Following Politics: Russian Youth Activism in Post-Socialist Latvia

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Fall 2014
Abstract

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My dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted in Latvia. Latvia is frequently introduced with a demographic statistic which characterizes 60% of its population as Latvian and 40% as Russian. The ensuing discussion focuses on nationalism and ethnic tensions—terms central to scholarship on Eastern Europe. Below, I problematize the ubiquity of these terms in accounts of post-socialist politics. Drawing on ethnographic research with Latvia's Russian youth organizations, I argue that these terms obscure a phenomenon that has an important empirical bearing: the fact that actors, who are by no means marginal in electoral politics, have a stake in remaining legible within a sphere of action characterized by ethnic division; and, at the same time, challenge forms of action based on ethnic solidarity.

Recent events in Ukraine have once again brought to the fore the problematic role of ethnic Russians in post-Soviet republics. In much of political commentary Russians living outside of the Russian Federation appear as pawns of Kremlin's attempt to regain its dominance over the post-soviet world; as subjects injured by nationalizing elites' attempt to undo effects of Soviet Russification; and, fundamentally, as reactionary supporters of a (pro-) Russian autocracy. In fact, over the last decade policy makers from the European Union have spent a great deal of effort working with Russian activists in Eastern Europe in a hope to shift their political allegiances; to teach them the value of national sovereignty; and, fundamentally, to get them to differentiate between democratic freedoms (inherent in European institutions) and selective privileges (held over from the Soviet period).

In my dissertation, I challenge the assumption that Russians living outside the Russian Federation are pawns of Muscovite expansion, and, in the same vein, critique the hope that they make become agents of European democratization. Analyzing Latvia's Russian youth activists' ambitious for meaningful elected office, I argue that despite having different geopolitical and ideological orientations, EU- and RF-programs are equally likely to perpetuate parliamentary gridlock, voter apathy, and anti-political sentiment. In a related vein, I explore how youth activists turn to late-socialist practices in an attempt to create viable alternatives to both “pro-Russian” and “pro-European” positions; and how these alternatives have immense potential to draw together young people of different ideological persuasions, ethnic identities and life styles.
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Acknowledgments

My first words of gratitude go to my informants who took time to share their words and worlds during my stay in Riga. My fieldwork depended on their unwavering generosity; and I owe them a great debt.

I thank Lawrence Cohen, Saba Mahmood, and Alexei Yurchak. This dissertation owes a great deal not only to their reading, support, and advice but also to their seminars—in particular, Lawrence’s and Saba’s pro-seminar in Anthropological Theory (Fall 2006), Alexei’s seminar on Aesthetics and Performativity (Spring 2007) and Postsocialism (Fall 2010), Saba’s seminars on Difference (Fall 2008) and Freedom (Spring 2009), and Lawrence’s seminars on Gender & Sexuality (Spring 2009) and the Non-Future (Spring 2011). I am continuously humbled by Lawrence's intellectual generosity, Saba's rigor and Alexei's attentiveness. I am thankful to Yuri Slezkine for his curiosity and kindness over the last eight years. Also, many thanks are due to Victoria Bonnell, Les Ferriss, Sharon Kaufman, Anna Muza, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Edward Walker, and Victor Zhivov for their classes, thoughts, and questions.

Over the last eight years, I turned to Saleem Al Bahloly for support more frequently than I can recall and/or admit. His friendship kept me going, running, and, sometimes, flying. I treasure it immensely. I am deeply grateful to Dace Dzenovska for taking me along and pushing me ahead so that I can find joy in unlikely places; to Katie Hendy for making sure that I keep my windows open, my pace measured, and my steps firm; to Larisa Kurtovic for her arts of patience at an impasse; to Liz Kelley for showing me how to see hope in place of probability; and to and to Andrea Wright for her attentiveness, care, and kindness. I am thankful to Liza Buchbinder for revealing a kinship between frustration and inspiration; to Nick Bartlett for showing how one cares for another’s work; to Patricia Kubala for never giving up on matters of the heart; to Jean-Michel Landry for being an unlikely and unwavering compatriot; to Julia Lerner for not respecting distances; and to Michal Ran and Jonah Rubin for exemplifying intellectual passion and strength. My debt to David Marcus extends far beyond intellectual companionship; yet, his insights have ignited, propelled, guided, and, finally, grounded my work. My sincere thanks to everyone who took time to read and to comment on some of the proceeding pages, formally and informally—in seminars, reading groups, dissertation workshops, and conferences.

I gratefully acknowledge financial support of the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council which made this research project possible. I owe great thanks to the Berkeley Program in East European Studies as well as to the Department of Anthropology, the European Union Center for Academic Excellence, and the UC Center for Race and Gender Studies.
ALEKSII ANTEDILLUVIANOVICH PRELAPSARIANOVI: What System of Thought have these Reformers to present to this mad swirling planetary disorganization, to the Inevident Welter of fact, event, phenomenon, calamity?

- Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Part II*

MA: After all, a problem is never as permanent as a solution!

- Harvey Fierstein, *The Torch Song Trilogy*
CHAPTER 1
Introduction

My dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted in Latvia. Latvia is frequently introduced with a demographic statistic which characterizes 60% of its population as Latvian and 40% as Russian. The ensuing discussion focuses on nationalism and ethnic politics—matters which dominate scholarship on Eastern Europe. In many respects, this dominance is well-founded. On the most general level, it reflects a historical concern with violence enacted by or in the name of what, today, we refer to as minorities. On the more immediate level, this discussion speaks to a particular empirical situation: the rise of nationalist discourse and ethnic parties throughout the former socialist bloc.

Many intellectuals interpret post-socialist nationalism in terms of “resurgence,” as a (possibly belated) reaction against the socialist states’ attempt to suppress ethnic particularism in favor of class solidarity (e.g. Gray 2007). This interpretation has been challenged in two ways. First, a significant number of Soviet historians argue that socialist states aimed to cultivate rather than repress ethnic identity; and that, in fact, post-socialist nationalism is continuous with the socialist investment in ethnic difference (e.g. Slezkine 1993). Second, a number of contemporary-oriented political theorists interpret post-socialist nationalism as a symptom of a global shift from a class-based pursuit of economic equality a status-based pursuit of formal equality; or, to use Nancy Fraser’s (1996) phrase—a shift from a politics of redistribution to a politics of recognition (Gille 2010; c.f. Taylor 1994).

My dissertation is indebted to various critiques of (to this day, widespread) understanding of post-socialism as characterized by ethnic-national “resurgence.” At the same time, my work suggests that these critiques continue to treat ethnic difference as the most notable feature of Eastern Europe and to reproduce a geopolitical imaginary that casts the region as the privileged site for studying ethnic politics (c.f. Wolff 1994). This imaginary is not false: ethnic solidarity remains crucial for various—quite possibly most—forms of political action. At the same time, it is empirically limiting: it obscures how particular actors attempt to challenge nationalist discourse while simultaneously ensuring that they remain legible (and possibly become successful) in the sphere of action characterized by sharp ethnic-national divisions.

There are many reasons to speak about “ethnic politics” and “nationalism” in Latvia, where I conducted my fieldwork in 2008-2009. Following the collapse of the Soviet

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1 Here, I mean violence enacted against / in the name of (religious, ethnic, linguistic) groups following: (a) the reconfiguration and the eventual breakdown of the Holy Roman Empire in the aftermath of the Reformation; (b) the breakdown of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires in the aftermath of World War I; and (c) the breakdown of state socialism in the aftermath of 1989. Post-socialist states that were once a part of the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman, and/or the Russian Empire include: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine.
Union, most of Latvia’s Russians became disenfranchised and could not participate in electoral politics. Their gradual naturalization entrenched, rather than reduced, ethnic divisions in the context of electoral and parliamentary institutions. Today, most people cast their votes for candidates who share their ethnic background; the parliament is divided between Russians (who sit to the left) and Latvians (who sit to the right); and the cabinet of ministers (the government) has never had a Russian member. More than two decades since Latvian independence, many Russians remain disenfranchised; they are not recognized as a group entitled to collective rights; the use of Russian language in the public sphere is regulated by state institutions; and Russian cultural production is not a policy priority.

There are also reasons to speak about “ethnic politics” and “nationalism” in the context of my fieldwork. This ethnography is an account of young people who seek a career in electoral politics; and, given the structure of parliamentary institutions, need to capture Russian votes. Most of these young men and women are registered as “Russian” in their Soviet-era birth certificates; they speak Russian as their native language; they are graduates of secondary schools where Russian is the primary language of instruction. They belong to organizations routinely glossed as “Russian”; and, arguably with good reason: in addition to having mostly Russian membership, these organizations seek funds distributed under the aegis of ethnic minority and Russian compatriot programs.

However, much of this ethnography is prompted by an attempt to challenge the dominance of “ethnic politics” and “nationalism” in accounts of post-socialism. One of my central arguments is that these terms obscure a phenomenon that has an important empirical bearing: the fact that actors, who are by no means marginal in electoral politics, have a stake in remaining legible within a sphere of action characterized by ethnic division; and, at the same time, have a stake in challenging forms of action that appeal to ethnic solidarity. This empirical phenomenon has a conceptual bearing: it challenges the way that many anthropologists—as well as other stakeholders—engage questions of difference and politics. My dissertation aims to develop an analytical vocabulary necessary to understand that challenge.

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I came to Latvia for the first time in the summer of 2007. Like many foreign researchers, I was particularly interested in ethnic politics and nationalism. Before setting foot in Latvia, I knew about its peculiar demographic situation: the fact that only 60% of its population was Latvian, while the other 40% was Russian and/or Russian-speaking. I spent most of my first summer in Riga reading about how this situation came about—how it contrasted with the “unsurprising” demography of Latvia’s interwar years, when ethnic Latvians comprised 75% of the population, Russians—10%, Jews—5%, and Baltic Germans—3%.

Looking through history books, encyclopedia articles, museum brochures, I read about
2 resettlement of Latvia’s Baltic Germans to German-occupied Poland in 1939; deportations and executions of Latvians following the Soviet annexation of independent Latvia in 1940; annihilation of Latvian Jewry during World War II; exodus of Latvians fearing the return of Soviet troops in 1944; deportations of Latvians during Soviet collectivization of 1948; and the massive inflow of Russians and Russian speakers as a result of Soviet economic and demographic policies between 1944 and 1989.

*Pursuing my interest in post-socialist ethnic politics, I was particularly keen to know more about Russians who moved to Latvia between 1944 and 1989 to partake in post-war reconstruction, industrialization, and militarization. Following the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, the majority of these Russians found themselves without Latvian citizenship. In contrast to most Soviet republics, which declared their independence based on a national right to self-determination, Latvia claimed to restore its already-existing independence—i.e., a state continuous with the interwar republic. Restoration of independence was followed by the restoration of citizenship. One could obtain Latvian citizenship only insofar as one was either born in or had a cognate kin relation in the inter-war republic. This had the effect of excluding most of Latvia’s Russians from holding citizenship: most of them either moved to, or descended from those who moved to, Latvia during the Soviet period.

After the collapse of the USSR, Latvia’s Russians had an indeterminate status: they were “citizens of the former Soviet Union.” By 1995, the Latvian government yielded to the

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2 Most of these Germans were the descendants of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword—subjects of Teutonic Knights—which settled on the Eastern seaboard of the Baltic Sea in the 13th century in order to Christianize the native heathens; who, in the process of their Christianization, became serfs to the Western colonizers. In the 16th century, Brothers of the Sword were defeated during the Livonian Wars and, consequently, became tributaries of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Kingdom of Sweden. In the 18th century, when the Russian Empire defeated Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Kingdom of Sweden in the Great Northern War, the Baltic Germans pledged allegiance to Peter I thereby managing to retain their dominance over the Latvian peasantry. Having lasted for nearly seven centuries, their power came to an end when Latvia became a nation state in 1920.

3 There is significant disagreement as to whether or not Latvia was “occupied,” “annexed” or “incorporated” in 1940.

4 The war between Germany and the Soviet Union began on June 22, 1941. Germans entered Riga a week later, on July 4th. Three days later, they burnt down Riga's central synagogue with several hundred Jews locked in the basement. On November 30th and December 8th of the same year, 24 000 Latvian Jews and 1 000 German Jews were shot in Rumbula, a forest on the outskirts of Riga. This was the second largest machine-gun massacre after Babi Yar.

5 In Lithuania, restoration of citizenship was immediately followed by an extension of automatic franchise to all registered residents. In Lithuania, ethnic Russians comprised 8% of the population. In Estonia, Russians were also denied franchise.

6 People with a status of “citizens of the former Soviet Union” could stay in Latvia for as it was their registered place of residence on the eve of the Soviet collapse. Soviet citizens were required to register their place of residence in internal passports; this practice was known as propiska. In other words, not all of Latvia’s residents had this status: in addition to citizens and citizens of the former Soviet Union, there were foreign (predominantly, Russian) citizens who were temporary residents. It is unclear whether or not Citizens of the former Soviet Union were stateless persons; however, their possibilities
pressure exerted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation and Europe and the European Council, and transformed “citizens of the former Soviet Union” into “Latvian noncitizens.” Over the decade that followed, the status of “noncitizenship” became an object of some elaboration. Jurists and legislators specified that Latvian noncitizens should not be confused with those who were not citizens of Latvia or those who were permanent residents in Latvia. Rather, noncitizens were subjects of the Latvian state, issued a state passport (called “Alien’s Passport”), and encouraged to naturalize.

In addition to emphasizing the distinction between “noncitizenship” and a lack of citizenship, the Latvian government sought to underscore the distinction between citizenship and ethnicity; to explain that, in Latvia, citizenship is a matter of where one’s ancestors lived rather than who one’s ancestors were. This explanation reflected Latvian policy-makers’ attempt to demonstrate Latvia’s readiness for membership in the EU; the need to implement the so-called “conditionality requirements” (Pridham 2009). In other words, this explanation reflected Latvian politicians’ anxiety about flauntingly violating the ideal of universal citizenship by limiting electoral franchise to a particular ethnic group—by creating a sharp distinction between ethnic nationality and state citizenship and thereby institutionalizing a boundary between subject members and self-governing citizens of a body politic (c.f. Rogers Smith 2002).

It is difficult to keep track of these (ethnographic) distinctions—particularly in light of multiple cross-disciplinary attempts to move away from using “citizenship” as a shorthand for a certain legal status and towards using “citizenship” analytically, as a heuristic for thinking about contingent relationships between various kinds of actors, institutions, and processes (Isin and Turner 2002). Since the 1990s, these attempts had

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7 Today, Latvian noncitizens are similar to Latvian citizens insofar as they are not allowed to apply for (or hold) citizenship status outside of Latvia. Unlike Latvia’s permanent residents, Latvian noncitizens have an option to apply for Latvian citizenship when they wish to do so: to take a test (which would examine their knowledge of Latvia and assume a rudimentary knowledge of Latvian); to swear an oath of allegiance; and become citizens.

8 Since 1998, bureaucratic process involved in naturalization has been progressively eased; furthermore, in the early 2000s, a major “benefit” of noncitizen status—freedom from military service—became irrelevant (since obligatory military service for citizens was abolished). However, most Latvia’s Russians refuse to take part in this process; they argue that Latvian citizenship should be given to them automatically; that their lack of enfranchisement, following the restoration of Latvian independence, is an injustice which must be remedied.

9 In addition to gaining analytic purchase, the term “citizenship” has become important in cultural production; some important examples include: Starship Troopers (1996, Paul Verhoeven, dir.) where people can get citizenship only through military service; Elysium (2013, Neill Blomkamp) where people fight to gain citizenship in order to secure medical treatment and procedural justice; and, perhaps, most famously, The Hunger Games Trilogy where one nation (Panem) has two classes and thirteen categories of citizenship (the former—between the authoritarian Capitol and subdued districts; the latter—among the thirteen districts).

10 This move reflects new forms of geographic and economic mobility (e.g., an increase in the number of people who can enjoy citizenship of more than one nation-state), emergence of new geo-political units (e.g., ability to move / draw benefits from member states of the European Union), as well as the effect of the post-1960s social movements: formal recognition of difference within a given body politic.
tangible effects: contemporary scholars rarely speak of “citizenship” in terms of participation in electoral politics; and, in fact, are fairly anxious to use the term in order to analyze differentially-positioned actors within a particular body politic—to talk about ethnic, sexual, or cultural citizenship.\footnote{11}

Anthropologists have made a significant contribution to using “citizenship” analytically (Lazar 2013); in part, because the concept builds upon the discipline’s long-standing engagement with questions of difference and belonging; in part, because the concept partakes in a cross-disciplinary challenge of formalist reductions of citizenship to statutory law (Neveau and Fillipova 2012). Scholars of Europe have focused on citizenship in order to foreground struggles around identity and difference, particularly in light of Europeanization (e.g., Borneman and Fowler 1997), migration (Werbner 1998) and multiculturalism (Mandel 2008).\footnote{12}

Given academic investment in “citizenship” as a category of analysis, the Latvian situation seems to call for an investigation of \emph{ethnic citizenship}. Contemporary Latvian state-makers' claims aside, institutionalization of noncitizenship can be clearly linked to an anxiety about ethnic difference. Activists who protested against Soviet domination in the 1980s were deeply concerned as to whether or not Latvia could ever be independent given that Russians accounted for 50\% of Latvian population. This concern was an underside of a hope—to some extent encouraged by glasnost and perestroika—that electoral process could once again be a site of meaningful action. Many pro-democracy activists feared that they would end up shooting themselves in the leg: that, once won, freedom from foreign (Soviet) domination, would be quickly jeopardized by Latvian Russians support of the Russian Federation which would lead to or legitimate foreign policy that would put Latvia closer to Russia than Europe.\footnote{13}

Furthermore, “citizenship” is a term that is increasingly used to discuss specific ideological formations (e.g., liberal citizenship), privileged spheres of action (e.g., economic citizenship), new regimes of sovereignty (e.g., flexible citizenship), and dominant modes of governance (e.g., biological citizenship). This is a voluminous literature—partially anthologized by Lazar (2013); some particularly influential accounts include Berlant (1997), Ong (1999), Petryna (2002).

In Eastern Europe the focus has been more on matters of redistribution—perhaps, not surprising given that, under socialism, state legitimacy was based less on the rule of law (and equality under the law) than on being equally dependent on centrally-planned distributing scarce resources (Verdery 1996) among complexly differentiated and hierarchically-organized bodies politic (Anderson 1996). Thus, anthropologists of post-socialism use the rubric of “citizenship” to analyze hierarchies among newly unmoored (and rapidly reconfigured) bodies politic (e.g., Berdahl 1999), tensions among various processes of political incorporation and economic exchange (Humphrey 2002), and, perhaps most influentially, relationships between ecological disasters, collapsing welfare system, and state building (Petryna 2002).

The pro-democracy activists' concerns about the Russian Federation's interference in domestic electoral politics were not unfounded. The Russian Federation has been passively supportive of
However, ethnic citizenship is not my primary object of inquiry. There is little doubt that institutionalization of noncitizenship reflected many Latvian activists' concern about potentially deleterious effects of ethnic difference on Latvian sovereignty (i.e., Latvia's place in post-Soviet geopolitical order). However, institutionalization of noncitizenship also reflected widespread concerns about parliamentary democracy. Central to these concerns was the late-socialist suspicion of formal politics: a desire to be free from a field of action constituted or regulated by a party apparatus (communist or otherwise). In this context, Russians figured less as a group that was likely to jeopardize freedom from Russia than as a group that was likely to jeopardize freedom from politics. In other words, institutionalization of noncitizenship reflected post-socialist desire to limit the domain of "politics" no less than an anxiety about ethnic difference.

1. THE PROBLEM OF 'POLITICS'

For me, the category of "post-socialism" has less to do with a dynamic particular to post-socialist states (i.e., the rise of ethnic parties nationalist discourse) or with a world-wide emergence of new objects of political action (i.e., the rise of identity politics) than with a new anxiety about the limits and nature of "politics."

To illustrate this anxiety, I turn to the Latvian Institute, an organization tasked by the government with promoting Latvia internationally. The Institute makes no mention of "ethnicity" in its web portal's entry on Government & Politics. Evidence that this omission is not accidental can be found in the Institute’s web portal’s entry on Society. After claiming that "there is little if no outward manifestation of otherness in the nowadays society,” the Institute’s writers bemoan “attempts to turn the ethnic issue into a political one and to connect it with the issue of non-citizenship” (Mežs 2010).

It is easy to dismiss the Latvian Institute’s warning against turning ethnicity into politics. To some extent, this ease has an ethnographic basis. During my fieldwork, I met many social activists who argued that, in Latvia, the distinction between citizenship and ethnicity is “purely formal” (chisto formal’no). According to these activists, one had to look at “facts” (smotret’ po faktu) which clearly demonstrated the close link between citizenship and ethnicity which, in turn, showed that, in Latvia, “ethnic” and “political” were one and the same. In fact, since the restoration of Latvian independence, the concept of “ethnocracy” has gained much currency among Latvia’s Russian intellectuals (cf. Verdery 1996, Hayden 1992).

However, it would be dishonest to credit my fieldwork with the temptation to dismiss the Latvian Institute’s attempt to separate “ethnicity” and “politics.” Here, far more influential than fieldwork are three disciplinary issues: an expansive understanding of “politics”; approach to “ethnicity” as a political rather than “cultural” phenomenon; autocratic regimes in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan; and, actively opposing electoral upheavals in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine.
anxiety about “anti-politics.”

**Anthropology of Politics**

The great majority of contemporary anthropologists use “politics” as a shorthand for a network of power-structured relationships pervading every aspect of life rather than as a term denoting an institutionally-bound practice limited to specific kinds of organized action (c.f. Fisher 1997). While currently mainstream, this understanding of “politics” is by no means inherent to Anthropology which, in postulating “the primitive” as its original object of inquiry, focused on study of social rather than political organization: an inquiry into variable forms of kinship rather than variable forms of government.¹⁴

Anthropological approach to “social” and “political” as distinct spheres of human organization lost much of its valence when anthropologists shifted their research sites from (supposedly) stable to rapidly changing contexts. While this shift produced an expansive understanding of “politics,” it did not lead to an investigation of discrete ¹⁵

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¹⁴ Usually, this distinction is represented as a consequence of anthropological engagement with evolutionism; and, indeed, its two main proponents—Maine and Morgan—were deeply influenced by Darwin. Central to Maine’s [1861] work is an inquiry into the progression from societies based on consanguinity (blood and descent) to societies based on continuity (territory). While Morgan’s [1877] distinction between society (societas) and state (civitas) aimed to promote research into variable forms of government—the first being based on inter-personal relations (such as family, tribe, and nation), the second being based on relationships of property and territory (such as the city and the state)—it did not compel anthropological study of “politics” until much later, when, in the 1960s, anthropologists turned to Marx and discovered Engels’ (1884) debt to Morgan (see Bloch 1983, Roseberry 1997).

However, it seems to me that the focus on evolutionism obscures the early anthropologists’ debt to Classics—particularly, the classical opposition between barbaros and politikós (barbarians and citizens). For a discussion of this debt, see Kluckhohn 1961; and, in an innovative vein, Detienne 2005.

¹⁵ By the first quarter of the 20th century, Durkheim replaced Darwin as a source of anthropological inspiration. As evolutionism gave way to what, later became known as “structural functionalism,” broad social typologies gave way to a comparative analysis of specific (albeit hypothetically interrelated) institutions. Combined with new ethnographic methods, this shift questioned the assumed identity between a given institutional form (e.g., a court system) and a particular social function (e.g., the maintenance of justice); and, by the 1940s, this challenged the commonplace reduction of “politics” to specific institutions (such as the parliament and, more broadly, the state apparatus).

By the 1960s, another shift was on the horizon—this time conceptually underwritten by an increased engagement with Marx and prompted by anti-colonial struggles. Anthropologists critiqued the previous generation’s hypothesis that most social institutions function to maintain the overall stability (as being complicit with the colonial domination) and, instead, increasingly focused on havoc wrought by violence and conflict—either implicit in institutions formally separated from the state (e.g., the market); and/or exercised in contexts where no single institution exercised monopoly over the means of violence.

The next shift in anthropological use of “politics” reflected an attempt to make sense of post-colonial conflict following the formal withdrawal of colonial powers; and, to a lesser degree, to analyze contested, if not failed, legacies of revolutionary Marxism. These attempts questioned equations of politics with violence; and, particularly in the case of anthropologists influenced by Foucault and Bourdieu, led to a focus on disciplinary apparatus and domains of life previously taken to be a matter of personal freedom, choice, or habit rather than targets of governance.
political processes—such as, for instance, democratic elections—on their own terms. In fact, many scholars dismissed these processes as “formal”; and, instead, focused on their failed implementation (c.f. Apter 1999); their re-appropriation by “native traditions” (c.f. West 1998); and their legitimating effects (c.f. Coles 2004).\footnote{16}

\textit{Anthropology of Ethnicity}

Any attempt to separate ethnicity and politics is bound to become an object of anthropological ire also in light of the discipline’s approach to ethnicity. The very emergence of “ethnicity” as an object of anthropological analysis reflected a new ethnographic research agenda (Williams 1989, Lentz 1995, Eriksen 2002): a shift away from focusing on isolated groups and their supposed cultural uniqueness towards examining inter-group relationships, and focusing on efforts to communicate difference placed under the sign of “culture” (Barth 1969). In a related vein, many anthropologists found “ethnicity” a necessary term for making sense of migration, industrialization and urbanization—processes which unsettled “tribal,” kinship-organized, or, alternatively “non-state,” societies which, until 1940s, were the primary object of ethnographic research (Cohen 1974).

\textit{Critiques of Anti-Politics}

Finally, any attempt to separate “ethnicity” and “politics” — particularly an attempt that seems to originate with a government-sponsored agency (such as the Latvian Institute)— is likely to be dismissed in light of anthropological concern with “anti-politics”; perhaps, most forcefully articulated in James Ferguson’s (1993) analysis of development projects in Lesotho. According to Ferguson, the discourse of “development” routinely takes the country’s economy and society “as lying within the control of a neutral… government” and represents the state apparatus “as an impartial instrument for implementing plans… providing social services and engineering growth” (Ferguson 1994:178). Ferguson takes these claims as effects of “the anti-politics machine” which disguises interested interventions and disguises them as universal. Anthropological task is to challenge the disguise of universality; to expose the government as “a relatively small clique with narrow interests” (Ferguson 1994:190); and—especially in light of calls for barefoot anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 1995) — attend to grounded struggles against these interests.

\footnote{16 General accounts of Anthropology’s involvement with the question of “politics” display much anxiety over other disciplines’ purported tendency to approach politics “formally”: either in terms of specific institutions (e.g., parliamentary debate rather than, say, religious ritual), particular actors (e.g., an NGO rather than, say, mafia), or certain domains (e.g., legislative reform rather than, say, sexual intercourse). However, anthropologists, and, more generally, social scientists, are not the only ones who classify certain dimensions of the world as “formal” (apparent, artificial, explicit) or “informal” (substantive, genuine, tacit). This classificatory scheme has significant currency in many post-socialist states—a testament to what was, perhaps, an even greater purchase in the past. Yet, much academic analysis does not attend to how various actors argue about what’s “formal” and what’s “substantive.” Instead, it adopts this scheme; and, then quickly dismisses “the formal” in favor of the “informal” or “the substantive.”}
Here, however, I’d like to argue against dismissing the Latvian Institute’s injunction not to confuse ethnicity with politics (which, needless to say, is not to the same as taking this claim at face value). This argument is prompted less by scholarship than by fieldwork. It responds not so much to the Latvian Institute’s warning against placing ethnicity under the sign of politics, than to my attempt to understand my informants’ arguments about what gets to count as “politics.”

During my fieldwork, I frequently came across a claim that the parliament was the only place where one could find Latvians and Russians sitting on the opposite sides of the same room. At stake in this claim was a conviction that formal political institutions presented a profoundly skewed perspective on Latvia’s Russian question, which, in turn, meant that if I were interested in posing this question “objectively,” I had to go as far away from the parliament as possible and “leave politics behind.”

In other words, a prerogative to analyze (much less to reveal) the “anti-politics machine” is not limited to an anthropologist; other actors may be no less engaged with this task than anthropologists. While their engagement may sit uneasily with an expansive understanding of “politics,” it should not be dismissed. If these actors argue that disengagement from formal politics (i.e., from institutions associated with parliamentary democracy) is “anti-political,” then it does not follow that they have a narrow understanding of “politics.” In fact, as my research shows, it is entirely possible to bemoan “voter apathy,” and “parliamentary politicking” at the same time.

An Ethnographic Approach

Matei Candea is one of a few anthropologists who argues for taking claims about “politics” seriously. During carrying out fieldwork on Corsica’s bilingual education, Candea came across a school principle who urged him “not to confuse education and politics.” Candea points to how difficult it is to take this claim seriously, given the expansiveness of anthropological approach to “politics.” Yet, he is hesitant to interpret his informants’ not to confuse education and politics as an effect of politics.

Instead of dismissing the distinction that his informant attempts to create, Candea wants to render it intelligible. This leads him to argue for retaining “politics” as an ethnographic category: to inquire into local and situated debates around the political (where it is, where it ends, what it does, how its supposed to do it, etc) rather than to dismiss any claims about something being “outside of politics” as political in and of themselves.

In Candea’s case, the postulation of the the distinction between “politics and education (or political decision and pedagogical science)—leads him to argue against taking “non-political” as an effect of politics; but, rather, to argue that “non-political” is a site that is produced by teachers in order to ensure that their students successfully mediate the arena of formal politics (which, quite importantly, is by no means given). In other words, by
allowing his informants to deploy their own controversies, Candea is able to argue that the distinction that some of them posit (i.e., the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘non-politics’) is not a ploy (which has a purpose of presenting something partial as universal) but, rather, an attempt to produce something that’s necessary but by no means assured: adequate citizens.

**Socialist Anti-Politics**

To understand “political anxiety” — anxiety about the limits of politics—it’s important to attend to a specific empirical context. In this case, it’s Eastern European “anti-politics.” My interlocutors’ claim about the “non-political” nature of their pursuits resonates with late socialist suspicion of formal politics. This suspicion was both elaborate and elaborated—most famously in the works of Vaclav Havel, Gyorgy Konrad, and Adam Michnik. While significantly distinct from each other (Renwick 2006), all three activist authors shared a profound distaste for a world constituted by the communist party—despite the fact that, several decades before, when socialist came to power, intellectuals had key positions in the state apparatus.

Late-socialist intellectuals’ distaste of formal politics took two forms. According to Gil Eyal (2000), this turn took two distinct forms. On the one hand, there were humanist intellectuals who, no longer able to pursue their vocation within the state apparatus, developed underground or dissident fields of cultural production, limiting their interaction to a closed circle of friends. On the other hand, there were technical intellectuals who sought to turn away from party hegemony by retreating into a private sphere—something that became possible following the growing rise of consumer industry following WWII (c.f. Fehervary 2002). ¹⁷

However different, humanist and technical intellectuals’ strategies both illustrated and deepened a widespread marginalization of formal politics. This led to an ethical change as well. In cases where ‘the polis’ had an intrinsic value, there was an emphasis on the ‘honor ethic’ — pursuit of distinction in the public realm (Taylor 1990, 2004). In places where this was not the case, emphasis shifted to “sacrifice” associated with and referring to and other-worldly place rather than something held in common.

