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Creating common ground among minority and the majority through artistic practice in Estonia

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The presentation uses the case of Estonia as an example to explore the relations between two main ethnic or language speaker groups, Estonians and Russians. Estonia with other East European countries has often been labelled in terms of nationalism particularistic and ethnic. However, the concept is rather political than analytical. The distinction can be valid between states rather than between world regions. Moreover, even strongly national celebrations could paradoxically attract and include minorities. I will use the examples of my artistic practise.

Keywords: Estonia, artistic practise, ethnic minorities, national celebrations, national identity

In the following presentation I would like to collaborate with my experience as an artist. I am going to give an overview of my practise as an artist in the topic of national identity, ideology in the context of different ethnic groups in Estonia.

My main points are the following:

1. I will give an overview of my artistic practice questions and methodology. In other words, could this method be beneficial in exploring the topic of nationalism? In this point, I am going to give some examples of my works in the light of artistic research and contemporary theories about nationalism.
2. Secondly, I will shortly explain Estonian background in the context of discussions about ethnic and civic nationalism. As Estonia is considered to be part of East-Europe, some points could be, in part, generalized about the region in general.
3. In my last point I will discuss a case study about Russian youth in Estonian national celebrations as an example of fluidity of identification.

1. Artistic research in the field of nationalism

In a modern world, nationalism is often seen as something out dated and old fashioned. While the theories of nationalism take into account cultural roots, and there are various arguments that support moderate patriotism; however, in contemporary artistic practise, as stated in introduction of Contemporary Art and Nationalism Critical Reader, nationalism is often unequivocally considered as "fossilized, slow, rude, unintelligent, and in non-dialectical solid ground". The authors see even its most processed and intelligent forms are at the same time the most dangerous in a world where each day nationalism takes more bare, banal, vulgar, and violent forms. However, nationalism manifests itself even in the most progressive structures (like

contemporary white-cube galleries that operate within the frame of the national institution); therefore it is very contemporary movement.¹

My position as an artist is rather emphatic than uncompromisingly critical, taking into account the complexity and ambivalence of the phenomenon of nationalism and national identity. Therefore, the response has been rather understanding from both the Estonian and Russian “side.”

As an artist, I am mostly working with the video medium that is based on documentary footage. I have collected the material since 2007 from different mainstream national events (parades, song festivals, etc.) and expeditions to Estonia and Russia. My main interest is the psychological and subjective side of the ideology: how does an individual get caught up in emotions and a sense of belonging? My aim is to highlight connectedness and tensions between a subject and ideology. To a certain extent, it is a topic of human freedom or rather compulsion to choose the "right" identity. As Benedict Anderson claims, nationality, as the formal universality is a sociocultural concept - in the modern world everyone should have a nationality, as one has a gender² or two eyes and a nose.³

While doing my fieldwork, besides capturing the overall impressions and possible changes over the years, I am taking the interviews at the scene. Mostly, I am interested in the cases where identifying oneself does not happen expectedly through ethnical belonging but rather through familiar ceremonies (parades), and objects (monuments, etc.). In a way, the nation proved to be secondary, raising the issue as universal.

Also, I observed the need (or in some cases indifference) to identify oneself to specific national group. How do we get manipulated as “us”? What are the different possibilities of this “us” and alternatives?

For example, one of my video "Place of Dreams" is about a young man who is born and lives in Russia during our first meeting. However, he has Estonian roots, and he is fascinated about the idea of returning to his historic homeland and to integrate to the Estonian society. "I am not Russian although I don't speak Estonian yet. I feel here as an alien," he said. He managed to fulfil the dream and move away from Russia. I met him in a year, and I made another interview. He spoke Estonian but felt much less enthusiastic about it than a year ago. In this case, the national identity was a choice; however, it revealed strong psychological need behind it. Another intriguing point was to fight with a stereotype of Russians hostility towards Estonians.

In my solo exhibitions I show the works in forms of installation, so the viewer gets a site-specific experience in a gallery. I believe, for many reasons, that this art practice has been beneficial. Firstly, it has certainly raised for me (and hopefully for the audience as well) new insights and perspectives. In the topic, often the artists tend to concentrate more on conflict of the small extremities that does not necessarily represent the majority of either ethnic group. So, the artwork is about the negative consequences of the ethnic discrimination. However, an informed viewer is probably aware of it and does not need to remind that discrimination, etc. is something that exists and needs improvement.

