Contested borders and identity revival among Setos and Cossacks in the Russian-Estonian borderland

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In summer 1996 I undertook fieldwork as part of a group project studying Setos, an ethnic group in Pechory district in the Pskov region on the Russian side of the Russian-Estonian border. To our surprise, we discovered another group of people there, who were in conflict with the Setos. These men behaved aggressively and distinguished themselves by cultural performances and ethnic markers, which they called ‘Cossack’.

This claim to ‘Cossack’ identity immediately drew a response from us. Even people unfamiliar with Russian history and culture have some idea of who the Cossacks were. Until recently Cossacks were the stuff of legends, strongly associated with the Russian monarchy and with the emigrations of the early twentieth century. Cossacks were traditionally linked to the territory in the south of Russia. Thus, one would not expect to meet them on the Russian northwest in the mid-1990s.

This paper is based on ethnographic, sociological and historical work, as well as on newspaper materials and my field notes. The first section considers the history of the contemporary Russian-Estonian borderland through the history of its inhabitants, the marginal ethnic group of Setos. Here we will see how the closure of the frontier region between the former Estonian and Russian Socialist Republics, and the territorial dispute between contemporary Estonia and Russia at the beginning of the 1990s, established a distinct cultural space in the contested territories of the Pechory region on the Russian side of the border, activated the Seto ethnic identity, and resulted in the appearance of the Cossacks. The second section of the paper addresses the broader question of the modern revival of Cossack identity, focusing, in particular, on the role of the state border in this process. Special attention is paid to state involvement in and attitude towards the manifestation of this identity in practice.

The Russian-Estonian frontier and its inhabitants

In the modern discourse on culturally constructed borders the term ‘frontier’ is used to define the zone between state borders as well as those boundaries where different peoples are in contact with each other (Boeck 2000). From the state perspective, unlike the boundary, which is a line of inclusion and exclusion and inward-oriented, frontier has been understood as being outward-oriented and as a zone of contact rather than a line of separation (Paasi 1998).

As Kopytoff (1987) and Boeck (2000) have pointed out, the distance from the center of the state and the weakness of state power in peripheral regions have historically provided fruitful ground for the emergence of new communities. As Kopytoff (1987) has shown for Africa, people forced to leave their homelands as a result of social, economic and environmental catastrophes settled in territories beyond the jurisdiction of established political communities. In his words, frontier regions have been the incubators of new societies, which have no opportunity (or desire) to re-
produce the forms of social life found in the center. Kopytov points out that a frontier does not create a society of a certain type; it rather provides an institutional vacuum which allows the development of specific social processes (Kopytov 1987).

The description above characterizes the contemporary borderland between Estonia and Russia. Indeed, historically these lands have been a frontier zone, a meeting place of two civilizations, the Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy and Western Europe. In different historical periods, following political ‘shifts’, the socio-political space of the modern border region changed more than once from its status as an open frontier zone to a closed borderland. While the lakes of Pskovskoe and Chudskoe had been the natural boundaries between the possessions of Russia and the Estonian lands, for a long time the boundaries to the south and the north of the lakes had remained blurred. In Russian ethnological writings, these territories have been referred to as an ‘ethno-contact zone’ between the Finno-Ugric peoples and the Slavs. The traces of this connection can be found even today. The small ethnic group of Setos is one of the most interesting products of these intensive centuries-old contacts between different peoples.

Before the end of the 1980s, only a few ethnologists knew about the Seto people. The ‘borderness’ of the area of Seto settlement and some specific features of their culture first generated interest in their ethnic identity. Two important markers of ethnic identity, religion and language, contain the evidence of the Setos’ frontier origin and their liminal position; unlike Estonians, who are Lutherans, the Setos profess Orthodoxy, like their Russian neighbors. However, they speak a southern dialect of the Estonian language, which has a number of words borrowed from Russian.

The ethnic history of the Setos remains speculative. Due to the Setos’ geographical and cultural marginality, modern Russian researchers are very careful when defining the key characteristics of Seto identity formation (Gadlo 1998). In addition, nowadays the issue of the Setos’ origin has become politically sensitive, as discussed below. However, there is a shared opinion that from the sixteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century, Orthodox religion had been a cornerstone of their identity, which allows some researchers to speak about the Setos of that time as a ‘socio-religious community’ rather than as an ethnic group (Gadlo 1998: 272). Indeed, the foundation of the Pskov-Pechory Monastery in the fifteenth century was a key event both in the history of the region and in the Seto’s ethnic history. Setomaa (the land of the Seto people) is still perceived as an outpost of Orthodoxy, with its center in the Pechory Monastery. As to the ethnic identity of the Seto, it is considered to be a relatively new phenomenon, a product perhaps of the twentieth century and nation building.