**Post-Socialist Reforms**

Post-soviet constitutional reforms sought to create conditions that would prevent any political party from attaining the kind of power that characterized the Communist Party. It is possible to distinguish between three sets of these reforms. The first set sought to distinguish between “government” (an organ of the state constituted as a result of an electoral process) and “political organizations” (associations formed by individuals

¹⁷ While specifically speaking to the Czech situation, Eyal’s distinction between humanist and technical intellectuals is no less fitting to the Soviet context (see Constanzo 2000 on the debates between “the lyricists” and the “physicists”). For a classical account of the Soviet “middle class” see Durham 1976; for a recent, and a highly innovative account, of Soviet privacy see Kaspe 2009.
interested in gaining temporary control of the government). The Communist Party lost its monopoly on political organizations: from 1991, political parties could be formed freely. More importantly, no single political organization was to have permanent control of the government. Political parties had to compete in elections with a hope of gaining a limited term in the government.

The second set of post-soviet constitutional reforms sought to create institutional boundaries between the government (an organ of the state constituted as a result of an electoral process) and the state apparatus (civil service). The party (or parties) which gained temporary control of the government had to respect the integrity of the state apparatus. Civil servants could not be recruited or let go based on their political affiliation. More importantly, certain functions of the state were guaranteed (either constitutionally or through various international treaties) and could not become an object of government policy spearheaded by a particular party; in other words, matters of “politics” had to be distinguished from matters of “state.”

The third set of post-soviet constitutional reforms sought to reduce the state apparatus: to withdraw and/or reconstitute domains of actions as “free from state control.” Not only political parties, but also “commercial” and “public” organizations could be formed at will. While the state apparatus retained regulative functions, it could not directly interfere in these organizations' spheres of action; in other words, matters of “politics” had to be distinguished from matters particular to “the market” (in case of commercial organizations) and “civil society” (in case of public organizations).

These reforms promoted a classificatory scheme that differentiated between various roles, actions, and organizations. One could be a party politician, a civil servant, a social activist, or an entrepreneur. One could belong to a political party, work in a state apparatus, be a member of an activist organization, or partake in a business concern. One could advocate a particular policy or a program of action, execute assigned tasks in a professional manner, pursue a particular cause or advocate on behalf of a particular group, or attempt to make money.

It may be easy to dismiss the significance of this classificatory scheme; particularly, for those who are acquainted with and critical of parliamentary democracy. Yet, in the post-Soviet context, this dismissal would be shortsighted. During the Soviet period, the Communist Party was the only political party which participated in elections; members of the Communist Party staffed key positions in the state apparatus; activist and commercial organizations were, for the most part, illegal.

The reformers recognized that political, bureaucratic, social, and commercial forms of action were interrelated; and, to this end, designed mechanisms that enabled organizations to change their status. Furthermore, they promoted a variety of institutions to ensure interaction between different kinds of social actors; to this end, they sponsored the development of chambers of commerce, public consortia, and state advisory committees. At the same time, the reformers recognized that the categorical separation
between different kinds of actions and actors was necessary to ensure that one form of action—particularly the one that could be classified as “political”—did not subjugate others.

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On a broader scale, it is important to attend to the importance of arguments over the nature of “politics” given these arguments’ imbrication with the problem of revolutionary change (which, arguably, has foundational significance for the modern world). In fact, the very possibility of a revolution as a phenomenon distinct from a rebellion (c.f. Arendt 1963), that is, the very possibility of events that radically transform the exercise of authority and power rather than challenge those who happen to partake in a given exercise of authority and power, calls forth arguments over the limits of politics. As Taylor (1991) points out, rebellions—which were not uncommon in the early modern period—were legitimate only insofar as they were carried out by a duly constituted subordinate authority; in fact, only revolutionary change adopts the language of “the people” and “the nation” as entities distinct from a contingent political order.

2. ETHNOGRAPHY OF 'POLITICS'

Much of what follows rests on taking “politics” as an object of ethnographic investigation which involves attending how how particular kinds of actors speak about politics. First, this means putting aside any temptation to define “politics”—whether institutionally (e.g., politics as something that happens in the parliament) or functionally (e.g. politics as something that has to do with authority). Second, this means taking seriously claims that are all-too-easy to dismiss (or place under the sign of “false consciousness”): claims about the “non-political” nature of ethnic identity, cultural production, state bureaucracy, market circulation, and intimacy. Third, and more immediately, this means struggling with how to describe actors whose talk about politics prompts this inquiry in the first place (for, if one describes particular actors in terms of gender, then, one is tempted to talk about feminist politics, etc.).

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During my fieldwork, I came across a group of young people—most frequently described as Russian political activists—18—who did not share the anti-political sentiment. Unlike

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18 Most of the work that follows springs from my unease with this description. On the most immediate level, this unease reflects my immediate fieldwork experience: my informants’ claim that if I came to Latvia to study Russian youth activists, then I had no business working with them. Both of these descriptions use Russian word russkie. As I explain in CHAPTER 1, the use of the word russkie—which is used in the phrase russkaia molodezh (Russian youth)—is an object of much contention when it comes to formal politics. From the 19th century onwards, there have been various attempts to distinguish between russkii (an adjective used in the phrase “Russian language”) and rossiiskii (an adjective used in the phrase “the Russian state”). This attempt reflects an emphasis on the multi-ethnic dimension of Russian statehood—whether in the period of Rossiiskaia Imperia (Russian Empire), Rossiiskaia Sovetskia Federativnaia Sotsialistickaia Respublika (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), or Rossiiskaia Federatsia (Russian Federation). Politically-engaged actors outside the Russian Federation cannot describe themselves as rossiiskie politiki: this denotes belonging / loyalty to the Russian Federation. However, they are hesitant to describe themselves as russkie politiki: this
most people, they did not use the category of “politics” in order to refer to a domain of action motivated by corrupt intentions and/or doomed to failure. These young people wanted to partake in post-Soviet political institutions. They did not shy away from professing their vocation for politics, which is one of the reasons that I call them “aspiring politicians.” According to aspiring politicians, the post-socialist predicament was that of politikanstvo (politicking) rather than politika (politics).

For aspiring politicians “politics” has to do with getting a seat at the table where policy issues are being debated and decided. This means a possibility of getting a seat in the government (the cabinet of ministers) rather than being elected in the parliament.19 Correspondingly, this means being concerned with forming a governing coalition with Latvian politicians just as much—and at the same time—as thinking about gaining the support of the Russian voters. As far as these young people are concerned, everything that jeopardizes getting a seat at that table is a matter of “politicking” rather than “politics.”

Most of my informants were born in the 1980 and were registered as “Russian” on their Soviet-issued birth certificates. Everyone spoke Russian as their native language; the majority received their secondary education in the so-called “Russian” schools. Everyone had a good command of Latvian—due to personal ambition; dramatic increase in quantity and quality of language instruction in post-secondary schools; and/or, the desire to pursue post-secondary education at a state institution (which did not offer instruction in Russian but was far more prestigious and affordable than a private counterpart). Everyone was born in Latvia; however, most could not trace their ancestry to the period of inter-war independence. Yet, by the time I began my fieldwork, everyone underwent naturalization—due to personal conviction, an increased ease of naturalization requirements, and/or the abolition of mandatory military service.20

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19 Russians have been in the Latvian parliament since the restoration of Latvian independence. In fact, there have been several Russians in key administrative positions. (Perhaps, the most notable case was that of Aleksejs Loskutovs, the head of Latvia’s Anti-Corruption Bureau between 2003 and 2009). However, Russians have not had a successful track-record with respect for being a part of parliamentary government coalitions. The first time that a Russian politician played a significant role in governing rather than deliberating or administrating (i.e., being in the government rather than the parliament or the state apparatus) happened in 2009. Following municipal elections in Riga, a home to half of Latvia’s total population, Nils Ušakovs became the mayor. Like most of Latvia’s Russians, he could not trace his ancestry to the interwar republic; in fact, his paternal and maternal grandfathers were in the Soviet military and settled in Latvia following WWII. Following the restoration of Latvia’s independence, Ušakovs underwent naturalization. He had a successful career in the media and eventually entered politics by way of a party-block called “The Harmony Center.”

20 This reflected the fact that, during the Soviet period, the party apparatus was dominated by Russians. However, Soviet-era Russian domination of the party apparatus should not be interpreted solely in terms of inter-ethnic tension. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CPSU ensured that the upper echelons of the party—in a given national republic—were staffed by “national cadres” (i.e., party members who had a “titular nationality”: e.g., Latvian CPSU was headed by an ethnic Latvian, Georgian CPSU was headed by an ethnic Georgian, etc.) Russians dominated the party not as "ethnic"
Most of my informants were university students in their early 20s. Nearly all worked at the same time as they studied: most—in order to pay tuition and ensure a certain life-style (a cell-phone, an internet connection, a new computer, an occasional ability to go out, and, perhaps, a once-a-year trip somewhere in Europe); a few—in order to support a widowed parent or a younger sibling or to pay rent for their own apartment. Yet, the majority lived in the same place where they grew up, did not plan to move out / to start a family, and had parents who did not depend on them for supplementary income. While recent university graduates were likely to make more money then those who currently studied, there were no significant class distinctions among them.

It is quite easy to interpret this as “power-driven politics”: i.e., a form of action which strives for power for its own sake rather than for a particular purpose (such as bringing an end to a particular injustice, advocating for particular policy measures, etc.). This interpretation is short-sighted for three reasons; it ignores aspiring politicians’ unique organizational form and their engagement with questions central to debates about Latvia’s Russian question over the last decade.

**Forms of Organizing**

To begin with, aspiring politicians have an uneasy relationship with organizational forms central to the post-socialist distribution of power: political parties and activist organizations.

Latvian law distinguishes between “political” and “social” organizations. The former are

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21 During the Soviet period it was quite unusual—and usually economically prohibitive—to move out upon reaching a certain age. University and college dorms were reserved for students whose families did not have a nearby residence. A newly-wed couple was likely to move in with either the groom's or the bride's parents. Up until the 1980s, there was no real estate market: living quarters were typically provided through one's place of work, following a lengthy waiting period.

22 Speaking of “class” in the post-soviet context is challenging—not least because it implies a fairly stable position in the economic system (something that arguably still lacks in much of the post-socialist world which, as I discuss in my concluding chapter, offers many ‘from rags to riches to rags to riches’ stories).

23 One variant of this interpretation, which can be found in the field, revolves around dismissing these young people as “party careerists.” The Russian original—*partiinye karieristy*—carries connotations of duplicity often projected onto, or said to be characteristic of, the Soviet period. The Soviet Union was a one-mass-party state. Membership in the Communist Party was necessary for organizational advancement regardless of one’s profession (i.e., managerial roles were typically held by party members; e.g. school principles had to be members of the CPSU; school teachers did not). However, advancement through the party ranks could lead to a total change of one’s occupational field (i.e., a school principal could be offered a position as a head of a scientific laboratory). Soviet residents who were not avid communists often took party membership to be part and parcel of one’s own professional development and, thus, morally legitimate. At the same time, they took advancement through the party ranks as driven by a desire to encroach on someone else’s life and, thus, morally illegitimate.
parties: organizations which explicitly partake in the electoral process during which they typically make explicit claims about society-at-large and/or the body-politic. The latter are activist groups: organizations that make issue- or group-specific claims which quite often rest on a critique of electoral politics; particularly, a claim that political parties are unable or unwilling to represent a particular constituency or advocate for a particular goal.\(^{24}\)

Distinction between “party politicians” and “social activists” is an object of great emotional and intellectual investment (which, in fact, prompts my insistence on taking “politics” as an ethnographic category). At the same time, the very law that mandates this distinction—not to mention political theories which legitimate and elaborate on it further—acknowledge its artificial and provisional nature.

The organizations within I conducted fieldwork can be easily taken as a testament of this artificiality. While they are registered as “public organizations,” most of their leaders belong to other (second) entities which are registered as “political organizations.” However, it would be shortsighted to take my informants' organizations as an illustration of a failed attempt at institutional differentiation. This failure—or, rather, a structural impossibility of institutional differentiation—is neither hidden from plain view nor specific to my informants' organizations. What makes these organizations specific—and, thus, merits ethnographic investigation—is an impasse of categorization. My informants cannot be characterized either as “party politicians” or “social activists.” In other words, what’s unique about their organizations is not that they challenge the distinction between “the public” or “the political” (or, alternatively, between social organizations and political parties) but that neither category does justice to their particularity.

**Political Parties**

Aspiring politicians are members of political parties. This membership allows them to participate in electoral politics; particularly, it holds a promise of being included on the party ballots during the election.\(^{25}\) However, my informants do not have a good relationship with party elites. Their movement through party ranks is limited; it would be mistaken to describe them as party functionaries or subsidiaries. During my fieldwork

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24 The distinction between “political” and “public” organizations is very much colored by the ethnic situation. Noncitizens' “political rights” were limited: they could not participate in the electoral process (i.e., either run or vote). However, their “civic rights” were not limited: they could establish and actively work within public organizations (i.e., NGOs).

25 This promise was realized: my key informants were included on the party ballot. I suspect that Latvia’s electoral system is a structural factor that (however marginally) contributed to this inclusion. Latvia is a unicameral parliamentary republic. Elections are based on proportional representation with preferential voting. During elections to the Parliament, electoral districts coincide with four Latvian regions: Kurzeme, Vidzeme, Latgale, and Zemgale. In each region, voters receive a separate ballot for every contending party. Party ballots contain a long, ranked list of candidates which voters may seek to amend by offering their own ranking. In other words, contending parties do not incur any cost for listing as many candidates on the ballot as the ballot’s space allows; and the candidates may hope that, even if they are not ranked highly by their parties, the voters will rank them higher.
there hasn’t been a single event co-sponsored by a political party: space for meetings, media resources, and permits have always been obtained through non-party, usually personal, affiliations. In part, this antagonism is a consequence of the incumbent parliamentarians’ wish to ensure their re-election by limiting the pool of potential competitors. More importantly, this antagonism is a consequence of my informants’ unabashed criticism of incumbent parliamentarians as pseudo-political. As I will explore in greater detail below, this criticism is quite unique. On the one hand, it does not rest on a disengagement / refutation of the parliamentary system and/or parliamentary democracy. Unlike many groups who turn away from electoral politics—including activist organizations who often pursue their aims through non-parliamentary channels (e.g. the relatively independent judiciary, international pressure, the court of public opinion)—my informants have faith in the parliamentary system. On the other hand, as one of the proceeding chapters shows, it does not rest on an ideologically-driven refutation of incumbent parties’ political programs or on an empirically-driven critique of parliamentarians’ conduct. In other words, my informants do not critique promises made by political parties (e.g. as ‘reprehensible’) or elected officials’ ability to deliver on these promises.

Activist Organizations

As I wrote above, my informants’ organizations are registered as “public organizations.” This registration is important for two reasons. First, it opens a possibility of applying for international funding. Youth agencies sponsored by the EU and the RF are hesitant or plainly unwilling to fund youth wings of political parties. Second, this registration opens a possibility of gaining access to stakeholders that are very hesitant to associate with a political party (e.g., schools, orphanages, etc.). However, my informants do not have a good relationship with social activists. Co-sponsored events or get-togethers at third parties’ events never lead to long-term alliances are marked by bitter arguments. Often, this results in aspiring politicians’ exclusion from non-partisan state-sponsored organizations, such as the Youth Advisory Council, which rely on pre-existing alliances. In part, this antagonism is a consequence of social activists’ wish to gain access to scarce resources by limiting the pool of potential competitors. More significantly, this antagonism is a consequence of my informants’ explicit criticism of social activists as anti-political. This criticism rests on the former’s valorization and the latter’s suspicion of the electoral process. It is also a consequence of my informants’ dismissal of social activists as “parochial” and/or as catering to specific interest groups rather than showing concern with the larger polity.

Common Problems: Problem Sociality

The antagonism between my informants’ and party politicians, on the one hand, and social activists, on another, is one of the reasons that I am hesitant to place them under

26 Quite often this refutation involves a pun on Russian cognate of “democracy.” The first two syllables of demokratia are resonant with the word der’mo which means “shit.” The resulting neologism —der’mokratia—can be translated as “shitocracy.”
the sign of “political activists.” This antagonism has practical effects. My informants do not do the kinds of things that party politicians do: they do not organize based on a desire to get elected in order to implement a particular program or represent a particular constituency. Similarly, my informants do not do the kinds of things that social activists do: they do not organize based on a commitment to a particular issue or to a particular interest group.

Instead of sharing a concern with a certain issue or a desire for a particular future, my informants share a problem. At various points of my dissertation, I describe them as partaking in “problem sociality.” The term “problem sociality” resonates with Michael Warner’s term “stranger sociality”. This resonance is accidental. Warner describes a form of sociality closely intertwined with processes of subject-formation produced through identification with (or, alternatively, interpellation by) public address. My informants find themselves in a place marked by competing forms of address. Each of my subsequent chapters shows the tension between EU-sponsored attempts to address Latvia’s variously Russian residents as “national minorities” and RF-sponsored attempts to address them as “compatriots” and/or as Latvia’s “co-constitutive nation.” However, my informants do not identify with these forms.

It may be tempting to interpret an absence of identification as a refusal of identification. Yet, this temptation ought to be resisted. If one were to interview random passersby about local Russians’ attitude to the category of “national minority,” then one would likely hear descriptions of Russians’ attitudes to Jews, Poles, and Belorussians. In other words, most respondents would assume that the category of “national minorities” cannot describe Latvia’s Russians. Some respondents—the ones those who follow formal politics—would say that the Latvian state’s attempt to institutionalize this category in an insult to Russians’ historical significance in the region. A few respondents—those who are involved in political activism—would say that Latvia’s Russians must be officially recognized as a national minority either because this category corresponds to their actual position or because it opens certain possibilities for future action. If one were to interview random passersby about local Russians’ attitude to the category of “compatriots” or “co-constitutive nation,” most respondents would be at a loss for any answer whatsoever. Some—the ones who follow formal politics and who are involved in political activism—would either express dismay with these categories (on the ground that they index loyalty to the Russian Federation) or express their support for their greater institutionalization.

Each of my chapters presents political activists deeply invested either in adopting or disavowing the category of national minority or the category of Russian compatriot as well as programmatic positions on issues associated with these categories. However, my closest informants are not political activists. They do not adopt programmatic positions which are associated with these categories. In fact, what makes my informants unique is

27 This work develops Nancy Fraser’s (1992) argument that Habermas (1989) does not pay sufficient attention to how gendered forms of expression betray the public ideal of an inclusive debate.

28 Both terms are recent innovations of Russia’s foreign and domestic policy. Their meaning is intentionally ambiguous.
that they do not have a position; and, while they are quite intent on working out a position—something to which they refer to as “ideological work” (ideologicheskaia rabota)—these intentions do not mask their willingness to admit that no such position is currently available. It is this willingness to articulate a problem—rather than to offer a solution—that gives rise to what I provisionally call “problem sociality.”

The proposed term—as well as my argument about lacking interpellation—has some resonance with Serguei Oushakine's work on “communities of loss.” Oushakine argues that disintegration of the Soviet Union led to a near-total collapse of symbolic order. This argument rests on taking the state to be a guarantor of this order and emphasizes the significance of communist ideology for everyday life: navigating urban environment, burying a family member, procuring identification documents. The failure of the post-soviet state to guarantee any sort of symbolic order atrophies political language and results in what Oushakine (2002) elsewhere terms “post-soviet aphasia.” According to him, this situation leads to: the increased importance of “transitional objects”—fragments of life past that make the present bearable; and prompts the rise of “communities of loss”—forms of solidarity based on a shared sense of trauma. Oushakine's purposive emphasis on “community” does not seem to be accidental or anachronistic: he is writing about groups that could be described as hostile to strangers.

Unlike Oushakine, I am not writing about groups hostile to strangers. In fact, my very ability to conduct extensive fieldwork with these organizations rested on their openness. As the subsequent chapters make clear, this openness should not be confused either with friendliness or inclusiveness. My informants were not even friendly with or inclusive of each other: both organizations where I worked were marked by personal antagonisms. However, my informants were all deeply invested in having an organizational following, in recruiting what they referred to as “adequate people.” Furthermore, unlike Oushakine, I am not writing about a lack of symbolic order: my informants lived in the world marked by tensions among various forms of symbolic order. Even though they could not be located in this field—either as “national minorities” or “Russian compatriots”; either as party-subsidiaries or social activists—they did not find its topography disorienting. Rather, they perceived it as producing an inevitable series of dead ends which they sought to avoid. They did not organize based on a shared experience of traumatic loss. And, while they drew on various aspects of Soviet experience they did so less in an attempt to tether themselves to an anchor (e.g., to solve the problem of symbolic classification) then

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29 This resonates with recent historiography of the Soviet Union; for example, Kotkin's (2005) argument that even though the Communist Revolution was staged in the name of the proletariat, Soviet Russia did not have its own proletariat (since it was not industrialized). Kotkin interprets Stalinism as a civilizing process which, among other things, taught Soviet citizens “how to speak Bolshevik.” Following Althusser's (1971) emphasis on an eminently practical and embodied nature of ideology and Foucault's 1979 move from ideology to knowledge/power, Kotkin emphasizes the productive aspect of Soviet rule. Incidentally, it is important to note that Oushakine puts Althusser in dialogue with Lacan rather than Foucault; and, thus, emphasizes symbolic order rather than technology of power.

30 Oushakine's interest in aphasia can be productively contrasted with Nancy Reis's (1996) interest in lament; whereas the former describes a loss of language, the latter focuses on the language of loss. Oushakine's diagnosis is more grave that Reis's.
to index their sense that it is shortsighted to think of “politics” as something that requires an identifiable position.

**Sites of Contention: the Russian Federation and the European Union**

The second post-Soviet decade led to an intensified elaboration of the Russian question. This elaboration resulted from a growing tension between the European Union and the Russian Federation; as well as from the growth of Latvia’s Russian activism. Three issues became central: status, culture, and language.

In 2004, the Baltic republics became the first post-Soviet members of NATO and the European Union. The Russian government took this as an offense to its attempt to maintain influence across the former Soviet states—referred to as “the near abroad” (*blizhnee zarubezh’e*). In its foreign policy, the Russian Federation increasingly positioned itself as a guarantor of peace in the former Soviet republics as well as the supporter of those who suffered in the hands of the new political elites. The latter position had particular relevance in Estonia and Latvia, given their disenfranchised Russian populations. The Russian government advocated on behalf of these populations in various EU institutions, threatened and/or implemented economic sanctions, and supported social activism through various institutional channels.

The two channels that exert most influence today are the Russian compatriot program and the Russian World Foundation. Concepts at the center of both initiatives—i.e., concepts of “compatriots” (*sootechestvenniki*) and “the Russian World” (*russkii mir*)—seek to address and provide some collective and institutional basis for Russians living outside the Russian Federation. However, they invariably draw upon and attempts to legitimize a dominant position of Russians in contemporary Russian Federation and the Soviet Union. The category of “compatriots” does this by casting Russians as a state-bearing or a “state-founding” nation (*gosudarstvo-obrazuushchaia natsia*)—something which reasserts the importance of multi-ethnic or multi-national or federated political structure; and, at the same time, explains or calls for Russian political leadership. The category of “the

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31 The Baltics joined several post-socialist states (all of which were under the Soviet zone of influence during the Cold War): the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia. The Czech Republic and Poland joined NATO in 1997.

32 The tension between the EU and the Russian Federation reached an apogee in early 2005 over elections in Ukraine: when Viktor Yanukovich, a pro-Russian candidate in presidential elections, had to give up his pretensions to the highest office in favor of Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-Western presidential candidate (who managed to survive a dioxin poisoning). Ukraine was not the first non-Baltic post-Soviet republic which sought to ally itself with the European Union. In 2003, a very similar situation unfolded in Georgia when pro-Russian Eduard Shevarnadze was replaced by Mikheil Saakashvili who promised to seek membership in the EU.

33 Given post-Soviet patterns of violence, this meant Russia's willingness to partake in ethnic politics within a particular nation-state. This was dramatically illustrated in the August of 2009, when Russian troops entered Georgia in order to protect Georgia's Ossetians.

34 It is suspected that the Russian government promoted cyber-terrorist attacks against Estonia in April 2007, following massive arrests of Russian activists who protested the decision to desecrate / relocate the remains of Soviet soldiers who died during WWII.
Russian World” does this by casting Russian “culture” as something that has world-wide relevance: i.e., as something that is significant precisely because its not particular to “Russians,” and especially Russians living in Russia; and, at the same time, calls for the patronage of Russian cultural industry.

Policy makers from the European Union attended to Latvia’s Russian question no less than their colleagues from the Russian Federation. Highly critical of Russia’s attempt to get Latvia’s Russian to identify as compatriots and / or pursue recognition as a state-founding nation, European policy-makers promoted the status of “national minorities” and by pledged to protect minority rights, including the right to enjoy one’s culture. However, policy-makers in the EU approached culture more as a set of traditions specific to a circumscribed place within a particular nation-state. This approach to “culture” reflected the policy-makers’ attempt to discourage regionalist secession.

By the 2000s, EU minority rights policies came to focus on “participation.” This focus reflected a growing recognition that Europe’s minority populations were being consigned to the private sphere; whereas they sought to participate in public life. According to Kymlicka (2005:211), it reflected the recognition of the “political dimension of minority aspirations.” This led to a growing availability of various funds. However, these funds were not accessible to political parties. Electoral politics was considered to be too much of a domestic issue; and explicit support of a political party—interference with national sovereignty.

The third issue central to formulations of Latvia’s Russian question revolved around language. In 1998, the Latvian parliament initiated the education reform which, to quote my interlocutors, sought to “Latvianize Russian schools.” For the most part, these schools had Russian teachers who did not speak Latvian fluently. However, according to the minority education reform, which was to take effect in 2004, they would have to begin

This critique of participation discourse is quite unusual. European policy is often blamed for dismissing particular forms of engagement as “apathy” (Greenberg 2010); or, alternatively, failing to understand the relationship between politics of aesthetics which seems to be of a particular relevance in post-socialist states (Buck-Morss 2000, Yurchak 2008).
teaching their disciplines in Latvian. As the reform was about to take effect, massive protests took place. During the protests, the organizers called upon school students to come out onto the streets. Furthermore, the organizers recruited students for various leadership positions within their organizations.

Terms and Questions

Aspiring politicians’ discussions of “what is to be done” revolves around three clusters of questions. The first had to do with naming—organizations, conferences, events, etc. Here, I attend to how aspiring politicians argue about: (a) why it may be unwise to explicate ethnicity (e.g., why it may be better to call one’s organization “The Way Forward” rather than “The Russian Youth Alliance”); (b) what are the advantages and disadvantages of having a name that’s a cognate in Latvian, Russian, and English (e.g., “The Loyalists”) or using an English word that cannot be easily translated into Russian or Latvian (e.g., “empowerment”); (c) whether it’s appropriate to use latin alphabet in a cyrillic text; and, relatedly, whether to use Latvian naming conventions when composing a text for the Russian audience (e.g., whether a surname that appears as “Ivanovs” in Latvian should be transliterated letter-for-letter into cyrillic or, instead, reverted back to its Russian original which wouldn’t have an “s”).

Another cluster of questions concerns identification. Here, I attend to how aspiring politicians argue about: (a) advantages and disadvantages of registering their organization on the Latvian registry of “ethnic minority” organizations and/or partaking in the Association of Russian Compatriot Organizations sponsored by the Russian Federation; (b) appropriateness of listing one’s ethnic nationality (tautiba/natsional’nost’) in their Latvian passports even though this is no longer required by law; (c) appropriateness of listing one’s ethnic nationality on voter information cards if they run in elections; (d) answering questions, in Latvia, Russia and abroad (in Latvian, Russian, and, typically English), about their background.

The third cluster of questions concerns public events. Here, I attend to how aspiring politicians: (a) partake in major holidays (e.g., Midsummer, Independence Day, Victory Day, etc.); (b) participate in more mundane forms of public programming (e.g., public lectures, other organizations’ events, academic and activist conferences, party congresses, etc); and (c) develop their own organizational programming (clubs, demonstrations, debates, lectures, conferences, youth outreach, etc.).

It is possible to dismiss aspiring politicians’ discussions for a variety of reasons: remoteness from party politics and daily life; lack of a scholarly apparatus; and, perhaps most importantly, an inevitable failure to delineate and commit to a specific position.37

37 One group of my informants established “an ideological division” within their organization. The goal of this division was to produce an “ideology” (ideologia)—a statement of the organization’s members worldview as well as goals and aims based on that worldview. After several months of work, a statement was indeed produced. However, it did not gather support sufficient support among the general membership in order to become publicized / circulated.
However, it is precisely these discussions' openness—their attempt not to reproduce widely available positions—that attracts young people.

3. STRUCTURE OF ARGUMENT

I develop my argument in three chapters. At the center of each chapter is an encounter between several youth organizations. Two of them appear in every chapter. One is called Loyalisty (the Loyalists); another one—Gumanisty (the Humanists). The third organization is different from chapter to chapter: in CHAPTER II, it is the Lithuanian Alliance of Russian Youth; in CHAPTER III, it is the youth steering committee of Latvia's Russian Compatriot Organizations Union; in CHAPTER IV, it is Klassika (the Classicists).

All of the encounters are spurred by the diagnosis of the present moment as marked by factionalism and nationalism; and a call to promote unity among Russians in order to ensure harmony between Russians and Latvians (i.e., to end factionalism in order to overcome nationalism). Each chapter deals with how representatives of various youth organizations attempt to find consensus on three issues which frame public discussions of Latvia's Russians: status (CHAPTER II), language (CHAPTER III), and culture (CHAPTER IV). CHAPTER II focuses on the pursuit of unity in the name of a shared Russian “identity” (identichnost'). CHAPTER III focuses on the pursuit of unity in the name of a shared investment in Russian language as a site of “value” (tsennost'). CHAPTER IV focuses on the pursuit of unity in the name of a shared understanding that cultural production constitutes a foundation aspect of public life. 38

Every chapter analyzes how the search for a common ground (re-)produces certain fault-lines. CHAPTER II describes the tension between actors who argue that Russians are Latvia's ethnic minority and actors who argue that Russians are Latvia's co-constitutive nation. CHAPTER III describes the conflict between actors who argue that Russian language is an untapped economic resource and actors who argue that Russian language is a guarantor of one's moral values. CHAPTER IV describes the opposition between actors who argue that there is something specific about Latvia's Russian culture and actors who deny this specificity and take Russian culture as a global force which transcends state boundaries. These arguments are not limited to a narrow circle of intellectuals. They are informed and supported by policy-makers from the European Union and the Russian Federation; in the former case—operating under the aegis of youth programs specific to the recent signatories of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities; in the latter case—operating under the aegis of programs for Russian compatriots who living in the post-Soviet states.

