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The (Baltic) “Near Abroad”: Culture Across Borders or Borders Across Culture?

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I know—the only thing that cheers up the gang from Tallinas St. is a big car racing by at excessive speed, and behind the wheel is a young courtier, explaining in Latvian the pleasures of purchase by credit... “By they way, better not to walk here after dark...” ...when on a fixed, even if modest, income. “But in a certain southern country there’s a special agency that secretly scatters small change across the morning cities... I read about it in the papers... “And so it costs the government next to nothing to keep people in a good mood,” he sums up joyfully. “I tell you, the bureaucratic profession one way or another leads to moral collapse,” the correspondence student of the Petersburg Academy of the Arts draws his conclusions with no thought for the car’s driver. Everyone laughs a bit to defuse a possible conflict... In silence we cross Čaka St. on yellow. We’ll ride together for five more minutes. The driver flips on the radio... After the news, I ask Imant, sitting there silently, what he, as a veteran designer, prefers—PC or Mac? He replies, in pretty good Russian, that he stopped seeing it in such stark terms a while back, but he only works on a Mac. “We just don’t have any PCs at the agency...” “...I’ll get out by the old Rigas Modas building...” “...By they way, how do Russians... I mean...” he wants to ask something about the peculiarities of PCs, but mixes up computers with my nationality and breaks off... “Funny,” from the front seat the student jumps in on the awkward moment, “I noticed long ago, that when someone names your nationality in a different language or with an accent, it always sounds sort of insulting, yeah... Or when you yourself say, Gypsy, there’s no terminological neutrality, you know? And with Chukchis, forget about it...” :) He stops, expecting we’ll laugh... A familiar song begins in the silence. But the gang from Tallinas St. can be cheered up only by a huge Jeep, racing by in the late evening at excessive speed.

—Artur Punte, Riga, 2002 (Timofejev et al. 2016: ??-??)

I. Indistinct Terms:

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, discussions of identity have been potentially awkward in Latvia—a space where history has thrown multiple languages, cultures and “nationalities” (to use a Soviet-era category with uneven persistence across former-Soviet space) together in

confined spaces and intimate conversations. A deep and complex history of Russian imperial domination, early twentieth century Latvian national independence, and Soviet occupation and demographic engineering resulted to make relations between Russians and Latvians in the post-Soviet era deeply fraught. In matters of ethnic and national belonging, there is “no terminological neutrality,” to borrow Artur Punte’s formula from the poem above. When the Soviet Union broke up, the Russians and Russian speakers of the region “emigrated” without leaving the comfort of their own homes from what had been, for many, self-evidently “Russian” territory into states in which Soviet “titular nationalities” had been granted renewed status as the rightful citizens of “their own” nation states. As Vladimir Putin remarked of territories such as this in 2014, in the wake of the annexation of Crimea, “millions of Russians went to sleep in one country and woke up in another, as national minorities” (Putin 2014). In that transformative historical moment, new, rapidly shifting and hotly contested categories of identity and geography came into being. The most significant of these, for the purposes of the present chapter, is that of “Near Abroad”—*blizhnee zarubez’e*—the Russian term that came to be applied to the band of former Soviet states that surrounds the Russian Federation to the west, south and east, stretching from the Baltic to Central Asia, in which significant populations of ethnic Russians reside. In what follows, I present Russophone literature and media in present-day Latvia as a case study of the relationships between culture and territory pertaining to this new conception of political space.

By way of entry into the cultural landscape of the Near Abroad, let us consider more closely the question of the lack of “terminological neutrality” regarding Russians and Russian speakers in independent Latvia, that has been most acute in matters of official categories of citizenship. In 1990–91, the post-Soviet Latvian state was declared to be legally continuous with the interwar Latvian Republic (1922–40), the constitution of which is therefore still in force

today. As a result, only citizens of the interwar republic and their descendants gained automatic citizenship in the republic's new era. This left all other residents—many of them born and raised in Soviet Latvia, and many of whom had cast votes in support of independence in a landmark 1991 referendum—stripped of many political and economic rights and faced with an initially ill-defined naturalization process. In 1995 a new law on citizenship and a special category of “*nepilsonis*,” or “noncitizen,” was created for this rather large category of former Soviet Latvians—who made up nearly 30% of the republic's population in 1995 and the majority of whom self-identify as “Russians” (*russkie*), although there are many other ethnicities mixed into this category as well (“Population Census” 2011). In the present, non-citizens still make up some 15% of the population. As these numbers perhaps make plain, many noncitizens have refused to naturalize out of disaffection or protest. Russians, in their inimitable way, commonly shorten *negrzhdanin*, the Russian translation of *nepilsonis*, to *negr*—the Russian word for “dark-skinned person,” which is a term of perhaps debatable significance in some contexts, but is without doubt an ironically charged slur in this instance.

