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**Small Towns
in Europe in the 20th
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Strategies of Manufacturing the Tourist Experience in a Small Town: Local Community and Symbolic Construction in Myshkin¹

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1. Introduction

Small towns in various regions throughout the world face challenges from economic globalisation that have gradually undermined the traditional structure of production.² Perhaps more importantly from a sociological point of view, these challenges put significant pressure on local communities. In small towns, the density and organisation of communal life in general are closely connected to traditional modes of production. As these habitual activities become uncompetitive in rapidly changing economic environments, reproduction of the structures of the local community tends to falter.

There are convincing reasons to believe that the preservation of local community, cohesion and solidarity are crucial for the survival of small towns. In a famous essay, sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel described life in metropolises as regulated by a blasé attitude, indifference towards the environment and supportive of individual freedom from the constraints of community. In the same text, Simmel contrasted metropolises with small towns, characterised by the power that the community possesses over members and the social control that secures cohesion and a stable communal life. Simmel argued that from a politico-sociological viewpoint the de-individualizing small town is similar to the ancient

¹ This work was supported by the Russian Foundation for the Humanities, research grant No. 14-33-01339.

² Paul Courtney and Andrew Errington, "The Role of small towns in the local economy and some implications for development policy," *Local Economy* 15, no. 4 (2000), 280–301.



Fig. 1: A picture on the wall of the Mouse Palace in Myshkin. Photo by courtesy of Varvara Kobyshcha.

polis.³ Whereas metropolises tend to be mere crowds of lonely individuals, small towns are political unities capable of coherent collective action.

While subversion of communal life can be regarded as a threat to small towns across Europe, the situation is particularly grave in Russia. Under the Soviet Union, many towns were built around or gradually became completely dependent on a single factory. The abrupt cessation of manufacturing during the post-Soviet recession was followed by Russia's swift integration into the international economy, which rendered most traditional industries uncompetitive.

In this context, many Russian small towns consider the development of tourism to be their only viable solution. These ambitions rely on exploiting a town's geographical location, historical heritage and monuments, and attractive landscapes as resources to boost the tourism industry. However, the attempts of most towns to capitalise on tourism

³ Georg Simmel, "The metropolis and mental life." In *The Blackwell City Reader*, edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2010), 107.

have proven to be unsuccessful. For instance, the Association of Small Russian Tourist Towns, the sole body representing small towns with well-developed tourism industries, currently has only eight member towns.

Why do such projects fail? The literature from the field of tourist studies suggests that one reason might be the inability of small towns to master the manufacturing of a tourist experience. According to various tourism scholars, a destination attractive to tourists offers the potential of a break from everyday experience and generates a feeling of authenticity.⁴ However, while the theory of authenticity, in its multiple versions, explains the success of tourist enterprises, it is rather indifferent towards the preservation of communities. While it is quite feasible for a small town to develop a tourist industry capable of generating an authentic experience, the question remains as to whether this contributes to preserving the community. Even large tourist enterprises cannot be expected to assume the functions of factories and traditional industries that used to hold communities together. Indeed, the relationship between sustainable community development and tourism management has proven to be rather ambiguous. Although communities are important resources for tourism, the efficient production of tourist experiences might have no significant effect on the revitalization of a community and even harm communal life.⁵ The development of tourism could turn into a risky option for small towns if it were to become an obstacle to the regeneration of the local community.

How are the conflicts and contradictions that arise in this context shaped? What are the possible solutions? How are the politics of community intertwined with tourism management in small towns?

To tackle these questions, this research considers the rare example of a successful development of tourism from scratch in Myshkin, a small Russian town of fewer than 6,000 inhabitants. Myshkin is distinguished by the absence of an historical place identity that could be relied upon for creating a tourist site. This lack makes the symbolic construction of tourism by local leaders all the more notable. This paper draws on ethno-

⁴ Dean MacCannell, "Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (1973), 589–603; John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London 2002).

⁵ Greg Richards and Derek Hall, "The Community: A sustainable concept in tourism development?" In *Tourism and Sustainable Community Development*, edited by Derek Hall and Greg Richards (London 2000), 1–14; Sue Beeton, *Community Development through Tourism* (Collingwood 2006), 21.



Fig. 2: Myshkin. Photo: Alexander Filyuta, (CC BY-SA 3.0).

graphic fieldwork conducted in 2013, including participant observation and more than 80 in-depth interviews with local political and business leaders, initiators of the big tourist project and ordinary residents.

The development of tourism in Myshkin is first put into a broader socio-historical context. Then, concepts from tourist studies are borrowed to explain how the tactics of combining phantasy with local history have supported the commercial success of the town. This shows how the radical constructivist approach adopted in Myshkin is backed by the local community but has had an ambiguous impact on the community's integrity.