Every chapter analyzes how actors escape these fault-lines by drawing on various Soviet

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38 I place “identity” in quotation marks in order to emphasize the novelty of this term and to distinguish between between identichnost' (identity) and lichnost' (personality). I place “cultural” in quotation marks in order: (i) to suggest that the meaning of “culture” (which ought to be distinguished from its importance) is an object of much contention; and (ii) to suggest that the category of “culture” has a particular, and unique, importance in much of Central and Eastern Europe.
practices. CHAPTER II describes how some actors challenge the prevailing form of identity politics by approaching ethnicity as something that ought to be “kept on one's person,” and accounted for in a particular social situation, rather than something that can be claimed by a particular individual. CHAPTER III describes how some actors challenge the prevailing form of language ideology by approaching language as a force that structures political consciousness rather than as a site of moral or economic value. CHAPTER IV describes how some actors challenge the prevailing form of cultural politics by lending their support to public events emphasizing intellectual competition rather than displaying aesthetic competence. These challenges do not emerge from a scholarly debate; rather, they are implicit in reproduction of particular Soviet forms: in CHAPTER II—certain aspects of the Soviet nationality policy; in CHAPTER III—certain aspects of the Soviet concern with political education; in CHAPTER IV—late-Soviet trivia competitions and festivals of humor and satire.

Actors who support or partake in the reproduction of these forms are not “united” in a recognizable way. Their turn to particular Soviet forms is not a consequence of a shared nostalgia for days gone by. These forms enable aspiring politicians to approach difference as a force which constitutes the field of action sometimes qualified as “political.” This approach is unique: activists supported by Russian and European policy-makers approach difference and politics as mutually exclusive. Some take politics as a force that destroys difference (and, to give an example that will be elaborated in CHAPTER III, argue that the Latvian state is assimilating its Russian population because it does not do enough to support Russian schools). Others take difference as a force that destroys politics (and, to give another example from CHAPTER III, argue that Russian narcissism of minor differences—the activists' inability to reach a compromise—leads to impotence). Yet both take difference as a collective property: as something primarily characteristic of groups.
“Ethnic politics” and “nationalism” continue to be dominant heuristics for analyzing collective action in Eastern and Central Europe (e.g. Csergo 2007; Hayden 2007; Wanner 1998). These heuristics suggest that political alliances are based on a shared commitment—either ideological or instrumental—to the maintenance or cultivation of ethnic difference. In academic and popular discourse alike, this commitment is often contrasted with “civic” activism, assumed to be more broad, inclusive, and democratic than its “ethnic” counterpart. (e.g. Kymlicka 1995; c.f. Canovan 1996; Miller 1996; Tamir 1993) Even though the distinction between “ethnic” and “civic” activism has been criticized (e.g. Brubaker 1996, 1998; Dzenovska 2009, 2010), the concepts of “ethnic politics” and “nationalism” continue to exert a broad appeal. In what follows, I question this appeal by analyzing arguments between leaders of political organizations often glossed as “ethnic” and “nationalistic” by outside observers. In particular, I study these leaders’ arguments—made over and against these outside observers—that their alliances are based on a shared commitment to what they call politika rather than a shared sense of ethnic identity.

My study takes place in Latvia—a former soviet republic which underwent the most dramatic shift in its ethnic composition of any post-Soviet or Eastern European country. As a result of wars, deportations, and Soviet demographic policies, on the eve of Latvia’s independence from the Soviet Union, Russians accounted for 50% of Latvia’s population. When Latvian independence was regained in 1991, most of these Russians were not enfranchised. In several years, they were given the status of “noncitizens.” “Noncitizenship” was meant to be an intermediary stage between a complete lack of citizenship and full citizenship which would follow naturalization. However, most noncitizens did not naturalize since they felt that citizenship was theirs by right. Since then, popular and academic analyses of Latvian politics have analyzed Latvian political landscape in terms of the standoff between “Russians” and “Latvians.” This standoff is said to be particularly characteristic of Latvian electoral politics with ethnic Russians...
voting for “Russian parties” and ethnic Latvians voting for “Latvian parties” (E.g. Bogushевич and Dimitrov 2010; Galbreath 2003; Iļabs 2006, Mužnieks 2006; Schmid 2008.)

Yet, not long after I began fieldwork in Latvia in 2009, my assumptions about ethnic bases of political organization were challenged. Whenever I said that I studied “Russian youth political organizations,” my interlocutors—members of these organizations—would often tell me that what I thought I was studying did not and could not exist. Their organizations, they insisted, were “social-political” (obshchestvenno-politicheskie) rather than “Russian.” Their appeal to politika (politics) over Russianness seemed paradoxical. If it were addressed to the Latvian audience, then it could have been interpreted as an attempt to create a “civic nation” by relegating “ethnicity” into the private, or the “non-political,” sphere. Instead, this appeal was addressed to people who, supposedly, were already politically organized based on their ethnic identity.

Grappling with this paradox in the chapter that follows, I show how youth activists' appeal to politika results from a lack of consensus—among “Russians” themselves—as to the diacritical factors that can be used to maintain difference between “Russians” and “Latvians.” Political activists glossed as “Russian” by external observers often do not recognize each other as Russian. For some activists, Russianness is a matter of kul'tura (culture)—a set of practices which, in English, would go under the sign of “high culture.” For other activists, Russianness is a matter of natsional'nost' (nationality)—a familial genealogy in need of constant accounting. Yet for others, Russianness is a matter of having an ethnic minority status—a recognition of certain rights predicated on ties to one's place of origin.

Many political activists find kul'tura, natsional'nost' and ethnic minority to be incommensurable with each other. Yet, however incommensurable, the first two understandings of Russianness, the ones that evolve around the concepts of kul'tura and natsional'nost', share a dynamic view of a political subject: a subject who, instead of remedying a wrong, attempts to create a world anew. Hence, organizational actors who are committed to these two concepts—and who, insofar as these concepts are perceived to be incommensurable, cannot ally based on a shared sense of Russianness—may ally based on a shared commitment to what they call politika (politics).

**Factions and Brooms**

In June 2009, a joint committee of Latvia’s Russian organizations hosted a conference. The main goal of the conference was to discuss conditions that would favor “consolidation” of Latvia's Russian organizations². The conference began with an

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² The split between Russian NGOs was mirrored by the split between Russian political parties. During my fieldwork, these parties were organized into two blocks: The Harmony Center (THC) and For Human Rights in United Latvia (FHRUL). I heard two accounts of how the Russian vote came to be “split” between these blocks; here, I present both (yet primarily for contextual considerations; I am
address from the Russian ambassador who rather unexpectedly began his speech by forcefully and vigorously chastising the organizers. He wondered aloud how they could not know that there was another group of Russian organizations conducting another conference on the very same day? How could one hope for “consolidation,” he asked, if people could not even coordinate their schedules? How could these organizations achieve any goals if factionalism was this rampant? Why could not all the Russian youth in Latvia remember their shared origins?

Several days after the ambassador’s talk, an acquaintance offered an allegorical account of Russian factionalism. “There is a father who calls up his sons to his deathbed,” he began. “He asks them to bring two brooms – you know, the old kind, with handles made of tree branches which are tied together. He unties one broomstick and breaks all the branches—one by one, for maximum effect. Then, he takes the other broom and tries to break it. Of course he can’t: when the branches are tied together, the broom is unbreakable.” The point of the fable was not difficult to see. Unity, conceived in the idiom of kinship, was a guarantee of strength. The fable illustrated an assumption that, insofar as they were Russian, Russian organizations had to be united.  

The two Russian organizations with which I did my fieldwork seemed to embody the proverbial sons. The Humanists, according to their articles of incorporation, were dedicated to promoting humanistic education. The Loyalists, according to their articles of incorporation, were dedicated to promoting civic engagement of youth. Despite these

3 The Russian source is Lev Tolstoy’s 1875 translation of Aesop’s fable “The Father and His Sons.” Tolstoy made this translation for a textbook designed to teach peasant children how to read. Tolstoy's book has never been out of print—hence the poetic reference. The English source is George Townsend's 1867 translation of Aesop’s fable; but in Townsend’s translation, branches are “sticks” and brooms are “faggots.”
seemingly similar objectives, the two organizations had a very uneasy relationship. Leaders of one organization thought poorly of leaders of the other organization; only a handful of the Loyalists members visited events that the Humanists organized (e.g. training seminars, discussion clubs); and almost no one from outside the Loyalist organization visited events that the Loyalists organized (e.g. field-trips, demonstrations, volunteer projects).

My key interlocutor among the Loyalists was Pavel. When I met him at a public lecture and shared my research interests, he immediately congratulated me on my good luck. Dressed in a green cotton cardigan, light brown khakis and greying black shoes (he wore this outfit for most of our three-year acquaintance), he explained that no one could speak as thoroughly and as interestingly about youth politics as he could. Even though he was still working at a bank, he had his heart set on going into politics; this is why he joined the Loyalists. Politics was the only true source of power, he explained. When I asked about his career at the bank, he responded that even the weakest government could bring down the strongest business. If I did not know that already, I had to read *The Prince* as quickly as possible; as for him, he had a copy next to his bed.

My key interlocutor among the Humanists was Kristina. Several years older that Pavel, she was in many ways his opposite. With a penchant for knit mittens and vintage hats, she was always immaculately dressed. She founded the Humanists primarily to promote Russian education in Latvia. She was educated in Latvia and Germany; in addition to Russian, Latvian, and German, she spoke fluent English and was learning French. Having graduated with a degree in law, she argued before the Latvian supreme court before she turned thirty. She became interested in electoral politics once she realized that jurisprudence was not what people hoped it would be—even in a EU state like Latvia. Not fond of Machiavelli, she frequently repeated that there was nothing as depressing as having political power without knowing what to do with it.

**What's the name of the game?**

Several months after the ambassador’s address, I participated in the event which made me question the salience of ethnicity as a basis of organizational alliances. The event was a meeting between three organizations: the Loyalists, the Humanists, and the Lithuanian Russian Youth League. The League received a large grant from a European funder to organize a “Forum for the Empowerment of Ethnic Minority NGOs in the Baltic Region.” Since all three Baltic states were involved (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia), the League needed to build an inter-organizational network. The head of the League, a twenty-year old Justinas, met Kristina, the head of the Humanists, at an international conference several years prior; and asked her if the Humanists would be willing to participate. When she answered in the affirmative, Justinas asked her to invite another “Russian organization” from Latvia to their joint meeting: so that they could plan the events of the forum. Kristina invited Pavel.
On a rainy October afternoon Justinas drove from Vilnius to Riga. Although the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the program for the forum, most of the conversation revolved around the forum’s title. Justinas wanted to keep the same title that the League used in their project proposal: “Forum for The Empowerment of Ethnic Minority Youth NGOs in The Baltic States.” Kristina and Pavel vehemently disagreed with him. “There were no ‘ethnic organizations’ in Latvia,” Pavel insisted. Dumfounded, Justinas asked if the government maintained a registry of ethnic minority organizations. When Kristina answered in the affirmative, Justinas asked why she couldn't personally invite participants using the registry. Kristina explained that this would not help: almost nobody was on the registry. Growing surprised, Justinas asked whether the Loyalists and the Humanists were on it. Both Pavel and Kristina responded with a resolute “no.” They did not indicate “Russianness” in their articles of incorporation—something one needed to do in order to be listed on the registry. Justinas protested, saying that he knew for certain that there were Russians in Riga who were “political” and had to be on the registry. With an added note of gravitas in her voice, Kristina asked Justinas what he meant by politika. Before Justinas got a chance to answer, Pavel interjected once again. There was no way, he said, that any organization listed on the registry had anything to do with politika.

On that rainy afternoon, Justinas, Kristina and Pavel did not manage to reach an agreement. However, this was the first time that I witnessed Kristina and Pavel adopt a shared position. Didn’t this show that, at times, consolidation of Latvia’s Russian organizations was indeed possible? That, when an antagonist entered the picture, organizations would unite? Perhaps, the Loyalists and the Humanists remembered their Tolstoy after all, and knew when to tie their disparate branches into one broom?

I found it curious that Kristina and Pavel argued that the problem with organizing based on the ethnic minority status was “the lack of politika.” I had never heard this argument before. What I had heard was that the problem with the ethnic minority status was that Russians did not “identify” with it. This seemed to be true. On two occasions, I was a party to fairly dramatic instances of dis-identification. The first was in the summer of 2008, during Latvia’s Song and Dance Festival. The festival lasted a week; one day was declared to be an “ethnic minority” day. Yet, the only Russians that I saw were the ones on the stage; in the audience, I heard only Latvian. When I asked a self-identified

4 For a scholarly analysis of the contingency of the “ethnic minority” form, see Jennifer Jackson-Price (1997). The question of “minorities” appeared concomitantly with the emergence of sovereign territorial states in the 17th century and the new international order established at The Congress of Westphalia in 1648. Its most immediate context was the doctrine of cuius regio, eius religio which maintained an identity between the religion of the sovereign and the religion of his subjects. Following the territorial redistribution in the wake of The Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the sovereign, at his discretion, could grant the freedom of religion to his new subjects. In other words, what was at stake in emergence of “minorities” was a sovereign gesture of goodwill. Once “the people” replaced “the prince” as the locus of sovereignty, “natural right” replaced “goodwill.” The “nation” displaced “religion” as the politically salient category by time of The Congress of Vienna (1815). Furthermore, the emergence of “great power” politics – particularly after Napoleonic Wars and The Congress of Berlin (1878) – resulted in international treaties’ minority clauses becoming preconditions of membership in the new international order.
Russian acquaintance why she did not attend the ethnic minority day, she responded that she did not like Roma choirs: it did not occur to her that most of the performers on the ethnic minority day actually were Russian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian. The second instance of such dis-identification happened during my extended fieldwork when, during the Loyalists' meeting, Pavel referred to “ethnic minority” schools. A girl sitting in the room asked, in all seriousness, what these schools were. When Pavel answered, “Russian schools,” she asked, without a note of jest or irony in her voice, whether or not this meant that she was an ethnic minority.

However, if Kristina and Pavel wanted to argue that the problem with the ethnic minority status was that “Latvia's Russians did not identify with it,” they would have to explain Justinas how “Latvia's Russians” self-identify. From their previous experience with each other, they knew that they could not provide the same answer to this question. This had to do less with the fact that they did not have any empirical data than with the fact that they each held very passionate views as to how Latvia's Russians should identify and, more generally, as to what “Russianness” was.

Kristina and the Humanists argued that Russianness was a matter of kul'tura, an ideal that could only be achieved and cultivated through various practices identified as cultural and dissociated from the conception of nativity and ethnic ancestry: education, conduct, morality, etc. Insofar as they placed a great emphasis on personal cultivation, the Humanists did not think that Russianness was a matter of genealogical descent; rather, it was a question of cultural achievement. People among the Humanists cared deeply about this ideal; once, I saw a girl break down in tears because she felt that everyone around her had more kul'tura.

One was Russian insofar as one accomplished something—a point the Humanists illustrated by talking about the famous poet Osip Mandelstam. Mandelstam, I was told, was a Russian (russkii) poet despite the fact that according to the Soviet system of registered nationalities, Mandelstam was a Jew. However, to say that Mandelstam was a “Russian (russkii) poet of Jewish origin” would sound anti-Semitic; and to say that Mandelstam was a “Russian” would be, strictly speaking, incorrect. In other words, all you could say was “Mandelstam was a Russian poet.” Furthermore, kul'tura was not something that one could achieve once and for all; it had to be maintained. On several occasions I heard people express dismay at not having time to read, go to the theater, learn a language, etc., and say that they have grown feral (odichali).

In contrast, as far as Pavel, and a good portion of the Loyalists, were concerned, “Russianness” was a matter of natsional'nost: genealogical descent. In the Soviet period, natsional'nost' was registered in a number of documents. However, this registration was characterized by several discrepancies. In particular, there was a discrepancy in the way in which natsional'nost' was indicated in one's birth certificate (issued at birth) and one's passport (issued upon reaching 16). The birth certificate indicated natsional'nost' of the newborn as well as natsional'nost' of his or her parents; when the parents were not of the
same nationality, they had to choose one for the child. Unlike the birth certificate, the passport indicated only *natsional'nost*' of the passport-holder; it did not have a record of familial descent. As far as some of the Loyalists were concerned, passports were not documents one could trust. Yulia, one of the organization's leaders once told me, “People say ‘I'm Russian,’ or ‘I'm Latvian’ or ‘I’m a Jew’ and then they add, ‘It’s written in my passport. Well, things are written on the fence as well. It doesn’t mean they are true.” Furthermore, Yulia argued that nobody had a pure *natsional'nost*; people were mixed and had to own up to it and to account for their lineage in fractions; to say that one was ½ of this, ¼ of that, and a ¼ of something else. If people were not willing to enumerate their lineage, then they had an option of keeping their *natsional'nost* “nearby” (*pri sebe*). One of Pavel's favorite pieces of advice would be to “approach Russianness like one approach Orthodoxy.” Just as one had to wear one's crucifix near one's body, one had to keep one's ethnic nationality “near oneself.”

Yet, however different, both *kul'tura* and *natsional'nost* rested on a dynamic sense of personhood. The self-cultivating person of *kul'tura* was future-oriented; the self-accounting person of *natsional'nost* was past-oriented. In contrast, the concept of “an ethnic minority” implied a static person, oriented around oneself. Both the Humanists and the Loyalists characterized people promoting Russianness based around the ethnic minority status as “assuming a pose” and “beating themselves on the chest.” These people were not interested in envisioning the future or respecting the past; rather, they were too busy “pumping rights”: seeking remedies against nationality policy which, they felt, had hurt them. These people were stuck in *obida*, an sense of hurt, injury and insult, which was the very opposite of *politika*. One of the Humanists' and the Loyalists' favorite proverbs was “The ones who hurt are made to haul water” (*na obizhennyh vodu voziat*). For members of both organizations, showing *obida* was an invitation for further marginalization rather than a way to be involved in *politika*.

Kristina and Pavel's claim of *politika* as a basis of their alliance was not purely rhetorical. On the one hand, this claim rested on prior knowledge of each other's notions of Russianness; as well as an understanding of *kul'tura* and *natsional'nost* as incommensurable. On the other hand, this claim rested on privileging a dynamic sense of

5 The decision which nationality to register could be influenced by personal convictions and perceived opportunities. A Ukrainian mother and a Russian father, both of whom were factory workers, may not have cared one way or another how their child was registered. A Russian mother and a Jewish father may have wanted their child to be registered as Russian to limit the chances of possible discrimination. A Latvian father, who worked in the party apparatus as one of the “national cadres,” and a Russian mother may have wanted to register their child as Latvian (even if they did not speak Latvian at home). Upon coming of age, the child could request to change her nationality to match the nationality of the other parent. This said, along with the passport – received on one's 16th birthday – one continued to use one's birth certificate (which, to repeat, had parents' nationalities) at various points of one's life.

6 The Orthodox tradition maintains that the personal crucifix needs to be worn underneath one's shirt, right next to one's body. Pavel's point reflects a widely propagated message of the 1990s during which, according to the representatives of the Church, crucifixes – worn on the outside – were worn for show (*na pokaz*).
personhood, and a desire to move beyond obida. There was, however, an additional dimension to politika: the question of electoral politics.

**Politika versus Politikanstvo**

Those self-identified Russians who could trace their ancestry to independent Latvia (1920-1940) were automatically enfranchised and were eligible to run for office as well as to vote. Consequently, self-identified Russian politicians have been in the Latvian parliament since 1991, even though their number was not proportional to the number of Russian residents in Latvia (since most of these residents did not have the right to vote). However, as far as Pavel and Kristina were concerned, “proportional representation” was not the main issue. For them, as well as for the members of the Humanists and the Loyalists who aimed to have a political career, the main issue was the capacity of Russian politicians to be a part of a governing coalition (i.e., a cabinet of ministers headed by the prime minister).

The emphasis on “coalition,” which emerged around 2008, contrasted sharply with the emphasis on “integration,” which has been a staple of Latvian political discourse since 1998. The question of “coalition” was limited to the conversations about electoral politics and the formation of the ministerial cabinet. These conversations were very focused: they concerned the electorate, strategies of particular parties, behavior of specific politicians, etc. In contrast, the question of “integration” was far more expansive: it concerned state and society at large. Conversations about integration aimed to address the relationship between Latvians and Russians, the rivalry between Russian parties and Latvian parties, the organization of public space, etc. Furthermore, it was the idiom of “integration” which rested on the division of the Latvian population into “minorities” and “majorities.” In fact, the Program for the Integration of Society in Latvia went into effect shortly after Latvia signed the Framework Convention on Ethnic Minority Rights and began talks about joining the European Union.

Insofar as the Loyalists and the Humanists were concerned, Russian politicians who understood Russianness to be a matter of ethnic minority status; who emphasized integration and pursued ethnic minority rights; and who sat in the parliamentary opposition and never aimed to become a part of the governing coalition, had nothing to do with politika. Instead, they were mired with politikanstvo (politicking), an oppositional stance emergent in the feeling of obida (hurt). These politkany (politicos) were busy “pumping rights” (zaniaty kachaneim prav) rather than pursuing politika. The image of the pump was derogatory: it suggested doing something purely for one's private benefit rather than the well-being of the entire polity.

Politkany had a grasp on the Russian electorate because they pandered to their feeling of obida (hurt). Furthermore, politikany had access to media networks, public relations specialists, foreign capital, etc. Most importantly, politikany controlled the electoral ballots: they had the power to pick candidates who would run during the elections.
However, aspiring politicians like Pavel and Kristina—who considered themselves to be true politiki—felt that they had one significant advantage over politikany: they could convince the Latvian political elite that they could be their allies. If Pavel and Kristina could do this, then they could achieve what no politicians achieved before them: they could be invited to be members of the governing coalition.

Concerned with “coalition” rather than “integration,” Pavel and Kristina understood the notion of “Latvian parties” to be an abstraction. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Latvian popular front fragmented into a multitude of parties which were competing with each other. No single party could ever attain parliamentary majority; the only way to form the government was through building a coalition. While since 1991, a coalition never included self-Russian politicians, Pavel and Kristina, like many other aspiring young politicians, did not feel that this would have to be the case in the future. If members of a Latvian party were reasonably sure that, in the next round of elections, their electorate would not punish them for forming a coalition with a “Russian party,” then Latvian politicians could very well form such a coalition. To be reasonably sure that this would not happen, they had to be certain of two things. First, they had to be certain that their potential Russian allies were not set on fighting for minority rights; that, in other words, they did not promote an agenda based on “ethnic minority” status. Insofar as both the Humanists and the Loyalists did not subscribe to the notion of Russianness as based on the ethnic minority status, they satisfied the first requirement. Second, Latvian politicians had to be certain that their potential Russian allies were not allied based on a shared sense of Russianness among themselves. Insofar as the Humanists and the Loyalists maintained that kul'tura and natsional'nost' were incommensurable with each other, they satisfied the second requirement. As far as Pavel and Kristina were concerned it was only a matter of time before they would succeed where no one else had succeeded. The political future was theirs.

The Future

The Humanists' and the Loyalists' aspirations for the future were challenged by more than the Russian electorate's feeling of obida and the Russian politicians politikanstvo. An equally significant challenge was posed by various European Union institutions which, as far as Kristina and Pavel were concerned, pandered to both obida and politikanstvo. For these institutions, the only legitimate form of Russianness was that of “ethnic minorities”; the only legitimate political objective was social integration; and the only legitimate activism was the pursuit of rights.

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7 During elections, the candidates are asked to fill out the questionnaire which is then made available to the voters. The questionnaire includes fields like age, education, income, and ethnic nationality (tautiba in Latvian; which is the Latvian translation of Russian natsional'nost'). When Kristina and Pavel ran for office, neither one indicated ethnic nationality. (In contrast, older politicians, Russian and Latvian alike, did.) Kristina did not indicate it because, as far as she was concerned, Russianness was a matter of kul'tura. Pavel did not indicate it because natsional'nost' could never be ascertained through self-identification on a government form.
Several months after meeting Justinas, Kristina told me that it was actually the Humanists’ idea to have a forum which would bring together representatives of Russian organizations in the Baltic states. However, when the Humanists applied for the grant, their proposed title for the forum was “The Future of Russian Culture in Europe.” Insofar as the Humanists were based in Riga, they had to apply to the Latvian office of the EU granting agency in order to get money for the forum. They did not get the funds. When I heard this story, I assumed that the Humanists did not get the funds because of “nationalist tensions”: because “Latvian employees” of the European granting agency discriminated against “Russian projects.” Yet, when I made a remark revealing this assumption, I was immediately corrected. According to the Humanists, they did not get funding because of “the EU’s lack of interest in projects that have to do with the future.” When I made a remark revealing my assumption that Justinas's organization got money for their project because Lithuania did not have many Russian residents, I was once again corrected. The League got the money because “they could translate Russian into European.” The comment was ironic: everyone among the Humanists spoke at least two languages. What this remark indexed was conceptual language, particularly the concept of “ethnic minorities.” Whereas the Humanists talked about “Russians,” “culture,” and “the future” in their project proposal, the League talked about “ethnic minorities.”

Indeed, who would fund a project titled “The Future of Russians in Europe”? The concept of Russianness embedded within it is not palatable to the funders committed to the values of tolerance, multiculturalism, individualism, etc. Self-cultivation, which the Humanists emphasize, is a long and painstaking process. Kul’tura has a profoundly elitist dimension: it was not uncommon for the Humanists to talk philosophy with some people while relegating others to cleaning up. Yet, it was precisely insofar as it was elitist that kul’tura could never work as a basis of social organization. There could be no mass politics organized around understanding Russianness as a matter of kul’tura. The same can be said about understanding Russianness to be a matter of natsional’nost’. Insofar as it is an exclusionary concept—which discriminates on the basis of descent—it cannot be a basis for mass politics.

In contrast, “ethnic minority” status is far less exclusionary than kul’tura and natsional’nost’. Yet, it is precisely because of its more encompassing nature that it promotes Russianness as a basis of social organization and enables what goes under the sign of “ethnic politics.” In contrast to those organizations that were allied on the basis of seeking recognition as “ethnic minorities,” the Humanists and the Loyalist were allied not because of a shared sense of Russianness but because of a shared sense of political subjectivity. In the context of their alliance, Russianness was a pathway for considering the nature of political action rather than a basis of social organization.

Conclusion

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8 Many EU granting agencies distribute funds through subdivisions located in the EU member-states' capitals rather than through a central office in Brussels.
I began this chapter with the Russian ambassador’s address to Latvia’s “Russian” organizations. The ambassador decried what he understood to be these organizations’ factionalism and urged the people whom he addressed as “Russian community leaders” to remember their shared origins and come together; or, to use an allegory shared by one of my informants, to tie their thin branches into a thick broom.

The ambassador’s appeal to consolidation based on recognition of shared origins fell on deaf ears. The Humanists and the Loyalists, two youth organizations representative of other so-called “Russian” youth organizations, did not feel as though they had shared origins. They claimed to be working with each other insofar as they had a shared commitment to politika (politics). This claim had merit for two reasons. First, because the Humanists and the Loyalists drew on significantly disparate notions of Russianness. The former understood Russianness to be a matter of kul’tura and self-cultivation. The latter understood Russianness to be a matter of natsional’nost’ and accounting for familial genealogies. Insofar as both maintained that kul’tura and natsional’nost’ were irreconcilable, members of neither organization recognized each other as “Russian.”

Second, the claim to politika had merit because the Humanists and the Loyalists shared a vision of a dynamic political subject. This became clear during Kristina and Pavel’s meeting with Justinas, the representative of the Lithuanian Russian Youth League. Justinas called on Pavel and Kristina to come together under the banner of “ethnic minority organizations,” yet they refused. Surprisingly, this refusal was not accompanied by the claim that in Latvia, Russians and Russianness have nothing to do with “ethnic minority” status, even though this claim could have been easily justified, either empirically (by pointing to the fact that most of Latvia’s self-perceived Russians did not identify with the category of “ethnic minorities”) or ideologically (by insisting that Russianness is a matter of kul’tura or natsional’nost’ rather than ethnic minority status). Instead, both the Humanists and the Loyalists argued that the problem with understanding Russianness as a matter of ethnic minority status was that it promoted a political project revolving around a sense of obida (injury and hurt).

Over the last two decades, Russian politicians pandered to their electorate's feelings of obida and engaged into a fruitless pursuit of rights. This was the reason why these politicians were always stuck in the parliamentary opposition. As far as the Humanists and the Loyalists were concerned, these politicians, politkany (politicos), had little to do with politika. People oriented towards politika had their hearts set on something other than just being elected into the parliament; they hoped one day to be invited to form a part of a governing coalition. This hope had merit. Insofar as Kristina and Pavel maintained a sense of Russianness based either on kul’tura or natsional’nost’, they satisfied those members of the Russian voting public that would vote on the ethnic principle. However, insofar as they maintained kul’tura and natsional’nost’ to be irreconcilable, they could not unite based on a shared sense of Russianness. This, as well as their refusal to orient their political programs around the question of rights, made them, in their own eyes, possible candidates for a governing coalition. However, insofar as various EU actors promoted institutionalization of difference under the aegis of the
“ethnic minority status,” they threatened this possibility.

In conclusion, I want to address three concerns which may arise in light of the above analysis. The first arises from the very focus of my narrative: electoral politics. Am I not writing about (and implicitly defending or legitimating) a position of “ethnic elites” or “ethnic entrepreneurs” who seek to manipulate rather than to represent their electorate? Indeed, The Humanists and the Loyalists were deeply invested in the question of votes. However, this investment was never hidden; instead, it was a matter of day-to-day conversation. Most of my interlocutors argued that the fact that the older generation of politicians (i.e., politikany) pandered to the electorate's sense of obida did not make them “representative.” Obida was only one dimension of Latvia's body politic; it had plenty of others. As members of the Humanists and the Loyalists never tired of telling me, the only room in Latvia where one could find Latvians and Russians sitting on the opposite sides of the same room was the parliamentary chamber. If a new generation of politicians—the ones committed to politika—would be invited to become a part of a governing coalition, then they would remedy what was seen as a dramatically non-representative situation in the parliament.

Another concern that I would like to forestall deals with my informants' appeal to politika over and against “Russianness” as a basis of their alliance. Anthropological work on ethnicity suggests that, in fact, such an appeal may entrench rather than destabilize ethnic difference. The possibility of ethnic boundaries depends not only on arbitrarily chosen cultural diacritica but also on structural differentiation of institutions. While already present in Barth's ground-breaking essay (1969), this argument is made more explicit by Ronald Cohen (1978) a decade later, when he writes that the differentiation of the political sector “allows for culturally distinctive groups to retain their ethnic differences as long as they accept sovereignty of the central government.” In other words, claiming a specific sector or a set of institutions as “political” may strengthen rather than weaken the salience of ethnic identity. The use of “politics” as a category of practice—my informants' constant appeal to politika—may be but an ideological ruse which, in fact, perpetuates ethnic difference precisely at the time when it claims politika rather than ethnicity to be the basis of alliance.

My response to this concern is twofold. First, the Humanists and the Loyalists never argued for the differentiation of the political sector. For them, politika was not about a particular set of institutions. This was well illustrated by their claim that the parliament

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9 I will address this concern in greater detail when I will analyze the tension between piar (Russian transliteration of “Public Relations”) and ideologija (ideology).

10 This did not mean that there were no “separate rooms” for Latvians and Russians. The most significant example of these “separate rooms” were Russian and Latvian schools. This said, there were no rules limiting parents' choice of possible school for their child. Russian parents could easily choose a Latvian school and Latvian parents could choose a Russian school. While I did not hear about these kind of choices being made, I did repeatedly hear about “Russian” parents choosing to enroll their children into a Latvian kindergarten and “Latvian” parents choosing to enroll their children into a Russian kindergarten to “lay the foundations” for future language proficiency.
was not a space for \textit{politika} because it bred opposition. Rather, \textit{politika} was about a certain attitude to life; an attitude which was not based on \textit{obida}. Further, \textit{politika} was about a highly specific configuration of one particular institution: a coalition-based government. In other words, there was nothing intrinsic about a particular institution which made it “political.”