During the twentieth century, the Setos increasingly began to feel ‘Estonian’ - ‘we are the Seto people, but our children are Estonians’ - due to the development of education in the Estonian language, the activities of educational and social organizations, and the Estonian state policy in the 1930s of providing the Setos with Estonian surnames (Rihopper 1979: 96, as cited in Gadlo 1998: 272). As a result, even the names of elderly Setos carried a frontier trace, an implicit reference to their frontier origins and their dual identity - having become Estonians by surname, their first names given by the Orthodox Church still looked and sounded Russian.

The history of the Setos is directly connected to the history of political borders in the region. In 1920 the territory of Pechory district - the Setos’ homeland - was given over to Estonia and the border moved westwards. In 1944 these lands were partly returned to Russia, with a part of Setomaa remaining under Estonian jurisdiction. However, since Estonia was included in the Soviet Union, the solid borders between Russia and Estonia were abolished and the region turned into a frontier once again.

Thus, in Soviet times, the transparency of the state in the USSR, it was common political to...
Thus, in Soviet times the territory of Setomaa was ambiguous: on the one hand, due to the transparency of the administrative boundaries in the USSR, it was the ‘innerland’ within the common political space of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it exercised fully a frontier mode of life, being an important communication zone, sewing together the peripheries of two socialist republics, which were very different in terms of socio-economic development and ethnic cultures. The distance from the socialist republican centers and their governmental authorities, combined with bad transport connections to the ‘mainland’ and a relatively well-developed network of roads with neighboring regions across administrative lines, facilitated the formation of a distinct socio-cultural space with a common local identity. This identity was constructed across ethnic boundaries between Russians and Setos as well as across the line of the administrative division between Estonia and Russia.

In 1992 the establishment of the new political border between Estonia and Russia introduced wide-ranging changes into the lives of the borderland inhabitants. ‘Having arrived’ (as the locals themselves say) in a ‘sleepy’ rural society, with its daily life arranged according to the laws of nature and agriculture, the border has brought new rules and regulations structured by the presence of the state. The border also disrupted the symbols and identities of the borderland inhabitants. With all its signs and institutions, the border has formed a new general cultural background; the ‘border industries’, including visa services and customs and border posts, have become a part of a daily cultural landscape in the towns of Pskov and Pechory and in the villages of the region. The border has appeared as a new center for this periphery, a core, a basis for building new social structures, new relationships and new identities.

In comparison to other parts of the new borderland between Estonia and Russia, some specific conditions resulted in the formation of a distinct cultural space in the administratrive area of Pechory district on the Russian side of the border. Three main factors determine this distinctive character: the ethnic composition of the district, the strong influence of the Orthodox Pechory monastery, and the contested political status of these territories. The interplay of these three characteristics, launched by the establishment of the border, changed the cultural landscape of this borderland. One of the most striking aspects of this change was the appearance of the Cossacks on the Russian side of the border.

Setos and Cossacks: modern revival of identities

In Tsarist Russia, the Cossacks were the irregular army forces that lived and operated on peripheries, protecting Russian borders and colonizing new territories. The social and ethnic composition of the Cossacks was complex: any man, a nobleman as well as a peasant, “who could not find himself in the conditions of stable existence or had an adventurous character” could join the Cossacks (Ionen 1996: 225). In Russian society the Cossacks held a distinct position and gained special status as a ‘military-service estate’. However, it has to be emphasized that the Cossacks also developed a distinct cultural and ethnic identity. This specificity of Cossack community formation raises the question of how Cossacks should now be defined - as estate or ethnic group? How this question is answered clearly has implications for the modern Cossack revival, as we will see later.

In 1917 the Cossacks numbered 4.5 million, organized in eleven Cossack ‘hosts’, which were scattered across the territories along the southern borders of Russia from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean. They were very effective in solving economic and political tasks in border regions and also formed the core of the Russian military reserve. In the 1920s the Cossacks were repressed, and their name has been silenced in both academic and non-academic
circles for more than sixty years.