2. Small Towns: Tourism as Salvation?

Small towns, such as Myshkin, have a distinct but usually overlooked position in Russian society. Only municipalities with a population of fewer than 50,000 inhabitants are technically classified as small towns. The country has 790 such settlements, accounting for 71% of all cities. Despite the general growth of metropolises, the number of small towns

in Russia doubled from 1926 to 2010, with their populations increasing by a factor of 3.4.⁶ However, these settlements appear neither attractive for living in nor particularly viable. The proportion of the general population residing in small towns shrank from 35.3% to 15.9% over these eight decades. It seems that small towns have come to be viewed as a major problem by government, which tends to treat them as dysfunctional parasites demanding state investment with little or no return.⁷ However, defenders of small towns believe that they occupy a strategic place in the country's life, and eliminating them would result in the 'devastation of enormous spaces' and the depopulation of large parts of Russia.⁸

The post-Soviet period has seen many small towns suffer from the effects of mono-industrialism, or dependence on one big factory which supports the entire economy and community.⁹ Other small towns, such as Myshkin, had previously survived on agriculture, which underwent rapid concentration and annexation of resources by powerful holdings, rendering many traditionally farming regions uncompetitive.¹⁰ The closing down of factories and the privatisation of land in the post-Soviet years made these towns economically vulnerable and culturally disorganised. The factories are unlikely to reopen due to the technological backwardness of the areas, infrastructural weaknesses (e.g., poor road networks) and an uncompetitive labour force. These closures have resulted in the demographic and infrastructural degradation of towns. Most importantly, after losing the factories and *kolkhozy* (collective farms) that used to be centres for the local community, the towns were deprived of an autonomous cultural life. The label "depressive towns" refers to municipalities suffering from both economic stagnation and cultural disintegration. The case of Mischelevka, a small settlement in the Irkutsk region which experienced almost total unemployment and an overwhelming problem

with alcoholism after the shutting down of its factory, conveys the gravity of the situation in small towns far removed from the metropolises.¹¹

Myshkin is in the Yaroslavl region of Central Russia, which is home to two large oil refineries.¹² A portion of Myshkin's population is employed at gas compression and oil pumping stations, but both enterprises provide only several hundred jobs and cannot satisfy the labour demand in this town of 6,000 inhabitants. Over its history, Myshkin has been classified as both a village and a small town by the national authorities, its status oscillating between both. Since regaining town status in 1991, Myshkin has faced the challenge of developing a viable development strategy in the absence of large production facilities.

Tourism is considered as a last resort by many Russian small towns desperate to build or restore large production facilities. Myshkin, however, did not seem to be in an especially favourable position to create a tourist industry. First, the town does not possess a rich or interesting history. Since its founding in the sixteenth century, it has been a small village or town, a home for local merchants. It has never been the site of any noteworthy historical events nor the birthplace of any celebrities. Second, Myshkin has few attractions apart from two cathedrals of limited architectural significance. Third, Myshkin is far from the major highways. It lies on the left bank of the Volga River, between Uglich and Rybinsk, the second largest industrial city in the Yaroslavl region. When the tourist industry in Myshkin was launched, river cruise vessels did not even stop at this small settlement.

These circumstances made it virtually impossible for Myshkin to capitalise on its history or architecture or use Uglich as its model, a neighbouring town dating from the early period of Russian statehood which witnessed many local wars between princes and the murder of the son of Ivan the Terrible.¹³ In addition, Myshkin had never possessed a tourist industry on which it could rely to develop its self-presentation and infrastructure. Realising its lack of tourist allurements, this small town adopted a rather enterprising strategy of radical symbolic construction. Myshkin performed a risky branding, taking the mouse as its symbol

6 Georgij M. Lappo, *Goroda Rossii: Vzgljad geografa* [Russian Cities: A Geographer's View]. (Moscow: Novyi khronograf, 2012), 152.

7 For instance, former Economy Minister Elvira Nabiullina openly admitted in 2011 that supporting "economically inefficient small towns" and preventing migration to metropolises could damage economic growth by 2–3%. http://economy.gov.ru/minec/press/news/doc20111208_004 (accessed 15. 4. 2017).

8 See the reaction to the Minister's statement by the Union of Small Towns of Russia. <http://smgrf.ru/zayavlenie-soyuza-malyh-gorodov-rf> (accessed 15. 4. 2017).

9 There are around 400 mono-industrial towns in Russia with nearly 16 mln. inhabitants, which amounts to approximately 25% of the total Russian population.

10 Michele L. Crumley, *Sowing Market Reforms: The Internationalization of Russian Agriculture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

11 Daria Dimke and Irina Koryukhina. "Zavod po proizvodstvu vremeni." ["A Time-Production Factory."] *Otechestvennye Zapiski* 50, no. 5 (2012).

12 Yaroslavl region is 37th in Russia by GRP, as of 2013. http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b15_14p/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d02/10-02.doc (accessed 15. 4. 2017).

