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# Narrating 'national' at the margins: Seto and Cossack identity in the Russian-Estonian borderlands[1]

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In summer 1996 I visited the field as part of a research team[2] to study the Setos, a transborder ethnic group that lives in Pechory district in the Pskov region on Russia's border with Estonia. To our surprise, we discovered another small group of people there, all men, who were in conflict with the Setos. These men behaved aggressively, and distinguished themselves by a style of cultural performance which they referred to as 'Cossack'.

The name 'Cossack' immediately drew a response from us. Even people unfamiliar with Russia's history are aware of the Cossacks, the mythic defenders of Russia's territories and borders. However, until recently Cossacks seem to have been the stuff of legends, closely associated with the Russian monarchy and the emigrations of the early twentieth century. In terms of a homeland Cossacks were traditionally linked to the margins of Russia in the south and southeast. One would not expect to find people identifying themselves as Cossacks in the Russian northwest, in the middle of the 1990s. Nor did the local Seto population expect this. To them 'the Cossacks' were 'uninvited guests', the 'Others', whose presence created anxiety and even fear. The tense relationships between the locals and the newcomers took on colonial overtones. Most of the local Setos were elderly and were predominantly women, and they faced an explicitly masculine and militarized group of newcomers who described themselves as Cossacks. Most importantly, these relationships reflected in a vulgar and distorted manner the border dispute being played out between Estonia and Russia over control of these territories, in which 'the Cossacks' defined themselves as defenders of Russia and its borders. The Cossacks saw themselves as belonging to this place, in contrast to the local Setos whom they saw as ethno-cultural Others, who did not belong there and whom they thought should leave.

In this chapter, I argue that the establishment of the border between Russia and Estonia activated Seto and Cossack identity construction in this particular time and place. I examine the intersection of state-scale nationalization projects, enacted through the border, and local-scale narratives and enactments of Seto and Cossack identity.[3] This involves a three-way interaction including the two states' nationalizing discourses and practices in the border zone, the way in which these state-scale discourses and practices activate Seto and Cossack narratives and enactments of place and identity in the borderland, and finally the way Seto and Cossack discourses and practices interact with one another. In each of these intersecting multiscalar networks, identity is re-narrated and re-enacted in specifically gendered ways. The chapter uses Ghassan Hage's (1996) work on the sociospatial contexts within which 'motherland' and 'fatherland' discourses predominate to explore Seto and Cossack narratives and performances of place and identity.

**Conceptual framework: A narrative network approach**

Recent research on place, identity and borders have moved from seeing these categories as static, reified units of analysis to viewing them as dynamic categories of discourse and practice, as interactive and mutually constituted socio-spatial fields (Balibar 2004; Billig 1995; Brah 1996; Brubaker 1996; Donnan and Wilson 1999; Edensor 2002; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Kaiser 2001, 2002; Newman and Paasi 1998; Nikiforova 2004; Smith 1999; Smith et al. 1998; Wilson and Donnan 1998). One of the most promising avenues opened up in the process of this reconceptualization is the emphasis placed on the narrative and performative aspects of place, identity and border. In her study of narrative identity, Somers (1994: 606) points out that 'one way to avoid the hazards of rigidifying aspects of identity into a misleading categorical entity is to incorporate into the core conception of identity the categorically destabilizing

dimensions of *time, space,* and *relationality'*. This can be done through narrativity, as it 'provides an opportunity to infuse the study of identity formation with a relational and historical approach … by emphasizing the embeddedness of identity in overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space' (Somers 1994: 607).

As noted by Newman and Paasi (1998: 196) in their review of border studies, focusing on narrativity draws our attention to the question of who the narrators of borders are, 'whose "plots" or "turfs" dominate these narratives, what is excluded or included by them and how the representations of "us" and "them" are produced and reproduced in various social practices, such as the media, education, etc.'. In studying place, identity and borders it is also important to examine how official narratives are contested, renarrated, reconfigured and enacted by people in their daily life, and to study the interactive relationships between the narrators and 'the narrated' (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Kaiser and Nikiforova 2005).