In the 1990s, when the new law on non-citizens was adopted, Russian diplomats complained, not without reason, that the identity document brought into being for this population—the purple “non-citizen passport”—had a “half-way” (*polovinchatyi*) character (Stroi 1997a). Yet terms developed for this population in the Russian Federation are no more lucid. Since the late 1990s, a multiply revised law has granted special privileges with regard to travel, emigration, access to medicine and education to the category of “compatriots abroad” (*sootechestvenniki za rubezhom*) former Soviet citizens in neighboring states who might, in some calculation, “belong” more properly to the Russian Federation (“O gosudarstvennoi politike RF” 2013). Yet what calculation could be applied to make sense of the category of “compatriots abroad”? Putin, in his

much-cited Address to the Federal Assembly of 2005, announced that in the wake of the Soviet collapse, “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century . . . , tens of millions of our compatriots and fellow citizens found themselves beyond the borders of Russian territory” (Putin 2005). In his address announcing the annexation of Crimea, cited above, he declared that after 1991, “the Russian people became one of the largest, if not the largest, divided people in the world” (Putin 2014). Yet the subtle distinctions between these two formulations points to the categorical complexity of “compatriots abroad”—a temporally confused term that could arguably refer to any former citizen of the Soviet Union (de facto citizens of a shared state who were sundered by post-Soviet state borders) or, as seems to be the case in Putin’s more recent statement, ethnic Russians who found themselves in suddenly “non-Russian territory.” However, given the complexity of ethnic Russian identity following centuries of social and cultural assimilation—in which a proud Russian might well be the grandchild of a Pole, a Jew, an Ossetian and a Ukrainian, or in which an “ethnic Russian” might well consider himself a Ukrainian and enlist in the fight against separatist formations in Donbas—determining which former Soviets are the “real” ethnic Russians is not so easy, either.

Successive revisions of the law on compatriots have attempted, without much success, to resolve this conceptual incoherence. The current redaction specifies that “compatriots abroad” are those persons living in other states and “relating, as a rule, to the peoples who have historically resided on the territory of the Russian Federation,” yet who have additionally “made a free choice to be spiritually, culturally, and legally linked to the Russian Federation.” This choice can be demonstrated by:

An act of self-identification, reinforced by social or professional activity for the preservation of Russian language, the native languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation, the development of Russian culture abroad, the strengthening of the friendly relations of the states of residence of the compatriots with the Russian Federation, the

support of social organizations of compatriots, and the defense of the rights of compatriots or by other evidence of the free choice of the persons in question of spiritual and cultural linkage with the Russian Federation (“O gosudarstvennoi politike RF” 2013: stat’ia 3).

Here, then, we see the collision in the territory of the Near Abroad of the complex social and ethnic identity formations inherited from the Soviet and Russian imperial past with contemporary problems of “disaggregation” of citizenship that have been observed as a global phenomenon (Benhabib 2004). As the above makes clear, “being Russian” boils down to free choices of “spiritual and cultural” affiliation. To spell out the implications fully: in the post-Soviet Near Abroad, questions of social belonging and collective identity—questions that, as we have seen in the course of 2014 and 2015 in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, have a direct bearing on territorial claims, on the establishment of political borders and, in extreme moments, on the murderous operations of armies and non-state armed formations—depend on cultural life. Which returns us, with a number of questions, to the poem offered as epigraph to this essay. Does writing poems in Russian in Riga automatically render one “Russian” or a “compatriot abroad”? Can one write in Russian without making a “free choice” to be spiritually and culturally linked to the “Russian Federation”?¹ Can one write in free verse? Does that fact that Artur Punte, a founding member of the Riga based poetry group Orbita, is a Russophone poet of mixed heritage have any bearing on this question?