Second, and more importantly, the Humanists and the Loyalists actively opposed understanding of politics in terms of a particular sphere. The older generation of Russian politicians claimed that in 1991, the Latvian political elite “politicized” Russianness when they did not automatically enfranchise Russians who could not trace their lineage to the interwar republic. Often, these politicians presented their lives in politics to be less of a vocation than of a necessity. They were “unwilling politicians” fighting for minority rights and and adopting the ethnic minority paradigm insofar as they wanted to remedy what they called “politicization” of Russianness in the early 1990s. In other words, these politicians conceived of the sphere of “rights” as limiting the sphere of “politics.” In contrast, the younger generation never understood \textit{politika} in the idiom of excess, as something that had to be limited by “law.” At stake in their distinction between \textit{politika} and \textit{politikanstvo} was not a separation of spheres but a possibility of a different world (a thesis I prove in subsequent chapters).

The third and last concern that I want to address concerns the relationship between \textit{politika} as my informants' emic category (i.e., a category of their practice) and “politics” as an etic category (i.e., a category of anthropological analysis). Following the example of many anthropologists, I find it important to investigate ethnographic categories precisely insofar as they promise to challenge disciplinary categories. The Loyalists' and the Humanists' use of \textit{politika} was far more targeted than the anthropological use of the term “politics.” Following anthropological engagement with an argument that power is all-pervasive, anthropologists have started to see “politics” everywhere (Candea 2011). While this expansion of “politics” may forewarn a shortsighted confusion of emic and etic categories, it may add little to developing a sense of perspective.

Searching for this perspective, I turn to Evans-Pritchard's (1940) study of the Nuer. Towards the end of his ethnography, Evans-Pritchard wonders whether or not he was justified in using the category of “politics” to explain social organization of a people who neither have formal political institutions nor the very concept of “politics.” He decides that he was justified, because the category of “politics” allowed him \textit{to do} something that has not been done before: to see the difference between lineages and tribes. This was no small task since tribes and lineages were often referred to by the same name even though they were not, in fact, the same; and the Nuer, even though using one name for both tribes and lineages, were acutely aware of the difference between them.

When reading \textit{The Nuer}, it would be shortsighted to confuse what “politics” does as an analytic tool with what “politics” happens to denote as a descriptive term. As a descriptive term, “politics” is Evans-Pritchard's shortcut for “being organized on the basis
of tribes rather than lineages.” As an analytic tool, “politics” allows Evans-Pritchard to distinguish between two seemingly interchangeable, yet very different, phenomena: tribes and lineages. The stakes of making this distinction are high: it is insofar as the Nuer are politically organized into tribes, rather than lineages, that they can move from place to place and find allies. In other words, as an analytic tool, “politics” allows Evans-Pritchard to identify that aspect of social organization which happens to matter most for the people that he studies.

Unlike Evans-Pritchard's informants, my informants had their own concept of politics; I referred to it as politika. Throughout the paper, I made certain not to confuse politika with “politics.” Yet, now, I would like to offer some thoughts as to the merit of their juxtaposition. Insofar as I took my informants' claim to be organized on the basis of “politics” seriously, I investigated the meaning that they attach to the word politika. As a descriptive term, “politics” or politika was my shortcut for “not being organized on the basis of hurt” and “pursuing coalition government.” However, attentiveness to politika also allowed me to challenge the concept of “ethnic politics” which, over the past two decades, became the dominant frame for thinking about Eastern Europe. It allowed me to see “Russianness” not as a basis of social organization—which, in my case, concerned the nature of inter-organizational alliances—but rather as mode of questioning the nature of the political subject. The fact that the Loyalists and the Humanists self-identified as “Russian” did not mean that their alliance was based on a shared sense of ethnic identity. Here, ethnicity was a flourish rather than a basis of social organization. “Ethnic politics” was indeed a misnomer.
This chapter explores the significance of “language” in conversations about Latvia’s Russian politics. Despite being a native language for about 40% of Latvia’s residents, Russian does not have any sort of official recognition. In fact, from the 1990s onwards, the Latvian government has undertaken a series of policies to limit the use of Russian in the public sphere: the state apparatus functions exclusively in Latvian; all private sector employees engaged with customer relations are obligated to speak Latvian; Latvian is increasingly the dominant language of instruction in secondary and post-secondary education.

Below, I analyze various actors’ engagement with language activism. In most cases, these actors have a very concrete and pragmatic understanding of language, taking it to be a means of communication and expression increasingly threatened by the government. However, this understanding exists alongside a more philosophical approach to language as an intrinsic dimension of thought of action, and, thus, a privileged site for diagnosing predicaments expanding far beyond formal politics. In fact, the acuteness of debates concerning language is evident in my interlocutors’ reliance on, and continued invention of, a meta-linguistic vocabulary which includes terms like slovobludie (“prodigal speech”), slovofon (“word aura”), and iazykovye shtampy (“word stamps”). It is further evident in various actors’ approach to language as a symptom of the post-socialist condition; that is, a widely-shared understanding that the stakes of the current moment can be revealed by analyzing how, why, and where people speak, read, and write. Thus, I discuss how, for some people, bad spelling becomes symptomatic of moral corruption and wayward sexuality; how others take free speech as a sign of economic abundance and procreative virility; and, how yet others, worry about a sudden appearance of words powerful enough to turn people into zombies.

Focusing on debates about the relationship between language and politics, I draw on anthropological work on language ideology—a relationship between, on the one hand, specific representations of language, and, on the other hand, various social positions, vested interests, and sites of contestation (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). Taking language ideology to be an interactional resource rather than a set of unconscious postulates (c.f. Briggs 1992), I analyze how various actors seek to mobilize support by arguing about language. The question of mobilizing support is particularly crucial in light of various attempts to “consolidate” Latvia’s Russians (discussed in Chapter 2); and, thereby, to overcome what’s understood to be Latvian “nationalism.”

Over the last decade, Latvia’s Russian activists have increasingly turned to the idiom of “value” to explain, justify, and further their efforts around the promotion of Russian
language. According to them, Latvian policy makers have repeatedly failed to appreciate “the value of language” (iazykovye tsennosti). Yet, the nature of this value—like the nature of language itself—is a subject of intense debate and disagreement which is often taken as an indication of Russian “factionalism.”

In the first part of this chapter, I analyze Russian language activists’ arguments about the kind of “value” that Latvian language reformers fail to appreciate. Here, I delineate the tensions between language activists who charge Latvian reformers with failing to recognize economic benefits of promoting Russian, and activists who accuse Latvian reformers with failing to recognize social benefits of promoting Russian.

In Section 1, I introduce Leonid, a full-time businessman, who approaches “value” in a narrowly economic sense and charges post-soviet language policy—particularly, state-mandated regulation of language in private enterprise—with stultifying economic growth. Like many activists, he argues that the value of Russian lies in its ability to improve commerce: to lower transactional costs among Latvia’s Russian-speaking and Latvian-speaking businessmen; to attract entrepreneurs from the European Union who lack linguistic skills necessary to pursue business opportunities in the Russian Federation; and, in the same vein, to attract entrepreneurs from the Russian Federation who lack linguistic skills necessary to pursue business opportunities in the European Union.

In Section 2, I introduce Feodor, a teacher and a historian who approaches “value” in a social sense. Like many language activists, Feodor argues that the value of Russian lies in its ability to ensure inter-generational continuity, strengthen kinship ties, and deepen a sense of self. Focusing on post-soviet educational reforms (often referred to as “Latvianization of Russian schools”), Feodor argues that Latvian language policy threatens generational continuity (because children no longer speak the language of their parents), undermines parental authority (because parents grow alienated from their children’s education), and threatens individual autonomy (understood to be based on one’s capacity to speak for and about oneself).

In Section 3, I show how young social activists attempt to reconcile the tension between economic and social approaches to language values (represented by Leonid’s and Feodor’s positions respectively). Their attempt draws heavily on the metaphor of the “bridge”—taken as a symbol of social and economic mediation (and valuation) of linguistic difference. At the same time, I show how other actors—the ones to whom I refer to as aspiring politicians—refuse to partake in their colleagues’ attempt to hammer out a shared understanding of “language values.” In contrast to most Russian language activists, aspiring politicians do not compel Latvian policy-makers to recognize the value of Russian language—either in the economic or social domain. Rather, they argue that the very approach to language in terms of “value”—regardless of how it is construed—leads to a political impasse.

In the second part of the chapter, I analyze aspiring politicians’ sometimes (admittedly) abstract and quasi-philosophical reflections about the relationship between
Language and politics. Section 3 links these reflections to growing concerns about Latvia’s youth supposed willingness / inability to develop a vocabulary necessary both for making sense of and partaking in political life; or to use one of my interlocutors’ idioms—to acquire language that will allow them to address and to be addressed by others.

Section 4 links my interlocutors’ reflections on language and politics to their anxiety that that, in today’s world, language no longer “passes through”—that is, genuinely influences and transforms—one’s consciousness; but, instead “spins around.” Somewhat unexpectedly, this anxiety coexists with a fear that contemporary politics heavily relies on “neuro-linguistic programming”: a use of particular verbal, syntactic, and grammatical structures to transform others’ behavior on the subconscious level.

In Section 5, I contextualize my informants’ anxieties about words that lack direction, weight, and cognizability in a broader conversation about the relationship between language and politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Much of this conversation emphasizes the distinction between Soviet politicians’ use of *ideologia* (ideology) and the post-Soviet politicians’ turn to *piar* (Russian transliteration of “PR”). Whereas *ideologia* is imagined as a set of concepts and narratives capable of producing a long-term change in one’s pattern of thought and action; *piar* is imagined as empty language—potentially leading to short-term gains yet undermining one’s trust in language in the long-run.

Section 6 discusses aspiring politicians’ attempt to undo pernicious effects of *piar* and find a conceptual vocabulary that can inspire, inform, and critique political action. Here, I analyze how my informants’ host weekly discussion sessions—ironically referred to by a Soviet neologism “*politlikbez*” (a shortened form of “liquidation of political illiteracy”)—in a hope to involve young people in conversations about contemporary politics.

1. **Stilted Entrepreneurs**

The city of Riga is cut in two by Daugava River. Beginning in the Valdai Hills, an upland half way between Moscow and St. Peterburg, Daugava crosses north-Western Russia, Belarus and Latvia before flowing into the Baltic Sea. A legend tells of a time when a tall man, called Big Kristaps, made his living carrying people on his shoulders across the river. One night, during a ravaging thunderstorm, Big Kristaps was visited by a child who pleaded to be helped crossing over. Unable to refuse, Kristaps braved the stormy waters and, even though the child grew heavier and heavier with each step that Kristaps made, he persevered and delivered him safely to the other shore. When he woke up the next morning, the child was gone. In his place there was a chest filled with gold coins. Overcome by mystery of the event, Kristaps never spent a single coin and continued his hard work for the rest of his life. After his death, this money was spent on building the town in the place where Riga was eventually established.

Medieval chroniclers tell of Riga’s founding by the Teutonic Knights in the early 13th century, as they colonized the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea subjugating and
Christianizing the indigenous population: the Baltic-speaking Curonians, Latgaliens, and Semigalians tribes and the Finno-Urgic speaking Livs. Located 30 km from the shores of a gulf which offered a respite to the ships crossing the Baltic’s windy waters, Riga was a safe harbor. Growing as a trade post on route from Scandinavia to the Byzantium, the city soon became a member of the Hanseatic League:a union of merchants and guildsmen keen on increasing and protecting their trade across Northern Europe.

Riga’s commercial past is not only the stuff of textbooks and guidebooks. It is, rather, constitutive of the very materiality of the city. The Old City’s architectural landmarks are guild halls and warehouses (some of which still remnants of rope— suspended from the attic for lifting up the ware from the ground floor). On a cold winter night—when the stores are closed and the tourists gone—the only thing that disturbs Old Riga’s fairy-like medievalism is the absence of city walls. As the expansion of Latvian industry made Riga the third largest city in the Russian Empire, the walls, which encircled the Old City for seven centuries, were demolished. As protestant ethic (or engineering initiative) would have had it, the rubble from the demolition was not wasted. It was used to create a landscaped park which stretched along the length of the Old City and connected it to neighborhood which became known as the city “Center.”

It was this park that Leonid—a self-identified Russian activist to whom I was introduced a week earlier—offered as a meeting point, when I asked him for an interview. In his early forties, Leonid finished his post-secondary education as the Soviet Union collapsed. Like most people of his age cohort, “he went into business” (something linked to construction); and made a decent living. Sitting down on a bench next to me, he put aside the traditional businessman paraphernalia— the cell phone belt buckle and a briefcase-shaped handbag—got a pack of “Russian Style” out of the inside pocket of his jean jacket, and lit up.

As I shortly found out, Leonid became politically active when he took part in 2004 protests against what was widely referred to as “Latvianization of Russian schools.” During the Soviet period, like other Republics, Latvia had two types of schools. First, there were “all Union” or “Soviet” schools where the language of instruction was Russian, explicitly defined as the language of international (i.e., Union-wide) communication. Second, there were “titular,” “national,” or “Republican” schools where the language of instruction was that of a nation holding a titular status within a particular republic (i.e., Latvian schools in the Latvian SSR, Armenian schools in the Armenian SSR, Georgian schools in Georgian SSR, etc.). Students in the national schools had very intense instruction in Russian language. When they graduated, they were typically fluent. Fluency in Russian was particularly important for those students who wanted to pursue scientific and technical training: engineering textbooks, machine manuals, production guidelines were all in Russian. The only area where fluency in Russian did not have day-to-day importance was the cultural sector: painters, musicians, artists, actors had to speak in Russian only when touring or training outside Latvia; their day-to-day activities did not require fluency.
Students in all-Union schools had negligible instruction in the titular language of a republic where the school happened to be located. Students studying in an all-Union school located in Latvian SSR had only a few hours of Latvian instruction a week (just like students in an all-Union school located in Armenian SSR had only a few hours of Armenian instruction a week). When these students graduated, they were not fluent in the republican language. Unless they wanted to pursue a career in the cultural sector (and they typically did not, since their parents were engineers, workers, and soldiers), they had no problem pursuing their post-secondary education and finding lucrative careers in Russian.

Over the four decades of Soviet rule, the two-track schooling system contributed to creating unequal bilingualism: a situation wherein Russian-speakers did not have to speak much Latvian; whereas Latvian-speakers had to speak good Russian. After the restoration of Latvian independence, Russian was not recognized as an official language (either on state or municipal level): commerce with state institutions—hospitals, courts, internal revenue service, immigration ministry—had to happen in Latvian. If someone did not speak Latvian and could not provide their own translator, all they could do was hope that they will be able to find a civil servant who will not mind speaking Russian; they did not have a right to receiving civil service in Russian. Insofar as granting of citizenship lay in the domain of the state, one had to speak Latvian to apply for citizenship: not only to fill out paperwork, but to pass the test (which included a test of Latvian).

Furthermore, in addition to language requirement for citizenship, the state instituted language requirement for employment. The state instituted an elaborate language certification system: it created a hierarchy of professions, mandating that an aspiring employee had to demonstrate a level of Latvian proficiency judged to be appropriate for a particular profession (doctors, for example, had to be more proficient than cab drivers). Thus, some professions—for example, a firefighter—demanded from an aspirant to pass both the citizenship test (since emergency services were one of the sectors where only citizens could work) and language certification (since firefighters would find themselves in a situation where they had to assist Latvian speakers).

School reform was a crucial site for changing unequal bilingualism: Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the all-Union schools became, legally speaking, “ethnic minority schools,” and, colloquially speaking, “Russian schools.” In the 1990s, the government began the educational reform which sought to increase the level of Latvian instruction: Latvian language and literature were now taught extensively; class hours for Russian language and literature decreased. However, while having lost its status as a separate discipline, Russian continued to be the dominant language of instruction across all disciplines.

In 2004, the government attempted to implement the bill that would end this: that would require that the general curriculum (i.e., Math, Chemistry, History, etc.) be taught in Latvian. The government's attempt to increase the dominance of Latvian in Russian schools led to significant social unrest. Parents of the students studying in these schools,
the students, and the teachers were opposed to the change. Self-identified Russian parliamentary politicians sought to capitalize on their discontent and helped organize massive demonstrations. Students from all over Latvia came out on Riga's streets to struggle against the reform; they succeeded in preserving the status quo: Russian continued to be the language for 60% of the general curriculum. It was during and after these protests that activists like Leonid became civically engaged.

Among the activists, the protests were framed as a matter of limiting the state’s interference; in fact, one of the most popular slogans among people on the streets was “Hands off Russian Schools!” While this slogan was chanted by people of all ideological persuasions, it drew heavily on the liberal concept of negative freedom: i.e., freedom from interference (rather than freedom to do something). As many of my interlocutors reflected, the protests were successful precisely because they were framed in terms of limiting the state’s interference rather than compelling the state’s involvement in a particular normative project: only the first goal could create a broad basis of support.

In fact, activism around matters of language was unique because it could be based on an attempt to limit state interference rather than to compel state involvement. In contrast, activism around matters of enfranchisement—the other major arena of activist work—could not but attempt to compel the state to act in some way: to offer automatic citizenship, to ease citizenship exam, to offer citizenship preparation classes, etc.

Leonid’s thoughts on activism, which he shared as his stick of Russian Style came to its ashy end, were informed by the desire to limit state interference. Blowing smoke in the direction of the Old City—the site of Latvia’s parliament—he said, “The situation with language is purely a political invention. If you go to the market,” he continued, now blowing smoke into the opposite direction, “You will see that everything is perfectly normal there. People can figure out for themselves which language to speak.”

Indeed, the market (billed in tourist brochures as the biggest outdoor market in Europe) was a place where Russian and Latvian were used interchangeably. The sellers’ constant call for customers’ to come up and look at the available merchandize was “Ludzu! Pozhailusta!”: the Latvian and the Russian words for “please,” spoken in a breath saturated with a monosyllabic desire.

For many activists—especially the ones without children—it was the market, rather than the school, which became paradigmatic of a site needing protection from state interference. The state’s attempts at “Latvianizing” the market place were most dramatically illustrated by language certification process and language inspection commissions. As far as activists like Leonid were concerned, it was one thing to require that public employees speak Latvian or to require that all interaction with state institutions happen in Latvian; it was quite another to make private entrepreneurs speak Latvian. Yet this is precisely what Latvian language legislation attempted to do: under the guise of protecting the interests of Latvian-speaking consumers in the market place, the state mandated that everyone who interacted with customers had to speak some Latvian.
Furthermore, it instituted language inspection commission which could inspect any private enterprise and fine entrepreneurs whose language skills were not up to the required standard.

2. Fallen Women

Whereas Leonid had me meet him right by the Old City, Feodor suggested that we get together about a five minute walk up Freedom (formerly Lenin’s) Boulevard: by the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Savior. Right by the cathedral there was a statue of Barclay De Tolly. A German-speaking descendant of Scottish Barclays (purportedly related to the English Berkleys) who settled in Livonia in the 17th century, Barclay De Tolly was the grandson of one of Riga’s mayors—and one of the most distinguished generals of the Russian Empire, a key actor during the Russian victory over Napoleon in the early nineteenth century. Like the Jewish Mandelstam (discussed in Chapter 1), Scottish-Livonian-German De Tolly was an exemplary Russian—albeit, in his case, for military, rather than poetic, feats.

Fedoor ran late; arriving—clad with shorts and a cap—he apologized: his neighbor’s fuse blew out; and they couldn’t fix it by themselves; so he had to help.

Feodor, like Leonid, was a self-identified Russian activist; like Leonid, he also had a tangible basis of support behind him. However, he did not share Leonid’s idealization of the market. His activism was of a different variety: for him, the problem was not with state interference; but, with the expansion of the market logic to all domains of life. This was particularly true when it came to Russian. People were selling out, Feodor explained.

He talked at length about the new “type of person” who appeared in post-Soviet Latvia: “the Russian for hire”; the turn of phrase which explicitly linked these people to ‘girls-for-hire.’ In Feodor’s eyes, the state was not so much an entity which interfered with the marked, than one extension of the market. Like Leonid, he also disliked the politicians. However, whereas for Leonid, the problem with the politicians was their nationalist ideology—their ‘nationalism’ was, in fact, an ideology which interfered with the market—for Feodor, it was their money-grabbing. Therein, the two positions reached their most explicit contrast: the view of politicians as ideological (albeit wrongly so) [notice how this position is going to be criticized by the Loyalists; but what about their position about people who are in the parliament only to make money / to business; why do they care about individual biographies; i.e., why don’t they reduce everything to some sort of ‘instrumentalism’—like Leonid does] and the view of politicians as instrumental.

“Russians for sale” were people who traded in their Russianness—either to state or private enterprises. Both—the state and the private enterprise—had a demand for these Russians; its just that their customers were different. In the former case, the customers were the international community invested in making sure that Russians had some sort of representation; whereas, in the latter case, it was other Russian consumers.
The problem with being for “hire” was that it exemplified the lack of moral probity. This, in fact, was the major contrast between Leonid and Feodor. For Leonid, the market was a site where people could act ‘morally’; for Leonid, this was not the case. The problem with being “a Russian for hire” is that, if today, you sold out your Russianness; you could sell out anything. And besides, if you sold your Russian schools, who was to say that, if the market provided different incentives—if, say, it no longer privileged style (and reduced language to the means of communication; this story makes a mockery of a statement that ‘language is a means to communication’: because, obviously, the message is reduced by the girl who doesn’t know her suffixes)—people would follow.

The set of anxieties which Feodor shared was very well summarized in a piece of news which circulated among the activists. This was a piece about a female student’s inability to distinguish between two adjectives—padshii and pavshii—in an essay about WWII. In English, both words are translated as “fallen.” In English, the meaning of “fallen” depends on the context in which it is used. In Russian, the meaning “fallen” is indicated by a slight modification of the word's root. Pavshii (with a v) denotes an “honorable fall”; it's an adjective appropriate for the phrase “a fallen soldier” (i.e., a soldier shot in the line of duty). Padshii (with a d) denotes a “dishonorable fall” or “fall from grace”; it’s an adjective appropriate for the phrase “a fallen woman.” The student's who confused two adjectives repeatedly wrote of a padshii soldat: a soldier who was fallen in a manner characteristic of a prostitute.

The point of the story was not reducible to the deterioration of education: it could have been made with any example. What was particular about this example was that it concerned what has become a sacred topic: the self-sacrifice of soldiers; something which is often termed as ‘their gift of life.’ Making any mistake when writing about soldiers would be bad enough—partially because the phrase ‘fallen soldier,’ in Russian, like in English, has acquired a stock character and thus should be known by any child. However, making a mistake which confuses their gift of life (their disinterested sacrifice) with the self-interested sale-of-self characteristic of a prostitute is even worse.

The older activists were afraid that there was nothing—including oneself—that could not be sold and bought at will. It was important that the scandal around the student who could not distinguish between honorable and dishonorable falls happened at the time when Riga’s streets were covered with posters of a blow-up sex-doll with the following message: “Sex Tourism? Sex Terrorism!” It was important that the student was a young woman—still a girl, many would say—that, in confusing different kinds of falls, not only violated the memory of her ancestors but also fell herself; in other words, she was a sell-out.

3. Common Values?

In the preceding section, I described my encounter with two prominent Russian activists—Feodor and Leonid. Even though Feodor and Leonid both oppose state involvement in the labor market and the educational system (which they subsume under the category of
“Latvian nationalism”), and, even though both are very concerned with the status of Russian language, they are unable to work together. In fact, their different understandings of language and divergent diagnoses of the post-socialist condition are often used to illustrate the problem of “Russian factionalism” — something that is persistently blamed for failing to curb the effect of “Latvian nationalism.”

Many of my readers may feel that I take my informants’ approaches to language at face value. Some may charge me with reproducing rather than challenging Feodor’s sense that the current state of Russian in Latvia testifies to a widespread moral decay or, Leonid’s sense that it highlights economic stultification. In a related vein, some readers may charge me with reproducing Feodor’s and Leonid’s perspectives on the post-socialist condition — particularly, their reduction of various problems either to moral corruption or economic retardation. After all, these perspectives sit uneasily with many anthropologists’ attempts to emphasize a complex imbrication of economic and moral domains (often, against an assertion of their independence).

Yet, like in previous chapters, I pause before turning to disciplinary insights; and, instead, study how Feodor’s and Leonid’s positions are taken up by other local actors. These actors are young men and women who meet at a round-table dedicated to problems of Russian youth and sponsored by the annual conference of Russian compatriots. Yet, like in previous chapters, I am hesitant to speak of “Russian youth activists”; and, instead, continue to differentiate between actors who have a clearly identifiable position (in this section, young social activists of various ideological persuasions) and actors whose position and vision cannot be easily defined (young men and women to whom I refer to as “aspiring politicians.”) As the proceeding account shows, the first set of actors challenge what they take to be the older generation’s unwise divide between “moral” and “economic” perspectives on the post-socialist condition. Instead, they appeal to an ambiguous notion of value in an attempt to, on the one hand, transcend Russian factionalism, and, on the other hand, to protect Russian values. The second set of actors (which cannot be easily identified) does not support this effort. While they do not offer a clear-cut alternative, they challenge an understanding of language in terms of value—moral, economic, or undefined. At stake in this refusal is a concern with “spinning words”; and an understanding of the current predicament as characterized by a lack of political and historical “consciousness” — and proper political lexicon—rather than political corruption or stultification of Russian values.

* Shortly after I began my fieldwork, young social activists (some of whom were affiliated with Leonid, others with Feodor, and yet others with neither one) sought to unite forces. Articulated under the banner of “organizational consolidation,” the activists’ pursuit of unity spoke to the anxiety that “Russian factionalism” perpetuated “Latvian nationalism.”

During one section of the Annual Compatriot Conference, a number of young activists distributed a document which called for consolidation based on shared “values.” The document read:
We are conscious that Russian language and Russian culture constitute for us, the representatives of the new generation, a value. We, the youth of Latvia, count ourselves to be a conductor-translator [provodnik-perevodchik] between the East (Russia) and the West.

Like English “value,” Russian tsennost’ is ambiguous, referring both to the economic and the moral domain. Whereas generally activists took care to specify which domain they were referring to when speaking about “values,” this time, section organizers’ left the word ambiguous in a hope to attract people of various persuasions (or, to quote one of my interviewees, to unite “the pro-Russia socialists” with “the pro-Europe liberals”).

The ploy did not work: the ambiguity of the word “value” immediately led to a heated—and a well-trodden—argument. One camp argued that language is a “communicative resource”; and that Russians should unite in order to promote linguistic capitalization. Another camp argued that language is an “inalienable good”; and that Russians should unite in order to prevent linguistic degeneration.

Yet, not everyone fell into these camps. A number of young people took issue not so much with the organizers’ purposefully ambiguous notion of value than with their attempt to cast Russians in the role of “conductor-translators.” Keeping with the proposal’s figurative tone, these other—not easily identifiable—actors rebuffed the proposed figure by comparing it with a child stuck in a fairy-tale fantasy, a homeless construction worker, and a self-centered train steward.

Milky Rivers

The first person countered the figure of the “conductor-translator” by exclaiming that, yet again, people were “talking about rivers of milk and shores of compote (molochnye reki i kisel’nye berega)!” This remark relied on the symbolism of “rivers” — their connotation of creating connections; that is, doing something akin to the proposed conductor-translator. In Riga, the symbolism of rivers is particularly strong because of city lore about Daugava as a commercial route—reinforced in popular historical discourse and daily sightings of ferries from Stockholm (the non-parenthetical “West” of the proposal). However, instead of an actual river, the young man talked of mythical rivers found in folk-tales. His remark dismissed the supposedly visionary claim of the proposal, rhetorically denigrating it to an act of infantile imagination: milky rivers are found in Russian folktales, alongside flying roasted partridges. They are an image of an abundance which is illusory, childish, and potentially malignant. Comparing the conductor-translator to a child mesmerized with a milky river with compote shores amounted to suggesting that only children thought that value could be generated by mediation. These children were not only mistaken but also inattentive: if they read their fairy-tales carefully they

1 The word translated as “compote” is kisel’. A traditional desert found in Baltic, Finnish, and Slavic cuisines, kisel’ is a cold soup thickened with potato starch. The phrase “rivers of milk and shores of compote” appears in the fairy tale called “The Geese-Swans” (Gusi-Lebedi).
would be suspicious of easy gains.

Under the Bridge

The second person rebuffed the figure of conductor-translator by using the figure of the bridge. Like rivers, bridges are symbolic of creating connections central to the task of conductor-translators. The use of this symbolism grew markedly over the past years: bridges appear on euro bills and a figured prominently in the names of EU-wide conferences, exhibits, etc. In Riga, this symbolism is particularly salient not only because the city is connected by bridges over Daugava, which crosses the city in half, but also because, over the last several years, there has been a lot of public discussion about corrupt contractors busy constructing a new bridge; and, because, one of the city’s major bridges had repeated “climbers”—people who presumably wanted to jump off into the river (or, as some Rigans claimed, to enjoy Riga’s skyline which is a UNESCO heritage site).

“When will we finally stop this incessant bridge-talk?” the young woman asked. “When will we remember that people who build bridges end up sleeping under them?” The question referenced what, to people in the room, was common-knowledge: the fact that Latvia’s economic collapse was in part brought on by the construction bubble. During the bubble, construction workers were very well-paid: one could make up to $1000 per month on a building site, while continuing to study part-time. Retrospectively, these salaries were seen as highly inflationary; not reflecting the true value of construction work. Furthermore, insofar as most young people did construction “on the side,” they spent their money on university tuition fees, vacation, and down payments on expensive cars (which, by the time I began fieldwork were reposed). In other words, the abundance brought by the construction boom turned out to be illusory: not much different from the abundance of milky rivers of fairy-tales.

Moving Melons

The third person expressed his dissatisfaction with conductor-translators during a smoking break. “These Mikhalkovian conductors (mikhalkovskie provodniki)!” he exclaimed, “When will they be bone already?” The young man’s exclamation referenced one of the most famous, if episodic characters of the late-Soviet cinema: the train conductor in El’dar Riazanov’s 1982 film “A Railway Station for Two” (Vokzal dlia dvoih). The film makes use of one of the most important symbols of Soviet progress: the train. However, the person who is shown as effectively running the train is not a quasi-mythical machinist of early Soviet literature, but, rather, a train-car steward (the conductor if one literally translates Russian provodnik), named Andrei. Andrei moves goods rather then progress: he traffics melons from southern to northern Russia and leaves them with a railway café waitress who, having to feed her elderly mother and son, sells them at a premium. Clearly not a hero, Andrei is too slimy and insignificant to be a villain; his appearance is episodic: the film’s plot is about the café waitress who meets a pianist riding in Andrei’s train car. The qualifier “Mikhalkovian” referenced the actor
who played Andrei: Nikita Mikhalkov. For many people across the political spectrum, Mikhalkov-the-person embodied Andrei-the-character: equally favored by Communist and post-communist governments, he was taken to be an ultimate post-Soviet turncoat.