13 Uglich has also been rather successful in developing tourism, with an annual tourist influx of 334,000 in 2012. However, by the early 1990s it already had a clear image, as well as a developed infrastructure and experience in tourism.

("mysh" means "mouse" in Russian). History was replaced by a set of mouse-centred narratives told to tourists. This plan meant integrating some pseudo-authentic elements into an established fairyland context and creating a dozen museums that exhibit seemingly everyday objects made interesting for tourists because of their immersion in the general structure of the phantasy. Thus, Myshkin constructed an operative symbolic matrix that could be used to generate new legends and museums. The distinctiveness of this strategy from the traditional history-oriented approach is immediately recognizable in the way tourist agencies advertise the town, inviting tourists to enter a "revived fairy-tale."¹⁴

The success of this ambitious project seems indisputable. In the mid-1990s, Myshkin had no tourist industry at all; by 2012, the annual number of tourists had skyrocketed to 165,000, according to statistics provided by the local administration. What accounted for this result? What role did the local community play in accomplishing this change? How has the transformation affected the community's life?

3. Authenticity and Phantasy

Tourist professionals often neglect an important consideration familiar to scholars in the field of tourist studies: the success of touristic enterprises does not depend on the number of objects objectively worth visiting but on the ability to produce a specific tourist experience. Many Russian small towns that witnessed the closure of important factories made considerable investments later in attempting to switch to the tourist industry. Although many reasonably believe that they have sufficient historically important monuments to interest tourists, few have actually succeeded in tourism. It may have been that they simply did not pay enough attention to producing a memorable tourist experience.¹⁵

What is the tourist experience, and how does it emerge? Although the answers suggested by scholars differ considerably, John Urry summarises the crucial features: the tourist experience emerges only when individuals break temporarily with everyday life and suspend ordinary, everyday

¹⁴ See, for instance a tour program called "Fairy-tales of a provincial town." <http://www.pstour.ru/shkolnye-tury-po-zolotomu-kolcu/skazki-provincialnogo-goroda/> (accessed 15. 4. 2017).

¹⁵ What is meant by experience here is not simply a view or an impression, but a set of interrelated meanings organizing the subject's inner spiritual world. The concept goes back to the notion of lived experience (*Erlebnis*), suggested by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. See: Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. VI* (Leipzig 1924), 313.

experience.¹⁶ Tourists do not merely look for new information or even new experiences; they seek an opportunity to adopt a completely new vision of or attitude towards the world, although they realize that the suspension of their normal routine is only temporary.¹⁷ In other words, for the tourist industry, it is essential to create situations that transform the attitude of tourists for some period of time.

Theories of the tourist experience emphasise various productive ways of modifying attitude. While some researchers claim that the proper experience can be gained only by restoring or simulating *authenticity*, others point out that some successful tourist projects achieve the required attitude by constructing *phantasy*. Both modes of generating the tourist experience involve a laborious processing of history, albeit in different ways. For small towns, history appears to be a reservoir for productive work. Sometimes, it requires effort to restore the atmosphere of authenticity by reconstructing the true history of a particular city, digging into its past to excavate famous persons or events related to it. In other cases, history must be amended to make the place worth seeing, and some pseudo-historical narratives that fit the general image of the place must be created. In still other cases, real history is completely replaced by a narrative that deliberately breaks all ties with reality, as happens in the construction of phantasy. However, we shall argue that these strategies of dealing with history elucidated by different theorists are not mutually exclusive and can in fact be combined to build a complex narrative featuring elements with varying historical veracity.

The significance of authenticity was brought to the forefront as early as 1973 by Dean MacCannell who argued that contemporary tourists are preoccupied with a search for authenticity. Contrary to Daniel Boorstin's earlier view that tourists are satisfied with glancing at the surface of objects and never want to go behind the stage,¹⁸ MacCannell believes that nowadays tourists are constantly searching for authentic experience not designed purposefully for them – they always want to see the backstage, not the frontstage (these terms are borrowed from the work of sociologist

¹⁶ Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*.

¹⁷ Theories of tourist experience tend to rely extensively on phenomenological notions, such as "attitude" and "authenticity" (see below). The idea of "natural attitude," corresponding to ordinary everyday life and multiple ways to modify it, was suggested by Edmund Husserl in his *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*, Dordrecht 1998. For a further discussion of the use of phenomenological concepts in tourist studies see: Ning Wang, "Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience," *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, no. 2 (1999).

¹⁸ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper 1961).

Erving Goffman).¹⁹ MacCannell adds that producers of the tourist experience are well aware of this desire and skillfully manipulate backstage experience, providing tourists with a kind of "staged authenticity."