In a final meditation at this level of abstraction, let us pause over the master term of this new geographical formation itself, “Near Abroad.” Note that the common Russian form of this term, “blizhnee zarubezh’e” deploys not the neutral word connoting close spatial relations

¹ In this essay, I refer to any resident of Latvia who speaks Russian with no recognizably foreign accent as a “Russian.” This is an intentionally “skewed” use of this term, that might well provoke objections by many of the individuals I so describe. My use is intended to do so, and thereby to provoke a cognizance of the social fissures and contestation that are in general concealed beneath standard usages—the same sort of cognizance that is generated by any attempt to imagine who might correctly be defined as a “compatriot abroad” in this territory.

“blizkii,” but rather the less common form “blizhnii,” that might better be translated as “neighboring” and carries the connotations of intimacy and almost personhood—in Russian, the substantivized adjective “blizhnii” means “fellow man” and is familiar from the biblical injunction to “love thy neighbor.” Further, one may remark on the “oxymoronic” construction of the term, denoting territory at once “close” and “distant.” Among the many territories that may be described as “Near Abroad,” Latvia epitomizes this conception of geography in an especially acute manner. From the perspective of Russia, it numbers among the most “near” spaces—territorially, historically, linguistically, ethnically, and in terms of economic, social, and familial relationships that bridge the border—Russians have resided here for centuries, and by some means of counting, they form a proportionally larger part of the Latvian population than do Russians in any other post-Soviet state except for the Russian Federation itself. Yet in other ways, Latvia is among the most “abroad” territories—a member of the European Union and of NATO, geographically positioned in the west, and defined by a non-Slavic titular nation. In short, from the perspective of the Russian Federation, Latvia maximally combines an almost domestic, intimate familiarity with integration into the emphatically (and of late, increasingly) foreign territory of Europe. Latvia is at once “theirs” and “ours,” near and far, exotic and homey, in an ironically charged conception of political space that correlates precisely with the contestation of social identities of Russians in the region, who reside in the complex interstitial spaces between societies, languages, and hegemonic formations.

II. Of Circuits, Orbits and Channels

there will be no days off, not today or tomorrow
we'll fly off to moscow and won't come back
we'll only fly back in the morning
throw off the blanket and fall asleep

the light will be out in the whole building again
and there'll be no streetlights in the entire world
more lovely than those that wander along the canal
when we wake up

—Semyon Khanin, Riga, 200? (Timofejev et al. 2016: ??-??)

The Orbita poetry collective, based in Riga, was founded in 1999 by Artur Punte, Semyon Khanin, Sergej Timofejev, Vladimir Svetlov and Zhorzh Uallik. Yet apart from the group's leaders, its activities bring together also a large number of affiliates active in literature, visual art, music, etc. in exhibitions, happenings, and group appearances at festivals in Latvia, across Europe, and in Russia, and publications of various sorts, poetic, artistic, and critical. Among the master tropes of Orbita texts and activities we may identify a focus on motion, thresholds and geography—the poems offered as epigraphs above—a commute through Riga streets and a dreamy trip to Moscow and back—provide good examples. Other poems could also be mentioned in this regard, such as Punte's *Gastarbeiters*, that offers a meditation on the anonymous and alienated experience of European labor migrants: “Let's suppose that was our first appearance in this city,/□that no one accepts us here, that even doors/□with photosensors don't always open when we come near” (Timofejev et al. 2016: ??-??). Or Khanin's overheard conversation concerning a forged passport sold in a back alley: “at the border try to look honest/□and smile/□so the seams'll be less obvious” (Timofejev et al. 2016: ??-??). Orbita's poems are, on the whole, evocations of minor movements across an uneven social landscape.

The most important such movement, in the practices of the group, is circulation across the linguistic and social borders between the Latvian and Russian enclaves of Latvian society. (Let us note, in passing, the terminological challenge here, where “Latvian” describes both a civil society and a linguistic or ethnic community—I will return to this problem below.) Since its

