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Perceptions of the State: Visaginas, Lithuania

Visaginas town is a planned socialist town in Lithuania, built in 1975 as a satellite urban settlement to the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (INPP). During the Soviet times, Visaginas became a specific "island", different from any other towns in Lithuania: it was situated in a peripheral region, remote from other urban sites; it was a mono industrial town, with power plant playing a central role not only in terms of employment but also as a main object of identification; Visaginas was directly controlled by All-Union institutions in Moscow, which resulted in living standards quite above Lithuanian average; finally, it had a highly educated population, majority of which were Russian speaking immigrants from different corners of the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Visaginas experienced not only general difficulties of transition (inflation, privatisation, unemployment, etc) but also troubles specific to the planned socialist towns: with its pro-Soviet identification, it was difficult for the town to position itself in the new post-socialist context. The situation was altered further on with Lithuania becoming a member of the European Union, resulting in closure of the INPP, compared to the loss of 'the mother' by the inhabitants of Visaginas.

Throughout this whole period, a particular ethnic composition of the town (more than 80 per cent of its population is Russian speaking) brought tensions with the rest of the Lithuanian society. Even though people of Visaginas begun to slowly accept and adapt to new situation, they remained targets of prevailing public doubts whether Russian minority is loyal to the Lithuanian state. These have intensified with the recent events in Ukraine, fearing Russia's political, cultural, and economic influence on Lithuanian statehood. Yet, while the main question which is usually posed is whether the society there *identifies with* and is *loyal to* the state, there are no inquiries being made, asking how the state is understood among the people there, or how these understandings emerge.

The main interest of this research project is precisely these perceptions of the state held by the people living in such specific town as Visaginas. The question being addressed in this project is how, in this particular context, the image of the state is

produced in everyday encounters with 'the state' through its institutions at the local level. In this context, the state is understood as a multilayered, contradictory, translocal ensemble of institutions, practices, and people, and is studied ethnographically: long-term residence in Visaginas town, conducting participant observations and interviews, is combined with institutional ethnography, focusing on a concrete street level bureaucracy and its effects on the community in which it operates. This study will shed light on the state and society relationship in everyday contexts, drawing interpretations on the meanings that are being ascribed to it and the reasons why they develop.