Secondly, I have gained a direct response from my subjects and members of both ethnic groups. Mostly the feedback, collected in a gallery, has shown signs of arousal of new thoughts and questions about the topic. Obviously, I cannot draw too far-reaching conclusions. To measure the direct impact of art would be a real challenge, because the result could be also indirect.

Research method

My art practise relies, in some part, on ethnographical methods and, in most part, participant observations. I believe that combination of art and anthropology can address successfully socio-political topics and power relations. An art historian Miwon Kwon argues that art practices, which examine power relations are beneficial in debates on the production of knowledge.⁴

While dealing with art practice, it would also be relevant to define my method as artistic research with all its various qualitative methods. The accumulation of knowledge in the artistic field is a form of research, claims Mika Hannula and several other researchers have optimistic perspectives towards the method.⁵

However, this is relatively young field, and in my opinion, the overall impression is vague. Moreover, how is so-called artistic research different than an ethnographic study by an anthropologist who applies visual research tools? Often the answer is the confirmation of the dichotomy between art and science, image and text. Svenungsson states that important artworks provoke different reactions and questions that depend on the viewer. On a practical level, the work is an answer to the question, which artists has stated to themselves, but it is only relevant answer if it becomes a new question.⁶ Topal adds that the result of artistic research can be measured by its ability to engage with seemingly unrelated matters and concepts that, in return, generates forms on intelligible affects, in contrast to scientific models that aim to explain or interpret social or natural phenomena.⁷ However, the same can be admitted about any scientific method that similarly aims to provoke new questions and are able to evoke affects; therefore, it needs some further investigation.

2. Estonian background

2.1. Estonian population

Currently, the population is slightly below 1,3 million with 69% of Estonians. Out of the 31%, the majority is Russian speakers.⁸ So, we can speak about a numerous minority that is, in turn, far from being homogeneous. Two main groups are rather separated, despite the continuous efforts by the government to integrate the minorities. The success of integration was severely debated after 2007 Bronze Soldier riots in Estonian media.⁹ However, current trend shows that both Estonians and Russians are more aware of the need to make mutual efforts,¹⁰ which I can see as a positive change.

2.2 Ethnic East versus civic West?

Division according to national identity seems to be present and an important issue. Why do not we, in established and democratic nations, forget 'our' national identity? This rhetorical question is being constantly asked. Michael Billig claims that 'we' are just constantly reminded our belonging in nations, 'our' identity is continually being flagged. He adds, "Just as a language will die rather for want of regular users, so a nation must be put to daily use".¹¹ Therefore, in order to be ready to react in extreme situations, one has to be constantly reminded about their belonging.

Commonly, east and west are divided between ethnic and civic lines. The latter can be characterized as liberal, voluntarist, universalist and inclusive; and ethnic nationalism referred as illiberal, particularist and exclusive. They base on common ethnicity in the first case, and common citizenship in the second.¹² Often nationalism can be seen almost anywhere but "here"¹³, and accordingly, this distinction is projected in space and used to contrast the civic nationalism of Western Europe, with the ethnic nationalism of Eastern Europe or other world regions (Brubaker 133). Such debate has

also been in Estonia with an agreement of the division.¹⁴ Although, I can agree with the need for self-criticism, I do agree with Brubaker who doubts the division according to geographical terms, and suggest that the distinction can be valid between states rather than between world regions.¹⁵ So, the concept is rather political than analytical.

Civic nationalists emphasize common culture, rather than common blood; however, the same claim ethnic nationalists. Also, the concept of "civil" is ambiguous, even typical examples of civic nationalisms (e.g. France, USA) contain critical cultural component and sense of community.

Anderson claims that nations are conceived in language, rather than blood, and are, therefore, "joinable at time".¹⁶ In that case, there would be nothing illiberal nor ethnic in policies, which promote particular language that facilitates communications and offers equal access to state officers.¹⁷

All forms of nationalism are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, what varies is the basis of criteria of inclusion and exclusion.¹⁸ The civic mode of exclusion can also be very powerful as access citizenship is everywhere limited.