founding, one of the chief features of Orbita practices has been bilingualism. The group's many publications of Russophone poetry are all produced in bilingual editions, featuring translations produced by prominent ethnic Latvian poets. Symmetrically, they publish translations of Latvian poetry into Russian and related trans-linguistic projects, such as a recent anthology of poetry written in Russian by Latvian poets since the eighteenth century (Zapol' 2009; Zapol' 2011). Orbita's group appearances typically feature multilinguistic and multimedia presentations that integrate Latvian musicians, poets, and translations of their own texts in projection or as subtitles in video treatments of poems. And beyond poetic work, Orbita participates in collaborative visual and media art projects and exhibitions that bring together Latvians and Russians. In 2014, they set up a pirate radio station in central Riga that broadcast poetry in Russian, Latvian and English ceaselessly for days, until the authorities located the transmitter and shut it down. In a reflection of all this cultural production across the internal linguistic and social (and legal) borders of Latvian society, the audiences for Orbita's presentations, actions, exhibits and publications are stylish young people of both ethnic and linguistic enclaves. To be precise—Orbita's work, by intently crossing and recrossing the border between Russian and Latvian language communities, aids in the constitution of this trans- or non-ethnic, multilinguistic social scene and network. As Timofejev once told me, "for the local ethnic Latvian audience, an interest in Orbita is in some sense a sign of good cultural taste."

The significance of Orbita's achievement is all the more apparent against the background of Latvian society as a whole, in which Latvian and Russian enclaves often function as independent societies within a society. On the whole, the mainstream of Russians in Latvia are characterized by a widespread sense of resentment, historical victimhood and marginalization in Latvian and European society, as a result of twenty-five post-Soviet years in which educational,

cultural and language policies have been oriented towards the establishment of Latvian language and culture as a dominant framework of identity for all members of society, regardless of ethnicity. This drive has been expressed, for instance, in successive policy decisions diminishing by stages the hours of Russian-language instruction in Russian elementary schools in Latvia, the elimination of instruction in Russian in higher education, the recalibration of library collections to increase the proportion of books in Latvian, and other measures. None of these policy moves has sat well with the local Russian population: as I was told in 2009 by Tamara Sergeevna, the lead librarian in a private Russian lending library in central Riga, founded in response to perceived turn away from Russian books in Latvian public libraries, “Russian culture is under threat in Latvia” (Platt 2014).

Latvian media policy, that has consistently privileged Latvian language in broadcast television, has played an important role in articulating post-Soviet social divisions. Ironically, policies that were intended to support linguistic assimilation by mandating the dominance of Latvian on the airwaves drove ethnic Russians to televised media originating in the Russian Federation, which is freely available via cable and, more recently, the Internet. In Ilze Šulmane’s straightforward assessment, Latvia’s “Russian-speaking audience is largely under the influence of Russia’s information and entertainment industry” (Šulmane 2006). Beyond the disassociation of Latvian Russians from local society that it effects, consumption of Russian media also substantively supports this population’s political and social alienation, given that Russian media overwhelmingly presents the fate of Latvian Russians in the most unfavorable light, as that of victims of an active state-sponsored discrimination (Muižnieks 2008). Finally, we should note the activity of state and non-state institutions and individuals emanating from the Russian Federation with the aim of supporting Russian society in the Near Abroad: grants from the

Russian World Foundation in support of “cultural seminars” under the leadership of social entrepreneur Sergei Mazur; Russian state-supported publications such as the glossy magazine *Baltic World* (*Baltiiskii mir*); or media events such as the Russian television-extravaganza *New Wave* (*Novaia volna*), a competition for “young performers of popular song,” that was staged in Jūrmala for over a decade up until 2014—all elements of a soft power apparatus that is described in greater detail in Michael Gorham’s contribution to this volume (Platt 2013a; Platt 2013b). Combined, these phenomena contribute to the estrangement of the majority of Russians in Latvia from the ethnic Latvian social and cultural scene and to their identification with and participation in the cultural and media world of the Russian Federation.

The current essay is not the place to adjudicate the political wisdom or justice of Latvian policies with regard to the Russian minority, which derived from a completely legitimate desire to counteract decades of Soviet occupation that had led to radical increases in the scale and social dominance of Russian language and culture in Latvian society. It is undoubtedly also true, however, that the Latvian Russian enclave has legitimate cause for complaint with regard to infringement of minority rights. Even those members of Russian society who have been most dedicated to the ideal of an integrated, multi-linguistic society within Latvia voice their frustrations with the prevalence and effects of more narrow, nationalist-inflected political and social agendas. An example may be found, for instance, in journalist Anna Stroi who was among the lead editors of the Russian edition of Latvia’s leading daily newspaper, *Diena*, in the late 1990s. At that time, Stroi personally produced for over a year a weekly feature on the topics of naturalization and citizenship, which she announced with a profession of faith that naturalization was necessary for all Latvian non-citizens in order to “build a civil society,” offering her column as a mechanism whereby the newspaper and its readers could “progress along this path together”

