of belonging' to construct belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities (Yuval-Davis 2006: 197). In this process, those who cannot trace their authenticity and rootedness in a historical soil are delineated as 'other'.

### *Estonia at the Natural Crossroads*

Similarly to Latvia, Estonia's borderland geography is often portrayed as a crossroads.<sup>2</sup> According to a famous Estonian writer and semiologist, Valdur Mikita, who published a series of books on the relationship between nature and Estonian culture – *Lingvistiline mets* (2013) and *Lindvistika ehk Metsa see lingvistika* (2015) – Estonia is a 'periphery of the periphery' (Kaljundi 2018) where not only different cultural influences met making the Estonian language so peculiar, but also different natures: the sea comes in the west and the mires and bogs in the east. In the eyes of Mikita (2013: 9) Estonia represents simultaneously an open bridge between cultures (*asub tõlkepiiril*) and an exclusionary space. Both narratives define Estonian identity through territorial terms, reinforcing binary opposition (inside *versus* outside, indigenous *versus* immigrant) and dramatizing or minimising some of the boundaries (Feldman 2001: 15).

The outward-looking narratives of Europeanness<sup>3</sup> pursued since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the efforts towards multiculturalism and international integration are uneasily juxtaposed with inward-looking 'homeland' narratives.<sup>4</sup> Europeanness is more inclusive and welcoming towards minorities and newcomers, it values Estonian multiculturalism and multiplicity of identities, presenting Estonia as a bridge between different cultures – Finno-Ugric, Russian, German. Whereas the homeland narrative, in the words of Feldman (2001: 13), defines Estonian identity as sharply distinguished from the rest of the world. The narrative

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<sup>2</sup> These accounts are in many ways similar to that of the Latvian case (see, for example, Schwartz 2006, 2007), whereby Latvian homeland is constructed as a crossroads – a bridge between East and West, which connects authenticity and vitality of peasant culture with cosmopolitanism as liberation from post-feudal penury and peasantry.

<sup>3</sup> This narrative defines both where and what Estonia is, and where it is not. In other words, while proclaiming the European character of Estonia, this narrative also acknowledges the insurmountable barrier between Estonia and Russia, with the former being a frontier of western civilisation and the latter being neither European nor western.

<sup>4</sup> According to Unwin (1999: 151) the resultant tensions of these competing images of national identity are expressed both within the political arena through contrasting patterns of support for political parties in different parts of the country, and in the dramatic changes taking place within rural society.

opposes both European and Russian influence, positing that ‘ethnic Estonians possess a unique relationship with the Estonian territory that gives them a primordial moral right to that space’. Archaic and close relationship of Estonians with nature distinguishes them from other folks in a modern and alienated Europe:

No one in Europe can imagine a family where a father takes a bike after work and goes fishing, while a mother picks up berries, a grandmother stocks herbal medicine and the children go alone to a nearby forest lake. Such a world has long been a fairy tale. (Mikita 2013: 87-88)

To emphasise Estonia’s genealogical rootedness and exclusive connection to the Estonian space, political and cultural elites often evoke metaphors of Estonian soil and indigenous culture. In his accounts Mikita (2013: 78-79), for example, connects Estonian cultural memory to the Finno-Ugric world, expanding Estonia’s genealogy and geography temporally on a scale of thousands of years.

The narratives of connection between Estonian people and nature have emerged back in the times of country’s national awakening in the 1860s, when the land reforms and cultural change not only led to the emergence of the Estonian farmers as landowners but also generated Estonian intelligentsia, who through poems and folk epics promoted Estonian national identity.<sup>5</sup> Up until the Soviet occupation in 1944, which initiated a land reform leading to collectivisation, Estonia remained a fundamentally rural country filled with small-scale farming sectors. The Soviet collectivisation process was, however, met with resistance by many Estonian farmers who often joined the forces of Forest Brothers (*metsavennad*) to wage a guerrilla war against Soviet rule. Living a precarious existence, hiding out in the thick, dark woods became a way of life for many thousands of Estonian men. During this time, the heavily forested countryside which served both as a natural refuge and as a base for armed anti-Soviet resistance turned into another, in the words of Canetti (1973), ‘crowd symbol’ of Estonian national identity. To this day, forest plays a special role for Estonians who continue seeing themselves as ‘forest people’ (Piltre 2017): not only does it represent the ‘church-like’ sanctuary but it also determines the very character of Estonians. Oskar Loorits (1990), a famous Estonian folklorist of the 20th century, was, for example, convinced that the forest environment made Estonians alert,

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<sup>5</sup> Note that before the 19th century, the territory of Estonia and its people were under control of different ruling elite, including Danish, German, Swedish, and Russian.

introverted, melancholic, at the same time increasing their appreciation of difference, individuality and democratic decision-making.