As one of the leaders of the modern Cossack movement recently reminisced: "about ten years ago I thought, I was the only person on the planet who felt himself a Cossack" (author's interview, October 2000, St. Petersburg). It would be no big surprise to hear a similar remark from one of the Seto leaders. Of course, both groups had 'quietly' existed before, as expressed in the exercising of some cultural practices in daily life, but the overwhelming processes of ethnic/national awakening in the USSR following the period of political liberalization at the beginning of the 1990s, brought them from the level of folklore ensembles and ethnographic museums to active public discussion.

The breakdown of the USSR led to the decline of Soviet culture. At the level of individuals, the collapse of the Soviet cultural model had serious effects on people's worldviews, which led to a crisis of individual identification. In this vacuum ethnicity has become the most accessible means of social identification for individuals. Ethnic groups became emergency support groups in the absence of other reliable reference groups. Furthermore, ethnicity in an ethnocratic state becomes a valuable resource, as it provides a whole spectrum of political rights (Dragunskii 1993).

Neither the Setos nor the Cossacks stayed outside the processes of ethnic mobilization. In both cases there emerged leaders and activists, and the movements' ideologies started to form. Of course, these movements are very different. The striking difference is the scope and the potential arena for the movements' development. There are no reliable estimations of the size of both groups, but even the approximate data that can be found are quite revealing. The estimated number of Setos is about 10-15,000 people, of whom less than 1000 at present live in Russia (Berg 2002). As to the Cossacks, newspapers give the total number of 4.5-5 million people (Nezavisimaia Gazeta-regiony, N2, November 1997), although these figures are unreliable and undoubtedly overestimated.

Geographically both groups also seem to be very distant from each other. The Seto movement was localized in the territories between the Russian Federation and nationalizing Estonia, while the Cossack movement was developing in a broad area on the southern margins of Russia, from the Black Sea to the Far East. It is especially interesting that Cossack organizations also appeared in many other regions, which are not the regions of traditional Cossack settlements, and this will be discussed below.

The movements also took different ideological paths. The Seto movement focused on cultural revival and began with the restoration of the Seto language and the collection of folklore, creating the ABC book and popularization of Seto folk heroes. In contrast, the Cossack movement began by declaring the restoration of the Cossacks' moral and ideological orders, which had existed since 1917 and are rooted in Christian values and the concept of faithfulness to the State. But by 1991 the declared cultural and social goals of the movement had gradually slipped to secondary importance, being replaced by emerging political goals. The rebirth of the Cossacks was no longer an abstract slogan but real politics aimed at acquiring power (Khoperskaia and Kharchenko 1998: 87).

The developing Cossack movement faced a number of serious obstacles. Of these problems, the justification of this 'archaic' union's restoration appeared as one of the most important. The public did not encourage the Cossack revival because of the unusual presentation of the Cossacks (for example, they often appear in public in a Cossack military uniform from the early twentieth century) and, to a large extent, because of their equivocal, often aggressive behavior and vague ideas. In addition, Russian society did not see (and still doubts) any functional need for the reconstruction of Cossack structures in a modern context.

Indeed, what is special about Cossack identi-

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The argument here between Fowlers and planners, and their desire to expand the possibilities of existing development, often illustrate the conflict of interest between the individual and the group. The planners, on the other hand, are more concerned with the overall impact of development on the environment and the community. This conflict is further exacerbated by the differences in the values and priorities of different groups, which often lead to a lack of consensus on the best approach to development.

It is important to note that the argument between Fowlers and planners is not a simple conflict between two opposing forces. Rather, it is a complex interplay of various factors, including economic, social, and environmental considerations. The planners’ emphasis on sustainability and long-term planning is often at odds with the Fowlers’ desire for immediate economic gains. This tension highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to urban development, one that takes into account the diverse interests of all stakeholders.