4. Spinning Words

What was at stake in aspiring politicians’ turn to these three figures—a child, a construction worker, and a train steward—over and against the conference organizers’ vision of conductors-translators mediating between the West and the West. On the one hand, they all seemed to connote to a predicament of address: a child stuck in a fantasy, a worker stuck in a bridge, and a steward stuck on a train all lacked a certain kind of personhood, often signaled by Russian words for “consciousness” (soznanie) and “conscientiousness” (soznatel’nost’), and taken to be necessary for meaningful speech. On the other hand, these figures connoted an inability of being addressed by someone: shores of compote, undersides of bridges, and running trains were all non-places of sorts, inaccessible by major communication routes.

Daily conversations about language, which were not as figuratively elaborate as the conversation during the compatriot conference, drew much of their power from the idiom of “spinning.” This idiom simultaneously marks a relationship between language, economy, time, and personhood. To describe oneself as being in a state of “spinning”—to say “I am spinning” (ia kruchus’)—is to talk of one’s sense of being like a rodent in a hamster wheel: moving at an incredibly high speed, yet remaining stationary; that is, achieving nothing. To describe oneself as performing “spinning” in a linguistic sense—to say “I spin it up” (ia rasskruchivau)—is to talk of one’s attempt to use rhetoric in order to increase the perceived value of a particular object. To describe oneself as doing “spinning” in an economic sense—to say “I spin” (ia prokruchivau)—is to talk of one’s attempt to speculate. As the semantic connection between these three verbs—krutit’sia, rasskruchivat’, and prokruchivat’—suggests, they all form an aspect of one activity. Once, when I asked an interlocutor how he was doing, he responded, kruchus’, rasskruchivaiu, prokruchivaiu. He was: (a) running from place to place; (b) trying to convince people to buy something; (c) that he himself bought earlier but hoped to sell at a higher price; and (d) not being particularly successful.

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According to Stas, language activists focused too much on the relationship between Russian and Latvian and not nearly enough on a general crisis of language. Whereas his colleagues framed this crisis in terms of “address,” Stas talked about “words passing through.” According to Stas, the major issue was “that nobody let words pass through them.” When I asked for an example of “words passing through,” he responded, “Reciting poetry.” This example was telling for three closely linked reasons.

First, it emphasized that spinning could not be explained by the lack of correspondence between words and objects. The work of poetry was not that of accurately describing the
world. If reciting poetry was opposite of spinning words, then, attempts to limit spinning could not be exhausted by the pursuit of accurate description.

Second, insofar as Stas’s explanation emphasized reciting, rather than composing, poetry, it indicated that the problem with spinning was not a lack of authorial originality. If reciting poetry was opposite of spinning words, then, attempts to limit spinning could not be exhausted by the pursuit of new ideas and a call to be an original author (to make sure that one never repeats what one has heard elsewhere). Similarly, Stas’s explanation emphasized that spinning could not be explained by the speaker’s lack of intentionality: nobody would ask of a person reading poetry whether or not he or she “really meant” what they said. If reciting poetry was opposite of spinning words, then attempts to limit spinning could not be exhausted by ascertaining the speaker’s intent.

Third, insofar as Stat’s explanation emphasized recitation rather than reading, it emphasized the public aspect of poetic speech. If reciting poetry was opposite of spinning words, then attempts to limit spinning by withdrawing from public discourse into the privacy of one’s home or quasi-privacy of one’s friends’ homes would be faulty.

Stas’s argument that ‘spinning’ could not be prevented by the pursuit of ‘correspondence’ between words and objects resonated powerfully with the aspiring politicians’ distrust of conspiracy theories. One day, I was party to an argument between social activists and aspiring politicians. The object of discussion was the possibility of establishing some sort of a ‘media’ outlet. Social activists argued that the most significant problem faced by youth today was “inaccessibility of information channels” or to use the persuasive idiom, “information blockade.” I saw their point clearly: it was very difficult to get the journalists to cover youth events; and, when they did, they were likely to use ‘standard language.’ Also, events had to be clearly ‘political’ or ‘cultural’: something in the middle didn’t fit the formal. Finally, unless you had connections with businessmen and party members, it was very difficult. And, this of course, not counting the fact that it was almost impossible to get coverage if you decided to put something up without consulting people in the party (like Pavel did when the Mock City Council). However, I grew very surprised when aspiring politicians argued that the problem is not ‘information,’ but, rather, the fact that people don’t respond to it; or, respond to it, ‘inadequately.’ Once I saw Ludmila say that the problem is not that people don’t know what’s going on: she talked about the attendance of an event that she and the Humanists have organized: they had some funding which they spend on informing people; yet, nobody came. As far as she was concerned, the problem was with ‘consciousness.’

Concern with consciousness recurred all the time. For aspiring politicians, one of the most nefarious forms that spinning could take was “NLP”: this is a theory, discredited in the Western academy, concerning the effect that words have on people. On the one hand, the interest in NLP reflected a characteristically socialist conviction that subjecthood is shaped through—rather than expressed by—language. (To a certain extent, it was this conviction which made it possible for language to be a ‘sign’ of moral worth: i.e., how you spoke was not separable from your person). However, the issue was whether or not
these words enabled the subject to speak back. The problem with NLP is that it produced people who were incapable of addressing. These were referred to as *bydlo* and *molodniak*: words which associated with animals. Thus, the anti-hero—the object of concern—for aspiring politicians was not a ‘stilted entrepreneur’ or the ‘fallen woman,’ but rather someone who wasn’t quite human at all. It was this that resonated with images of child, worker, and train conductor.

The lack of subjecthood was expressed explicitly when people talked about political education; the purpose of the schools was to cultivate ‘consciousness.’ Yet, here ‘consciousness’ was not individualized ‘psychology’ but rather one’s capacity to see one’s role in the world, to see how one occupies a position in the world. The conceptual crisis that aspiring politicians were so deeply concerned with was being able to see one’s place in the world—of being addressed; it was this sense that was expressed by the figures of the child, the worker, and the train conductor: a blindness of sorts; a lack of perspective. This was a very different predicament than that of the stilted entrepreneur and the fallen woman: in both cases, there was a very clear vision but just strayed from it.

5. From *Ideologia* to *Piar*

On a more abstract level, concern with spinning leads to concerns over the substitution of “ideology” (*ideologia*) by *piar* (Russian transliteration of “PR”). Ideology (*ideologia*) is a conscious commitment to a particular vision of the world. As far as my interlocutors were concerned, “real” political organizations had to be based on this commitment. The problem of their time was not that “nationalism was the dominant ideology” — and, as such, undermined language values (whether political or economic) — but, rather, that *ideologia* was becoming replaced by *piar*.

In Russian, *piar* connotes an instrumentalist pragmatism rather than a principled commitment, a means-ends rationality, and malicious duplicity—all exercised in an attempt to subjugate another human being to one's own will rather than to “make them conscious of their role in the historical process” (something enabled by *ideologia*). Here, the focus on individual will is of significant importance: whereas *ideologia* is imagined to be a basis of a conscious collectivity, *piar* is understood to be a strategy for individual advancement.

Another way to appreciate the difference between *ideologia* and *piar* it to approach them as various forms of relating language and personhood to political economy. *Ideologia* is a series of postulates which are “embodied” (in one's soul and consciousness) rather than simply “known” (held as “information” in one's brain and liable to become obsolete or useless). Young political activists argue that *ideologia* is not subject to economic transactions. It is something that changes a person in his or her entirely, not something that person can change at will. However, as far my interlocutors are concerned, the problem with *piar* is not that it can be exchanged; but, rather, that it makes exchange itself impossible. If, for the older generation the post-socialist predicament has to do either with the fact that everything has a price and can be bought and sold at will, or,
alternatively, that the government interferes with private citizens' economic transactions; then, for the younger generation, the post-socialist predicament is that meaningful circulation—including speech—has become jeopardized.

To emphasize the difference between ideología and piar further, I will attend to pedagogical projects implicit within them. Insofar as ideología requires a conscious commitment to a series of postulates, it necessitates education (obrazovanie) or cultivation which the young generation of activists understand to be quite different from knowledge (znanie) and instruction. The pedagogical project emergent in ideología can change a person for the better rather than just make a person better at something. In contrast, piar rests on what was referred to as “neuro-linguistic programming” (i.e., advanced brainwashing) rather than cultivation of consciousness. It neither changes the person for the better or makes him or her better at something; rather, it destroys his or her very personhood: something suggested by the frequent argument that piar results in bydloizatsia (a word that can be translated as “making of a beast”); or, to use a phrase current among my informants, yet potentially lost on many Russian speakers, due to its complex wordplay, “turning youth (molodezh) into hatchlings (molodniak).”

6. Talking Politics

In November, as Riga plunged into the coldest winter of the decade, Pavel and I waded through the snow towards the neighborhood known as “the quiet center.” At the turn of the twentieth century, when Riga became the Russian Empire's third most-industrialized city and the second-largest port, this was the neighborhood where the newly-rich set up lavish apartments in then just-built Jugendsil buildings. Following Soviet expropriation, the apartments underwent “condensation” (uplotnenie): they were turned into communal flats housing several families at once. After the restitution and privatization of property in the early 1990s, they once again transformed; now, becoming homes to successful entrepreneurs, foreign dignitaries, finance firms, and, in a few cases, political parties.

It was in one of these apartments that Kristina held her “Club of Practical Philosophy.” The purpose of the club was to remedy “the lack of political education,” which, according to Kristina, was endemic to post-socialism. Like Kristina, Pavel too was preoccupied with “political education” and has already developed his own initiative to remedy it: “Political School of the Loyalists.” Over the past two months, Pavel's school has been extraordinarily well attended. [ Kristina knew this and was interested in having Pavel comment on her Club and, perhaps, to offer advice.

In what once must have been a living room—one of the walls was lined with blue and

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2 Molodezh is a noun used to describe humans; molodniak, which shares the same root, describes young animals.
3 When it came to industry, Riga followed St. Petersburg and Moscow; when it came to shipping—Odessa (located on the Black Sea in the Ukraine).
4 Many of these buildings were designed by Mikhail Eisenstein, Sergei Eisenstein's father.
white porcelain tiles connected to the kitchen furnace—ten secondary school students sat along a slim plastic table. At the head of the table sat a young bespectacled man with a buzz, military-style haircut. Kristina introduced him as Valdis, saying that she invited him to give a guest lecture on “the state.” In the hour and a half that followed, Valdis covered the difference between divine and natural rights, monarchical and national sovereignty, discussed the treaty of Westphalia, and, last but not least, delineated Hobbes’s, Lock’s, and Rousseau’s theories of social contract.

Valdis’s ease with the material, command of voice, style of narration easily rivaled most university lecturers. Yet, praise for the lecture was not forthcoming. A young woman in the audience thanked Valdis for his lecture on “the state in general” (o gosudarstve voobshe). Then, she asked him if he could please say something about Latvia “concretely” (konkretno). Valdis shook his head, saying that this was not possible. He prided himself on speaking “concretely”: everything he talked about so far could be checked against specific sources; he was happy to provide citations, in case someone was interested. However, it was impossible to speak “concretely” about Latvia. Contemporary journalism was little but “white word noise” (slovofon). All the information was produced by PR-men (piarshchiki) who “spun” (rasskurchivaiut) everything according to their clients’ wishes. “If you read Latvian state documents, then you think that everything is OK. If you read Russian documents, then you think that Latvia is a state spawning nationalists and fascists. If you read Western documents, then we are somewhere in between,” he explained.

The idiom of “spinning,” which Valdis used to justify his focus on “general history of the state” and to explain his refusal to “talk about Latvia specifically,” drew its rhetorical power from its ability to simultaneously mark a relationship between language, economy, and time. To describe oneself as being in a state of “spinning”—to say “I am spinning” (ia kruchus’)—is to talk of one’s sense of being like a rodent in a hamster wheel: moving at an incredibly high speed, yet remaining stationary; that is, gaining nothing. To describe oneself as performing “spinning” in a linguistic sense—to say “I spin it up” (ia rasskruchivau)—is to talk of one’s attempt to use rhetoric in order to increase the perceived value of a particular object. To describe oneself as doing “spinning” in an economic sense—to say “I spin” (ia prokruchivau)—is to talk of one’s attempt to buy low and sell high, or, to use the English idiom, “to flip.” The three verbs—krutit’sia, rasskruchivat’, and prokruchivat’—share the same root. Hence, when people talk of any one of these “spinnings,” they often refer to performing all three activities at once. While most often the connection between these three activities remains implicit and assumed, sometimes it is explicated. Once, when I asked Andrei how was doing, he responded with a grim smile, “Kruchus’, rasskruchivaiu, prokruchivaiu.” He was madly running from place to place trying to convince people to buy something that he himself bought earlier and hoped to sell at a higher price.

Valdis used this idiom to describe an interpretive activity: to “spin” various events—potentially given to multiple interpretations—into a coherent narrative which legitimated a particular political agenda. However, it was clear to all of Valdis’s listeners that this
interpretive activity expanded far beyond the political sector; it was the major operating principle of post-socialist economy. For aspiring politicians, the market was neither a site where values of certain products (like language skills) could be realized, nor a site where moral values became transactional and therefore corrupted. Rather, it was the site where products were “spun”—or, to use an English equivalent, “flipped”—to realize a profit. Success of “flipping” depended on the success of “spinning”: i.e., convincing the buyer that there was some value-added to the product that they were considering to buy. However, this was an illusion: people who “flipped” needed people who “spun” (the PR-men) precisely because they had to convince their audience that whatever object they offered had value while, in fact, it did not. In this frame, political parties were little different from, say, travel agencies: both were intermediaries who “flipped” rather than produced; both relied heavily on “spinning”—employing PR-men, advertising agencies, image-consultants—in order to create an illusion of value. Therein lay a significant distinction between aspiring politicians and social activists. Insofar as social activists understood their predicament in terms of corruption or stultification of value, they evaluated their current predicament against an idealized value. Insofar as aspiring politicians understood their predicament in terms of an illusory value, they had no easily-available standard for (and therefore could not conduct) such an evaluation.

The difference between aspiring politicians and social activists resonated with the difference among Latvia’s Russian-speaking residents. Some of them had a clear sense of values—either economic or moral—which became either stultified or corrupted; these residents were typically “tuned into” Latvia’s political discourse. However, many people did not partake in any social or political project and adopted what they referred to as a “non-political” or an “anti-political” position and refused to engage in conversation about politics all together. (This was a contemporary incarnation of a well-documented Soviet attitude of isolating oneself from ‘the political world’; a position which became much more available when participation in political discourse was no longer necessary for everyday life) For them, any conversation about politics was a form of “prodigal speech” (slovobludie).

In fact, many of the people who listened to Valdis’s lecture—who attended the Loyalists’ and the Humanists’ meetings—came from places where this position was dominant. They were surrounded by people—teachers, parents, and friends—who refused to talk about politics in Latvia. These people did not take kindly to Valdis’ refusal to speak “concretely” about the Latvian state. While they agreed with Valdis that their predicament was that of “spinning,” they did not think that it was impossible to talk about Latvian politics “concretely.” It was their commitment to find a “concrete” language that made them come out on a cold winter night to hear Valdis;

During my fieldwork, the opposition between “spinning” and “concreteness” recurred. The Loyalists spent a great deal of time looking for a language which would be “concrete” and discussing the best ways to avoid spinning. As Pavel explained to me after Valdis’s lecture, his attempt to avoid spinning was laudable, yet ill conceived. According to Pavel, spinning was not a phenomenon endemic to certain events (like post-socialist
transformation in Latvia); it was also a phenomenon endemic to certain concepts. Three concepts were particularly liable to spinning and thus not suitable for a meaningful conversation about Latvian politics: “nationalism,” “party,” and “state.”

All aspiring politicians realized how endemic the concept of “nationalism” has become since the restoration of the Latvian independence. Yet, Pavel warned people attending his talk against describing politicians as “nationalist.” The party which was often described—both by the Russian-Latvian as well as foreign press—as “nationalistic” was called “For Fatherland and Freedom.” Yet, for members of this party, nationalism was little other than a spin: public talk, a soap-box, a means to get heard. It was a matter of public record, Yulia and others insisted, that members of this party were, in the Soviet period, members of the Communist Party and, in the post-Soviet period, accepted money from Russia's business elite.5 “For Fatherland and Freedom” was juxtaposed with “All for Latvia,” —a party which at that point did not have any parliamentary seats. According to Pavel, members of this party could be legitimately described as “nationalist”; they were not afraid to voice positions which would cost them support of moderate voters; thus, “their words had weight.” This demarcation was hardly an empty lip-service. When Pavel established a mock city council, he insisted on inviting representatives from “All for Latvia” despite being told not to do so by his allies in the parliament. Here, the criteria was less of “ideological correctness” —i.e., the tension between ‘nationalist’ and ‘civic’ positions—than sincerity which was credited with giving words weight.

As Pavel explained to the attendees of his own political school, it was difficult to have a meaningful conversation about the ‘state’ because the concept could be “spun” in any way that the speaker wanted. In fact, this was Pavel’s major complaint with respect to Valdis’s lecture. The immediate context for this point was the argument over whether or not “state” was a form that could be “interrupted.” This question arose in light of the Latvian parliament’s adoption of the doctrine of state continuity in the 1990s: i.e., the position that Latvian statehood was not interrupted; a position which legitimated non-extension of Latvian citizenship to Russians. This position was reinforced by the recent debates over the statehood of Southern Ossetia and Kosovo. In this context, “what was a state?” was no less puzzling a question than “What was the nation?” Thirdly, this referenced a longstanding conversation—and obsession about—gosudarstvennost’ in Russian political discourse. Trying to avoid spinning words, Pavel encouraged people to talk about “government regimes” rather than “states”: about the difference between parliamentary and presidential republics, unicameral and bicameral parliaments, etc.

Another concept liable to being spun was “the party.” As Pavel explained, the “party” used to be the concept designating a group of people who came together based on a shared ideology—in this context understood as a conscious commitment to a particular

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5 Russia’s business elite was suspected of having a vested interest in keeping the relationship between Latvian and Russian government (i.e., between Riga and Moscow) as tense as possible. These businessmen were suspected of keeping vast amounts of money in Latvian banks; treating Latvia as a “nearby Switzerland.” Fragility of diplomatic contacts was taken to be indicative of the Russian government's inability to reach this money.
vision of the world. However, the majority of today’s parties were not “ideological.” Instead, today’s parties were fragile conglomerations of people around the person of the leader. If one hoped to have a “concrete” conversation about politics, then one could not focus on party programs. The programs were lifted from the internet, assembled at last minute, written by journalists. They were filled with “stock phrases” (*iazykovye shtampy*) and said nothing concrete. Having a meaningful conversation about politics required discussing party leaders: something that Pavel did with utmost scrupulousness spending two hours going over biographies.

Despite being critical of one another, Valdis and Pavel shared the concern over “concreteness.” In both cases, this concern led to the disappearance of Latvia as an object of analysis. In the case of Valdis—due to his historical abstraction that explicitly aimed to talk about the state in general; in the case of Pavel—due to this encyclopedic particularism which focused on individual politicians. Students who attended Pavel’s lectures were just as unsatisfied as students who attend Valdis’s lectures. Yet, they kept coming: it was the only space where it was possible to have an honest conversation about the lack of ‘concreteness.’

In Chapter 2, I discussed how aspiring politicians—a group of actors that are quite distinct from mainstream, easily identifiable political actors—avoid framing the problem of Russian noncitizenship as a matter of rights. They avoid this frame because they aspire not only to be elected into the parliament but to also to have a chance of participating in a governing coalition, something that mainstream political actors, particularly those who are keen on self-identifying as Russian and those who compel state to recognize Latvia’s “Russians,” have not accomplished. Furthermore, I argued that aspiring politicians come together insofar as they recognize that there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, desire to participate in formal politics—i.e., the desire to appeal to one’s constituents and one’s colleagues—and, on the other hand, the compulsion to either assert difference (by self-identifying as a minority subject) or to suppress difference altogether. Finally, I argued that their sociality speaks to this particular predicament—and a self-consciously articulated sense of being committed to *politika*—rather than to a particular identity or a goal.

In this chapter, I turned from the question of noncitizenship to the question of language; and shifted focus from the Latvian state’s refusal to recognize many of its Russian residents as citizens to the Latvian state’s refusal to recognize Russian as an official language. Correspondingly, I attended to how various political actors engaging questions like: How can the government be compelled to recognize the value of Russian language? Why is speaking Russian important? How should Russian language be promoted? Actors, who assume fairly identifiable positions with respect to formal political institutions, answer these questions by turning to various idioms of *value* (which are distinct, albeit related, to the idioms of *right* explored in Chapter 2). Actors, whose

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6 When I was asked about my research methodology and needed to explain “participant observation,” I always contrasted it with interviewing. This always communicated my point.
positions are not very clear—young men and women to whom I refer to as “aspiring politicians”—do not approve of this turn; but, instead, partake in discussions about language by engaging the problem of politika.

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In the first two sections of the chapter, I traced a conflict between two older Russian activists. Here, my protagonists are Leonid and Feodor — two men who share a grave concern over the effects of “Latvian nationalism” on Russian language; yet, at the same time, are unable to work together. In the eyes of many, they illustrate the problem of “Russian factionalism” that is so often blamed for the persistence of Latvian nationalism in the first place. Analyzing concerns with “factionalism,” I showed how matters, seemingly limited to issues of language, come to occupy a central role in much broader narratives about the aftermath of state socialism. In the third section of the chapter, I discussed an attempt—spearheaded by young Russian social activists also concerned with the effect of Latvian nationalism on the Russian language—to reconcile the two diagnoses of the post-socialist predicament. Here, I looked at how young social activists appeal to the concept of “value” in order to emphasize a similarity and/or find a middle ground between “entrepreneurial” and “moral” positions; and, as a result to protect and/or capitalize on the “value” of Russian in a period marked by Latvian nationalism. In the third part of the chapter, I analyzed how aspiring politicians—a set of actors who are not easily identifiable either as party- or parliamentary-politicians or political activists—refuse to appeal to value. As in previous chapters, I argued that their refusal speaks to their concern with politika. On the most immediate level, this concern has to do with electoral politics: unlike social activists, aspiring politicians are invested in the electoral system. On a deeper level, politika speaks to aspiring politicians' hesitance to run on promises of “limiting politics” (which, to recall, may paradoxically mean “extending the state apparatus” insofar as “the state” is imagined as a politically-neutral institution). However, even more significantly, at stake in politika is a longing for action in concert: acting with someone rather than acting on something.

My interlocutors' arguments about politics and language emerge from two analytically discrete concerns. The first set of concerns—characteristic of mainstream political actors (party politicians, political activists, public intellectuals, etc.)—draws on a very concrete understanding of language and revolves around the relationship between Russian and Latvian in contemporary Latvia. In this context, the central issue is the effect of Latvian's language policy on Russian language. Here two aspects of language policy are particularly important. The first is the attempt to make Latvian a dominant language of instruction in Russian schools by requiring that the general curriculum (Math, Physics, History) is taught in Latvian rather than Russian. The second is the attempt to promote
the dominance of Latvian in the consumer goods sector by requiring all front-line employees to have a certain facility with Latvian irrespective of what, where, and how they may enter economic transactions. In this context, language tends to be understood as a site of value and an object of policy; whereas “politics” tends to figure as a morally-compromised and economically-shortsighted attempt to undermine the value of Russian (and Russians) in post-soviet Latvia.

The second set of concerns—characteristic of actors who cannot be easily identified and to whom I refer to as “aspiring politicians”—revolves around a conceptual understanding of language. In this context, I am not talking about people invested in “Russian language” or “their language.” Instead, I focus on young men and women invested into the work of concepts, appropriateness of vocabularies, and availability of grammars. Here people are concerned less with the value of a specific language (Russian, Latvian or English) then with a political lexicon shared by multiple languages — lexicon which includes words like “nationalism,” “party,” and the “state.” For this set of actors—who, once again, cannot be linked to clearly identifiable positions and to whom I refer to as “aspiring politicians”—language does not figure as a cultural marker, a matter of ethnic identity, and object of policy. Rather, language becomes construed as a vehicle for thought and action; and deterioration of language becomes cast as a matter of political impasse. In other words, whereas the first set of actors worries about the effect of nationalist politics on the Russian language; the second set of actors (young men and women to whom I refer to as “aspiring politicians”) worry about the effect of language, dominated by terms like “nationalism,” on politics.

Unlike actors, who are often glossed as “liberal” or “pro-EU” activists, aspiring politicians do not compel the state apparatus to stop meddling with the labor market. Unlike actors, who are often glossed as “socialist” or “pro-Russia” activists, aspiring politicians do not compel high school students to stop “selling out” to the highest bidder (sometimes figured as the state apparatus; sometimes as Western tourists). As in previous chapters, I struggle to define aspiring politicians’ positively—that is to say, independently of actors who have clearly identifiable positions. Correspondingly, the relationship between politics and language comes to be configured less in the idiom of “freedom from politics” but rather in the practice of political education.
CHAPTER IV
The Place of Culture

This chapter explores the significance of “culture” in narratives about Latvia’s Russian question. Over the last two decades, “culture” emerged as a central object of debate—distinct, yet closely related, to arguments about ethnic identification and language (respectively explored in Chapters 2 and 3).

Most of these debates approach “culture” as an site of policy intervention. This approach reflects a socialist experience of state-mandated investment in aesthetic production and humanistic education. Furthermore, this approach reflects: a contemporary institutional configuration (similarly to other post-socialist states, Latvia has a “Ministry of Culture”); consequences of European integration (Latvia is involved in the EU Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European Commission all of which are engaged in various forms of cultural programming); and the influence of the Russian Federation’s near-abroad / compatriot policy in Latvia (specifically, the “Russian World” Foundation).

Debates concerning culture often revolve around arguments about the meaning of culture. Some actors take “culture” to stand for a dimension of everyday life. Other actors limit it to the realm of arts & letters. Generally, the former are more sympathetic to cultural policies sponsored by the EU (which, at least on the level of explicit rhetorical formulation refuses to endorse a hierarchy of particular “cultures”). The latter are more supportive of cultural policies sponsored by the RF (which does not shy away from placing Russia top of a cultural hierarchy).

Below, I carefully attend to various academics’, artists’, and activists’ disagreements about the meaning of culture and their debates about appropriate cultural policy. Yet, at the same time, I seek to highlight many of these actors’ shared contempt for formal politics. Then, in the second part of the chapter, I juxtapose this contempt with aspiring politicians’ attempt to approach culture and politics in novel and, according to them, more productive ways.

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During my fieldwork, I repeatedly came across a claim that “the parliament was the only place in Latvia where one could find Latvians and Russians sitting on the opposite sides of the room.” Responding to my interest in Latvia’s Russian question, my informants urged me to get as far away from the parliament as possible—to avoid what, in their opinion was a fundamental, albeit all-too-frequent, reduction of the Russian

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1 Germany is an interesting site of comparison—not least because Eastern European approaches to culture have been profoundly marked by German (rather than British) approaches to the concept. Contemporary Germany does not have a “Ministry of Culture.” German hesitance to have a centralized, state-administered cultural policy reflects post-war institutional reforms: FDR sought to minimize state intervention in the cultural industry (GDR, however, had a Ministry of Culture up until its dissolution).
question to the impasse of formal politics.

The first half of the chapter discusses various actors’ search for an alternative to the parliamentary chamber. These actors emphasize a disjunction between “politics” (which they cast as a site of Russian-Latvian disagreement and conflict) and “culture” (which they cast as a site of Latvian-Russian cooperation and harmony). Depending on their understanding of “culture,” they compel me to go to the theater—so that I can observe Russians and Latvians sitting side by side enjoying the same play; or, alternatively, to go to a village—where I can see how Russians and Latvians find a common language as they seek to go about their everyday business.

In the Section 1, I discuss my meeting with Prof. Rubins—a noted expert on Latvia’s Russian question. Here, I explore his claim that Riga has always been a privileged site for the production and consumption of Russian arts & letters; and follow his advice to go to the theater. In Section 2, I discuss my meeting with Prof. Murniece—another noted expert on Latvia’s Russian question. Here, I explore her claims about the depth of cultural ties between Russians and Latvians in Latgale, Latvia’s easternmost region; and follow her advice to go to a Latgalian village.

Most of my interlocutors interpret Prof. Rubins’ and Prof. Murniece’s approaches to culture—indexed by their respective enjoyment of “theater” and “village”—as opposing. Indeed, it is not unusual to find the “villagers” accusing the “thespians” of profound elitism (as well as an implicit endorsement of the Russian Federation’s emphasis on a hierarchy of world cultures). Similarly, it is not unusual to find the “thespians” accusing the “villagers” of naiveté, folklorization (as well as selling out to the European Union). However, while Prof. Rubins and Prof. Murniece draw on different concepts of culture (possibly oriented towards opposing geopolitical projects), they both emphasize a fundamental separation between “politics” and “culture.” In other words, however different, the two sites of culture—metonymically indicated by “theater” and “village”—have value precisely insofar as they indicate something different from “politics.”

In the second half of the chapter, I shift my attention from academics, activists, and artists to aspiring politicians—young men and women who pursue elected political office; and who are expected to demonstrate their involvement with various Russian cultural causes as they seek out allies, and develop a public profile.

In Section 3, I explore the aspiring politicians’ attempt to establish an alliance with youth activists involved with amateur theater. Describing the pressures to create this alliance, I explore its breakdown following various participants' disagreement over a fitting name for the new venture. It is possible to interpret this disagreement in terms of the participants’ different understanding of “culture”—the theater activists’ emphasis on “arts and letters” and aspiring politicians’ emphasis on “the everyday life.” This interpretation seems particularly justified by aspiring politicians’ explicitly articulated dislike of intelligentsia—a class of people who take it upon themselves to bring “culture to the people.”
Yet, as I show in Section 4, aspiring politicians’ dislike of intelligentsia is matched only by their dislike of “the common folk.” Exploring my interlocutors’ involvement with independence day celebrations, I analyze their unease with an attempt to look at Latgale as a model of “cultural harmony” that contrasts with “political strife.” Thus, I come back to my earlier point that my interlocutors’ arguments about “culture” speak less to their commitment to a particular concept of culture than to their attempt to rethink the relationship between politics and culture. Section 5 explores this attempt by analyzing their engagement with the work of Latvian national poet Rainis—who, at one point, proposed to introduce a new word allowing to distinguish between “ethnic” and “cultural” Latvians. Section 6 explores this attempt by analyzing their appreciation of a very particular Soviet-era TV show; and their turn to “game” or “play” as an alternative to “the village” and to “the theater” alike.