Despite the attempts of the Communist elites to ‘stamp out independent thinking and [distinctive] national identity’, images of idyllic Estonian countryside with which local population shares close links were sustained up into the present day (Unwin 1999: 159). It was this naturalised national identity that reverberated in the Estonian songs (e.g. through the words ‘jää vabaks, Eesti pind!’ or ‘stay free, soil of Estonia’) and in the speeches of political actors. According to President Meri (1996: 486), who served from 1992 until 2001, ‘the bones of 50 or 100 previous generation rest in this soil’ and highlight the fundamental aspect of Estonian identity rooted in this ethnoscape.

Such emphasis on nativism, however, is alerting for scholars like Feldman (2001) as it constructs symbolic boundaries that draw a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Stressing the ties between state-bearing nation with the land, she argues, reinforces the differences between the ‘indigenous population’ and the so-called recent immigrants, who in a cultural sense have ‘less’ right to claim Estonia as their home than the natives. Indeed, some official narratives still challenge the rightful belonging of Russian speakers in Estonia, strengthening their images as internal ‘other’ within the new world order that the country has entered. Consider, for example, the editorial newspaper article by the chairman of the Estonian national conservative People’s Party (EKRE), Mart Helme (2015), who questions any possible connection between Russian speakers and Estonia:

We should not be consoled by the fact that now we are living alongside the second and third generation of Russian speakers, who were predominantly born in Estonia and consider Estonia as their homeland in the same way as Estonians do. This is a fatal mistake! Neither second, third or fourth or even fifth generation of Russian speakers perceive Estonia as their homeland in the same way as we do. To us and only us Estonians Estonia is homeland.

Unsurprisingly, such exclusionary accounts have a negative effect on the daily lives of Russian speakers in Narva, which in my conversations with them were reflected in the narratives of ‘otherness’, ‘marginality’ and ‘not belonging’:

The feeling of being foreign among *svoikh*<sup>6</sup> (*chuzhoi sredi svoikh*) still prevails. I have Estonian citizenship, which I received myself about seven years ago. And I don't really speak Estonian so well, maybe on B2-level, though I want to. I consider Estonia my country, not Russia or any other country. But I don't feel myself accepted (*svoei*). (Vera, 40 years old, social worker)

Research by Zabrodskaia and Ehala (2010: 22) highlights that numerous grievances and discomfort that Russian speakers might experience leads them to the creation of Ida-Viru County (the region of which Narva is a part) as a 'significant, mentally imagined place, a small fatherland, where they can "hide" from the rest of Estonia'. While indeed internalising certain state discourses of marginalisation, contrary to conclusions drawn by Zabrodskaia and Ehala my respondents often express dissent with the national politics that positions them and their city at the margins as 'foreign'. Instead, they demonstrate their resilience in highlighting Narva as a continuously Estonian place and themselves as significant parts of it. As Masha, a 24-year-old student told me:

Narvans want to be accepted. [...] It's like every family has a freak and we are this freak. This is upsetting. And when Estonians say that we are not Estonia...How come? At least geographically. Yes, we are Estonians, Estonia...not Estonians, but Estonia. And a lot of Narva dwellers, simple workers, working in factories or in shops, they value Estonia and love living here. [...] It just has to be understood that I am Russian, but I love Estonia.