In this case, the planners and Fowlers are working together to create a development plan that balances the needs of the community with the requirements of economic development. The goal is to ensure that the changes made are sustainable and beneficial for all parties involved.
Russia over the Pechory district brought the Seto people from the realm of ethnographic museums to top-level political debate. We should recall here that the Setos are marginal, and speak a dialect of Estonian, but are Orthodox like the Russians. Thus, when the border dispute arose, the question of Seto identity became important in Estonian discourse and in scientific and political circles in the Russian northwest. The marginal Seto identity suddenly became a trump card in the hands of the politicians who were arguing for these territories. Estonia presented the Setos as a 'separated part of the Estonian people', whereas the Russian side emphasized the uniqueness of Seto culture and their common Orthodox roots. For instance, in 1994 geographers at St. Petersburg State University concluded that the Setos are an ethnic group with a distinct culture influenced by the Russian ethos.

Political debates over the Setos and the new border enhanced the political capital of the Seto movement's ideologists and boosted the movement's development. Seto distinctiveness and its preservation became a cornerstone of the movement's ideology. Since Pechory is seen by the Setos as a sacred cradle, a container and an anchorage of their identity, it is not surprising that the border has become the main driving force of their movement. So although the border divides the Setos in territorial space, it plays an important role in the integration of their group identity, thereby uniting them in discursive and cultural space (Nikiforova 1999).

Cossacks, the Russian state, and Russian borders

Whereas the Setos, facing the closing door of the Russian-Estonian border, are trying to resist these processes from the Estonian side, the modern Cossacks, as we shall see below, are looking for their niche on the other side, in Russia. Historically relations between the Cossacks and the Russian state have been controversial and dramatic. As the Russian researcher Ivakenko (1996) has pointed out, being a specific peripheral phenomenon only partly integrated into the wider society, the Cossacks were the bearers of a pre-state, chaotic culture. Because of their different, unpredictable nature, the state had to localize, suppress and incorporate the Cossacks into its body. This struggle between the center and the Cossacks persisted for centuries, and has been extensively analyzed by historians. Here I will mention only that relations between the state and the Cossack communities in the south were stabilized from the end of the seventeenth century to the first quarter of the nineteenth century. During this period Cossack autonomy was curtailed, and the Cossacks were transformed by the state into 'a military-service estate'. Until 1917 the Cossacks remained under state control (Tikidzhian 1994). What had helped to stabilize relations between Cossacks and the state was their agreement over the role of the former should play in protecting the state's borders.

Looked at from a border perspective, the role of the Cossacks in Russian history is difficult to overestimate. They are famous for their participation in Russian campaigns of conquest, for instance in the opening up of Siberia and the Far East, and serving as a buffer on the margins of the Russian Empire. From the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, detachments of Cossack pioners went to Siberia, establishing the loci of power on their way with a system of forts and fortresses (Korolev 1997: 153). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Russian state introduced a policy of forced migration to Siberia and the Far East, and the Cossacks were among the first settlers. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century Siberia was still relatively unpopulated and the border with China remained loose. To protect the border with China, the Government formed two Cossack hosts. In fact, the whole system of Russian border protection relied on the Cossack hosts. The margins of the state were guarded by the so-called 'fortified lines', made up of chains of town system of border protection until the First World War.

As Markedonov (2001) years of post-Soviet Russ the 'bright future' that the Soviet period was replaced the 'bright past'. Many some Cossack leaders, be good life it was enough they were before 1917, though they still make on. There are objective reasons the former Cossack role takes on a new relevance nationalism in the old s in neighboring countries become blurred by the influences as is happening in the order with China. In short, are far from being 'lock solid', as they were in (1997) has described the state as a 'drying spot rically highly centralized, impotent in maintaining ripheries. In order to recall insufficiency of the past (Korolev 1997, the Cossacks. The offer to the state today do for the Cossacks is

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As Markedonov (2001) has noted, in the first
years of post-Soviet Russia the conception of
the ‘bright future’ that had characterized the
Soviet period was replaced by the notion of
the ‘bright past’. Many people, including
some Cossack leaders, believed that to have a
good life it was enough to restore things as
they were before 1917. Now they are less naïve,
though they still make reference to the past.
There are objective reasons for this, too, as
the former Cossack role in border protection
takes on a new relevance in the face of rising
nationalisms in the old Soviet Republics and
in neighboring countries, and as old borders
become blurred by the influx of illegal migrants,
as is happening in the south-east at the bor-
der with China. In short, the borders of Russia
are far from being ‘locked, impenetrable and
solid’, as they were in the USSR. Korolev
(1997) has described the contemporary Russian
state as a ‘drying spot’, which though histori-
cally highly centralized, now appears to be
impotent in maintaining power in distant
peripheries. In order to reduce this ‘technologi-
cal insufficiency of power’ in the periphery in
the past (Korolev 1997), the state employed
the Cossacks. What the modern Cossacks can
offer to the state today and what the state can
do for the Cossacks is considered below.