Even though the demise of the nation state has become a prominent theme in the literature on globalization, it is nonetheless still the case that states act as the main narrators of political borders, since in the world of places states have been empowered to decide where the border is to be drawn and what kind of border regime is to be established. However, it is often the case that the interests of other groups territorially and/or symbolically connected to borderlands come into conflict with the interests of the states. When such situations occur, these groups' members engage in the process of (re)imagining and (re)narrating the border by constructing their own counter-narratives of place, identity and border in an effort to renegotiate its meaning and reappropriate the border for their own purposes. Such counter-narratives can become a strategy of empowerment for the group, to the extent that they have an effect on state scale border discourses and practices. Borderland activists not only engage in a process of contestation directly with the state, but can also 'jump up scale' by bringing in transnational actors and institutions. Viewed from this perspective every border is polysemic and contested, since it implies that a whole range of narratives are in dialogue with each other, and intertwine, compete, make it to the surface of public debate and gain power or stay silenced until the right conditions emerge. This applies equally to every place and every identity. 'Struggles over narratives are thus struggles over identity…writing counter-narratives is a crucial strategy when one's identity is not expressed in the dominant public ones' (Somers 1994: 631).

'Nations' as the preeminent example of the intersection of place, identity and borders should also be seen as mutually constituted, dynamic processes of becoming, rather than as static, unchanging bounded territories and communities of belonging. The construction of a nation is never completed, and its identity boundaries are never fixed, since the narratives that constitute collective identities are constantly changing within interactive multiscalar networks. '(N)ations, like any social reality, never reach a stage where they can just 'exist'; they are not only constructions, but also *continually in the making*' (Hage 1996: 465). Dominant groups in nationalizing states have their identities produced, stored, and channelled through a set of institutions, telling a more or less coherent story about what it means to be 'Us', while 'national minorities' and nationalizing movements often lack such an intricate institutional network for the nationalization of their constituents. Nonetheless, even though their practices of nationalization can vary due to the more limited institutional resources on the part of national minorities, their discourses of nationalization are organized and enacted according to the same set of idealized visions.

Similarly, Hage (1996) criticizes the essentialized conception of two radically different kinds of nationalisms (i.e. 'Western/European/democratic' and 'Eastern/Oriental/totalitarian') and argues instead for the existence of one nationalism, which is two-faceted.

> (T)he national imaginary emerges (as) an interrelated two-levelled, gendered construction: a fatherland, conceived as a wilful active national body constituting the imaginary space of governmental and sovereign belonging, and a motherland, conceived as an ordered and pleasing space constituting the imaginary space of functional and homely belonging (Hage 1996: 476-7).

These two gendered concepts occupy different imaginary spaces: motherland is more inclusive of Otherness, while fatherland is a more exclusionary nationalizing space. However, as emphasized by Hage (1996), the two gendered modes of identity construction are ideal types and can only be separated analytically, always complementing each other in every project of nation building. The shifts from exclusive to inclusive discourses and practices within nationalizing narratives are determined by changes in a broader multiscalar context, composed of kaleidoscopic sets of relationships at local, national and transnational scales. Fatherland discourses, which are more militarized and exclusionary towards ethno-national others, tend to predominate when the nation and homeland are viewed by national elites as under threat. The threat may be external or internal, and the border narratives and enactments constructed against this threat seek to protect ethno-national home and identity from the external Other, as well as the Other within. When the threat is perceived as less serious, fatherland discourses tend to give way to motherland discourses, which are more tolerant and more inclusive towards Otherness and seek to domesticate 'them'. Borders conceived through the motherland imaginary are renarrated as open 'bridges' rather than as strict defensive barriers.

Territorial borders and borderlands of nationalizing states represent spaces where exclusive, fatherland discourses and practices are more likely to be enacted and observed. The reterritorializing space of the former Soviet Union offers numerous examples of such exclusionary nationalization. Compared with unification processes in Europe, the fatherland-type disjunction of former 'sister republics' – manifested in the establishment of barrier borders, strict visa regimes and lingering territorial disputes – is particularly striking, and the Russian-Estonian border represents an especially prominent example in this regard. This chapter focuses on the processes which are taking place in the southern Russian-Estonian transborder zone, particularly on a constellation of small villages in the district of Pechory in Russia.