MacCannell's paper precipitated a long tradition of studies on authenticity in tourism. The concept of authenticity itself has been revisited several times. Much attention has been paid to so-called "existential" authenticity (as opposed to the authenticity of particular objects) – that is, to the particular experience of authenticity that tourists seek.²⁰ Drawing on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Ning Wang demonstrates that the search for existential authenticity is driven by a profound feeling of inauthenticity of being, characteristic of Western modernity. Nostalgia and romanticism stimulate the hunt for authenticity; there is always a feeling that something has been lost, that some preordained harmony has been corrupted, and everyday life is forever marked by inauthenticity.²¹ The search for the lost harmony presumes the original unity of man with nature and the human community. Nostalgic images portray man as undifferentiated from nature and community – all three merge into one another, protecting man and unburdening him from the anxiety of his individualistic being.

Some scholars have criticised the theory of authenticity, pointing out that, in a world filled with simulacra, authenticity can no longer be attained nor even truly sought, even in its staged form.²² Indeed, the success of the Disneyland model in tourism attests at least to the fact that authenticity is not the sole way to change attitudes and create a consistent tourist experience. Another kind of modification occurs when "real-life" history is supplemented with, or supplanted by, myths and fairy tales to make an object or territory more attractive to visitors.²³ Although tourists can sometimes attribute a certain degree of reality to myths, these are generally understood to be merely phantasies.²⁴ Their effect arises from combining real-world elements (e.g., settings, surroundings, buildings)

19 MacCannell, "Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings," 593.

20 Carol Steiner and Yvette Reisinger, "Understanding existential authenticity," *Annals of Tourism Research* 33, no. 2 (2006), 299–318.

21 Wang, "Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience," 358–359.

22 George Ritzer and Allan Liska, "McDisneyization and 'post-tourism': Complementary perspectives on contemporary tourism." In *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, ed. Chris Rojek and John Urry (London and New York 2003), 107.

23 John Hannigan, *Fantasy City* (London 1998).

24 Husserl has suggested that in phantasy, as opposed to both ordinary life and hallucination, we can have a clear image of the objects and at the same time understand that they are unreal: Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (Dordrecht 2005), 4.

with purely fantastic characters and events. When exploring a city, tourists often prefer to listen to fairy tales, occasionally intermeshed with 'real' history. In other words, producing a tourist experience in a city sometimes relies on generating exciting myths rather than on digging up the "real" past. Some tourist sites may even reject history entirely and become attractive by completely transporting tourists into fairy tales.

Although authenticity theories and the phantasy approach are usually presented as two opposing perspectives,²⁵ they are not necessarily incompatible. Tourists can appreciate authentic objects within phantasy. In fact, as we shall demonstrate, the fairy-tale narrative of Myshkin reinforces the experience of genuineness, endowing ordinary objects with an aura of authenticity.

4. Branding the Mouse

The development of the tourist industry in Myshkin was a conscious, strategic choice by local elites, including public officials, cultural activists and members of the administration (mostly newcomers from the late Soviet years). A dozen representatives from these groups created and promoted the ideology of tourism. The industry has been largely and is increasingly controlled by the local administration. Although a number of small entrepreneurs are involved, they are coordinated by the dominant city-owned enterprise that generates an ever-growing share of revenue.

When discussing the tourist project in Myshkin, local officials tend to emphasise the unfavourable initial conditions and the town's lack of a history that would attract tourists: "Myshkin is a self-made town. Uglich and the like are popular due to their great history, [...] whilst our Myshkin – well, there are churches, but [there's no] history as such." (Excerpt from an interview with a local official.)

Since the town was initially cut off from the main transport routes and almost inaccessible to tourists, the local administration faced the challenge of persuading tourist agencies to make cruise ships stop in Myshkin and send tour buses to the town. The task was especially difficult as Myshkin has no historically significant attractions that might draw tourist attention. Not surprisingly, tourist agencies were unwilling to risk including Myshkin in their itineraries.

25 See, for instance, Erich Cohen and Scott A. Cohen, "Current sociological theories and issues in tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research* 39, no. 4 (2012), 2177–2202.

Tourism advocates responded by suggesting a non-historical basis for manufacturing the tourist experience. Myshkin would make use of a legend about its foundation and the origin of its name. According to the myth, a prince hunting in the area became tired and fell asleep on the bank of the Volga River. Awakened by a mouse, he was angry with it at first but then realised that a snake had been approaching him, which meant that the mouse had saved his life. After escaping this danger, the prince ordered the construction of a temple in honour of Saints Boris and Gleb at the place of the incident. The town that grew up around the new building was named Myshkin. Multiple versions of this legend might differ in details, but they all emphasise the key role of a mouse as the prince's saviour.

In the mid-1990s, local activists seeking a brand solution attractive to tourists eventually drew on the legend. The mouse became the official iconic image for the town, the local coat of arms was altered to include a small mouse, and the authorities heavily promoted depictions of mice.