The growth in scale of the modern Cossack
movement is impressive: in the last few years
464 different Cossack voluntary organizations
(social, security, and commercial) have been
registered in 75 (out of a total 89) constitu-
encies of the Russian Federation (Semenenk 1998),
though, as mentioned earlier, we should be
cautious when interpreting figures relating to
Cossacks in contemporary Russia. Neverthe-
less, whatever the reliability of such figures, it
is clear that the Cossack movement is now too
large to be ignored by the state. Moreover, the
military performance and often belligerent
behavior of the Cossacks and the growing
threat of conflict between the center and the
Cossacks in the south of Russia demand spe-
cial state policies to deal with the movement.
The state articulated its position as follows:
‘the state is interested in the Cossacks merely
as a special form of state service. Even the
hints on any ethnicity should be excluded from
the notion of the Cossacks’ (Segodnya, 1 De-
ceber 1997). This declaration makes explicit
reference to the desirability of ‘professionaliz-
ing’ the modern Cossacks. Therefore, the
state has supported the restoration of the Cos-
sacks as a modernized estate.

In 1996 the Cossack movement began its
transformation into a state service. The first
step was the establishment of the Central
Board of Cossack troops by the President of
the Russian Federation. This body was given
responsibility for the organization of Cossack
state service and for carrying out the Federal
program of support for Cossack organizations
included in the state Cossack register. The
main expectation of the state, expressed in the
Federal program, is that the Cossacks will help
‘to diminish national conflicts’ and will become
‘a steel border belt’ (Vremia MN, 24 March
1999). To make this proposal a reality, the state
must solve a crucial question: how to incorpo-
rate the Cossack forces into the existing
system of border control? How to legitimize
their activity? This issue is still being discus-
sed. However, a number of documents provid-
ing a legal background for the Cossack bor-
der service have already been adopted, includ-
ing a Presidential Decree on enlisting Cos-
sacks as border guards (signed on 19 July
1996). Taking into account historical experi-
ence and the fact that many Cossacks live in
the borderlands of the northern Caucasus, the
Far East and the Transbaikal area, it is sup-
posed that the Cossacks will serve on the
‘weakest’ segments of the border.

Another clear reference to the former Cos-
sack duties in the Russian Empire is the state
policy that aims to establish Cossack settle-
ments on some parts of the state border. It
concerns in particular the new borders of Rus-
sia with the countries of the former USSR.
Some new borders are still not clearly demarcated and retain the characteristics of a frontier zone. At the same time, due to political preconditions, they are gradually transforming into more of a barrier. The Russian border regions to the south are more economically and socially developed than their neighbors. For instance, the administration of the border regions which neighbor Kazakhstan raise the question of 'closing the borders in a civilized way' to limit illegal migration, the drug trade, and smuggling (Vardomskii 2000). Under the Federal Program, the Cossacks will receive land for building farmsteads and the right to guard the border (though only on a voluntary basis, as assistants of border guards).

"The border with Kazakhstan is half-opened. Unfortunately, the border guards, due to the lack of resources, are not able to lock the border. So, the people from neighboring Kazakhstan steal hay from the Russian territory, fell wood, smuggle. This segment of the border is also actively used for the traffic of drugs from the CIS countries to Russia. If the Cossacks, who know this area well, appear here (some Cossacks from Kazakhstan are also ready to move over), the raids of the neighbors will be brought to naught" (Vremya MN, 19 May 2000).

As with any issue related to the Cossack revival, the idea of Cossack settlements has many opponents. Yet there are a few border regions where the idea of enrolling the Cossacks as border guards may have practical advantages. In the regions bordering with Chechnya, for example, kidnapping and cattle and property theft are increasingly problematic. Media reports indicate that these problems have been eased by recruiting Cossacks into the local militia in the Kursk district of the Stavropol region (Vremya MN, 28 January 1999).