This quote symbolises well the persisting desire of Russian speakers to challenge their own images as the undesirable remnants of the Soviet past who do not fit into the new cultural geographies of the independent state. By drawing on the individual accounts of 'nature' the next section then demonstrates different ways in which Russian speakers overcome politically entrenched divisions and re-construct personal ideas of space and homeland. Through their relationship with 'natural world', I argue, individuals are able to re-inscribe themselves, albeit differently, into the Estonian landscape. In what comes, I will, first, demonstrate how through 'territorialisation of memory' (Smith 1999: 151) and establishing one's own continuity in place Russian speakers take active part in the process of de-bordering (challenging the state enacted configurations of social relations). I will then consider how 'nature' is implicated in the re-

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<sup>6</sup> Since *svoi* is a grammatical form that does not have an equivalent in English (the closest meaning would be 'being a part of' or 'being accepted'), I keep the word in its original Russian language.

bordering process or defining ‘own’ against ‘alien’ places, and what it means for their understanding of home.

### *On Symbolic Meaning of Nature in Narva*

Seeking to make places habitable while resisting spatial forms of social control or exclusion individuals often turn to clandestine ‘spatial tactics’ expressed in both material (e.g. consumption practices or home renovations) and less material acts (walking, naming, narrating) (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003: 31). In this process, memory, especially of one’s continuity in place, plays particularly significant role. Through memories places acquire symbolic meaning and help individuals or groups to construct, substantiate as well as renounce received notions of territoriality and space (Low 2017: 77). People make sense of the places by remembering them in particular ways and by putting past memories into meaningful relations to the present and future. In turn, by emphasising continuity or rupture with the past in the present, individuals and collectives can legitimise or contest present social order and construct belonging on their own terms.

Indeed, Russian speakers often territorialised personal memories in diverse places, especially in natural landscapes, to claim recognition of their rightful presence not only locally but equally nationally. By re-inscribing themselves into the Estonian ‘natural world’ through memories my respondents were able to establish the so-called historical ‘nativism’ in what they regarded as home. Consider, for example, Nadezhda, a 45-year-old kindergarten teacher, who through nostalgic memories of the past claimed connection to the terrain locally, as her native place:

When I visit Mediterranean Sea, it is warm and sunny. Here the sea is cold, but I still always tell my husband that I want to go to *Ust’ Narva*. Well the sea is cold, but it is *svojo* (own). Probably a nostalgia. I cannot forget or throw Estonia because of the politics, I cannot throw it out of my soul and say that I am going to live in Russia. Sure, I like Russia, I have many relatives there, but I know that I always come back here with big enthusiasm. With joy is filled my soul. It is mine (*eto moja*). [...] I’ll tell you now one of my school memories. We were travelling a lot with my class, we went to Moscow, to St. Petersburg. I liked it everywhere. But there is this turn to Narva, when our castle becomes visible. When the bus would turn, and you would see the Hermann Tower. I would immediately get tears – this is my native place (*rodnoe*), this is my home. And I would say, I am finally home.

For another respondent, Karina, a 28-year-old museum worker, Estonian landscapes familiar to her from childhood are unique as they represent the idea of home:

For me, there is nothing closer and more dear than fresh Estonian air, the ripples of numerous Estonian bogs, the splash of waves of the cold Baltic Sea. Such a thrilling, albeit sometimes harsh, landscape cannot be compared with any tropical palm trees and southern sands. There is nothing more pleasant than strolling alone in our pine forests or along the seashore. Why do I speak in such a poetic form? There is really no other way to talk about Estonian nature. It is unique. //But how about Latvia, does not it have similar landscape?// Yes, but Latvia is not my *rodina* (home). Landscapes familiar from childhood cannot be compared with anything else.

Stephanie Taylor (2010, 12) summarises such stories as ‘born and bred narratives’ that arguably help individuals to establish a connection to place associated with local identities, thereby representing an alternative strategy for coping with social boundaries imposed by the nation-building policies of the Estonian state. In this sense, growing up in this place, and recalling memories of it, helped develop emotional continuity among my respondents. This allowed them to challenge or *de-border* state enacted boundaries of belonging and to re-inscribe themselves in the local and national memoryscapes as people of that place. As another respondent from Narva put it: ‘You can’t say – Dima get out of here, this is not your home. How come it’s not my home? My parents live and will be buried here. My children live here. Where else should I go? To Russia?’ (Dima, 42 years old, salesman).