"And so I told them [acquaintances from another town], there's nothing to laugh about. It's all dead serious. We make money on mice." (Representative of tourism industry)

"So, little by little, this mouse entered each and every sphere." (Local official)

"It is as if Myshkin is identical to mouse." (Local activist)

Making the mouse the town symbol, opening the first Museum of the Mouse and holding a mouse-themed festival in 1996 paid off shortly, when tourist agencies agreed to change their travel schedule and some vessels introduced an additional stop at Myshkin on the way to Uglich. The new fairy-tale town quickly became popular among tourists, especially children. It made a productive contrast to other towns on the river-cruise routes that tended to capitalise on their historical heritage. Describing the attractiveness of Myshkin, tourists emphasise the town's inventiveness and ability to play up its features to an extent rarely matched at other sites on the cruise route.

However, as suggested by theories of phantasy, it is not enough simply to coin a symbol or a legend; the real work is to build an environment that suspends ordinary life and draws tourists into a new reality. Myshkin is not the only Russian town to adopt the constructivist strategy, although it was likely the first and stands as a role model. In 1997, Petushki, a town of 14,000 in the Vladimir region, followed Myshkin's example of capitalising on the animal contained in the town's name and opened



Fig. 3: Summer street in Myshkin. Photo by courtesy of Varvara Kobysheva.

the Cock Museum. However, this museum draws only 2,500 visitors annually, compared to the 65,000 at the Mouse Museum in Myshkin. This difference can be largely explained by the context: the Cock Museum is positioned as an art institution and emphasises the aesthetic value of the objects exhibited, whereas the Mouse Museum invites visitors "into the Mouse kingdom-state," downplaying the aesthetic qualities of the items on display.

To create a full-scale phantasy world, the whole town of Myshkin has been redesigned thematically. The city centre features the Mouse Museum and the Palace of the Mouse Queen, and the town itself is often referred to as Mouseland. As described by Myshkin's English-language website: "The town is full with tales and legends. The very atmosphere and architecture of the town take us as though to a completely different world, to another planet – the planet ruled by Mice. [...] Thousands of tourists from all over the world visit the small mouse town every year to kneel before the great Mice."²⁶

This manner of manufacturing the tourist experience builds on a narrative that is not only indifferent to the town's "real" history but is even

26 <http://eng.mouseland.ru/mushkin.html> (accessed 16. 7. 2014). The website no longer exists.

conspicuously a-historical. However, this has proven to be quite constructive in Myshkin precisely because it can produce a whole fantastic microcosm that suspends ordinary attitude and replaces it with a stream of phantasy that remains almost uninterrupted as long as tourists stay in Myshkin. Securing the continuation of the experience is among the key tasks of local tourist industry operators. Visitors to Myshkin tend to fall into three broad categories by mode of travel: individual travellers and groups arriving by either ship or bus. The two latter categories, which account for more than 90% of the tourist flow,²⁷ are immediately met at their point of arrival by local guides responsible for conducting visitors along carefully developed routes, bringing them from one museum to another and insulating them from anything that could interrupt the impression of being in a fairy tale. This strategy perfectly matches the disposition of the tourists, who tend to complain that, without constant guidance, they feel as if they are “blind.”

5. Local History: A Movement beneath the Business

Constructivist theories emphasising the phantasy element of the tourist experience cannot fully account for the tourism success in Myshkin. A constructivist approach to history is especially strong in producing the experience of phantasy, but it has to rely on other types of historical work to mobilise local inhabitants to participate in the collective action of manufacturing the image presented to tourists. The case of Myshkin demonstrates that the simultaneous operation of different modes of dealing with history creates a stable and profitable image. Moreover, despite all the differences, these modes can intermingle, reinforce one another and create opportunities for the production of new staged authenticities.

Until the mid-1990s, when the mouse became the town's brand and supplanted the historical narrative, a group of local historians in Myshkin worked on maintaining a collective memory. The group was organised in the 1970s by an enthusiast and resembled an association of Boy Scouts,

27 The levee is more important and accounts probably for three quarters of the flow. More accurate estimates are difficult to make because official statistics only count the tourists coming through agencies. Agencies deliver tourists to Myshkin mostly by river; a large portion of them are state employees from Moscow and St. Petersburg who get tickets for the cruise from their trade unions at a reduced price. Since the unions have a long-term contract with tourist agencies, many tourists are offered the cruise on the Volga River several times, so that they come to Myshkin more than once. Several respondents told us that this was their fifth trip to the town.

consisting mainly of schoolchildren who sought and collected artefacts from earlier times throughout the town. Anything that looked old and had a flavour of authenticity was collected in the first museum of local history.