The examples considered above concern the regions of traditional Cossack settlement. But what is especially interesting is the process of Cossack revival in those parts of Russia, which are not regions of traditional Cossack residence. New structures, organized according to the principles of the historic Cossack formations, have emerged in regions and cities that would not previously have been referred to as 'Cossack', for instance, in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kaliningrad, and Murmansk, as well as in other parts of Russia. The Cossack movement has become institutionalized in many other regions where the state border is problematic, i.e. where, in the opinion of the Cossack leaders, the Russian boundaries and the interests of Russia are threatened.

Such forces led to the emergence of the Cossacks in the northwest of Russia, where I carried out my research. As we have already seen, the political debate between Estonia and Russia over the contested territories along the border was an enduring feature of Russian political discourse. Even today, when the border tensions between the two countries have eased and Estonia has repudiated its territorial claims to Russia, many people in Russia see a potential threat in the Estonian policy towards the population of the Pechory region. Almost half of the population of Pechory and of the old Russian town of Ishorsk has Estonian passports. And it seems reasonable to suggest that for the Cossacks who support the idea of a 'strong state', and whose ideology can be characterized as nationalistic rather than democratic or liberal, the border with such a 'biography' looks fragile. The problematization of border issues and the 'estonianization' of the population in the contested territories provoked a response from the Cossacks in the early 1990s. The union of countrymen (zemljachestvo) Nevskii Stanitsa, established in 1990 in St. Petersburg as the first Cossack organization, appeared in the region. Later this organization developed into the 'Nevsky Cossack District' (Nevskii kazach'ii okrug), which embraced all the Cossack organizations of St. Petersburg and its region, and the Pskov region. To illustrate this with figures: 11 Cossack organizations had been registered in St. Petersburg, 5 stanitsas (Cossack settled region and 6 in the 1998). As one of the stated: "If there's a Cossacks".

Thus the identity of Cossacks has been questioned during fieldwork in 1996 when a newspaper reports a "Cossack" bought a farmstead to a family, and big Cossack settlement in a Cossack document of the St. Petersburg experience can be the establishment of the Dam along the border territories of the Pskov. The involvement of also not accidental - talking to came to the where, as in many others, the representation experienced set of the ethnocentric Government. Here up to the vast country - nation of its politics rored in the life sto from one border to the other.

**Conclusion**

Following Baud and have 'humanized' the metaphor of a border's 'life cycle' despite its young age, between Estonia an-
in St. Petersburg, 5 organizations and 4 stanitsas (Cossack settlements) in the Leningrad region and 6 in the Pskov region (Tabolina 1998). As one of the local Cossack leaders stated: “If there’s a border, there should be Cossacks”.

Thus the identity of the Cossacks encountered during fieldwork in the Russian-Estonian borderland in 1996 was finally revealed. From newspaper reports and conversations with experts it became clear that these Cossacks were members of the Cossack organization ‘Nevskaia stanitsa’, located in St. Petersburg. Like their ancestors before them, they had been sent to this contested borderzone to mark out these lands as Russian. The ‘Nevskaia stanitsa’ bought a farmstead, previously belonging to a Seto family, and planned to turn it into a big Cossack settlement (stanitsa). As indicated in a Cossack document found in the archives of the St. Petersburg Migration Service, “this experience can be taken as a principle for the establishment of the line of the Cossack stanitsas along the border with Estonia on the territories of the Pskov and Leningrad regions”.

The involvement of the Migration Service is not accidental - the Cossack family I was talking to came to that place from Kazakhstan, where, as in many other former Soviet republics, the representatives of a non-titular nation experienced serious difficulties because of the ethnocentric policy of the Kazakhstan Government. Here again we see how the history of a vast country and the dramatic transformation of its political and social space are mirrored in the life story of one family moving from one border to another.

**Conclusion**

Following Baud and Van Schendel (1997), who have “humanized” the notion of the border by using the metaphor of a human life to describe a border’s “life cycles”, it can be said that, despite its young age, the contemporary border between Estonia and Russia has already a rich “biography”. Even before it was established, this border had become an “area of special attraction” for politicians and social scientists. Today, as Estonia stands on the threshold of entry to the European Union and has also declared a desire to join NATO, it is a focus of international attention. And while the border is strengthened on both the Estonian and Russian sides, both countries seek to develop and implement new programs of cross-border co-operation.