## Russian-Estonian borderlands: From a bridge to a barrier

In different periods of history, following political 'shifts', the social-political space of the modern border region changed more than once from its status as an open frontier zone to a closed borderland. In the narratives of these borderlands the story lines of conflict and contact are deeply intertwined, which allows a story teller to emphasize one or the other side of these borderland relationships. In Soviet and post-Soviet ethnological writings from Russia, these territories have been referred to as an 'ethno-contact zone' between the Finno-Ugric peoples and the Slavs (Gadlo 1998). However, a line of medieval fortresses which runs through these lands suggests a different story. The fortresses of Narva in Estonia and Ivangorod in Russia in the north, and the Orthodox Pechory Monastery on the Russian side, and the fortresses of Vastseliina and Izborsk in the south, in Estonia and Russia respectively, not only ground in space the distant memory of conflict from 'time immemorial', but also provide a material metaphor for re-narrating these lands today as a historical dividing line between West and East. Since 1991, this idea has been especially prominent in Estonia, where it has gained a particular symbolic meaning for the Estonian nationalizing state and identity, and has been extensively portrayed by the Estonian national elites as a barrier, demarcating two ethno-national place-identities, and even a 'civilizational' fault line, separating Europe and the West from its Other to the East. For example, in justifying Estonia's need for a tightly closed border with Russia, Estonian President Lennart Meri stated that 'It is

precisely in the name of European values that Estonia needs a secure border … Our border is the border of European values' (Lennart Meri 1993, as quoted in G. Smith et al. 1998).

Nonetheless, local narratives also clearly picture these territories in the recent past as a place of contact and connectivity. During the Soviet era, there was no border on the ground, and the rural areas on both sides of the administrative boundary around Pechory functioned as one localized transboundary network, sewing together the deep peripheries of two socialist republics. The distance from the republican centres and their governmental authorities, combined with poor transport connections to the 'main land' and a relatively well-developed network of roads with neighbouring regions across administrative lines, facilitated the formation of a distinct socio-cultural place with a common local identity, which was constructed across ethnic boundaries as well as across the line of the administrative division between Estonia and Russia.

Informal economic networks also contributed to framing this region as a transboundary place. The population freely commuted between the two sides of the boundary, taking advantage of differences in prices, supplies and services. Several villages situated right on this administrative divide lived a 'truly' transboundary daily life. For example, the inhabitants of Krupp (Russia) and neighbouring Saatse (Zacheren'e in Russian, a village in Estonia) worked in one collective farm, which embraced both villages and also neighbouring settlements in the two republics.

Besides secular well-worn routes of villagers' daily life, Orthodoxy and locally performed religious practices stabilized this place as an interactive network of social relationships. It is quite remarkable that since the time of its foundation (fifteenth century) the Orthodox Pechory Monastery has consistently been a very influential political and social actor in this region and Russia as a whole, as both a military outpost and a religious centre, and held a special status even in Soviet times, under conditions of atheistic ideology. Krupp, Saatse, and the small surrounding villages formed an ethnically mixed parish, centred on the church in Saatse. In local discourse the division between parishes was well articulated and emphasized (e.g. 'this is *our* parish', 'those villages belong to *another* parish'), and the practices associated with local inhabitants of different parishes also varied. The services in the Saatse church were conducted in two languages, Russian and Estonian. This all creates a picture of a countryside unity-in-diversity lifestyle: the population - Setos, Estonians, Russians - going to the same church, sitting at the same cemetery while visiting their relatives' graves, talking, and exchanging news and goods. In the words of one local, 'at the cemetery we were eating their sausages, Estonians were eating our fish...' (woman, Krupp village, Russian side, interviewed summer 1999).

Since 1991 enforced political borders have severed the ties that bound places and identities on either side of the border to one another and have disrupted the existing transborder space. 'Having arrived' (as the locals themselves say) in a 'sleepy' rural society, with its daily life arranged according to the laws of nature and agriculture, the border has brought new rules and regulations structured by the presence of the state. With all its signs and institutions, the border has formed a new general cultural background; the 'border industries', including visa services and customs and border posts, have become a part of a daily cultural landscape in the towns of Pskov and Pechory and in the villages of the region. The border has appeared as *a new centre for this periphery*, a core, a basis for building new networks of social relationships and new identities.

In comparison to other parts of the new borderland between Estonia and Russia, some specific conditions resulted in the formation of a distinct cultural space in the administrative area of Pechory district on the Russian side of the border. Three main factors determine this distinctive character: the ethnic composition of the district, the strong influence of the Orthodox Pechory monastery, and the contested political status of these territories. The interplay of these three characteristics, launched by the establishment of the border, changed the cultural landscape of this borderland and encouraged the enactments of 'Seto' and 'Cossack' identities.

## Seto and Cossacks: Ethnic awakening

As one of the leaders of the modern Cossack movement recently reminisced: 'About ten years ago I thought I was the only person on the planet who felt himself Cossack' (interview, October 2000, St. Petersburg). It would not be surprising to hear a similar remark made by a Seto leader. Of course, both groups had 'quietly' existed before, as expressed in the exercising of some cultural practices in daily life, but the overwhelming processes of ethnic/national awakening in the USSR following the period of political liberalization at the beginning of the 1990s brought them from the level of folklore ensembles and ethnographic museums to active public discussion.

