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Representations on the Margins of Europe

Politics and Identities in the
Baltic and South Caucasian States



Eigene und
Fremde Welten

campus

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One of the central features of the current transformation on the Eurasian continent after socialism relates to the notion of "experiencing Europe"¹. The tectonic shifts in West European boundaries and the geographic fragmentation have raised many questions about the ways of social and cultural remaking of collective identities and belonging to "remote" regions of the "New Europe". Since the Baltic nations joined the European Union, debates about reorganizing post Soviet republics have grown increasingly heated. "Representations on the Margins of Europe" presents case studies in the post socialist South Caucasian and Baltic states, those regions which since 2004 have joined or are expected to join the European Union. The fact is that the previous relative stability of identities, social categories, and national narratives in this region that served well for the recent past became problematic for representations of the present and future. The emotions of national liberation movements in the Baltic States and South Caucasian republics at the end of the 80s have 15 years later been replaced by the sentiment of "to-be-a-part-of-Europe ". Though not exhaustive, the range of contributions collected here covers a span of three South Caucasian and three Baltic countries with their different modes of symbolic redefinition of geographical and political belonging, cultural division and unit. Focusing mostly on the contemporary postSoviet period, the chapters demonstrate the specifics of the interplay between local representations of national identities and a larger political affiliation to New Europe. The question is: how do the citizens in the Baltic and South Caucasian states cope with EU expansion and the feeling of existing simultaneously "inside" and "outside" Europe?

Anthropologists to understand post socialist transformation have done significant work, and a key to this approach was to pose questions about such problems like the creation of markets, new property relations, and the construction of democracy.² Katherine Verdery is right in arguing that "the post socialist change is much bigger"³, and this idea helps to throw light on the intersecting facets of the contributions collected here. After socialism, the tectonic shifts of European boundaries and in the hierarchy of the relationships of center and periphery led to new challenges that small nationstates had to face in a very short time after gaining independence: symbolically remarking territories, reordering their meaningful world, and giving new contours to national histories and memories not only as "local" but also as "European". And this is an uneasy balancing act, as the contemporary logic of local identity politics, the regeneration of nationalism, hardly fits the basic format of European selfrepresentation. Moreover, it occurs in those societies where the notion of belonging to political or cultural "Europe" was always contested. As some chapters of this book show, whereas the Western core of the European project has long promoted a culturally integrative, more inclusive ideology of a new European unit, national narratives in these states (re) form their identity in terms of difference from their neighbors by establishing new linguistic, cultural, or religious boundaries. Apparently, "Europeanization" faces a serious conflict here between the integrative political center and the particularistic "periphery". This distinction makes the contrast between the "old" and "new" Europe visible not only in a demonstrative presentation of political values close to the US policies but also in an unstable redefinition of local collective identities. Alongside the recognition of the EU as a powerful political institution where a new "promised world" is being designed, often influenced by postnational ambitions, the radical change in the small societies includes the creation of nationstates and the marking of territories as "ours" by introducing completely new calendars, by establishing holidays to punctuate time in opposition to Moscow and differently from the rest of the world. The clearest example of the particularization of identities and the sense of dividedness can be seen in the (re) emergence of new local terms and names for geographical places and locations. The results of interethnic conflicts and dramatic wars found their expression in radically "returning" old names and symbolically "renaming" places with specific pronunciations. In the South Caucasus, for example, two separate terms have been established for the single geographical place and administrative unit Nagorny Karabakh: the Armenian Arts'akh and the Azerbaijani Qarabakh.⁴ The same place can be called

differently by the local population and by academics, as, e.g., it is the case with the Estonian city Tartu / Dorpat. In this regard, one of the striking points in the reconfiguration of local identities in this region is the growing particularization of geographical names for a single place. Moreover, the competing names for a single region, town, or city are obvious indicators for the contested nature of the rapid transformation. The aim of this anthology is to reflect on these changes and reveal how different identity strategies; arguments of history, and figurative signs of collective remembering are constructed and represented in small societies such as Armenia or Estonia. In the geographical span between Riga and Baku anthropologists and historians look at different sites of cultural inclusion and exclusion from the Russian and / or Soviet past and how they are (re) turned to a European present and future. This volume describes and analyzes the politics of remaking of cultural and historical identities that have been diversely affected by the encounter with an idealized picture of the West and the "values of European civilization". We try to look critically at the new political rhetoric by emphasizing not Europe itself but the permeability of boundaries and its involvement in a larger Eurasian context. Addressing the problem of semantic redefinition of meaningful worlds, the chapters include practices, expectations, and beliefs that serve, like landmarks, to differentiate and change the face of a new landscape. If we talk about the reorganization of meaningful worlds, then this pertains to the semantics of the ambivalent transformation of group identities and how this process is communicated on the level of (everyday) representations in increasingly globalized places - particularly in places undergoing rapid transformation of social and economic orders, in places that are considered peripheral to the centers of European power⁵ and which are marked by a new creativity of ritualistic dimension. The authors look at how old and new images of national identifications in the South Caucasian and Baltic states are reconfigured by local elites and ordinary people in order to represent themselves as a part of or beyond the imagined Europe and to give new contours to their "past". The question of this "politics of representations" - the way meaning can be struggled over, contested, and transformed - informs the whole collection of essays.

Inclusion, separateness, and the "margins" are celebrated in speeches, rites, and advertising that present themselves in different domains of social and symbolic life, such as in coming to terms with the past and identifying a new image for future solidarity. Therefore, the essays written by anthropologists and historians focus on images and practices of performative identity politics in those societies which ideologically and morally have to negotiate the interplay between "postcolonial " nationalism, New Europe, and Russia.