In the 1960s, local history (*kraevedenie*, knowledge of the region) flourished in the Soviet Union as a tool for reshaping patriotism. It has an ambiguous relationship with historical science, being rather the practice of collecting items of material culture and writing biographies of local celebrities than a scientific undertaking. Local history emerged in the years of the Russian Empire and, after thirty years of oblivion under dictator Josef Stalin, was revitalised to make “exhibitions of the regional past and its material culture [...] affirm contemporary values of collective leadership, democracy, and the construction of socialism.”²⁸ According to the new conception of local history, the values espoused by the dominant ideology of the Communist Party were too abstract to create love for the motherland, but knowledge of local history could effectively create attachment to the land. The efforts by local historians survived the collapse of communist ideology and continue to instil local patriotism in the absence of a state-imposed framework.

As part of the general *kraevedenie* movement,²⁹ local historians in Myshkin promoted local patriotism. One of their objectives was the preservation of town status, since Myshkin had been officially reclassified as a village several times. At some point, the group acquired enough symbolic power to persuade the authorities and the population that fighting for town status was important. As adults, the former schoolchildren took up positions in the library, museum and other institutions that contributed to communication between local historians from Myshkin and other towns. Myshkin became one of the key centres of local history in the Yaroslavl region, but most importantly, local historians gradually developed into an organised community claiming a monopoly on the symbolic representation of the town.

When a journalist from Moscow suggested the idea of making the mouse the town's brand, local historians were the key group authorising this decision. Despite the inconsistency between the symbolism of the

28 Victoria Donovan, “‘Going backwards, we stride forwards’: Kraevedenie museums and the making of local memory in North West Russia, 1956–1981,” *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* 7 (2012), 215.

29 As is the case in many other Russian small towns, local historians in Myshkin are proud to have been in communication with the famous philologist Dmitry Likhachev, who is usually credited with being the founder of *kraevedenie*.

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29 As is the case in many other Russian small towns, local historians in Myshkin are proud to have been in communication with the famous philologist Dmitry Likhachev, who is usually credited with being the founder of *kraevedenie*.

fictitious mouse and the hunt for authentic local history, it was generally believed that rebranding could make Myshkin better known and contribute to economic and cultural development. The museum of local history was redesigned and officially renamed The National Museum – Mouse Museum, and local historians started playing important roles in the tourist project. They drew attention to Myshkin by arranging events, communicating with colleagues in other regions and spreading the word about the new brand.

Even more importantly, a link was established between schoolchildren and the tourist industry. Local history was incorporated into the curriculum in secondary schools in Myshkin at the same time that school-teachers became involved in the tourist business. Most tourist enterprises (e.g., museums, guided tours, production of handmade mouse figurines) involve local historians, so children are quickly socialised in the industry. Some work in the summer as vendors of handmade products, while others are trained as tour guides. Some even try making museums of their own, following the established pattern.

“A current director of the tourist enterprise had previously worked at the school. At that period, children were taken on the guided tours all the time. [...] I had a museum of my own. It used to be quite famous. My friends and I, we collected old things in courtyards and established a museum in my grandfather’s garage. We collected matchboxes. We collected old things from grandmothers. We did not work for anybody. We charged money for visits.”
(Recent graduate of local secondary school)

The synthesis of phantasy and local history opens up opportunities for yet another type of tourist experience. However successful the symbol of the mouse might be, tourists confess that they inevitably tire of it. A challenge for the industry emerging here is to diversify the exhibits without breaking the narrative of Mouseland.

The carefully preserved atmosphere of the fairy tale creates an aura which can transform ordinary objects into valuable cultural units. Once a fantastic experience is produced, it can convey additional meaning even to exhibits not related to the mouse symbol. Consequently, some objects generally seen in local history museums acquire additional importance; an old salt-cellar or an axe exhibited in the National Museum of Myshkin is perceived differently by tourists already floating in a world of phantasy. Matchboxes, Soviet-era tins and other small items are easily turned into museum objects by relating them to the mouse theme. To endow

ordinary material things with considerable symbolic significance, it is sufficient to declare that the objects were collected by “mouskins” who “took them into their burrow” (that is, by children who brought them to the museum), as museum guides put it.

Such exhibits provide a viable response to the tourist hunger for authenticity. The objects establish a quasi-historical connection between the exhibitions and the town. In these settings, objects acquire a flavour of authenticity and appear to represent tradition. Through combining phantasy and authenticity, Myshkin addresses two different demands by tourists: for fairy tales and for tradition, *combination*.

Moreover, the aura that assigns importance to ordinary objects creates opportunities to make authentic what is in reality completely artificial. In addition to old objects exhibited in museums in Myshkin, there is yet another type of appeal, which might be called a pseudo-authentic tourist attraction. A range of museums specialise in presenting pseudo-traditional practices, crafts and artefacts. For instance, at the Flax Museum, the House of Crafts and the Valenok Museum, tourists look at traditional methods of producing certain household items. However, these so-called “traditional crafts” are rather late inventions; they have no long-standing history in Myshkin and were devised for the sake of drawing visitors. In addition, as a reminder of the town’s symbol, numerous mice appear in a fairy-tale manner in even the most authentic activities, tourist attractions and museums (e.g., toys made of flax, *valenki* – felt boots – with mouse ears, and the like).