(Stroi 1997b). By the 2000s, however, following the liquidation of the Russian edition of *Diena* and the failure of Latvian naturalization policies to create the integrated society she had hoped to see, Stroi had largely given up on her journalistic endeavors and at times spoke bitterly about the fate of Latvia's Russian enclave. In one conversation, shortly after the defeat of a landmark 2012 referendum on a constitutional reform that would have granted Russian the status of "second state language" in Latvia, she told me that she speaks a language that "has been declared an enemy of the people."

Let us return to consideration of Orbita in this social landscape. In 2011, I attended a private reading of the group organized at a dacha in the seaside resort of Jurmala, outside of Riga. The audience was largely composed of Latvians for whom Russian is first language—many of whom were witnessing Orbita's work for the first time. The performance was a version of the "Slow Show" that the group performed at a number of public venues and festivals in the course of that and the following few years, in which the poets read their work to the accompaniment of background noise generated by means of manual adjustment of vintage radios across the spectrum. Afterwards, I asked two members of the audience, Dar'ia and Maria, for their reactions. "Interesting," they remarked, "but it's not poetry." This assessment, I learned in our further discussions, was a response both to the experimental nature of the performance and to the Orbita poets' tendency to write in free verse. When I asked as whether Orbita could be seen as representative of a new, Latvian redaction of Russian culture, they laughed at me and told me that "culture doesn't change"—Russian culture, according to Dar'ia and Maria, is a persistent and historically deep entity, identified with the canon of literary classics. The activities of an experimental group in Riga have little bearing on Russian culture, so conceived.

One may describe this scene as a microcosm of the dynamics of Russian cultural life in Riga and of the cultural condition of the Near Abroad, in general. The mainstream of Russian-speaking Latvian society, like Dar'ia and Maria, occupy the “near” pole of cultural and social circulation and identification in Latvia, consuming media products emanating from the Russian Federation and envisioning their cultural location as that of an outpost of a larger cultural whole, the center of which is located in Russia and the weight of which is derived from historical tradition. Orbita, in contrast, presents the most “abroad” pole of Russian cultural activity here, fully integrated in Latvian society, pursuing a cultural program oriented towards borders, multilingualism, and innovative, future-oriented practices. One may note as well that these poles of activity correspond to what appear to be counterpoised conceptions of culture itself—one that envisions culture as a single and indivisible whole and the other leaving room for hybrid, transcultural practices—in another place, I have described the Orbita project as a “lyric cosmopolitanism,” “balancing conflicting communities and interests in the looming shadow of competing hegemonic powers” (Platt 2015)

Yet it would be an analytical error to locate Orbita too emphatically on the margins of Russian cultural space and identity, for they are, in their own manner, also closely affiliated with cultural life in the Russian Federation. Although Timofejev has been the recipient of the “Russian Prize” —a literary honor that aims to foster the unity of the Russian World and funded by the Eurasian Integration Fund—they are more closely and multiply linked to non-state institutions that stand at some remove from the patriotic politics and state supported initiatives of the Russian World foundation, and from a vision of Russian cultural life as constituting an autarchic whole. This includes leading avant-garde and experimental journals such as *Vavilon*, *Vozdukh* and *TextOnly*, which regularly publish Orbita's work and review its publications, as

well as the prestigious contemporary poetry book series of the most successful cosmopolitan publishing house *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, which brought out a monolingual volume of Timofejev's poetry (Timofejev, 2011). Orbita regularly participates in the poetry festival circuit in Russia. Further, Timofejev has been shortlisted for the Andrey Bely Prize, the most prestigious recognition for cutting-edge Russian poetry, while Punte's video poetry—in particular his video based on “I know—the only thing that cheers up the gang from Tallinas St. □”—was honored at the 2013 Moscow festival of “hybrid” poetic forms Fifth Leg (*Piataia noga*). Finally, subtending all of this activity, the poets of Orbita are linked by a web of personal and professional relationships with the leading edge of Russian poetic culture. One recalls, in this regard, Pascale Casanova's demonstrations of the hegemonic power of nationally organized literary centers, which themselves are interrelated in an agonistic and unequal system of transnational competition (Casanova 2004). The Orbita poets, after all, are still Russian poets, and their work gains recognition and value not only in local spaces at the periphery, but in the dominant mechanisms of prestige of the Russian literary system.