1. Moves and Movies

One of the first people I talked with about Russian culture in Latvia was Prof. Rubins—a noted academic expert on the Russian question. Prof. Rubins was quick to emphasize the “artificial” nature of this question. According to him, it was “a political invention”—meant to agitate the public during election campaigns. In fact, it did not take much to see the groundlessness of this question. All one had to do is leave the vicinity of Old Riga—where the parliament was flanked by historic buildings and not posters were permitted—and look around the city center. It was filled with poster boards announcing Russian plays, concerts, and festivals. Even Kiev, which Rubins just came back from, did not have nearly as many Russian cultural events as Riga did.²

I recalled Prof. Rubins's advice some months later when I came across posters advertising a Russian Film Festival. The Festival was held at a multiplex cinema complex called Parex Plaza after a bank was established by a Russian-Jewish entrepreneur in the 1990s. (The entrepreneur did not have to undergo naturalization; instead, he received his Latvian citizenship in virtue of his “services to the state”—yet another illustration of how Latvians and Russians got along on the economic level.) In 2008 Parex took a rapid

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² Kiev (or Kyiv) is the capital of Ukraine—much of which was part of the the Russian Empire, particularly after the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between Russia, Austria, and Prussia. After the October Revolution of 1917, it seemed as though Ukraine would follow suit of Poland's, Finland's, and the Baltic State's successful claims to independence. However, the Red Army occupied the city and Ukraine did not gain independence until 1991. In a common gesture, Prof. Rubins took Kiev to be (a now foreign) city “culturally closest” to Moscow. This gesture rested not only on the perception of Ukraine as “culturally closest” to Russia but also on understanding of Ukraine as “culturally polarized” by Kiev and Lvov. Kiev 'Rus' is conventionally taken to be a birthplace of Russian Christendom and Russian statehood (the Rurik Dynasty—which ruled Russia until the installment of the Romanovs in he 17th century—begins in Kiev). Lvov (or L’viv) was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Poland. It was only following World War II that it became a part of Ukraine. (Under Soviet regime, Ukraine gained a considerable amount of territory: in addition to Stalin's annexation of Eastern Poland; there was Khrushchev's transfer of the Crimean peninsula from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SFSR).
plunge: about to collapse, it was bought out by the Latvian government (which did not revoke its founder's citizenship even though there was now a shadow of doubt as to his virtues). The cinema complex remained standing (and not renamed). In a number of my conversations, it was used as an emblem of Russian-Latvian cultural harmony. Its stadium seats were used as much by Russians as they were by Latvians; its movies had two set of subtitles—Latvian on the top and Russian on the bottom; even the movie tickets were personalized based on the language that the customer used to place the order.

To get from the Old City (emblematic of “politics” as a site of conflict) to Parex Plaza (emblematic of “economics” and “culture” as a site of harmony) one had to go through an underground tunnel. The tunnel was lined with pensioners who asked for alms. Seeking shelter from the weather, they leaned against the tiled walls which, during my stay, were plastered with advertising murals for a major cell-phone company called Zelta Zivtiņa—the Golden Fish. The Golden Fish is a staple figure of Russian literature—incarnated in a fairy-tale titled The Golden Fish and The Old Man, written in verse by Pushkin. The tale tells the story of an old poor fisherman who catches a golden fish which, begging him for her life, offers to grant him a wish. The fisherman says that he does not need much and lets the fish go. When his wife hears about this, she grows angry saying that she can't even afford to replace her broken laundry basin. The fisherman obliges and asks the Golden Fish for a new laundry basin. Yet, his wife grows hungry. Her hunger is for power rather than wealth: first she wants to be a noblewoman, then a tsarina, and, finally, an empress of the seas. The fish grants all but the last wish, upon hearing which, she takes everything away, leaving the old woman with nothing but a broken laundry basin. To this day, no Pushkin verse is as widespread as “to remain by a broken basin” (ostat'sia u razbitogo koryta)—an idiom of ruin which follows greed. In Pushkin's tale, the Golden Fish is an arbiter of just measure; yet, its contemporary incarnation—which playfully circled around pensioners leaning against the wall—seemed to be anything but just.

The film which was the festival's centerpiece was Pavel Lungin's The Tsar, a historical drama set during the Livonian Wars (1558-1583). The wars were fought among Russia, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and Sweden over the control of Livonian territories which included present-day Latvia. As the film opens, the war is not going particularly well for Russia. When Russian soldiers loose Polotsk to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—their battle takes place on the Polota river, Daugava's estuary—they come to Moscow. There, they hide with Metropolotian Filip, Ivan's one-time childhood friend who now heads the church. Ivan finds out that Filip harbors escapees and has them tortured and executed. As Filip protests Ivan's cruelty he is himself starved and strangled. When monks faithful to Filip refuse to give up his body to Ivan's henchmen, they are burnt alive. The film's ends with a scene in a torture game park commissioned by Ivan from Heinrich von Staden, a German engineer, a spy and an amateur ethnographer. Ivan, who ordered people of Moscow to come to the park, is shown alone in a gray snowy twilight. His last words are a question, “Where are my people?”
On an important level, *The Tsar* is a film about political tyranny; or, to be more exact, about tyranny as the only kind of politics that is possible in Russia. (Lungin indicated something like this during his remarks prior to the screening: according to him, we were about to witness something that Russians have been living with for the last 500 years). The “other” of political tyranny (embodied in Ivan) is not religious belief. In fact, Ivan spends far more time praying than Filip. (And, in addition to this, there's a crucial meta-theatrical element structuring the film: the actor who plays Ivan became famous after playing a holy-fool in Lungin's *The Island*; the actor who plays Filip became famous after playing a church-defying Baron Munchausen in the film of the same name which ends with a shot of the Baron climbing up a ladder thrown down from the sky). The conflict central to the film is between political tyranny (supported, rather than opposed, by Europe: it is the German ethnographer who designs implements of torture) and some sort of humanism (very much grounded in Russian cultural tradition). In other words, the conflict is between “politics” and “culture.”

The film's ending is darkly utopian for almost no one deserts historical Ivan. Yet, in Latvia, this ending has a different hue. As visitors to Cesis, or Koknese, or Bauska—to name just a few of Latvia's towns famous for their medieval castles—quickly find out Ivan failed to get to the Baltic; Russia lost the Livonian Wars. In other words, when seen in Riga, *The Tsar* plays on a historical imaginary in which Latvia connotes “freedom” and Russia connotes “tyranny.”

I have heard this imaginary developed in a variety of ways. Some stuck to the medieval period and contrasted the fate of Livonia with that of Novgorod—a Russian medieval republic which was crushed by Ivan. Others moved to the early-modern period and situated Latvia as a place of refuge to Russia's Orthodox Old Believers who fled from religious prosecution following Patriarch Nikon's reforms. Yet others moved onto the Soviet period and discussed how Riga's location—distance from Moscow, ports on the Baltic Sea, proximity to the West—made it a place where one could have a comparatively unencumbered access to foreign consumer goods (particularly jeans), music, samizdat, and so on.

Seen in Latvia, *The Tsar* serendipitously illustrated Rubins’ point that Latvia offered a unique place for the production and consumption of Russian arts & letters. Therein lay the basis of the argument that “culture was a space of Russian-Latvian harmony.” It did so by drawing forth a well-established narrative of Latvia as a place of (relative) freedom when it came to all spheres of life—which in addition to “culture” could include

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3 Novgorod was the only Russian principality which was not conquered by the Tartar-Mongols in the 12th century (although it did pay the tribute to the Golden Horde); and one of a few that was ruled by a council. Like Riga, Novgorod was the member of the Hanseatic League. The fall of Novgorod coincided with the rise of Muscovy and the latter's subjugation of freedom from the Tartar-Mongols in the 15th century.

4 Beginning in 1652, Patriarch Nikon sought to bring Russian liturgical practices in line with what he understood to be the Greek originals. Among his reforms were a new spelling of “Jesus”; a reformulation of the Nicene Creed (which has been a subject of much contention since the split between the Roman and the Byzantine Church in the 11th century); and various modifications of rituals.
“government,” “religion,” “fashion” and so on. The reason that some of my interlocutors turned to “culture” as a pivot of freedom had to do with the fact that it was much easier for them to claim a position of a “cultured person”—a member of inteligentsia—than, say, a position of a religious practitioner. While offered in a response to a set question about “culture,” Rubins’s methodological advice—to look at the posters rather than listen to political babble—nevertheless drew upon this general imaginary of “freedom from politics.” position. My other interlocutors performed a similar move, albeit through a poetic recitation rather than a methodological imperative.

When, at the beginning of my fieldwork (at the time when my set goal was to “study Russians in Latvia), I inquired as to the particularity of Latvia's Russian experience, one interlocutor responded by quoting from Brodsky's poem Letters to a Roman Friend, citing a verse which praised the freedom of the seaside hut over the seat of the empire. Another informant shared a verse from Grebenshchikov's ballad Crème and Caramel to make a similar point: to position Russia as an empire which leads to slumber and passivity and Latvia as a place of unencumbered creativity. The stakes of the poetic citation could not be reduced to the contrast between free Latvia and servile Russia; rather, they very much involved the contrast between Culture (as a sphere of freedom) and Politics (as a sphere of domination); as well as to locate oneself within the sphere of Culture—to position oneself as a member of inteligentsia.

2. The Village Folk

The narrative of “culture” as a space of Latvian-Russian harmony had another side. In addition to those who took kul'tura to be a space of arts & letters, there were those who took kul'tura to be a dimension of the everyday life. The latter was even more distant from the Old Town then the former: to get a dose of arts & letters, one could always walk from the Old Town to a theater; however, to get a dose of the everyday, one had to take a train and go a village—preferably somewhere in Latgale.

The first person who advised me to go to a village was Prof. Murniece, a noted Latvian ethnographer. We met in the Old Town, at a place called The Galric Pub. The pub's chef expanded the use of garlic—typically used in a butter-spread on fried rye-bread served with beer—to the entirety of Latvian cuisine. To make after-dinner conversations palatable, waiters brought out complementary bouquets of parsley with the bill. “You chew on it,” Prof. Murniece explained, sensing my confusion.

During our meeting, Prof. Murniece told me what I've heard before and was to hear again

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5 The literal translation of the line is: “If you're destined to born in an empire/ It is better to live in a far-away province, by the sea” (Eśli vypalo v Imperii rodit'sia / Luchshe zhit' v glukhoi provincii u moria). In the poem, Brodsky speaks with the voice of exiled Martial writing a letter to Postumus who continues to reside in rome.

6 The literal translation of the line is “There's no news in a good empire / Leave some vodka by the bedside of the northern barbarians / And not a single one will desire change” (A v khoroshei imperii net novostei / Daite severnym varvaram vodki v postel' / I nikto iz nih ne stanet zhelat' peremen).
and again: Latgale was a place where Russians, Latvians, and Jews lived peacefully for centuries. (The Baltic Germans and the Poles were not mentioned; in contemporary context, neither was “a sensitive issue.”) Their harmonious co-existence was a consequence of their shared past and their shared tie to the land: it was to be found in language, songs, and material culture—all of which were currently studied by ethnographers.

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In the spring, I made a point of following up on Prof. Murniece advice and went out in a search of village harmony. The first place I visited was a small town called Alūksne which lay very close Vidzeme – Latgale border. Alūksne's claim to fame is two-fold. It was a town where a German Lutheran pastor, named Ernst Gluck, was the first one to translate the Bible from Latin to Latvian. Gluck is revered as the founding figure of Latvian lexicography. It was also a town where Count Sheremetiev, Russian field-marshall in The Northern War— which saw the transfer of Latvian and Estonian territories from Sweden to Russia— found a woman who was to become Peter The Great's wife. The woman, at that point known as Marta Skawronska, was Ernst Gluck's adopted daughter or a housemaid. The pastoral romance between Peter and Marta—shortly to become baptized as Catherine in the Russian Orthodox Church—was the stuff of harmony fairy-tales.

Raisa took me to The Gluck's museum. The museum turned out to be a one-room stone house, located in the yard of a Lutheran kirkha, where Gluck is purported to have worked. In the region, the museum is known for its collection of bibles in many of the world's languages. I was greeted by the museum's curator, who, upon finding out that I am an anthropologist, asked me to identify the language of one of the Bibles. Unable to do this, yet no longer attempting to explain that “over there ethnography is different,” I took a picture of the Bible and promised to try and find an expert who could figure out the language.

The curator, a full-bodied woman in her early 30s, was glad to show me around the church. We spoke Russian, although I, as always, inquired in my token Latvian, whether or not she would prefer me to speak Russian or English; and Raisa offered to translate. There was no need, the curator said, she was happy to practice her Russian. When we went out to the courtyard, she pointed to the rooster atop of the kirkha. Most of Latvia's kirkhas have roosters who remind the parishioners of Christ's prophecy that Peter would betray him three times before the cock crows. The curator said that there was a problem with their rooster. According to her, when Russians pushed out the Germans in 1944, they used the rooster as a target practice. Not repaired since then, the rooster gradually filled up rain water; and the church needed the money to drain it. I gave the little change I had.

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7 Kirkha is a Russian transliteration of Swedish kirka (church) Many of my interlocutors reserved tserkov' (Russian for “church”) to talk about Russian Orthodox houses of worship, and used kirkha to refer to Lutheran houses of worship and kostiol (Russian transliteration of Polish kościół) refers to Catholic houses of worship.
As we were driving back to Raisa's farm, she grew upset. “Why did you give her your money?” she asked. “Last month, when I took my friends from Russia to the museum, she told them that the Germans shot the rooster!” Yet, this comment was not followed up by a fairly standardized account of how Latvians supported the Nazis rather than the Red Army. Instead, after a pause, Raisa added, “These Lutherans...They swayed from the Church. You know, they are the ones with the political agenda of promoting homosexuality in Europe.”

Before having a chance to think about the stakes of Raisa's comment, we arrived to her family farm. Right by the entrance gate, we were greeted by hissing from a gaggle, formed by two gray geese and a row of goslings behind them. “Be careful!” Raisa said, her face suddenly beaming with a smile. “They can be a little aggressive towards strangers. It turned out that we slaughtered a goose last fall,” she added. “This left us with two ganders—something we found out this spring, when neither one laid eggs. So, My father got some goslings, and the geese really took to them. Two ganders are definitely better than a goose and a gander, when it comes to parenting,” she concluded. “They are really defensive: not a single gosling has disappeared!”

During my next trip to the village, I had to work hard to abstain from inquiring into politics of gay ganders and did my best to confine myself to questions of citizenship. Most of my interviewees said that they did not know anyone who had problems restoring citizenship. “Is it because everyone lived here before 1940?” I asked. “This too,” they responded. Indeed, many of Latgale's Russians lived in Latgale before 1940. However, there was a wryness in the reply which referenced something in excess of a legal basis for citizenship. It referenced a personal connection that was not less important than a legal justification if someone wanted to get something accomplished. In addition to having a practical dimension, this connection made naturalization and language accreditation procedures more welcoming than they would be in the large city. In other words, there was a sense that in Latgale, people could always “reach an agreement.” Yet this agreement was not to be construed in an image of inter-cultural harmony, propagated by Prof. Murniece, or even a “purely personal level” mentioned by many of my Latgalian informants. Natalia.

When I spoke with Irina, a member of the Loyalists, who was also from Latgale, she also told em that “the Russian question” is specific to Riga; and that, in Latgale “everything was fine.” However, it was fine neither because of intercultural harmony or a purely personal relationships. This became quite evident when I asked Irina what went on in

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8 In the Latvian context, which, as one of the Loyalists's leading members was intent on reminding everyone, was the European context, Raisa's point was quite problematic. The head of The Latvian Lutheran Church, after purging his opponents from power, was happy to join his counterparts in The Russian Orthodox Church and The Catholic Church in order to fight the geopolitical threat of homosexuality.
Latgale in 2004, during the protests against the education reform. In Riga, the protests resulted in a virtual shut down of schools: students joined the teachers in a massive walk out. Irina said that she did not know anyone who took place in the protests. “A person from municipal government would call the school principle,” she explained, “and ask him, nicely, as a friend, to make sure that nobody leaves the school. If this didn't work, he hinted that there could be problems with funding.” Like in Soviet times, school principles are more often delegated from above rather than nominated from below. However, what is specific to Latgale is that, unlike in Riga, “above” and “below” are very lose to each other; hierarchy is intimate rather than impersonal—hence, “the economy of favors” (c.f. Ledeneva 1998).

3. Culture to the People!

Some time after the ambassador's address at the Russian Compatriot Conference (described in Chapter 2), I took part in a meeting of several youth groups. Most of youth in attendance heard the ambassador's speech; and, in fact, got together with a hope of founding some sort of a consortium which would remedy the problem which was referred to as “factionalism.” Yet, the meeting began with a remark which, in retrospect, offered an analytical explanation of the rift within a group of people which was consistently referred to as “Russian youth.” A young man took the floor and urged everyone present to acknowledge the fact that people in attendance were from two very different types of organizations—“cultural” and “political.”

The meeting proceeded with a discussion about the name for the proposed consortium. Everyone present took it for granted that the name should not have the word “Russian.” (The possibility of using terms “Russian Compatriots” and “Ethnic Minorities”—the former advocated by policy-makers from the European Union; the latter advocated by policy-makers from the Russian Federation—was not even discussed.) One of the people in the room articulated a widely held view that if an organization had the word “Russian” in its title, many people would think that its members have “a national preoccupation” (natsional'nost’). At that point, Marc, who represented one of organizations which identified as “cultural,” suggested using the world raznochitsy as a part of the consortium's name.

Raznochintsy means “people of different ranks.” This word appeared in the Russian language following Peter the Great's attempt to rationalize Russian statecraft in the 17th century: to formalize the relationship between state authorities and state subjects based on rank (or estate). This term designated members of an uncertain estate—people who did not belong to the nobles, the clergy, the merchants, the city-dwellers, or the peasantry. The term was in active use up until the disintegration of the Russian Empire. In the aftermath of the Communist Revolution, nationality (natsional'nost’) gradually replaced

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9 Raznochintsy is the plural form of raznochinet—a neologism which consists of the adjective razlichnye (different) and the noun chin (rank).
estate as a central mechanism of identification on state documents. One did not need to be a historical connoisseur to recognize that raznochintsy communicated a predicament of difference. However, archaic, it shared its root with everyday words for difference and different—razlichie, razhnitsa, raznye.

This term was particularly appealing because it did not have a clear reference point (i.e., a point which made it possible to ascertain difference). First, raznochintsy indicated difference between two or more distinct groups—that is, a group of people with a determined rank and a group of people without a determined rank. On the other hand, raznhochintsy indicated difference within what was supposedly a group—difference among individuals who were habitually referred to as a coherent social unit yet did not share much. Marc had an investment in both of these meanings insofar as they were quite resonant with the predicament of Latvia's Russians. Insofar as the term raznochintsy sought to compensate for the failure of usual categories, it was taken as analogous to nepilsoniba (noncitizenship)—the term that sought to perform a similar task in post-Soviet Latvia. Insofar as as the the term raznochintsy did not seek to hide a lack of a common ground among its designated subjects, it posed a counter-example to the term “Russian” which (among other reasons) was unsatisfactory because it hid this lack.

However, when Marc proposed using raznochintsy as a part of a name for a new organization, he drew not only on the term’s connotations of (ambiguous) difference, but also on its connotation of intelligentsia (intelligentsia). The 18th century marked the emancipation of Russian nobles from mandatory state service. Young nobles who sought a vocation outside of state institutions and pursued academic education coalesced into a social form which later became known as intelligentsia (Raeff 1966). By the middle of the 19th century the ranks of intelligentsia expanded as more and more young men pursued formal education and were no longer bound to repeat their fathers' careers (whether in the clergy, the military, or the trades). It was at this point raznochintsy and intelligentsia started to be used interchangeably—in part, to describe a particular demographic; in part, to connote an egalitarian ideal. Intelligentsia's commitment to something that, over the 19th and early 20th century began to be called kul'tura, captured an alienation from state institutions, an idealization of education, and a pursuit of equality.

When Marc suggested using raznochintsy for the consortium's title, he explicitly drew on a concept of kul'tura, saying that raznochintsy were “those who brought culture to the people.” His suggestion was immediately rebuked: it drew on a concept of “culture” as a

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10 In addition to natsional'nost', klass (class) was indicated on all personal identification papers. However, klass was dropped in the mid 1930s after Stalin proclaimed that the class war was over; and (the remaining) members of formerly antagonistic classes were readmitted into the general franchise. Natsional'nost' remained in active use throughout the Soviet period. (See Fitzpatrick's Ascribing Class and Slezkine's The Communal Apartment).

11 It was only as a result of Catherine the Great's decision to grant Russian nobility a charter of rights that civil service ceased to be a compulsory obligation. Prior to the introduction of the charter, the relationship between the emperor (or the czar) and the nobles was analogous to the relationship between a master and his serfs.
domain of arts and letters and “culturalness” as a commitment to self-cultivation, necessary to become a part of this domain. For most people in the audience, this concept was not palatable. First, it rested on a hierarchical distinction between intelligentsia and obyvateli (the common-folk). Second, it involved a hierarchical distinction between “world cultures” (mirovaia kultura) and small cultures. Both distinctions were troubling; the latter one especially so because it resonated with Soviet and post-Soviet discourses on cultural difference that were highly criticized.

To explain this criticism, it is necessary to make a historical aside. In the 1920s, the Soviet government was highly critical of Russian chauvinism which was buttressed by a claim to the superiority of Russian culture. This was part and parcel of the Soviet commitment to ethnic federalism. However, by the 1930s and 1940s the situation changed.12 Russian culture was taken to be as “greater” than any other Soviet culture; and national poets were increasingly called upon to praise Russian culture's greatness.13 In the post-Soviet period, this narrative was perpetuated by a concept of “the Russian World” which, by the mid 2000s, emerged as a central aspect of Russia's foreign policy in the near-abroad. At stake in the word “world” was not a claim to some underlying unity among all the Russians who happened to live outside the Russian Federation but rather a claim to a particular kind of global / historical significance.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed a number of rebukes to people suspected of drawing on this notion of culture. Some bemoaned “the reduction of cultural complexity to Pushkin.”14 Others argued that every culture had its own Pushkin—Rainis in Latvia, Shevchenko in Ukraine, Rustaveli in Georgia, etc. Some questioned the credentials of those who propagated this concept by describing them as people who just recently nashtukul'turis (something like “got whitewashed”).15 However, the great majority drew on an alternative concept of culture—a quasi-anthropological concept that took “culture” to refer to to everyday life. This concept was widely available. It had historical antecedents in Soviet ethnography which used a concept that can be translated either as

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12 Multiple factors contributed to this development: disintegration of the Communist International in the 1930s; Stalin's Russophilia; and, in the 1950s, mass editions of the 19th century Russian writers who fell outside of Stalin's favor—Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov.

13 National poets were increasingly called upon to praise the greatness of Russian culture. For an illustration, consider the verses of Tanzila Zamakulova (from Kabardino-Balkaria): My native tongue! It's tender, strong, eternal / And needs no textbook, for it makes me grow /With sweetness of its words... And there is Russian tongue! Its mine forever / Like native tongue, it flows right through my heart... (Родной язык! В нём нежность, вечность, сила / Я с ним росла: и не по букварю / Сладчайшие слова произносила — / Сначала "мама", а потом "люблю"... Но русский есть язык! И он навеки / Мне близок и понятен, как родной. / Две речи в моём сердце, будто реки, / Звучат, текут, становятся одной.)

14 Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1835) is poet venerated as a wellspring of literary Russian. It was only a century earlier—during the reign of Peter the Great—that secular Russian became differentiated from the Church Slavonic.

15 Nashtukul'turis' is a neologism composed of the verb shtukaturit (“to apply plaster”), modified by a reflexive ending, which results in a logically impossible shtukaturit'sia (“to self-plaster”), and further modified by combining shtukaturka (plaster) with kultura (culture)—resulting in something like “to get culture-pastered.”
“everyday culture” or “material culture” (bytovaia kul’tura). More significantly, it was implicit in a variety of practices placed under the sign of kul’turnost’—a word which simultaneously denoted the importance of personal hygiene and weekend visits to the theater. Even more significantly, it was implicit in the EU-sponsored discourse on cultural difference which, on the level of explicit ideological utterance, refused any sense of cultural hierarchy and—to give one example—took Cork and Patras to be no less “cultured” than London and Paris.

Marc's remark was indeed rebuked. However, it was not rebuked by drawing on an alternative concept of culture. The rebuke came from Pavel who exclaimed, “Better dekabristy than raznochintsy!” Dekabristy—translated into English as “Decemberists”—was a group of Russian noblemen who revolted during the interregnum in December of 1825 and refused to pledge allegiance to Nicholas I. They hoped that their revolt would lead to a replacement of tsarist absolutism with constitutional monarchy and bring an end to serfdom.¹⁶ To this day, Decemberists embody the ethos of just opposition to political tyranny—an opposition closely associated with the ideal of intelligentsia. Pavel's proposal to use dekabristy instead of raznochintsy was made with an ironic tone; and, in fact, elicited giggles across the room. Marc, however, was not giggling. According to him, dekabristy was one of the most “political” names that one could use; and, as such, clearly indicated Pavel's inability to attend to the need to distinguish between “politics” and “culture.”

After the meeting, I spoke with Pavel and Kristina about Marc's attempt with keeping “politics” and “culture” separate. Neither Pavel nor Kristina thought much of this attempt—albeit for different different reasons. According to Pavel, it would be better if concerns with kul’tura would disappear all together. He did not do much to hide this position. Several times, I heard him address the Loyalists with a verse, which he explicitly attributed to Pushkin, “One does not need to be a poet; but one must be a citizen.” The felicity of this address lay less in his audience's vocal agreement then in their inability to correct him: to point out that it was Nekrasov, rather than Pushkin, who wrote the verse. His opinions on intelligentsia were far from favorable. “Intelligentsia is incapable of doing anything besides criticizing the state,” he explained. “It's not even a class!” he continued. “It's nothing but some sort of a social layer!” Pavel's remark drew on a variety of sources. First, it indexed the Soviet definition of intelligentsia as a “layer,” following the officially-proclaimed end of the class-struggle and the triumph of the proletariat and

¹⁶ The Decemberists' rebellion ought to be located in the pan-European aftermath of Napoleonic Wars. In 1815 (following Napoleon's defeat), the monarchs Russia, Austria, and Prussia created the Holy Alliance, based on the pledge to curb the revolutionary enthusiasm and to protect the divine right of kings. By 1818, they were joined by France and Germany in a Quintuple Alliance—famous for curbing German, Italian, and Spanish republicanism and nationalism (Carlsbad Decrees outlawed student fraternities in 1819, the Carbonari Revolt was suppressed in 1820, Trienio Liberal was ended in 1823). The Alliance disintegrated following the French Revolution of 1830 and the rising tensions between Russia and Britain over control of the Ottoman Empire. In 1848, Austria drew on Russia's assistance in suppressing the Hungarian Revolt; Prussian authorities squashed the March Revolution without any outside help. The Alliance between Russia and Austria came to an end when the latter did not support Russia during the Crimean War (1850-56) with Britain.
the peasants. Second, it relied on a Marxist-Leninist understanding of class as a formation characterized by a privileged relationship to history (rather than defined by its means of production). Third, it rested on a contrast between the importance of intelligentsia during glasnost (Gorbachev-led liberalization) and its near-oblivion in the wake of an almost-total withdrawal of state-funding from universities and research institutes following the collapse of socialism (Buck-Morss 2002, Gessen 1997).

Like Pavel, Kristina did not think much of Marc's suggestion. Yet, her reasons were quite different. Whereas Pavel criticized intelligentsia for its refusal (or fear, or lack) of power, Kristina criticized intelligentsia for what she interpreted as a withdrawal from the world. According to her, intelligentsia was driven less by a sense of “duty” (springing from a concern with “the people”) than by a sense of entitlement (springing from a hierarchical vision of kul'tura). Kristina's position was shared by most of the Humanist' rank-and-file members. Unlike the Loyalists, the Humanists did not disavow kul'tura; rather, they searched for a way to think about kul'tura differently. To begin with, they felt that reduction of kul'tura to the world of arts & letters underwrote a claim to an exclusive expertise. The problem with this claim was not that it established a hierarchical relationship between intelligentsia and obyvateli (the common-folk), but, rather, that it isolated intelligentsia from the present moment. According to the Humanists, the defining characteristic of intelligentsia was not its commitment to kul'tura but, rather, the social form that this commitment produced: conversations around a kitchen table (kukhonnye razgovory). This diagnosis led the Humanists to distinguish between intelligentsia and intelektualy (intellectuals). Unlike the former, the latter searched for new questions: precisely because they lacked a commitment to a particular canon and wanted to get out of their kitchens.

The Humanists' argument that configuring kul'tura around arts & letters inevitably resulted in kitchen-talk had an obverse side. They were quite cognizant of the fact that this configuration was fairly central to the Russian World Program; and they did not hesitate to describe this program as “paternalistic.” Whereas intelligentsia was likely to reduce kul'tura to arts & letters, the participants of the Russian World Program were likely to locate it Russia. No place could compete with Moscow when it came to cultural production. According to Kristina, this legitimated the Russian government's claim to “seniority” and reduced Latvia's Russians to a position of “a younger brother.” As far as many Humanists were concerned, this position was no better than the one implicit in the EU's integration program—that of a “social problem” or “a social remnant” (ostatki obshchestva).

Given Kristina's and Pavel's different positions on intelligentsia and kul'tura, it is tempting to interpret their negative response to Marc as based on a shared or strategic opposition rather than a common position. Below, I argue against making this interpretation.

4. Milking Cows
The narrative of Latgalian harmony became a focus of a heated argument between Pavel and Natalia during one of the Loyalists' meetings. Natalia was new to the Loyalists; she began to attend meetings not long before I began fieldwork. She was born in a small town in a northern part of Latgale. Unlike Pavel (and most of the Loyalists' members), Natalia did not have to undergo naturalization process in order to receive citizenship: she could trace her family genealogy to the period of interwar independence.

Natalia came to Riga after she finished high school and gained admission to a highly competitive program at the University of Latvia, the state's most prestigious university.¹⁷ Like most of my acquaintances, Natalia paid university tuition herself; however, she also had to pay for room and board at the university dorm. To make ends meet, Natalia worked practically full time. Often, she came to meetings right from work and, not infrequently, wore a business suit. One night, after the Loyalists' meeting drew to a close, I accompanied Natalia as she hurried to catch the bus to her dormitory. I wanted to find out what compelled her to join the Loyalists; but, like most young people to whom I posed this question, she could not give an answer. As we stepped from a paved sidewalk onto a cobbled street of the Old City, she shared a concern. “My best friend is spending a year studying abroad,” she said, casting a look over a young female tourist who (in vain) tried to avoid getting her heels stuck between the cobblestones. “I’m certain she’ll think that I’ve gone mad when she finds out that I became involved in politics.”

In October, Natalia took on a leading role in organizing the Loyalists' observance of Latvian War Memorial Day (known as the Day of the Bear-Slayer—the hero of the Latvian national epic composed in the 19th century) and celebration of the Latvian Independence Day. The Memorial Day was fairly easy to plan: in Riga, there is an old tradition of placing lit candles around a wall of the Old City. Someone suggested that the Loyalists arrange their candles in a way that would trace Latvia's map; and the suggestion was quickly adopted.¹⁸

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¹⁷ State-run post-secondary institutions are generally considered to be more prestigious than private-run institutions. These institutions offer instruction in Latvian, which is the state language, and, increasingly in English. The introduction of English has to do with an attempt to recruit international students; its use is legitimated on the grounds of English being an official language of the EU (even though quite a number of foreign students are not from the EU). State-run post-secondary institutions do not offer instruction in Russian (which does not have a recognized status). This is not to say that state-run institutions don't offer instruction of Russian (at the Faculty of Philology and Russian Literature) or rely on Russian-language materials (throughout different—but, I suspect, particularly engineering-related—programs). Students who wish to pursue their post-secondary education in Russian may do so in a privately-run institution.