The nearby village of Martynovo is also part of the Myshkin tourist industry. It is presented as the homeland of a small, disappearing ethnic group (*katskari*) with its own language. Although there is no evidence that such a group ever existed, and the language is limited to several words, tours of the village are quite popular among travellers looking for authentic life and evanescent tradition. The institutions of the pseudo-authentic experience participate in the rearing of members of the host community and play a significant role in promoting the town itself.

6. Don’t Spoil the Impression: The Ambiguous Status of the Local Community

Manufacturing the tourist experience, especially in the modes of radical phantasy construction and staged authenticity, often poses challenges to the sustainable development of local communities. Although tour-



Fig. 4: Locals of different ages gather at the entrance to a shop near the tourist route. Photo by courtesy of Varvara Kobyshcha.

ism might be salvific for the town's economy, it also complicates local identity and makes citizens worry about their place in a tourist-oriented town. As demonstrated, local historians in Myshkin could integrate the preservation of historical identity into the broader phantasy narrative. However, in addition to the issue of identity, there is a need to secure cooperation from local inhabitants. Doing so requires finding the right balance between involving citizens in the industry and, at the same time, protecting it from them.

The industry has had some clear, positive effects on the lives of citizens, creating jobs in both small businesses and the large city-owned tourist enterprise, and modernising the infrastructure. For instance, foodstuffs were long supplied to the local population through small shops owned by local businessmen. In 2014, however, two supermarkets were opened, leading to lower prices. On the other hand, the constant presence of tourists in the town also has negative effects: prices tend to be set for visitors from Moscow and St. Petersburg, who are much wealthier than the local population. Perhaps more importantly, a growing sentiment among citizens holds that the town has been turned into a "town

for tourists, not for us," as many informants put it. Although the administration tends to emphasise the industry's contribution to the town's economic profitability, tourism is sometimes considered a necessary evil rather than a blessing. The integration of the local community has become important to prevent the increase of hostility towards tourists.

Tourism in Myshkin has flourished by building a fairy-tale world relatively isolated from the ordinary life of both tourists and hosts. The biggest town map which tourists encounter is called "The Kingdom of the Mouse" and painted in fairy-tale style on a wall inside the Mouse Palace (where Mouse King and Mouse Queen sit on their thrones). In the middle of the map is an enormous picture of the Mouse Palace, while other tourist attractions, including two cathedrals, look relatively small.

However, completely excluding locals from this staged phantasy of a mouse-centred town would be impossible. The preservation of the borders of the fairy tale requires some collaboration or at least consent from the town's inhabitants. To keep the experience of phantasy intact, the authorities need to protect it from various possible external



Fig. 5: Scene from a show for tourists in the Mouse Palace: the Mouse Queen talking to visitors. Photo by courtesy of Varvara Kobyshcha.

intrusions. Local townspeople can significantly influence the tourists' overall impression. Areas with sightseeing attractions need to be kept clean, and visitors expect the houses which appear on their path to be presentable and follow a unified style. Officials and activists understand that citizens could spoil the work of producing the right impression on tourists. Enlisting locals as allies is necessary to prevent the destruction of the front-stage.

"Tourists should be in good spirits from the very moment the ship arrives. And Heaven save us from leaving an unpleasant impression on tourists. [...] What could spoil the impression? Well, if one meets a drunken person in the street. A long time ago, we instructed our people, so things of that kind don't happen anymore. We have even succeeded in civilising city dwellers. And it's good that we have a newspaper where such matters are discussed. People in Myshkin are active themselves. [...] There is a real pride for their town and also a struggle for cleanliness, for beauty." (One of the founders of the local tourist industry).



Fig. 6: A warning sign in the town centre. The left side reads: "Smokers! Your cigarette butts are most unwelcome here. There is a trashcan near the museum." The front reads: "Please do not leave any garbage here. There is a trashcan near the museum." Photo by courtesy of Varvara Kobysheva.

Several mechanisms promote collaboration among locals. Special prizes are granted for cleanliness and beauty, while well-known figures impose moral sanctions on those who spoil the view by redesigning the facade of their own homes. While arranging awards for best practices is a relatively simple undertaking, inducing self-restraint is a complicated task. In Myshkin, local officials hope to overcome this difficulty through the construction of a strong local community. Community-building takes place by means of patriotism and history lessons, which are viewed as interconnected. Such objects and activities as museums, lessons on local history and the victory memorial to Myshkin soldiers who fought in World War II are necessary for the successful schooling of members of the host community. The importance of education is constantly underlined:

A: "Local history lessons start in kindergarten. They are not part of the curriculum at this level, but local historians and teachers set up events for schoolchildren, arrange annual competitions and so on, everything about local history. They also set up museums at schools."

Q: "Is that really important?"

