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Estonia and Russia

The Cultural Politics of Scale and the Rescaling of Place and Identity in the Estonian-Russian Borderlands

Topic of Research

The research focuses on the processes of reterritorializing and rescaling place and identity in two settings along the Estonian-Russian border: Setomaa in the south and Narva-Ivangorod in the north. The research examines the ways in which discourses of place and identity, as well as practices of place-making and identity enactment, have been reterritorialized and rescaled in the borderlands following independence. In particular, I studied the place and identity narratives and enactments associated with creating and contesting Seto identity and Setomaa in the south, and the identity and place narratives and enactments associated with Narva in the north. I investigated not only state-scale (i.e., Estonian and Russian) identity and place narratives regarding these borderlands, but also those created by local social activists, and by the local non-activist publics living in these borderland settings. I also examined the ways in which these borderland place and identity discourses and practices were being transnationalized, especially with the coming of the EU to the border, but also through the involvement of transnational NGOs throughout the region.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

Research in political and cultural geography, as well as political anthropology and ethnosociology, has increasingly emphasized not only the imagined or constructed nature of place and identity, but also the need to treat both as categories of discourse and practice, rather than reified categories of analysis—as something real that is out there waiting to be analyzed. This research contributes to this post-structural, process-oriented approach by assessing the narratives and enactments of place and identity that are occurring in post-socialist space, a region undergoing dynamic place and identity transformations.

It contributes significantly to this research in three ways. First, in treating place and identity as mutually constitutive relational fields of discourse and practice, it goes beyond much of the research currently extant that tends to analyze identity or place as separable categories. Second, this research contributes significantly to the politics of scale literature in political geography, which up to now has emphasized political economy aspects of rescaling processes, and has tended to ignore the cultural politics of scale on which this project elaborates. Finally, this research contributes significantly to the new field of border studies, by concentrating attention on the way in which the borderlands themselves serve to reterritorialize and rescale place and identity. This

research contributes to the view of borders and borderlands not as marginal places, but as central nodes of power, where the meaning of state-scale and interstate-scale identities (e.g., Estonian-ness, European-ness) are being created and contested.

Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

The approach taken in this research is, as noted above, to explore the narratives and enactments of identity and place created and contested by a wide variety of actors and institutions, as well as by the non-activist borderland publics in their everyday lives. The focus of the research project for the time of the IREX grant was on the cultural politics of memory, and examined the ways in which sites of memory in Narva were being used to rescale (Estonianize, Europeanize) place and identity, as well as the way in which the borderlands to the south were being re-narrated as a commemorative landscape of Seto-ness, as Setomaa. The methodology used to explore the rescaled narratives and enactments of identity was qualitative. In addition to analysis of archival records, official documents, textbooks, tourist brochures, newspaper and magazine representations of the borderlands, I interviewed state and interstate officials, local political and cultural elites, social activists and non-activist publics living in the borderlands. I also attended cultural festivals and events, studied representations created through museums and other architectural sites of memory, and debates about cultural tourism development projects. Although the IREX grant was only for a two month period, this came at the culmination of 3 years of fieldwork in the Estonian-Russian borderlands.

In addition to Narva and Ivangorod, the research sites included cities and villages throughout the southern borderlands, and in particular in Pechory, Izborsk, Sigova, and Krupp in the Russian borderlands of Pskov Oblast, as well as Meremae, Varska, Obinita, Rapina, Polva and Vatselina in southeastern Estonia.

Research findings and preliminary conclusions

Narva has undergone a transformation over the past decade, from a place and a population that were treated both in official circles and in popular culture as exterior to Estonia and Estonian-ness, to a place that is experiencing an Estonianization and Europeanization, even while the population is still treated as external to Estonian state and society. The rescaling of Narva as a European and a European place is being accomplished discursively not only with official speeches, but also through the transformation of the commemorative landscape to highlight the period of interwar independence and the period of Swedish rule. 1700, and Swedish King Karl XII's victory over Peter I, is especially promoted in the textual and visual cultural landscape, while Peter's victory in 1704 and the period of Russian rule is largely downplayed or ignored. This has created a disjuncture between people—largely an ethnically Russian population—and place, now re-narrated not only as Estonian and European but also as anti-Russian. The local population has been discursively cast in the role of Other by state-scale Estonian officials. However, the local population narrates and enacts its own identity in localized terms, as Narvans, who came to Narva to rebuild the city and who were remade as Narvans in the process. This rescaled, localized identity

represents an effort by the local population to re-emplot itself into the narrative of Narva, and also reflects a widespread sentiment that the population feels it belongs nowhere else. This sense of isolation has been a source of anxiety and discontentment among Narvans, and also a source of continued othering of both Narva and Narvans at the level of Estonian popular culture. The Integration Program has done nothing to alleviate this, and in many ways has further exacerbated these isolated, alienated feelings among local residents, who are nonetheless seeking to 'jump up scale' by involving transnational actors and institutions in helping to create a new conjuncture between place and identity. However, transnational-local interaction is for the most part choreographed by the Estonian state itself, which places serious limitations on scale jumping as a means of local empowerment. This finding also challenges the 'demise of the nation-state' literature which contends that transnational organizations and local actors are bypassing the state and eroding state sovereignty and capacity.