Many biographical accounts and memories of the past grounded in natural landscapes were often extended further to delineate ‘own’ and ‘desired’ against ‘alien’ places. Narvans, for example, were keen to demonstrate how ‘Estonianness’ is integral to their local experiences of place. In those accounts, unique Estonian nature is often juxtaposed to nature in Russia, that is considered disorderly, and by extension Russian speakers themselves are juxtaposed to rather unfamiliar people in Russia:

Our forests are all clean. In some places we even have *lõkkekohad* (Estonian for campfire) with wooden tables and places for tents. In Russia, you go out of the city into the forest and see the dumps everywhere’ (Marina, 30 years old, administrative worker).

Estonian forest, our sea... Although it is often very cold, but still it is somehow... This is your country, and everything here is so dear. For example, I would not want to live in Russia. A friend of mine met a guy and moved with him to Russia. She told me that, at

first, she could not bear it at all, Russians in Russia are not like ours in Estonia. I think they are completely a different folk (*drugoi narod*). (Lilya, 27 years old, school teacher)

The natural landscape in Estonia thus represents a space where modernised and civilised people act out their lives as opposed to space of difference – Russia, where disorder seems to prevail. Following the individual accounts of Russian speakers, being born in Estonia or living there for a considerable period of time led to their appropriation of certain Estonian cultural traits – becoming more civilised, less chaotic. In this regard, nature and particular natural landscapes contributed greatly to buttressing the belief not only in spatial differences between Estonia and other geographies, but in own personal differences from other folks thereafter. Through appropriation of certain Estonian cultural traits (*obestonits'ya*) and interaction with ‘unique’ Estonian landscapes the life in Russia became to many simply unimaginable. Tellingly, Dima remarked that life in Russia remains unimaginable to him, disregarding the ways Russian speakers are treated in Estonia: ‘life in Russia would be savage (*dikost*) to me’. As such, ascribing particular attributes (negative and positive) to a particular geographical place is inherently linked with the process of *re-bordering*. In this process my respondents draw the new territorial and cultural boundaries (especially with the ‘wild’ Russia) to challenge and subvert the top-down Estonian state narratives that depict Russian speakers as ‘other’. By re-constructing memories of their embodied experience of local life as a part of Estonia, Russian speakers create new alternative cultural geographies of their belonging, where they represent legitimate dwellers and a part of a larger national collective.

### *Concluding Discussion*

Belonging, as Prins (2006: 288) argues, is a precarious predicament that describes different ways people experience ‘fitting into’ certain contexts and places. It is not a mere state of being, but rather indicates a continuous desire to belong, negotiated between both a sense of marginalisation and new alternative ways to undesired attachments. In this paper, I examined how through diverse narratives and memories about ‘nature’ Russian speakers challenge boundaries between ‘in’ and ‘out’ enacted by official state discourses, and how, in this process, they re-inscribe themselves into the national landscape of Estonia. Although, as I argue, Estonian political and cultural elites often use the geographical symbols to construct ancestral homeland with authentic ‘culture’ distinct from ‘others’, which sidelines the minority populations, the vast nature and natural landscape open a possibility for Russian speakers to construct alternative images of themselves and of the place they inhabit. As such, this research,

therefore, highlights that there is no such thing as one nature, but multiple simultaneously co-existing natures that can exclude (through the accounts of authentic and legitimate ethnics against the ‘others’) or include (through individual accounts which help naturalise belonging). Establishing one’s own continuity by territorialising memory in unique Estonian landscapes or by drawing new territorial and cultural boundaries against the Russian ‘other’ offers Russian speakers an alternative strategy for coping with social boundaries imposed by the nation-building policies of the Estonian state. These practices all serve to highlight that individuals do not simply confront a world ‘out there’ produced by the governments and state authorities but are agents in their environment who inhabit rather than ‘assimilate to a formal design specification’ (Ingold 2000: 173). ‘Being in the world’ as in dwelling is essential in the meaning-making and the construction of meaningful environment for people (*ibid.*). To reaffirm their ‘insidedness’ and belonging as people of that place as well as to resist a broader ‘narrative’ that stressed their lack of authentic rootedness in Estonia, Russian speakers in Narva improvised, often without one’s knowing, alternative ‘chronotopes’ (Bakhtin 1981) of their belonging grounded in place.

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