A: "It is very important. [...] This is the inculcation of love for the homeland." (One of the founders of the local tourist industry.)

However, not everything in the town is meant to be presented to tourists, so there is also a need to protect the backstage from the gaze of tourists. In Myshkin, the border between the front- and the backstage is geographically visible as the tourist area is in the town centre near the embankment. All the museums are concentrated there, and all the tourist routes are designed to give visitors no incentive to leave the central area. Most tourists arrive on river cruises, so they are immediately picked up by guides upon disembarkation and controlled throughout the duration of their stay in Myshkin, usually 2–4 hours.

Guides and routes are especially important for creating and preserving the desired impression, so considerable effort is put into training programmes. The guides are taught to protect the backstage by channeling visitors along the set routes. They are also adept at satisfying those hungry for authenticity or simply eager to learn more about the town or who seek to look behind the staged fairy tale. Tour guides have special instructions prescribing which information to disclose. In interviews, tourists attest that local guides tend to present a positive image of the town, in sharp contrast to guides at many other tourist sites who often



Fig. 7: Display in the Mouse Palace featuring mice in various forms and sizes. Photo by courtesy of Varvara Kobysheva.

complain about prevailing living conditions. Most importantly, the origin of the tour guides is of paramount consideration in the selection process, and only those from Myshkin itself are hired. It is assumed that they are more loyal to the town and its officials and more willing to present the setting in a favourable way.³⁰

7. Conclusion

In the global economy, tourism is a viable alternative for many small towns, but developing this industry requires careful interplay with a town's history. The case of Myshkin demonstrates that there are multiple

³⁰ The way the system works can be illustrated by the example of the maternity hospital closure, which took place in early 2013. Interviews with the local inhabitants reveal that a protest took place following the closure, and 1,000 people signed a petition against it. Informants usually highlighted the fact that a pregnant woman died soon afterwards due to the lack of medical care. Some tourists visiting the following summer were aware of the incident and asked the tour guides for details. The guides, however, tried to downplay the story since it might create an unpleasant impression of the town. They presented mutually contradictory versions of what



Fig. 8: A cruise ship on the Volga River near Myshkin. Photo by courtesy of Varvara Kobysheva.

facets involved, and a successful tourist industry requires a combination of these. The tourist experience can be produced and heightened by suspending everyday life and immersing visitors within historical or pseudo-historical narratives. Although artificially constructed, myths can sometimes be a powerful means for generating the phantasy experience, but the local community always needs an identity for concerted, collective action, which is indispensable for maintaining the presentation of the city both on the front- and the backstage. Tourists tend to search for authenticity, and historical tradition is of crucial importance here since history justifies and underscores the claims put forward. As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger point out, the skilful invention of tradition is always employed to substantiate claims about the primordial unity of the community.³¹

However fictional the myths produced by the host town might be, there is always a place for the community behind the myth, a collective

happened, but always tended to conceal the unpleasant event itself, either by denying closure or claiming that it was proposed by the locals themselves or they simply evaded the question.

³¹ Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992).

narrator who relates the myth to the tourist. Myth alone is never sufficient to manufacture an appropriate tourist experience – it must be accompanied by recourse to history and tradition, and be mediated by the presence of a community. The success of a tourist enterprise depends on integrating the politics of building a community with the practice of tourist management. The effectiveness of this work is crucial for the survival of small towns as both economic units and political unities.

Urban Cores and Urban Identity: Appropriating and Rejecting a City's History. The Case of Rethymno

Olga Moatsou

1. Small Towns in Greece

The city of Athens enjoys considerable attention from academics and researchers thanks to its long past, its history, as well as the unique urbanization processes it has experienced on many occasions since it became Greece's capital. Often, Greek cities are categorized into large metropolises (which include for instance Athens and Thessaloniki) and big cities (Larissa, Patra, Heraklion and Volos), and small towns.¹ And while there is an extended bibliography on Athens and Thessaloniki, and significant references regarding the various big cities, little can be found – particularly in non-Greek publications – on the small Greek towns. This present essay is an effort to shed some light on the life and urban identity in small towns in Greece and to shift the focus towards the way they changed in post-war and contemporary times.

1.1 Athens and Patterns of Expansion

During the post-war years the Greek countryside was devastated; by 1948, over 5,000 villages had been ruined.² What was worse, World War II was followed by a shattering civil war (1946–1949), forcing Greece to enter the 1950s in a state of penury. The reconstruction programme, mainly financed by foreign help, finally took place after 1949 and brought about urbanization and demographic changes. At the same time, reconstruction faced the problems of an overwhelmed Greek state,

1 For more analytical information, see Guy Burgel and Zakharias Demathas, *La Grèce face au troisième millénaire: Territoire, économie, société. 40 ans de mutations* (Athens: Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences 2001).

2 Thomas W. Gallant, *Modern Greece* (London: Arnold 2001).