In the southern borderlands, a very different dynamic regarding the rescaling of place and identity is at work. The borderland itself has been re-narrated and re-enacted as a commemorative landscape of Seto-ness, as Setomaa. This conjuncture between transborder place and identity has been accomplished through maps, tourist brochures, cultural and socio-historical publications on the region, new museums and the stories they tell about the place. The construction of Setomaa has been a project of Seto political and cultural activists, Estonian state-scale officials (particularly those responsible for the creation and implementation of the Seto Program), and transnational actors and institutions (especially the EU PHARE program and EU structural funds). Cultural tourism, emphasizing enactments of Seto identity for external tourist markets, has replaced agriculture and forestry as the number one ranking economic activity throughout Estonian Setomaa. Nevertheless, rescaling processes of place and identity in the southern borderlands have had profoundly disruptive effects on self-identifying Seto communities. Estonian narratives and enactments of national identity have prioritized a hardening of the border between Estonia and Russia, since Russia and Russian-ness is the primary other against which Estonia and Estonian-ness have been discursively constructed. The hardened border has taken precedence over the construction of a transborder Setomaa, and has severed the ties that bound transborder Seto social networks together prior to 1991. While most of the younger generation of self-identifying Setos live in Estonia, an elderly population of Seto farm families is all that remains on the Russian side of the border. A combination of resettlement and high mortality rates has further reduced the local Seto population on the Russian side, to the point where few if any self-identifying Setos will remain in a generation. Seto political activists have lobbied the Estonian government, and also attempted to 'jump up scale' by involving the EU and UN in an effort to soften the border, ease transborder mobility for Setos, and so retain a viable Seto presence on the Russian side of the border. Thus far, however, these efforts have not been successful, and while Seto-ness is increasingly present in the commemorative landscape on the Russian side of the border in museums, it is disappearing as a lived identity enactment in daily life. On the Estonian side of the border, there are also concerns that narratives and enactments of Seto identity are performed for an external tourist market. However, thus far this is a minor cause for concern, and most Seto activists continue to seek new ways to mine

the resource of Seto-ness in order to benefit socioeconomically from the tourism funds flowing to the region.

Future research agendas

The linkage between power, place, identity and scale is clearly visible in narratives and enactments of place and identity in borderlands. Future research plans include doing comparative work in similar transborder settings in other regions of post-socialist space. In addition, the findings of this research emphasize the importance of 'memory work' and commemoration in the new power dynamics and political decision-making occurring in post-socialist space. Future work will continue to develop the 'cultural politics of memory' and the cultural politics of scale as relational fields of empowerment and disempowerment.

Policy recommendations

From a US perspective, this research in particular exposes the problems associated with identity categories constructed by state-scale representatives interested in promoting a set of policy agendas. While Estonia's political and cultural elites continue to speak of 'the Russian' or 'the Russian-speaking' minority, and to design policies to contain and control this ethno-national other, field research provides strong evidence that this is not the way the local publics narrate or enact their own identity. The strong feelings of Narvan-ness among the resident population clearly indicates that 'the Russian-speaking' minority is a state-scale construct, created by Estonian officials and reinforced by policy statements in Russia and constructed in order to do work at the nation-state scale. Our own policies regarding Estonia's treatment of the population that it has so categorized should challenge the identity category itself, and should base support for 'integration programs' on identity as narrated and enacted by the publics in Estonia themselves. Narvan social activists have been striving to integrate into Estonian society, and have worked to re-narrate integration in ways that are meaningful for Narvans. US policies should at minimum examine the degree to which the population currently being 'othered' has been involved in programs created to bring about their integration.

Increasingly, European officials are also looking for ways to open the border to Russia as a new set of socioeconomic opportunities. This re-emphasizes the gateway function of the Baltic states in particular, and could well help redefine the characteristic 'Russian-speaking' from a problem to a benefit or an asset. In this sense, places of concentrated other-ness like northeastern Estonia could become powerful magnets for investment, social, cultural and economic revitalization. The US should be also be aligning its policy interests in such a way to help bring this about.