There has been a discussion about constitutional patriotism as a form of civic nationalism in Estonia for several years. The aim is to include people according to common values (for example democracy) rather than ethnicity. My experience as an artist has revealed many other possible common values, which have potential to bring different ethnic communities together. I will give below a short overview of one of those examples.

3. Estonian national celebrations and youth

During the past few years I had the joy of following most of the national celebrations in Estonia. In this short text I will however focus on just one event: the Defence Forces parade displayed for the Estonian Independence Day (24th of February). Through this public event I aim at exploring the construction of nationalism feelings among the Russian-speaking youth.

There are approximately 1/3 of non-Estonian speakers in the population and this minority itself is quite heterogeneous. My question here is how could a parade create loyalty among Russian-speakers?

Obviously, the parade is meant to work as a tool to give a lesson of patriotism. Young people are especially a target of this discursive construction, being more vulnerable in a way and still forming their identity. While Estonian Independence Day parades attract people of various generations, the main focus is on the youth. Firstly, most of the participants in soldier troops are not older than around their early twenties. Secondly, and from the side of the viewers it is mostly a family event, including children and teenagers.

Independence Day celebrations start with marching the troops. Afterwards, different military vehicles drive through the square. Officials also take part in this spectacle open for all the viewers. The celebration clearly represents Estonian power and authorities. However, it attracts too a lot of viewers from the Russian speaking community. There have been parades where I heard as much Russian as Estonian, dependent on where the celebration takes place. So far I have done fieldwork in Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu, the latter two have a majority of the Estonian population.

In some cases the participation has been truly active and conscious, the parents encourage their kids to wave to the soldiers (sometimes with Estonian tricolour in their

hands) or even say hurray! to Estonian troops passing by (see the caption 1). Fascinated teenagers ask a friend to make a photo of them and pose proudly with guns or behind the steering wheel of the Estonian military vehicle.

So what is the secret behind this phenomenon? To whom is targeted the celebration? Who cares of it? Clearly the event is not just some politically neutral festivity. As public events, parades should always be looked at as a part of more comprehensive narrative structure.¹⁹ Such traditions are invented to reveal local and national power relations.

According to Hartly-Moore, one of the keys to Swiss nationalism and its successful incorporation of various linguistic and ethnic minorities into the nation, are festivals, that assemblage nationalist political rituals with local traditions.²⁰ This can be also applied while discussing Estonian society national issues.

Another example is the US manual after WWII suggesting how to instil patriotism and attain national solidarity in the face of massive immigration. The manual argues that the performance of theatre, historical pageant, and military parade in every community would accomplish this task of the 'Americanization' of the different. Collective gatherings would be a direct reflection and expression of the ideal American nation-state. The manual suggests that the dramatization of nursery rhymes would be used to inculcate appropriate values to young immigrant children.²¹

Parades and representations of ideology have much in common. The paradox is that a viewer who tends to be fascinated of this kind of 'beauty and harmony' might not really care about the colour of the flag. A person with Ukrainian roots I have recently interviewed told me: "I used to visit the parades during Soviet time on Victory Day. And now I watch the Estonian parades already with my grandchild" (see the caption 2). Otherwise, the square is crowded with Estonian teenagers who just want to see the guns, without very much thinking about the ideology and possible war enemies. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the ceremony does not work at the ideological level. The remaining question is: could an overtly nationalist event function as a tool of integration? I invite you to attend a military parade and answer it yourself.

Captions:

1. A boy called Alyosha waves flag from the Estonian military vehicle for his parents



2. An Ukrainian-decent grandmother with her granddaughter watching the marching troops.



Eva Sepping:

I am an artist and a PhD-student from Estonian Academy of Arts. Besides art education, I have a bachelor's degree in contemporary history from Tartu University. My research topic in the field of art is nationalism and national identity. My main concern is the person's relations with ideology, identification and alienation. Especially I am interested the cases where identification does not follow the subjects own ethnic path. I have done made solo exhibitions in Estonia and participated in several group exhibitions in Russia and West-Europe. The artwork is usually presented in forms of site-specific installation, videos and photos. For more information, see <http://eva.city.ee>

Notes

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