Among Setos and Cossacks there appeared leaders and activists, and the movements' ideologies started to form. At first glance, these movements seem very different, in terms of both place and identity narratives and enactments.[4] 'The Setos' are narrated as an aboriginal people living from time immemorial in the borderlands between Russia and Estonia, while Cossack narratives and enactments draw on both 'ethnic roots' and also on a pre-Soviet history of service to the Tsar, defending the borders of Orthodoxy and *Otechestvo* (Fatherland). Cossack discourses and practices developed primarily in a broad area on the southern margins of Russia, from the Black Sea to the Far East. However, Cossack organizations also appeared in many other regions which were not places of traditional Cossack settlement, but where the border of Russia was felt to be under threat, such as the southern border area between Russia and Estonia.

For both Seto and Cossack political and cultural activists, the border has figured as an important resource for their narration of group identity, just as the borderland has been an arena for group identity enactment. Applying Hage's argument to these two cases, I will examine the dynamic process of Seto and Cossack identity narrative construction and will demonstrate how motherland/fatherland discourses and practices of nationalism have been enacted through time in both cases. Even though, considered in the long term, both groups' identity narratives and enactments are dominated by one gendered modality over the other, there have been times in the recent history when the alternative gendered discourse of nationalization tended to predominate. I will suggest that these shifts between 'motherland' and 'fatherland' conceptualizations of place and identity occurred in response to fatherland nationalization practices enacted by the two states, Russia and Estonia, at their political borders.

## Seto borderland enactment

The demarcation of the border between Estonia and Russia played a crucial role in defining Seto identity. Before the establishment of the border, there was no coherent narrative that depicted what it meant to be 'Seto' or that bounded a Seto identity (on narrative identity, see Somers 1994). Seto social identity was narrated and enacted in everyday life at the local level, structured around parishes, collective farms, and other public spaces. As already mentioned, the Russian-Estonian frontier region was characterized by the high density of links between the neighbouring territories of the two socialist republics. Estonia, with its high living standards, looked very attractive for young people from the villages on the Russian side, 'Setos' and 'Russians' alike. Urbanization also affected the demography of this region, and by the time the border was established the Seto population living permanently in small border villages consisted mainly of women and the elderly whose adult children and their families were living in Estonian (and to less extent in Russian) cities. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the new states began to demarcate their borders, villagers of Seto origin, having migrated from the countryside, were gradually and silently absorbed into the cities of the two dominant neighbouring cultures. There were no serious obstacles to assimilation. Language was not a problem, as the Setos spoke a dialect of Estonian, and most of the young Setos were able to speak Russian. In addition, the word 'Seto' was not officially used, and from the Soviet state's perspective, they were categorized as Estonians in the national census. The dynamics of Seto assimilation, at least until the early 1990s, suggest that 'Seto' culture would have gradually disappeared had the new border not been introduced.

On the maps published in Estonia one can find two demarcation lines between Estonia and Russia: 'a temporary control line' and 'a border line' (e.g., *Eesti Atlas* 1996; *Map of Estonia* n.d.; *In Time* 2001). These lines diverge to a significant extent, especially to the south from the lakes of Pskovskoe and Chudskoe. 'The temporary control line' followed the administrative borders between the Estonian and Russian Socialist Republics and was demarcated by Russia as a state political border, while according to 'the border line' Estonia stretched a bit further to the southeast. This map is an illustration of the border dispute between Estonia and Russia over control of the Pechory district, expressed in Estonia's claim on the return of Pechory and its surrounding territory to Estonia, in line with the Tartu Peace treaty (1920).[5] The 'gap' between the two lines framed the focus of the dispute, namely the contested lands that happened to be part of the territory of 'traditional Seto' settlements.

The territorial dispute between Estonia and Russia over Pechory district brought the name of Seto from the realm of ethnographic museums to high political discourse. The marginal Seto identity suddenly became a trump card in the hands of the politicians arguing for these territories. Thus, when the border dispute arose, essentialist discussions about what the Setos *really* are and where they *truly* belong acquired an important position in Estonian discourse and also appeared on the agenda of scientific and political circles in the Russian northwest. Politicians and intellectual elites on both sides became engaged in the process of 'rediscovering' and redefining the meaning of Seto place and identity according to their own contemporary territorial agendas.