Thus, for Estonia and Russia as well as for the whole international community, this border is “burdened” with symbolic, political and social meanings, and the borderzone is a space of contradiction and contest. However, anthropological research has uncovered another facet of this border. Being a place of different political interests, the borderland between Estonia and Russia has also shown itself also to be “a zone of cultural play and experimentation” (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 39). I agree with Lavie who has pointed out that the “borderzone is not just a dangerous place, but a festive one” (Lavie 1992: 93, as cited in Donnan and Wilson 1999: 39). In our case political preconditions resulted in the meeting in one space of two different frontier cultures, those of Setos and Cossacks, and set the scene for their interaction. In the lines above I have explored how modern processes of transforming frontiers to borders has influenced both groups’ identity construction and how the border is being used as a group identity resource. We have also seen how states manipulate border peoples, supporting or neglecting them in accordance with state interests.

This story is not yet finished. Looking at how things are developing now, it is possible to predict how the stories of these two groups will unfold in their respective states. The Setos, with their unique cultural practices, bright costumes, folk groups (and complicated fate) can become cherished representatives of Estonia in an international arena. As to the Cossacks, their role in Russia is likely to be linked with the army. With the crisis in the Russian armed
forces, the Russian state considers the Cossack organizations as one possible pillar in the reformation of the Russian military system (Dontsov 1998).

Notes

1. This project was conducted by the Lake Peipsi Project (Tartu, Estonia) and focused on the study of the ethnic identity of the Seto people living on the Russian side of the Russian-Estonian border. I have worked on the Lake Peipsi Project for a number of years and would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to Gunhara Roll and Eiki Berg for this chance to see with my own eyes the political and social borders' transformation. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues Evgenia Viktorova and Olga Bredivkova for our fruitful discussions and for their personal warmth and generosity.

2. The border dispute between Estonia and Russia stems from the Tartu peace treaty signed by the Russian Soviet Republic and the Estonian Democratic Republic in February 1920. According to this treaty, the borderline between Estonia and Russia was moved eastwards, practically coinciding with the line of the Soviet-Estonian front at that time. A significant part of Pskov region, including the towns of Pechory and Izbsorsk, was given to Estonia. Thus, the whole territory of Sokoinitsa went to the Estonian side. In 1940 Estonia was included in the Soviet Union, and the political border became an internal administrative boundary, the subject for change according to the USSR's formal procedures. In 1944 some territories, including the territory of Pechory district, were joined with the newly established Pskov region and went formally under the governance of the Russian Republic. When in 1991 Estonia gained independence, the border question became one of the hottest issues in relations between the two countries. Estonia declared itself a successor of the first Estonian Democratic Republic and, following the principle of legal continuity, claimed the Tartu peace treaty of 1920 to be the foundation for Estonian-Russian relations and, hence, the territories of Pechory district to be returned to Estonia. Russia, from its side, began to demarcate the border along the line that had existed under the USSR. For a few years, the two sides could not agree on the border. Nowadays, there is no border dispute between Estonia and Russia, although a final border agreement has still to be signed.

3. According to this program, the state is going to solve the Cossacks' problems in three stages. At the first stage (1997-2000) it was planned to establish the main administrative bodies managing the Cossacks' organizations. The main objectives of the second stage (2001-05) are to establish the state system of the Cossack troops, to set up financial systems and to establish a special type of state service - the Cossack service. The members of the Cossack organizations undertaking Cossack service will have the status of state employee (Sedoinya, 1 December 1997).

4. The state Cossack register was adopted in 1995 as a form of state registration of the Cossack organizations, the members of which are able and willing to carry out state service. The adoption of the register provided the platform for new relationships between the state and the Cossacks and, in fact, divided the Cossack organizations into two groups: those who have entered the register and those who have not. As one of the central newspapers states, by 1999 about 490,000 people had entered the register, "voluntarily declaring their will to carry out state and other services" (Premya MN, 24 March 1999).

5. Unfortunately, I do not have more recent data on the number of Cossack organizations in St. Petersburg and Pskov and their surroundings.

6. Cossack activities in St. Petersburg include but are not limited to border protection. For instance, the Cossacks are involved in security activities, in the form of the Cossack security service 'Kasach'ka strazha', which specializes in public order protection in the trains of the northwestern region of Russia. Branches of this organization have been established in Pskov, Novgorod and Murmansk (Tabolina 1998). From newspaper sources it seems possible - although I do not have any research material on this issue - that some of the Cossack structures are commercial projects.

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