Yet these two dimensions of activity are not unrelated, either: for success in the avant-garde dimension of literary life in the Russian Federation is undoubtedly a reflection not only of the innovative nature of the group's poetic and performance experiments, but precisely of the literary politics of cultural hybridity described above, which acts out the politics of global interconnectedness and cosmopolitan contact to which institutions such as New Literary Observer publishing house aspire. In sum, then, the cultural geography of Russian-language literature of the Near Abroad reflects, in inverted form, that of the metropolitan centers of Russian literary life, in which a cosmopolitan and experimental avant-garde balances against a politically legitimated mainstream. In the Russian literary life of Latvia, insofar as it coincides

with the institutional and cultural centers of Latvian society per se, lyric cosmopolitan and innovative trans-linguistic poetic work occupies cultural and social center stage, while the classics and traditions of the Russian cultural canon are marginalized as the absent, yet mourned markers of a lost cultural whole or absent “mainland” by the majority of Latvia’s marginalized Russian-speaking population.

II. Borders Across Culture or Culture Across Borders

The world as I know it begins on Miera Street. A five-story building constructed in 1901. Building 19, apartment 19. The damp air of the courtyard (the basement always hopelessly flooded). Soccer—the tall bushes form one goal and the metal doors of a garage, scrawled with chalk, the other. Our window on the first floor, into which one day flies an egg that someone has thrown with some dexterity. It smashes into the ironing board. This is unexpected. We freeze, and papa sternly approaches the window and looks outside. As might have been anticipated, no one is there. Papa sticks out his hand with finger extended and pronounces the words: “bang, bang.”

—Sergej Timofejev, Riga, 200? (Timofejev et al. 2016: ??-??)

In the 2000s, the situation I have described above, for all of its complexity, appeared to be settling into a form of stability or equilibrium in Latvian society and in the larger, international geography. The events of the past two years in Ukraine, however, have proven to be remarkably unsettling for Russians and Russian cultural production in Latvia. In the summer of 2014, while the extent of the conflict unfolding in eastern Ukraine was as yet unclear, I stopped into the private lending library mentioned above. The librarian Tamara Sergeevna told me that “World War Three is already in process in Ukraine, only they have organized things so that Slavs are killing Slavs” (Platt 2015, 325). The phrase “World War Three” was on many people’s lips that summer, during which the sympathies of many, perhaps a majority, among Latvia’s Russian population were tilting towards the Russian interpretation of events, as presented in the state-

owned media emanating from the Russian Federation. As conversations such as this might demonstrate, the extension of Russia cultural and media “territory” far beyond Russia’s political borders suddenly came to exert a palpable effect in social life in Latvia, as it did in other places in the Baltic and Central Europe. In response, Latvian political elites began to seek measures to counteract Russian soft media power: the Russian station RTR was temporarily suspended from distribution in Latvia in 2014 for what were deemed to be its propagandistic pronouncements concerning the Ukraine conflict, and warnings were issued to others, although as Latvian analyst Sergejs Kruks noted at the time, the crackdown may have backfired—working to increase demand for Russian state media in Latvia rather than weaken its grip on the population (Stājas spēkā aizliegums 2014). 2014 also saw proposals for a new state-funded Russian-language television channel for all three Baltic states—proposals which apparently foundered on lack of political will and economic resources.

Even without large new investments in Russophone media, the geography of belonging palpably changed for Russians in Latvia following the Ukraine events, which forced individuals to make stark choices concerning political and cultural loyalties. Stroi, for instance, who had largely rejected public life by the late 2000s, returned to professional activity as a producer and journalist for the Latvian public radio station LR-4. Her case illustrates well not only a renewed commitment on the part of some Russians to the project of an integrated multilingual Latvian society, but also the complexities of life in the Russian Near Abroad in conditions of media war. Stroi’s sister, who also grew up in Latvia, has followed a completely contrasting biography to that of her sibling. Having married a Russian military man in the early 1990s, she relocated to Russia and eventually settled in Moscow with her family. Stroi’s parents are divorced: her mother eventually joined her sister in Russia, but her father, who is Ukrainian, still lives in Riga.