¹⁸ This suggestion was more difficult to implement than it was assumed; but, nonetheless, proved to be quite felicitous. The wall that is candle-lit on the Day of the Bearslayer faces the embankment of Daugava which, by mid-fall, becomes increasingly windy. To make sure that the wind does not extinguish the candles, they are typically placed in glass containers (or, more likely, bought already encased in glass). However, the Loyalists bought tea light candles—since it was too costly to buy enough glass-contained candles to make the map. This made it quite difficult to keep the fire going. However, passersby were eager to get involved—both relighting candles and filling the map with towns and cities.
However, plans for the Independence Day proved to be more contentious. There were few volunteers: some of those present in the room called the holiday nationalist (natsionalisticheskii) rather than national (gosudarstvenniy). Moreover, there was no easily available template for the kind of activity that the Loyalists could organize. Those who were invested in celebrating the holiday wanted to put forth an activity which would emphasize friendship (druzhba) among Latvia's people—that is, Latvians and Russians. However, this idiom invariably drew on the Soviet-era internationalist imaginary which heralded the “friendship of the people” (druzhba narodov). While this connotation was clearly undesirable, its post-Soviet permutation—the discourse around integratsia (integration)—was even less desirable. As an acquaintance put it, ten years after Integration Program started, no one knew what integration was; but everyone was convinced that it did not work out.

It was at this point that Natalia exclaimed that she could not understand why people in Riga were always so intent on dividing everyone into “Russians” and “Latvians” (a division perpetuated equally—albeit with different valences—by the idiom of “friendship” and by the idiom of “integration”). In Latgale, she added, nobody did so; instead, people related to each other “on the personal level” (na lichnom urovne).

Pavel, who grew increasingly irate, erupted in anger: “They milk cows in Latgale, rather than think about politics!” Natalia held her cool and, in a measured tone, replied, “Do you think Latvia is an office? Have you ever been to the regions?” Not missing a beat, Pavel exclaimed, “Kant did not travel anywhere! And he was the smartest man of his time! Riga is the seat of political power. We must talk about Riga!”

Following that meeting, Pavel's opinion of Natalia changed. He as well as his allies began to refer to her as kolkhoznitsa—a female worker on a collective farm. The term functioned in a number of ways. On the most explicit level, it pointed to someone's rural origins. Yet, whoever used it was himself invariably marked not as “urban” but as “non-native.” Given that Riga was dominated by Germans until 1918 and by Russians until 1941, most of my Latvian-speaking acquaintances were well aware of their “rural origins.” as much as my Russian-speaking informants. On a more subtle level, kolkhoznitsa pointed to a someone's understanding of politics or, in Pavel's opinion, a lack of thereof. When Natalia lamented the fact that people did not relate to each other on “a personal level,” Pavel took this to be an indication of Natalia's “delusional” understanding of power. The figure of a female farm worker was central to the

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19 As I was shortly to hear from another informant, Kant, in fact, did travel; and Riga was one of a few places that he went to from Konigsberg (today's Kalingrad). While I could not verify Kant's itinerary, I did (to my surprise) found that that the Critiques were all first published in Riga: the Hackett edition contains a facsimile of the title page which lists Riga as the place of publication. Baltic Germans dominated Riga from its founding in the 12th century until Latvian independence in 1918.

20 I suspect that this awareness was also a consequence of Soviet-led deportations of Riga's residents in 1940 and after 1944. While the deportees were eventually allowed to return to Latvia, many of them were not allowed to live in Riga. Another factor contributing to Latvia's configuration of the urban/rural divide has to do with Latvia's geography: a small territory and a flat topography—all of which made the capital city quite accessible.
iconography of Soviet power—most famously materialized in Vera Mukhina's sculpture *The Worker and the Peasant*. Calling someone *kolkhoznitsa* amounted to pointing to their Sovietness, which, in this context, had to do with what would be described as a naïve expectation of equality, emancipation, and progress.

Pavel's opinion about Natalia was by no means hegemonic. A number of people complemented Natalia's ability to maintain a cool composure—a quality that the Loyalists took to be of fundamental importance for overcoming politics of injury (*obida*). In other words, Natalia was complimented—if not for her political philosophy, then on her ability to conduct herself in a “political” way. In other words, while there was no consensus on whether or not Pavel and Natalia's argument illustrated a naïve understanding of politics of demonstrated good political conduct, their argument was interpreted as a matter of relating to *politika*.

* Despite his response to Natalia, Pavel was actually quite keen to talk about Latgale or, rather, “Latgalian.” On occasion, the adjective “Latgalian” could be heard as part and parcel of stories about Latgalian harmony between “Russians” and “Latvians”—the stories that Pavel dismissed. In that context, this adjective claimed a collectivity for a people who, on a different occasion, would be differentiated in Latgale's Russian and Latvian residents. More frequently this adjective was used to draw a distinction between “Latgalian” and “Latvian”; Pavel adopted this latter usage. The distinction between Latgalian and Latvian rested on a historiography which emphasized Latvia's “fractional past”: specifically, the fact that much of modern-day Latgale was once a part of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth (rather than The Kingdom of Sweden) and, following Polish partitions, a part of the Russian Empire's Vitebsk Province (as opposed to a part of the Livonian province which was won from the Swedes).

More significantly, the distinction between “Latgalian” and “Latvians” functioned to reiterate claims to cultural autonomy which, since the 1990s, were made by Latgale's intellectuals. These intellectuals argued that there was a distinct Latgalian language, which, given Latvia's political imaginary, amounted to arguing that there was a Latgalian

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21 In Russian, there is a distinction between *krestianka* (a female peasant) and *kolkhoznitsa* (a female collective farm worker). The former word is etymologically derived from “Christian”; the latter is a derivation of *kolkhoz* an abbreviated form of *kollektivnoe khoziaistvo* – a phrase that has been translated as a “collective farm.” (This translation is not entirely felicitous—it forgoes a crucial dimension implicit in the Russian phrase: * khoziain* is “landlord” or “master” or “administrator”; furthermore, it does not attend to a very different valence of *khoziaistvo* (an old and semantically rich term) and ferma (Russian transliteration of English “farm” which is a comparatively new word). Cf. Rogers 2006.

22 I met a number of people who would usually be described as Russian but who identified as Latgalian.

23 My informants compared the relationship between Latgalian and Latvian to the relationship between Ukrainian and Russian—i.e., closely related and mutually comprehensible. While this comparison drew on the juxtaposition of Russian and Ukrainian, it reversed this juxtaposition's usual valence—i.e., positioning Ukrainian to be a lesser form of Russian.
nation. These claims have never been entertained by the Latvian government. My Russian activist acquaintances—particularly those who were not proponents of the Latgalian harmony narrative—took this as “self-evident”: according to them, any official recognition of Latgalians would set a precedent for and clear the path to recognizing Russians. While Pavel happened to share these activists' dislike of Latgalian harmony, he did not partake in conversations on Latgalian uniqueness. When he talked of Latgalians, he did so only because he felt that they would be more amenable to forming a party coalition with “adequate” Russian politicians (i.e., politicians who, in contrast to Russian activists, did not proclaim their ethnic identity). In other words, if Pavel cared about a conflict between “Latvians” and “Latgalians,” then, he did so in a very circumscribed manner—staying away from framing this conflict as a matter of cultural difference which could be transposed from one set of relations onto another; and, instead, emphasizing “political alliances.”

5. Waiting for a J

The Loyalists' dislike of kul'tura was most dramatically illustrated by their attempt to disassociate culture from any discussion of political action. This attempt was most dramatically illustrated by their attempt to promote the word latviets (and latvijetis—a word which they claimed to be its Latvian equivalent). In Russian, “Latvian” can be rendered in two ways: latysh and latviets. The first is a cognate of the Latvian adjective laviešu, frequently used in the phrase laviešu valoda (Latvian language). The second is by the adjectival noun latviets. Latviets is a cognate of the Latvian adjective Latvijas, frequently used in the phrase Latvijas Republica (Latvian Republic). In contrast to Russian, Latvian has only one word for “Latvian”: latvietis. During the interwar republic, this was recognized as a problem—most notably by the Latvian national poet Rainis.

Rainis offered to distinguish between latvietis and latvijetis: the first denoting ethnic Latvians, the second—Latvian minorities (Germans, Russians, and Jews). Rainis' suggestion was not taken up; however, some nine decades after it was first made, it found new advocates. A young woman who was in charge of the Loyalists' Ideological Division repeated over and over again the importance of inculcating the broader use of “latvijetis with a j.” (This was to be done through “work with consciousness” (rabota s soznaniem)—an activity which characterized political schools I describe in Chapter 3).

6. Culture Games

Even though Pavel and Kristina were quite critical when it came to the dominant ways of talking about kul'tura, they nonetheless felt that they had to demonstrate their

24 Since the 1990s, the Latvian government recognized only Livs as Latvia's other autochthonous people. Livs, who give medieval Livonia its name) are speakers of a Finno-Urgic language. The Soviet Union did not recognize Livonians or Latgalians as nations separate from Latvians. Ironically, today's Russian Federation does recognize “Latgalians” as a separate nationality.

25 Latvijas is a possessive noun. It is better translated into English with a possessive adjective “Latvia’s.”

26 Rainis is a pen-name of Jānis Pliekšāns (1865-1929).
engagement with “the cultural question.” In this section, I am interested in how they did that; in their attempt to associate themselves with a very specific kind of activity that was recognizable as “cultural.” During my fieldwork, they took interest only in two such activities—colloquially referred to by acronyms ChGK and KVN. Their turn to “a game” as a site of kul’tra contrasted starkly with social activists’ turn to the theater or to the village. Here, kul’tura was neither a matter of aesthetic enjoyment nor of grounded interaction. Instead, it was a site of fruitful disagreement.

ChGK—an acronym of Russian words Chto? (What?) Gde? (Where?) Kogda? (When?)—is something like a trivia competition originally developed for Soviet television in the 1970s. Its protagonists are two teams: a team of knowledge-bearers (znatoki) and a team of television-viewers (telezriteli). The knowledge-bearers are a group of six people, chosen on the basis of their expertise in various fields—rather than institutional affiliation or personal connections—and headed by a captain whom they themselves appoint. The knowledge-bearers are physically present in the television studio: they are seated at a round table with a spinning top. As for the television-viewers, strictly speaking, they are not a team at all. They are people who mailed-in questions—represented by original envelopes placed along the perimeter of the game table—that were judged to be appropriate for the game. While criteria for “appropriateness” are not explicit, there is a shared understanding that “good” questions are somewhere between a test and a riddle; i.e., they require some factual knowledge yet not reducible to knowing a particular fact.27

Each round begins with one of the knowledge-bearer pressing onto a spinning top which points to one of the envelopes. Then, the anchor (who is not shown on the screen) announces the name of the television-viewer associated with the envelope, specifies his or her place of residence and occupation, displays his or her picture, and reads the question. The team of knowledge-bearers spends a minute in a heated debate over the right answer. This debate has a dialogical quality: while the knowledge-bearers frequently propose different answers, they formulate them in response to provocation of their teammates rather than in an attempt to reiterate previous knowledge. More often then not, they do not reach an agreement: the captain is charged with choosing among possible alternatives. Typically, the choice is made on the basis of a “hunch” rather than as a result of formal adjudication; and, not infrequently, the hunch turns out to be wrong, in which

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27 Here are a few notable questions: (a) When a sports commentator introduced the Greek soccer team, which was due to play a match with the Russian team, he named two players who, despite having been expected to play, were absent for two unrelated reasons. As he did so, he also mentioned the names of two mythical heroes. One of the Greek players was absent because his club—Amsterdam's Ajax—refused to lend him for the match. Why was the second player absent? (b) Once Mark Twain loaned $500 to a friend who promised to pay it back in a month if he were not dead. What did Twain do when this friend failed to meet this obligation? (c) Most of THEM fall without having undergone a hoped-for metamorphosis. According to Jack Tresidder, the author of The Complete Dictionary of Symbols, a growing consciousness of THEIR importance in the 18th century coincides with the development of mass politics. What are THEY? (d) What did a famous Russian jurist call “an artwork which always has two authors”? (e) An entry in the dictionary of Russian phraseology about THIS word mentions three people—a middle-eastern king, a Russian grand duke, and an American slave owner. What is THIS word?
case, the team of television-viewers gains a point because of a weak captain rather than a weak team. Whichever team gains six points—i.e., answers six questions during what could be as many as eleven rounds—wins. At the end of the game season, teams of of knowledge-bearers that have lost a game to a (virtual) team of television-viewers are ranked based on their relative scores; the the team which places at the bottom loses its legibility to participate in future games.

ChGK achieved immense popularity during the Soviet period. Beginning as a television show, it became a game that people—particularly young people—played in their schools, universities, houses of culture, and city pioneer palaces. Adapted to “real-life,” ChGK changed in important respects. Teams of knowledge-bearers were composed of people who shared an institutional affiliation albeit not the same institutional niche (for example, a team of knowledge-bearers which represented a particular school could have members from different grade levels and grade classes; in other words, people who would not otherwise interact). Teams of television-bearers became even more virtual: the game table still had envelopes with contained questions; but these questions were selected/chosen/authored by a person responsible for organizing the event. Crucially, criteria for a “good” question remained the same: the good question had to be as much of a riddle (to be solved through argumentation) as it was a “test” (of preexisting knowledge).

In the post-Soviet period, the broadcast ChGK not only kept but increased its viewership. In the Soviet period, teams of knowledge-bearers and television-viewers mostly received rare books as a prize for winning a round. In the post-Soviet period, the game re-branded itself as an “intellectual casino.” Everyone in the studio was clad in a black-tie attire. The program’s anchor (televedushchii) was referred to as a croupier (krup’e); his assistants wore uniforms quite similar to the ones worn by card-dealers in an actual casino. Everyone was clad in black-tie attire. The table around which the team of knowledge-bearers sat was stylized to look like a roulette table. Most importantly, each question was assigned a monetary value. This value was extraordinarily high—the money was supplied by newly set up commercial banks or telecommunication companies who were anxious to showcase their opulence. Instead of being acknowledged during commercial interruptions, these companies—or rather their senior representatives (frequently CEOs)—were explicitly addressed by the croupier who not only acknowledged their

28 Houses of Culture can be compared to “Community Centers” (in particular, Community Centers that offer an array of educational programs). Palaces of Pioneers can be compared to “Youth Centers.”

29 In Soviet schools, the student body was classified in two ways. The first was grade level—beginning with Grade 1 (which started after the kindergarten) and ending with Grade 10 (which made one eligible to pursue post-secondary education). Each grade level had two classes—typically referred to as “Class A” and “Class B.” These classes did not typically reflect academic standing. Sometimes, they reflected a particular emphasis—for example, an emphasis on sciences rather than humanities; or an emphasis on one foreign language rather than another. Typically, a student who began his/her education in “1A” (Grade 1, Class A) would finish in “10A” (Grade 10, Class A): the same group of people studied together for ten years (typically, under the same primary school teacher—who taught all subjects—from grades 1 to 3; and, then, under the same secondary school teachers—who specialized in specific subjects—between grades 4 and 10).
sponsorship but asked for their opinions as to the quality of the questions and answers, dynamics of team discussion, capacities of the team captain, etc. If there was a technical dispute—for example, if the croupier accused someone present in the audience of trying to communicate an answer to one of the players sitting at the table—the sponsors were asked to arbitrate.

The post-Soviet transformation of *ChGK* was remarkable given the fact that most of the institutions which supplied its main players entered a deep crisis in the 1990s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, research institutes as well as universities—an places where quite a number of knowledge-bearers worked—lost state funding. Unable to attract private capital (not to mention existing in such an economically tumultuous climate that no capital was secure), these institutes closed down. While some of the former staff members found employment in newly emergent business ventures, most did not: the 1990s were marked by the stories about professors of humanities working as sales clerks in outdoor markets and physicists moonlighting as construction workers. The common wisdom was that the post-Soviet period was even less hospitable to the life of the mind than the Soviet period. However (politically) restrictive, the Soviet government was predictable. However (economically) free, the post-Soviet period was hostile to everything that could not be monetized. *ChGK* was the only (fairly) mainstream example of the opposite case: a place where abstract knowledge received a monetary reward. This was reflected in *ChGK*s post-soviet motto: “the intellectual casino is the only place where it is possible to earn money with one's own mind.” That was reflected in the show's self-promotion as a place for intellectuals rather than for the intelligentsia: the former, unlike the latter, mixed with the elites.

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30 In the Soviet Union, research and teaching did not typically coincide: scientists working at research institutes did not have students.
CHAPTER V
The Time of Youth

Several months after beginning fieldwork, I met Irina—a young mother heavily involved in Russian activism. When told her that my project was shaping around questions of youth politics, she reacted with a feigned surprise. “Youth politics?” she asked, moving aback with a sarcastic smile. “Do you mean to say that not only do we have politics, but also youth?”

Over the course of the coming months, I came across similar remarks which, in one way or another, suggested “a lack of youth.” These remarks contradicted what seemed to be the very condition of my research: hanging out with people in the early 20s—a demographic group classified as “youth” by various institutions in the EU, Latvia, and the Russian Federation. Furthermore, these remarks seemed to ignore a rise of youth-oriented programming—spurred on by well-publicized anxieties about young people’s levels of substance abuse, unemployment rate, and outmigration.

Irina’s question—her attempt to unsettle my ease with the category of “youth”—followed an evening at a youth documentary festival. In fact, my interlocutors’ thoughts about “lacking youth” typically emerged in response to particular representations of young people. In addition to Irina’s response to a film titled Arrhythmia, I explore my informants’ response to a late-Soviet Latvian documentary titled Is It Easy to Be Young? as well as to a Russian youth theater group’s production of Tennessee Williams’ play The Glass Menagerie.

While my interlocutors’ reflections on “youth” do not reflect a particular agenda or a shared set of assumptions, they nonetheless gesture towards a particular generational consciousness. Furthermore, these reflections offer a perspective which is fairly different from—although, no doubt, at the same time, resonant with—dominant representations of youth. Most of these representation revolve around imagery of “the crisis,” which proliferated as Latvia experienced a global financial downturn. This imagery played into decade-long anxieties about, on the one hand, young people’s supposed pursuit of economic rewards at the expense of familial, friendship, and political ties; and, on the other hand, young people’s particular vulnerability to economic downtown. Yet, as I show below, my interlocutors reflections of “youth” seek to cast their predicament less in terms of moral or economic crisis than in terms of a historical impasse.

Master Narratives: the Year of Youth and Youth in Action

Much of this chapter discusses how variously positioned actors rely on the category of “youth” as they reflect on specific representations of youth. These representations—two documentary films and a play—need to be situated with respect to two master narratives about youth in the Soviet Union and post-soviet states.

In the first narrative, socialist states offer a crucial infrastructure (sometimes explicitly identified with communist youth organizations) for making a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood. Post-socialist states, on the contrary, leave young people to fend
for themselves which, effectively, leads them to delve into the life of organized crime, sex trade and substance of abuse.

During my fieldwork, this narrative was most powerfully represented in a video clip announcing (or responding to) the Kremlin’s designation of 2009 as “the year of youth.” It was rumored that the video was scheduled to be broadcast on television before being censored for its excessive pessimism. Yet, it found its way to the web, and, quickly gaining notoriety as “the informational bomb of Russian internet,” circulated through social networking sites, blogs, media portals, etc.

**Figure 1**
Stills from “The Year of Youth”

You don't do anything; you only exploit

The only thing that will be left after you are gone is a plaque with 16 numbers

You create nothing

That's your freedom – the freedom to be a criminal or a prostitute

The video is set to a contemporary remix of “The Wondrous Far-Away” (*Prekrasnoe dalioko*), a song originally written for a movie titled “The Guest from the Future” (*Gostia iz budushchego*)—by far the most popular children’s film of the perestroika.\(^1\) First heard

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\(^1\) The film was based on a science fiction novel for young adults titled “One Hundred Years Ahead”
in the film’s concluding episode, the song revolves around a hope that the future (the
eponymous Wondrous Far Away) won’t be cruel to a person who is starting out their life
journey.² The video sets out to show that this hope has come to a naught. Beginning with
the historical footage of Soviet soldiers and shock-workers, it locates all the wonder
squarely in the past and then calls on its young viewers to recognize that they do nothing
and value nothing; that they destroy themselves and their country; and that, unless they
want to disappear without a trace, they should find out more about the year of youth.

In the second narrative about youth and socialism, centrally-administrated social welfare
programs are suspected of being disconnected from everyday needs of young people (or
outright harmful). Democratic principles demand an attentiveness to young people’s own
views, goals, and hopes incompatible with generational and bureaucratic hierarchies still
prevalent in post-socialist states. These states must ensure that there are institutional
channels that young people can use to communicate their concerns, educational and
technical means necessary for them to make use of these channels, and, most importantly,
opportunities and means for self-organizing and peer-learning.

Associated with EU-sponsored youth policy, this narrative was represented in a variety of
promotional materials associated with Youth in Action program loosely administered by
the European Commission. While these materials were easily accessible, their circulation
was limited. In contrast to Kremlin-sponsored Year of Youth, Youth in Action program
did not involve a centralized media campaign. In fact, the program called for youth to
make their own media (film videos, publish newsletters, create websites, etc.).

My emphasis on the tension between EU- and RF-sponsored discourses on youth
resonates with the previous chapters' emphasis on the tension between EU- and RF-
sponsored perspectives on ethnic identification, language values, and cultural production.
As before, I emphasize this tension because I seek to foreground my informants’ attempt
to challenge its perniciousness effects before engaging a scholarly apparatus which
challenges it epistemological validity.

² The text of the song is as follows: I hear a voice from the wondrous far-away / it is filled with
silver dew / I hear the voice, and a seducing road / Makes my head spin like a merry-go-round [Refrain:
Wondrous Far Away /Do not be Cruel / Do not be Cruel /Do not be Cruel /Do not be Cruel / I start my
journey innocently] I hear a voice from the wondrous far-away / It calls me to incredible places/ I hear
the voice which strictly asks / What did I do today for tomorrow? [Refrain] I swear that I will become
more pure and more kind / And that I will never abandon a friend who's in trouble / I hear the call and
hurry / Down a road that has not been travelled [Refrain]. There is some debate about the song’s second
stanza. The version most often played on the radio has the voice calling the protagonist to “incredible”
(prekrasnye) places. However, the film version has the voice calling the protagonist to “unheavenly”
neraiskie places. Lyrics by Yuri Entin; music by Yevgenii Krylatov; translation is mine.

(Sto let tomu vperiod), written by Igor Mozheiko under the pen name of Kir Bulychev. (It is rumored
that Mozheiko, who was a distinguished ethnographer and historian of Burma, was concerned that his
colleagues won’t take his seriously once they find out about his literary proclivities). Set in Moscow in
1984, the novel (and the film) focuses on a girl who comes back from the future while being pursued by
space pirates (from her own timeline) and helped by Soviet students (from the reader’s timeline).
Is It Easy To Be Young?

In 1985, Juris Podnieks, a Soviet-Latvian filmmaker, completed a documentary called *Is It Easy To Be Young (Vai viegli būt jaunam) ?.* The film focused on what would become a major object of glasnost' cinema: troubled youth. When the film premiered in Moscow a year later, the cavalry policy was called in to manage the crowds of people wishing to see it. The highly negative reviews in *Pravda* (a newspaper most closely associated with the Communist Party) only added to its growing popularity.

Dedicated to “those who seek their place in life,” Podnieks's film questions a central Soviet axiom – that every person has a place. Podnieks's youth are a foil for thinking about Soviet people as a whole: the opening scene shows a young man wearing reflective sunglasses. The film begins with shots of an outdoor rock concert in a town of Ogre, just outside of Riga. Following the concert, a group of young men vandalized a car of a commuter train. Four teens that have been apprehended by the police shortly after the act of vandalism have been judged as if they were the sole perpetrators. As their sentences are read – one of them is sentenced to three years in a maximum security prison – the voice of the judge dissolves into the background and the atmosphere of general doom sets in. The rest of the film expands – or purposefully loses – its focus. Among Podnieks's protagonists appear: a girl, hospitalized following a suicide attempt; an amateur filmmaker imagining a nuclear apocalypse and the kingdom come (which furnishes Podnieks' with his concluding shot); a young morgue worker; a Khare Krishna adept (something highly unusual in the mid-1980s USSR); and a group of Afghan veterans.

In 2010, as I was conducting fieldwork, there was a series of events celebrating the film’s 25th anniversary both in Russia and Latvia. One of the most publicly prominent discussions about the film was hosted by Dmitrii Bykov, a left-leaning post-Soviet poet, journalist, writer and, a talk show host on Russia’s Channel 5 (at that point not controlled by the Kremlin). Bykov invited more than a dozen of guests to his studio. Podnieks's friends and colleagues, from Latvia and Russia, were joined by contemporary filmmakers and (mostly silent) young people of uncertain provenance, described as “representatives of contemporary youth.”

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3 Often “troubled” youth turned into “degenerate” youth. The most significant fiction film on the subject of degenerate youth was El'dar Riazanov's *Dear Elena Sergeevna* (1988). The film was based on Liudmila Razumovskaya 1981 play of the same title which ran in repertory across the USSR until censured by the Ministry of Culture in 1983. (Although, I was told that it ran for a longer period of time in Tallinn's Russian Theater since censorship regulations were less stringent in the Baltic republics). The film deals with a group of high school graduates who come to congratulate their teacher, Elena Sergeevna, with her birthday. As the scene unfolds, it becomes clear that they came in order to force Elena Sergeevna to give them access to the school's grade book, so that they could falsify their grades. Among their tactics is threatening to rape their classmate. The film ends with Elena Sergeevna's death or suicide.
The discussion began with an emphasis on the revolutionary impact of the film in 1986. Like Bykov himself, who was born in 1967, most of his guests were the same age as Podnieks' protagonists in 1986. Before Podnieks, one of the guests said, no one posed a question about whether or not something was “easy”; nobody had enough courage to paint a picture of “a total degradation.”

Unlike his guests, Bykov did not applaud the film for its courageous exposé. In fact, Bykov refused to interpret Podnieks’s protagonists as victims of the Soviet regime. Referencing the film’s concluding scene, Bykov said that Podnieks’ genius lay in an attempt to show “the light of Soviet collapse” (svet rasspada). However marginalized, the film’s protagonists were committed to non-conformist and counter-cultural practices. According to Bykov, everyone who saw the film when it first came out, hoped that these practices would give rise to something new. However, this did not happen: everything

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4 When the film premiered in Moscow in 1986, cavalry police was called in to manage the crowds of people wishing to see it. In 1988, Podnieks received The State Prize, the highest possible Soviet honor at that time, for the film. Writing in Ogoniok, a major Russian weekly magazine, Andrei Archangelskii (2004) suggests that the film “gave” the Soviet Union its perestroika generation. Natalia Sevidova made the same point in Latvia's Russian daily Vesti while covering the film’s 25th anniversary. A different perspective is offered by a number of Latvian intellectuals who emphasize the film's importance for the restoration of Latvian independence. In this context, it's worth pointing out that the film focuses on Latvian-speaking youth. In fact, there is only one episode when Russian is heard on the screen: when several doctors admonish their young female patient for trying to commit suicide: "You just don't understand what's life and what's death! Yet, you jump out of the window only to get stuck at a lamp post outside. That's just not serious!"
post-soviet crawled out (vše vylezlo) out of komsomol rather than non-conformist youth. “We thought,” he concluded, “that a wall came tumbling down, and that the future was behind that wall. But it turned out that it was the future that tumbled.”

The talk show continued with an excerpt from the film’s sequel, titled Is It Easy…? (Vai Viegli), which traced the lives of the original film’s protagonists in the present. The excerpt focused on one of the protagonists’ reflections on the post-soviet period. Similarly to Bykov, he did not think that the post-soviet period brought much good. In fact, he suggested that it did not bring much at all: the last twenty years, he said, passed like a closed circle—bringing everyone back to where they started. Partly agreeing with the man in the excerpt, Bykov nonetheless made a more pessimistic diagnosis. “All that was interesting in [the original film’s protagonists’s] lives ended with the Soviet Union,” he said wrapping up the talk show.

In a blog post published some time after the show, Bykov (2010) emphasized the bleakness of the current situation. Furthering his point about “everything post-Soviet crawling out of komsomol,” he referenced the original’s film’s concern with the impact of the Afghan war, and then lamented the dominance of Nashi—a pro-Kremlin youth organization—in youth politics, particularly during the year of youth:

> Today’s youth has it significantly harder than youth of 1986. Yes, deployment to Afghanistan is no longer a threat. The [new] threat is Nashi, and while it may not be as traumatic, it is just as dangerous.

It is possible to take Bykov’s concern about growing institutionalization of youth as resonant with the EU-sponsored perspective on post-socialist youth. However, his frankness about (now admittedly unrealized) hope that non-conformist youth could have ushered in a new era of history speaks to a socialist perspective on youth as the historical avant-garde. This understanding is absent from the EU youth policy which casts “youth” as a demographic group characterized by a particular set of needs rather than as class of actors capable of speeding up the course of history.

Bykov’s approach to Podnieks’ film sits uneasily with both the RF- and the EU-sponsored discourse about socialist and post-socialist youth. Much of this unease rests on a dismissal of formal politics—evident in his explicit distaste for komsomol and Nashi as well as in an implicit contrast between conformist politicians (equally present in late socialist and post-socialist states) and non-conformist artists (lamentably absent from the contemporary world). In fact, a similar dismissal characterized a fairly well-circulated response to the Year of Youth—another video clip, executed in the same style as the original. The clip gained wide notoriety for blaming politicians and bureaucrats for, if not for causing, then propelling, degradation of youth—visually represented by superimposing the tally of parliamentary elections onto a middle finger.
Figure 3
Year of Youth: An Alternative Clip

The bar graph shows the distribution of seats in Russian legislature. The middle finger—the largest number of seats—is occupied by members of “United Russia” (a party closely associated with Putin).

Bykov’s antipolitics can be countered with a turn to recent scholarship on Komsomol (e.g. Yurchak 2006) and Nashi (e.g. Hemment 2012)—which offers plenty of evidence that young people have been and continue to be quite capable of working around officially-sanctioned programs of action. However, I aim to respond to his perspective—particularly, to his dismissal of formal politics—by turning to ethnographic data. To this end, analyze some of my key informants’ reflections about “youth” following a screening of Podnieks’ film.

Stas

I met Stas at one of the Loyalists’ meeting. He was by far one of the most widely known of the group’s members—highly sought out by his colleagues whenever they needed help organizing something and frequently called on for advice. It was quite easy to take Stas as one of the beneficiaries of post-socialist reforms—a highly adaptive, independent, and entrepreneurial young man imagined by proponents of liberalization. Not yet in his mid twenties, he ran an advertising agency, drove a Mercedez, regularly travelled across Europe, and had no shortage of romantic entanglement. Indeed, even those who were highly critical of the new economic order, took Stas as someone thoroughly capable of overcoming its characteristic difficulties in a morally uncompromising fashion.

Apparently, he could get a car through the Russian border in about an hour—a near miraculous feat considering that it was not unusual to wait more than eight hours in customs-related traffic; and, furthermore, to do so without bribing the guards. In fact, whenever there was a need to deal with the police during public events, Stas would be turned to in a (rarely disappointed) hope that his air of authority would lead to a favorable resolution.

Like most of my interlocutors, Stas was not particularly given to self-reflection in a confessional mode. Whenever he came over, our preferred late-night activity was that of “philosophizing” – a genre of speech not reducible to “sharing” or “commiserating.”
(Clowes 2004, c.f. Ries 1997). Yet, after we watched *Is It Easy to Be Young*? he made a quizzical remark. At the end of the film, Podnieks interviews a group of young Latvian men drafted to serve in Afghanistan and focuses the camera on a young man who, talking about his experience in the military, says, “I’ve heard that people are supposed to grow up in the war. This is wrong. They get old.” “If I were to do so something autobiographical,” Stas said reflecting on the young veteran’s insight, “I’d call it *An Unrepentant Confession*.”

On the one hand, Stas’s remark indexed Podnieks’s refusal to shy away from his protagonists’ unscripted, often unclear and elusive, language—indeed, in some sense, reminiscent of confessional speech. Yet, on the other hand, Stas’ remark indexed not only a particular style of speech but also a very specific content: his turn to “confession” made sense insofar as Podnieks’s protagonist spoke of “growing old.” However, neither link shed light on the paradoxical nature of the phrase. According to the Russian Orthodox tradition, to which Stas, in some sense, belonged, confession and repentance went hand in hand: Why would one want to confess, unless one could also repent?

I suggest that Stas’ musing about an “unrepentant confession” speak to challenges associated with an attempt to narrate one’s life or to offer a particular representation of self (be it to a film-maker, a friend, or an ethnographer). Here, the imagined narrative is both confessionary and repentant — terms that connote an attempt at sincerity, openness.

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5 “Philosophizing” connotes a genre of speech which is sufficiently general so as to not be reflective of any personal / private concerns, yet not sufficiently grounded to denote a scholarly discussion. In Russian, the verb “philosophize” may be used as a synonym of verbs such as “thinking,” “discussing,” “blabbering,” “showing off.”

6 Military training/service was mandatory for men and could last up to 3 years (in the navy) or 2 years (in the army). Most young men pursuing university education had a chance to undertake their military training in the summer; thereby, they could evade both the lengthy service term and minimize the possibility that they’d be required to partake in active military operations. This, however, was conditional on their ability to gain admission to a university / program with an internal “military division” (voennaia kafedra). In fact, availability/access to this division was a major factor in influencing young men’s choice of profession.

7 The response should be contextualized in Soviet narratives about World War II—particularly, stories about children who, mature far beyond their years, are more courageous in the face of death than many of their older compatriots. These narratives were preceded by accounts of children’s involvement in the Civil War of which Gaidar’s “The Tale of the War Secret, Malchish Kibalchish and Keeping One’s Word” (anthologized in Balina et al 2004) is, perhaps, the most famous (Steiner 1999 and Kelley 2007 offer a thorough discussion of Soviet children’s literature). A cinematic work which, in some sense, puts this narrative on its head—as it questions the very trope of war-time heroism—is Larisa Shepitko’s 1977 film “The Ascent” (Voskhozhdenie). A less aesthetically sophisticated critique is offered in Aleksandr Atenev’s 2006 film “Bastards” (Svolochi).

8 It is possible to interpret Podniek’s emphasis on unscripted speech as running counter both to the prevalence of voice-overs and well-rehearsed/ formulaic remarks in Soviet documentary cinema. However, this interpretation would be shortsighted since much of fairly mainstream and officially-sanctioned late-socialist aesthetic production emphasized instability / impossibility / difficulty of verbal communication & clarity.

9 The (assumed) correlation between aging and confessing draws both on grounded sociology — an observation that most people who go to church (and partake in the ritual of confession) are the elderly; and on a literary / historical imagination — which frequently casts confession as an end-of-life ritual.
and truthfulness as well as an hope for response, forgiveness, and recognition. Yet, at stake in repentance is also a possibility of retrospection—an ability to judge one’s life by placing it in a broader context and evaluating one’s actions in light of possible alternatives. Youth (molodost’) is a retrospective vantage point which makes this judgement possible. It is imagined as a period when “one enters life”: when, through a series of actions and choices one becomes a moral agent capable of taking responsibility. In this context, molodost’ is less of a liminal space where one experiments with social taboos than a site where one is able to hear and, for the first time, respond to a call from a future.

The line from Podnieks’ film which spoke of growing old rather than growing up resonated with Stas because he, like many of my other interlocutors, sensed that his youth molodost’ never happened. Making sense of this sentiment—a longing for “youth” as something that never happened rather than as something that has been lost—requires a biographic turn.

Like most of my interlocutors, Stas was born in the mid 1980s. When he was in high school, around 2005, Latvia's credit craze has not entered its ultimate stage. Agents in the informal sector still competed with banks for offering finance capital. Stas had a head on his shoulders, was dependable, and had interpersonal skills, of which being a seven feet tall amateur-boxer was an important part. This made him a sought-after associate. As Stas graduated high school, the informal sector lost out its credit business to the banks almost entirely. Stas opened his own business, specializing in shipping between the EU and Russia. At that time, the mechanics of border crossing were favorable both for formal and informal transit. However, as Latvia entered the Schengen zone, this changed. Stas's third venture revolved around advertising and promotions. During the economic boom, everyone sought to advertise. Self-advertising was thought to be a “reinvestment” bound to increase future returns. Yet, as I began my intensive fieldwork in 2009, Latvia's advertising industry went belly-up.

Whereas Stas's financial situation was tangibly better than his peers', he was was quite hesitant to attribute his success to his business acumen: to an entrepreneurial ability to see particular trends and make calculated risks. Over the period of 8 years, Stas had three successful businesses; yet, by 2010, he had little to show for his success. Here, at stake is more than “material evidence” of one's previous success: i.e., “economic capital” that one was able to accumulate. American idiom of “experience” – which speaks to a kind of a “materiality” which persists as other, more tangible, economically-dependent forms of materiality disintegrate – has limited resonance. Like Bourdieu's forms of capital, “experience” presupposes convertibility which does not always exist in post-socialist setting. Simply put, the kind of experience that is needed to navigate the intersection of formal and informal economy at a specific border cannot be translated to other settings.10

10 Here, I am implicitly drawing a parallel between a situation that Stas and many of his contemporaries found themselves in 2008-2010; and a situation that many of late-socialist “businessmen” found themselves after the collapse of Socialism. International economists interpreted black-market transactions as indicative of entrepreneurial potential bound to erupt in 1991. However,
Yet, interpretations of the current predicament as that of “the crisis” implicitly assumed that a return to a normal state of affairs would be possible—that insights gained in the period “before” could be of use in the period “after.” Yet, as Stas's career path—and more importantly, his hesitance to interpret it in terms of individual achievement—suggested otherwise.

Many of my informants shared Stas's longing for “youth”—imagined to be a time when one can hear and respond to a call from the future. For these young men and women, Podnieks' film was not an archive of Soviet repression. At the same time, from their perspective, the film was hardly a celebration of late-socialist non-conformism. In fact, both interpretations of Is it Easy to Be Young?—the one expressed by Bykov's guests and drawing on a liberal critique of socialism, the other articulated by Bykov—did not resonate with my informants. In part, this lack of resonance had to do with a question of formal politics.

From “Crisis” to Arrhythmia

One of my first acquaintances in Riga was Klim, a young jurist, who invited me over to his office for a cup of coffee. In his early 30s, he was slightly older than most of The Loyalists. He was married and had two children. In 2008, when his wife was expecting their second child, he decided to buy a bigger apartment. This was the point at which the real estate prices were most inflated. Klim and his wife decided to keep their old apartment—which was also mortgaged—as a form of investment rather than sell it. Not selling the old apartment, meant taking a larger loan. He and his wife borrowed around €175,000 for a 2-bedroom apartment in one of Riga's suburbs. By the time I began my fieldwork, the new apartment's market value was around €100,000. The old apartment could be sold for €75,000: which was €10,000 less than what Klim and his wife owed on their first mortgage. The market value of Klim's property was €175,000; yet, he and his wife owed €256,000 to the bank. In other words, their net worth was -€81,000. Since graduating from university in 2000, Klim worked like a dog and built up a successful small business. Yet, in 2009, all he had to show for it was -€81,000.

After Klim shared his financial situation with me, he paused and added “Now they say that we have crisis. But what we have is a miniature train [paravozik] which keeps moving somewhere, and all that can change is a machinist.” Here was a remarkable reversal of a classical socialist metaphor. In Soviet cinematography and fiction, the train 

these transactions depended on economic networks that did not survive the collapse of state socialism—e.g. access to state-owned machinery to moonlight. For a sustained discussion, see Humphrey 2002, Verdery 2004. For an alternative account see Yurchak 2002, 2003.

11 In Latvia, there is a difference between “jurists” and “lawyers.” Like in most of post-Soviet republics, law is taught on the undergraduate level. The difference between “jurists” and “lawyers” is not so much a matter of education (although, lawyers typically hold master's degrees) but elected membership in a professional college. In terms of legal procedure, the substantial difference between jurists and lawyers is that jurists may not participate in criminal proceedings.
was an ultimate symbol of progress. The railcar and the railway – as contrasted to the American automobile and the road – indexed progress precisely insofar as they were preset: i.e., insofar as the course of history was known. The reason for Klim's remark was to highlight his impotence at being able to hear the future—something that made direction gravely uncertain and, furthermore, turned the real train into something akin to a child's toy.

The image of the train recurred during my conversation with Yulia, a key member of The Loyalists. Like Klim, Yulia was sharply critical of using the trope of "crisis" to emphasize the particularity of the present moment. As we were preparing for a Young European Federalists Exchange Program (of which I spoke in Chapter 1), she said, "This talk of the crisis is nonsense. Our politicians have always lived in the present, in the moment." This was not particularly surprising, she continued. Over the last century, Latvia has seen multiple regime changes. Consequently, Yulia continued, nobody thought anything was forever. "Just look at the independence period!" she exclaimed. "The average government lasted for 10 months!" And now," Yulia concluded, "There is not even a foundation on which you can fall. We're just in a free fall: we can't even start anew. We are stuck in timelessness [bezvremen'e]."

My informants' unease with "the crisis"—evident their ruminations about growing old, riding on the train to nowhere, being stuck in timelessness—resonated with Svetlana's Strel'nikova 2009 documentary titled Arrhythmia. In Riga, the film screened as a part of Youth Documentary Night—an event loosely linked with the 25th anniversary of Is It Easy To Be Young? Interweaving fiction and nonfiction, Arrhythmia follows several days in the life of a 25-year old cardiologist. On the one hand, these days revolve around the clinic where he works. In these scenes, the camera focuses on the rows of tired patients waiting for their turn to see a doctor; on elderly babushkas who lament their lives and do not understand what is going on; and on emergency visits to dying patients. On the other hand, the doctor's days revolve around organizing parties and promotional events. Here, the camera follows the crowds of young dancers covered in soap bubbles, laser light shows, and late-night contests and competitions.

Incidentally, the image of the train had a particularly charged character in Latvia since it played a crucial role in the history of Russian Imperial and then Soviet railways. Riga's Electric Railways Factory (Rīgas Vagonbūves Rūpnica) manufactured a great number (possibly a majority) of Soviet trains. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the factory went into deep decline. The collapse of industrial manufacturing wasn't unique to Latvia; yet, whereas railways were concerned, this collapse was felt particularly strongly – in part, because it was concomitant to a significant reduction of railway services throughout the republic as well as between the three Baltic states.

Somewhat hyperbolic, this statement has a strong resonance with Latvia's post-soviet history. Since the restoration of independence, Latvia had 11 prime-ministers; given that 2 of them, held office twice non-consecutively, the number of post-soviet prime-ministerial changes stands at 13. In Estonia, the number is 10; in Lithuania – 11. Only the Baltic States were re-constituted as parliamentary republics following the disintegration of the USSR. Even thought the Baltic States have the presidential office, which provides a limited measure of continuity, it is largely ceremonial.

In Russia (and Latvia), medicine is taught on the undergraduate level. Consequently, it is possible to be a practicing physician by the time one is in his / her mid-twenties.

One particularly poignant episode focuses on the protagonist's attempt to organize a vkladishi
On one level, the film's title emphasizes the difference between the protagonist's past-times. Yet, the title also suggests that the protagonist's attempt to balance his demanding day job with a strenuous night life—or, rather, his inability to decide what life to pursue—has a pathological effect. Strel'nikova foregrounded this aspect of the film when she spoke about her peers' (the first post-soviet generation's) proclivity for living “a double life because while you want to do one thing, you have to make money” (Troepol'skaia 2010).

This perspective was shared by Irina with whom I attended the festival. While Irina was no longer involved in any sort of activism, she still kept abreast of all political issues; and was a frequent guest at various political and community events. As I mentioned above, when I first told her of my interest in “youth,” she feigned surprise, asking whether or not I thought there was any youth to do research with. Several months later, when we saw Arrhythmia, she yet again problematized “youth” as an object of research, “Youth is possible only for as long as you don't have to spin [krutitsia].” In the everyday use of the word, “spinning” is primarily linked to the Russian concept of byt which is rendered in English as “the everyday.” Byt has a negative connotation: it speaks of a life which, in its banality and repetition, stands outside of the historical process (Boym 1994). Insofar as over the past century and a half, history has been understood in terms of “progress,” spinning also bespeaks to an impossibility of a cumulative movement necessary for progress.16

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16 The negative connotation of byt can be traced to the pre-revolutionary period. The Russian Orthodox

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Vkladishi – literally, “inserts” – are inner wrappers for individually-wrapped chewing gum. In the early 1990s, as non-Soviet chewing-gum became accessible, many children became avid collectors of vkladishi. (Even though seemingly novel, this practice drew on a long-standing Soviet tradition of collecting postage stamps; perhaps most famously commemorated in Sofia Mogilevskaiia's 1958 novel Marka Strany Gondelup / The Stamp of Gondelupa.) One of the rituals around collecting vkladishi revolved around an eponymous game. Contenders of the game tried to hit a stack of several waged vkladishi with a palm of their hand in such a way so that some or all of vkladishi would flip sides. Whoever succeeded, got the flipped vkladishi.
A longing for history permeated *Arrhythmia*. To begin with, it characterized its very form of a partly fictionalized documentary. Sharing her preference for plot lines driven by events, she suggested that that fictional elements were necessary to compensate for the documentary tendency to forgo action in favor of portraiture. At the same time, she foregrounded a very contradictory nature of this form when she described her protagonist's impasse in terms of reflection rather than action. According to her, the film was much more about the young doctor's inability to ask “What kind of a shithead am I?” than “Am I a doctor or do I organize parties?” (Troepol'skaia 2010:6). In another interview, Strel'nikova emphasized that that she did not want to make a film about a young man who thinks that he has time to experiment with different life styles, while, at the same time, recognizing that one day he'll have to do something seriously. According to her, if that were the case, then the film would have been about time passing by an indecisive young man. However, *Arrhythmia* was “not about the time that's passing him” but, rather, “him passing the time” (Borovik 2012).

Among my interlocutors, the person who talked about “passing the time” most passionately was Renars whom I met at one of the Loyalists' meetings. Over the course of the year Renars came to The Loyalists only several times; but he kept in close touch with Pavel since, like Pavel, Renars also ran and planned to run for the city council and the parliament. Renars's father passed away when he was in high school, at which point Renars started working to support his younger brother and mother. When I met him, he was working full time at a bank and studying full time at The University of Latvia. As it was impossible to get a budget spot in Finance, he paid for his education out of pocket. His younger brother was about to start university and, given the crisis, could not get a job; so, Renars was paying for his brother's education as well.

Renars and I had a conversation after The Loyalists' Political School meeting, as he walked towards the train station: to go back home to Sloka, a town a 30 minute train ride away from Riga. He began by talking about the problems with education: its low quality, its lack, its commercialization. Soon, however, he moved onto talking about the crisis. “Crisis” is a misnomer, he argued. “Crisis” implies the presence of an economic cycle a presence of certain horizons of possibility; but Latvian economy isn't cyclical at all, it is wild; instead of curves there are peaks and plunges. Trying to exploit the peak as long as possible, people run from one place to another and cannot see beyond their immediate moment. Regular people “spin” trying to make ends meet. As for politicians, they “run” from one idea to another idea, from one party to another party. During The Loyalists' meetings “running” was seen as emblematic of Latvia's political problems. All of Latvia's

Tradition condemns daily sueta (“fuss” and “bustle”) and directs the faithful to focus on bytie rather than byt; a word which shares the same root, but denotes something very different, such as “being” or “existence.”

17 Like other state universities, The University of Latvia has a certain number of “budget spots” in all of the programs of study. A student occupying one of these spots – which are “given out” based on academic achievement in the final year of study – does not have to pay for education. The intensity of the competition for these spots depends both on the university and the program of study.
politicians were perebezhchiki and perevertyshi. Perebezhchik may be translated as a “defector”; but, in Russian, its etymologically linked to beg – running and begun – runner. Pervertysh may be translated as “turncoat”; it's etymologically linked to vertet’ – to turn and spin. “Everyone wants to be as close to the feeding trough (kormushka),” Renars explained. “So they spin and run.”

The Glass Menagerie

The problem of spinning and running—interlinked with the problem of “youth”—permeated the production of The Glass Menagerie, staged by a Russian youth theater troupe. The troupe, called The Free Actors Society, used to be housed in an attic in the Old City, but, shortly before I arrived to Riga, moved to a new home on Čaka street. Although still in Riga's center, the street is not frequented by tourists. Its Jugendstil buildings are still unrestored, their caryatids – veiled in grime. The air is dense with a web of cables for trolleybuses, which thin out the sidewalks. A twenty-minute walk up the street, there is a six-story building. Not very noticeable, it is nonetheless well known. It is a palimpsest of sorts. For some, it is the place where the first post-Soviet nightclub opened its doors in 1991. For others, it is the place where one could see arthouse European cinema in the late 1990s. For yet others, a place where people tried their fortune playing roulette. Today, it's a home for about twenty Russian actors.

The Glass Menagerie was one of the first plays produced by The Free Actors Society. During my fieldwork, the play emerged as one of the main sites for talking about the question of youth. The plot of the play frequently revolves around Amanda Wingfield. Longing for gentleman callers of her youth – a youth spent in the carefree turn-of-the-century American South – Amanda tries to find a suitor for her daughter Laura. This is difficult since instead of going out, Laura spends most of her time taking care of her glass collection. Laura's brother, Tom, is a poet who works in a warehouse. One night, Tom brings home Jim, Tom's work colleague and a former classmate. Amanda and Tom hope that Laura will like Jim, and indeed, Laura does. But it turns out that Jim is already engaged. This leads to Laura's complete breakdown and Tom's escape to the sea.

The contemporary resonance of Williams's play seems striking. First, it is set during the aftermath of America's Great Depression. In the course of my fieldwork, the Great Depression became a benchmark against which international press situated Latvia's economic collapse. (In fact, shortly after I arrived, I found city announcement boards covered with posters announcing a film festival dedicated to cinema of the Great Depression, yet, paradoxically adorned with Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly). Yet, Riga's Menagerie does not stage a resonance between the Great Depression and Latvia's economic crisis. Instead, it uses the economic crisis as a foil for meditating on “a crisis of conscience.” Second, in light of Amanda's longing for an easy past, Glass Menagerie invites a meditation on nostalgia for socialism. However, in Riga's production it is Jim, rather than Amanda, who serves as a focal point of nostalgic yearning. Let me elaborate on both of these.
I'll begin with conscience. “Conscience” is offered as a frame for the play in the production notes:

How to remain true to yourself, not to lose your unique self in the merciless maelstrom, and how to leave everything, beloved and dear, in search of a fantom happiness? [This is] a play about sick conscience which pushes through memories and wounds the soul like fragments of glass. [We can] try and run away, to scream in an attempt to somehow muffle this pain. But [the conscience] catches up [with us] again and again. Tugging at the soul's wounds with the familiar melody, the screams of the seagulls, and the noise of the surf, [the conscience] reminds you of the life that, having been shattered, pierced [your] heart with broken pieces of glass. Is it possible to put these pieces together into a mosaic of happiness?

Figure 5
Production Photographs of *The Glass Menagerie*

The problem of conscience informs the production insofar as the staging of the play collapses the present and the past. In this production, Tom *is* at sea rather than plans to go to sea. Riga's *Menagerie* unfolds on a deck of a ship which doubles as The Wingfield's apartment. Bollards serve as chairs, sails – as curtains, a stair rope – as a fire escape. Menacing cries of seagulls interweave with a thunderous racket of a passing streetcar. Tom becomes overwhelmed with his memories. He roams the stage as if dreaming. He circles Jim and Laura with a lantern attempting to grasp them. Yet, however close he comes, he always passes them by. They are memories or ghosts which evade his grasp. Tom's journey, his escape, has not worked out. He is haunted.
On the most rudimentary scale, this may be a comment on the transition from socialism to capitalism. However, here the object of melancholia is not a failed promise of capitalism. What haunts Tom is not the specter of a possibility envisioned in the 90s; what is mourned is a particular relationship to time. When I interviewed Gleb Belikov, an actor who played Tom, he reiterated the centrality of “conscience” in OSA's interpretation of the play. “There are problems with conscience [sovest’] now,” Gleb said. “It is not that the time we live in is difficult. Rather, it's wicked [podloz].”

Today, both words that Gleb uses – conscience [sovest’] and wickedness [podloz’] – sound anachronistic. Conscience has been replaced by “psyche” or “individuality.” At stake in the difference between, on the one hand, “conscience,” and, on the other hand, “psyche” or “individuality,” is a conception of a subject. The subject of conscience is a subject who has a relationship with the flow of History. He is, to use a word that appears several times in The Big Soviet Encyclopedia's definition of “conscience” a person [lichnost'] rather than an individual [individ]. In other words, he understands himself vis-a-vis a transcendent historical processes. This subject has a Marxian historical consciousness rather than a Freudian unconscious. Thus, to speak of “sick conscience” is to speak not so much of an individual psyche but of a time in which a person finds himself. To repeat, according to Gleb, this time is not so much as “difficult” as it is “dastardly” or “wicked.”

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Now, I would like to switch registered and talk about Jim. I do so in order to come back to a point that I made earlier: that the failure in the center of The Glass Menagerie is not, in any simple way, a failure of the capitalist promise.

I saw The Glass Menagerie with my friend Ludmila, a leader of The Humanists. While in high school, Ludmila trained to be a professional ballet dancer; yet, it did not work out. When we got acquainted, she was finishing a degree in journalism in St. Petersburg, where she would go several times a year for exams. When there, she would cram in as many theater outings as she could. Riga's Menagerie was her second or third. “This time around,” she said as we were making our way back to the center, “I kept thinking of Jim. Now, all the men are like Jim,” she added. “They used to be successful, but now they lost everything. All they can talk about now are there former days of glory. It's like dating elderly men.”

As Ludmila said this, I thought of Stas. Stas was always reticent to speak of the days gone by. Furthermore, compared to many – for instance, Klim – he was still doing well. This said, the men of Ludmila's story were easy to come by. A character who made a regular appearance in crisis-themed stories shared with me by my interlocutors was a young man with a Mercedes (bought on credit), but no gas money. This man would hang out near the train station by day and next to dance clubs by night in an attempt to moonlight. However hard I looked, I searched for this man in vain. As I realized towards
the end of my fieldwork, by 2009 all the cars that were bought on credit were repossessed by the bank. Settled with enormous debt (stringent legislation made personal bankruptcy nearly impossible), these men left in search of better fortunes in Ireland or England. Emigration of youth was a widely discussed indication of the crisis. However, discussions of emigrating young men was a particularly salient sign of how serious the situation has become.

Less than a month after Ludmila and I saw The Glass Menagerie, I was invited to participate in The Loyalists' school outreach program. The program was run by Feliks, a sophomore at The University of Latvia. As we met in the city center to go to the school—it was located in an outlying borough—Feliks was telling me how difficult it was to secure invitations. Teachers and principles alike, he said, were biased against political organizations. To remedy the bias, The Loyalists downplayed their affiliation with the party and emphasized their “social” rather than “political” nature. What was offered as a part of The Loyalists' outreach program was not political education with an implicit aim of recruiting members, but rather, advice regarding university education in Latvia. I was invited along as an “expert” and charged with the task of emphasizing the quality of Latvian education to prevent people from leaving to study abroad. (Given that the costs of studying in Denmark were comparable to the costs of studying in Riga, a lot of students tried to go abroad).

Feliks and I were joined by five other men (Pavel among them): one for each of Riga's universities. Each one extolled their respective experiences and downplayed any potential benefit from studying abroad. “So imagine you get a degree from London School of Economics,” Pavel said brusquely. (Given how competitive admissions are, this is a near impossibility). “It's not like you'll want to work as a bank clerk afterwards. At the same time, no matter how good your education is, you won't be hired without having any experience. You should stay here and do what I did: study and work at the same time.” Everyone listened intently. As the bell was about to wring, the female teacher addressed the class. “Girls! Look in front of you,” she exclaimed. (In the class of 20, there were 3 male students). “There are six self-actualized men right here. Trust me, it would be difficult to find men like this abroad!”

**Conclusion**

What do Latvia’s Russian youth activists—specifically, young men and women to whom I refer to as “aspiring politicians”—want? How can their desire for politika be concretized? What are the stakes of their investment in practices which make politika possible? Why do they turn to late-socialist forms of identification, communication, and cultural production? What is the ethos underlying their attempts to “keep ethnicity nearby,” to “speak concretely,” to be “culturally inventive”?

This chapter—offered as a coda to a more sustained discussion of aspiring politicians’ engagement with debates on ethnic, linguistic and cultural policy—offers a somewhat
paradoxical answer: youth activists do what they do because they long to be young. As the object of their longing, “youth” speaks neither to a particular age bracket nor to a set of roles associated with a particular age group. Rather, longing for youth recalls a socialist dream of being in the avant-garde of historical progress. In this context, “youth” is a consciously developed character trait (which speaks to one’s relationship to History) rather than a chronological attribute (which indicates one’s age); something that is emphasized by my interlocutors’ persistent differentiation between molodezh (a word which connotes a group of young people who share generational consciousness) and molodniak (a word usually used to describe a group of young animals).

My immediate context for asking “What do young people want?” is the financial crisis of 2008-2010. The crisis, which had global proportions, had a particularly negative effect on Latvia. Salaries, pensions, and social services were cut; unemployment tripled; and out-migration reached previously unseen levels. As the crisis unfolded, “youth” became a crucial topic of conversation among politicians, policy-makers and journalists. Parliamentarians, activists, and public intellectuals alike expressed concerns about young people’ heightened vulnerability to the financial downturn.

Widely articulated concerns about “youth” in “crisis” rested on (fairly reasonable)

To appreciate this distinction further, it is useful to recall several features of its cultural-historical context. The first concerns the importance of concepts like “consciousness” and “History” for Russian practices of self-interpretation and political organizing. In this context, it is worth recalling that the German philosophers’ “idealistic” interpretations of the French Revolution (which put an early modern understanding of man as someone who “makes” history on its head — making “History” and “Spirit” forces in and of themselves) had a profound influence on Russian intellectual culture. (For a succinct account of thinking about “History” from antiquity to the present, with a particular emphasis on the contrast between Vico’s humanism and Hegel’s idealism, see Arendt (2006); much of Arendt’s work on totalitarianism explores the implications of this paradigm. Some of the classic accounts of the German idealists’ influence on Russian intelligentsia—and the revolutionary tradition—include Berlin 2008, Raeff 1966, Walicki 1979. The persistence of German idealist’s influence during the Soviet period is suggested by Hellbeck’s (2009) study of Bukharin’s engagement with Hegel’s Phenomenology and History during his 1938 show trial.)

The second factor that further elucidates my informants’ investment in a particular understanding of molodezh has to do with their attempt to use “generation” (pokolenie) as a category of self-interpretation and political organizing. This attempt reflects the importance of horizontal or associational ties—and a concomitant critique of / unease with vertical or filial ties—which is often associated with contemporary and modern politics; most recently—the importance of “youth” in Color Revolutions (e.g., Nikolaenko 2007); and, speaking more broadly, the influence of the 19th century youth movements on nationalism and bureaucratization (c.f. Mannheim 1952). Lovell (2008) offers a provocative account of Russian (and, in part, Soviet) historiography’s investment in “generation” as a category of interpretation.

The third factor that elucidates my interlocutors’ investment in generational identity has to do with Leninist emphasis on “youth” as the avant-garde of communist movement (perhaps, most famously outlined in Lenin’s 1920 speech titled “The Tasks of the Youth Leagues.” In the 1920s and the 1930s, Soviet cultural policy explicitly appealed to generational identity—describing the first Soviet generation as vydvizhentsy (the ones who have been pushed forward); here, the classic account is provided by Fitzpatrick (1992). The Communist Youth League (KOMSOMOL) promoted generational identity since its establishment in 1918—frequently in opposition to kinship-based systems (associated with the peasantry); and, incidentally, referencing Nietzsche (Tirado 1993, 1994).
assumptions about what young people want and need: education, employment, and, most importantly, the family. Indeed, building a family was understood to be the ultimate goal, or, alternatively, the reason for, of getting a college diploma and finding a job. This emphasis on the family—and concerns over anything that would prevent young people from getting married and having children—reflected widespread anxieties about “demographic catastrophe” (the dramatic decline of the population during the 1990s and higher rates of mortality / morbidity); as well as a general sense that young people’s (supposed) drug abuse, alcoholism, promiscuity, abortions, sexual perversion, etc.19—were to blame for the catastrophe in the first place.

My interlocutors were keen to interrogate assumptions about personhood and temporality that made the discourse of “youth in crisis” so prominent. Above I explore how they did so by analyzing my informants’ response to three aesthetic representations of youth that punctuated my fieldwork. I turn to these aesthetic representations for two reasons. First, neither one of them was as politically charged as the official discourse on youth; as a result, they led to unsolicited reflections on the problem of youth—made in an off-beat, somewhat philosophical, key. These reflections reveal young people's attempts to frame their predicament as that of a historical impasse rather than that of an economic downturn—a frame that is missing from most public discussions of youth politics in Latvia. Second, I turn to these pieces in order to emphasize a representational (and, in some sense, aesthetic) aspect of my own work; and to suggest that ethnographic writing may be evaluated based on its ability not only to trace effects of particular representations but also to unsettle them by opening up a space for reflection.

19 Concerns over degeneration (in biological rather than moral sense) were already fairly prominent in the 1980s, particularly following the Chernobyl catastrophe. Quite likely drawing on earlier forms of popular science (e.g. Beer 2008), these concerns went against the officially-sanctioned emphasis on nurture (over nature)—most dramatically illustrated by Lysenko’s criticism of “bourgeois genetics” (Graham 1993). In the late 1990s, concerns over (biological) degeneration gave rise to a variety of aesthetic forms thematizing perversity, monstrosity, and violence—sometimes opening up spaces of critique (Yurchak 2008a, 2008b, c.f. Gololobov et al. 2014, Pilkinton 1994 and Markowitz 2000); sometimes providing source material for the newly emergent media and entertainment market (Borenstein 2007); sometimes furnishing particular ideological projects (Khapaeva 2008 and Etkind 2013); sometimes resonating with/ informing health activism (Rivkin-Fish 2005).
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