At family gatherings that still bring all together in Latvia, in private correspondence, and in semi-public exchanges on Facebook, debates between the “pro-Russian party” and “pro-Ukrainian party” concerning Stroi’s positions in Latvian media mirror in microcosm the explosive tensions of the border zones of Russian cultural belonging. In Stroi’s own words, in summer of 2015, “I’m only thankful that we don’t live in Ukraine, or else we would be actually fighting on opposite sides.”

Yet as patriotic Russia was expanding its palpable influence abroad, alternative Russian cultural space was shrinking in the Russian Federation, pushing opposition-minded Russians out in a new wave of political transplants to places like Riga. Dmitrii Kuz’min, the founder and editor of a leading Russian journal of avant-garde poetry, relocated to Riga in 2015 in order to find a safe haven for his publishing work, which strongly promotes oppositional and minority voices, and for his non-traditional family that unites a transgender man and two gay men along with their son. In a similar trajectory, following the firing of Galina Timchenko from the popular Internet news portal Lenta.ru, she and many from her loyal staff of journalists relocated from Moscow to Riga and established a new news portal, Meduza.io with largely anonymous private backing. Meduza.io is intended to counteract the dominance of Russian state media not only in Latvia, but in the Russian speaking world, by offering an objective account of events emanating from a point beyond the Russian sphere of political dominance. When I met with Timchenko in the summer of 2015, she told me that her goal is to provide information for “the entire so-called ‘Russian world,’ which is to say not the ‘Russian world’ in Putin’s sense, but rather the normal Russian people who live everywhere in the world and read in Russian.” In this competition of media spaces and attitudes towards geography, however, the complex imbrication of “near” and “abroad” makes itself felt in new ways. When asked whether her portal made an effort to reflect

the interests and views of Russians across the globe (in Ukraine, London or Riga, for instance...)

Timchenko was quick to explain that she “lived according to a business plan” and that the majority of her readers were located in Moscow: “It is not my goal, whether I’m located in Latvia or in Bulgaria, to look at the world from the perspective of a person in Bulgaria.” Asked about the reasons she located her project in Riga, Timchenko explained that “it’s a short train ride away from Moscow and they speak Russian here.” This is to say: the Meduza.io project, for all of its oppositional character, represents the rather narrow global vision of Moscow elites in a peculiar mirror of the “imperial” attitudes that inform patriotic conceptions of Russian cultural geography, rather than any alternative conception of Russian space as decentered or multi-centered. When I began a sentence “This ‘Russian World’ is organized around...” Timchenko completed the sentence in no uncertain terms “Russia.”

This conflict of two Russian worlds, both centered in Moscow, returns us to the *Orbita* project, and in particular to Sergej Timofejev’s poem, cited above. Its first line—“Мир, как я его знаю, начинается на улице Мира” —contains a multilingual pun that presents some difficulty for translation. The Russian word “мир” that Timofejev uses in the phrase “The world as I know it” means both “world” and “peace.” It obviously shares a root with the Latvian word “miers,” which figures in this line as the name of Riga’s “Miera ielā” —Peace Street—the address of Riga’s central maternity hospital, where Timofejev was born. The translation problem here does not simply come from the dual meaning of “мир” in Russian; it reflects as well a tension that a Russian speaker feels on reading the recognizable but still foreign word “miers.”ⁱ This line can no more be translated entirely into Latvian than into English. Given that a main metareferent of the sentence is this distinction between Russian and Latvian, one might suggest that the line cannot be translated into Russian either, although, if it is in any language at all, the

poem is already in Russian. Timofejev's own world is the realm of this pun—a realm in which Russian peace is not quite the same as Latvian peace, and the Russian “world” is not quite the same as the Latvian one. Nevertheless, I submit that it is Timofejev's small world, rather than the large, imperial “Russian Worlds” of either the Kremlin or of Meduza.io, that bears the most hopeful implications not only for the Near Abroad, but for the planet as a whole.

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ⁱ For Russian readers, the name Peace Street (Miera ielā) also recalls the widespread Soviet toponymic practice evident in, for instance, Moscow's Peace Prospect (Проспект мира). The name of Miera ielā, however, dates to Latvia's pre-Soviet period of independence.