

Geopolitical Discourse in Contemporary Latvian and American Travel Narratives

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Abstract

The concept of geopolitics has become a subject for research in a number of scientific disciplines, including literary studies with a special focus on travelogue, which is the most multipresentative genre of travel writing. Travelogue, being a literary genre, the thematic dominant of which highlights the aspect of mobility, represents numerous geographical locations through the prism of geopolitics. Countries, territories, and regions, may acquire associative changes in the context of historically-political shifts.

The present article focuses on the common political influences on the Siberian chronotope reflected in the contemporary Latvian and American travel narratives. It reveals not just the travellers' subjective receptions of the place, but also indicates numerous political influences, which created a stereotypical image of Siberia as a place of marginality, forced power and exile.

After considering and analysing the Siberian chronotope through the comparative perspective, it becomes obvious that American travellers tend to perceive this region basing on their general knowledge of historical processes and on the established stereotypes, while Latvian travellers trace a piece of their own history in Siberia, where hundreds of Latvians suffered repressions in the late 1930s under the influence of the Soviet regime.

Keywords

Geopolitical Discourse; Travel Narrative; American and Latvian Travelogues; Mental Mapping; Cartography; Postcolonial Studies; Siberian Chronotope; the Other; Soviet Regime; National Identity



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Геополитический дискурс в современных латвийских и американских повествованиях о путешествиях

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Аннотация

Понятие о геополитике стало объектом исследования в ряде научных дисциплин, включая литературоведение с особым акцентом на травелог, который является наиболее многопредставительным жанром путевых заметок. Травелог, как литературный жанр, тематическая доминанта которого актуализирует аспект мобильности, представляет множество географических мест через призму геополитики. Страны, территории и регионы могут приобретать ассоциативные изменения в контексте историко-политических сдвигов.

Настоящая статья фокусируется на общих политических влияниях на сибирский хронотоп, отраженных в современных латвийских и американских путевых заметках. Она раскрывает не только субъективные восприятия места путешественниками, но также указывает на множественные политические влияния, которые создали стереотипный образ Сибири как периферии, места ссылки и принудительной власти.

После рассмотрения и анализа сибирского хронотопа в сравнительной перспективе становится очевидным, что американские путешественники склонны воспринимать этот регион, опираясь на свои общие знания об исторических процессах и установленные стереотипы, в то время как латвийские путешественники прослеживают часть своей истории в Сибири, где сотни латышей пострадали от репрессий в конце 1930-х годов под влиянием советского режима.

Ключевые слова

геополитический дискурс; повествование о путешествии; американские и латвийские травелог; ментальное картирование; картография; постколониальные исследования; сибирский хронотоп; Другой; советский режим; национальная индивидуальность



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Introduction

The key element of any travel narrative is movement and mobility. Texts which reflect on routes or vectors, “accrete” with components of a narrative, developing into a work of fiction or non-fiction, where “protagonists have been travelling, wandering, running, chasing, roving, roaming, shifting, drifting through fictional and less fictional universes. Their movements have made them travellers, wanderers, runners, explorers, adventurers, rovers, treers, tourists.” (Berensmeyer & Ehland, 2013, p. 12)

The 21st century breaks down the boundaries of many earlier conventions and bans, expanding travel horizons with the use of new technological advances. The narrator of a contemporary travelogue is a human who reflects on travelling as an essential component of his lifestyle. S/he travels often and for several reasons: for relaxation, for shopping, for research, for acquiring knowledge in various fields, for finding a new place to live, for gaining new experience, etc. “Travelling is something we all do, on different scales, in one form or another. We all have stories of travel and they are of more than personal consequence.” (Youngs, 2013, p. 1). Travelling demonstrates the individual’s openness to change, to the Other¹, which is unknown. It is an opportunity to “open one’s mind” and to meet the otherness. Each journey is characterized by a sense of discovery, craving for adventure and experience, as well as by an impulse to behold something new or unusual, and, by gathering experience, to share new discoveries with a potential reader through a variety of literary genres. In his studies of the politics of mobility, a British human geographer Tim Cresswell expounds its development not just in terms of mobility and immobility, but also in terms of motive force, speed, rhythm, route, experience, and friction. He suggests that the concept of motive force “refers to the reasons, why mobility [...] occurs” (Cresswell, 2011, p. 22), and widely considers the degree of choice, “whether mobility is a chosen option or whether it is compelled” (ibid.). Cresswell maintains that the basic distinction between choice and compulsion in mobility is “central to any hierarchy and thus any politics of mobility” (ibid.). In his research on the abovementioned issues, the scientist denotes the interdisciplinarity of the field, tracing the links not just between mobility and geography, but also examining mobility across social sciences and humanities. The coverage of research on mobilities expands to art theory and practice, history, contemporary archaeology and many other spheres, including literary studies.

1 In semiotics, the concept of ‘the Other’ is a component of a semiotic model “the Self-the Other” that was conceptualized by the Russian literary scholar Juri Lotman (Юрий Михайлович Лотман), who designated binarity as a mandatory principle for constructing any semiotic system. (See: Lotman, J. M., 1996. *Semiosphere. Inside the thinking worlds*. Part 2. Moscow: Languages of Russian Culture.) In postcolonial discussions, in turn, the term was developed into the concepts of ‘Othering’ and ‘Worlding’, thus being coined by the American philosopher and literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (See: Spivak, G. Ch., 2007. *The Other Asias*. Wiley-Blackwell.)



Travel writing reveals a wide range of geographical and topographical objects that often become the main subject of a travel narrative. The British researchers of travel writing, Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, express an idea that “the three disciplines that have engaged most with travel writing are anthropology, history, and geography” (Hulme & Youngs, 2002, p. 9). American scientists Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera, referring to the structure and the plot of travel narratives, point out that travelogues primarily focus on “the real experiences of actual travelers rooted in the specific factual details of both history and geography” (Bendixen & Hamera, 2009, p. 2). A Russian literary scholar Vasilisa Shachkova, in her turn, points not only to the necessity of incorporating documentary elements into a travelogue (including the names of geographical objects and describing their specifics), but also highlights one of the genre features, which is “a route¹, a way as a thematic and structural core of a travel text” (Shachkova, 2008, p. 281), thus emphasizing not just the process of travelling, but also the representation of the narrator’s spatial identity in travel texts.

In geographical aspect any travel narrative has several forms of representation. The first group of texts is marked as “places popular with tourists across the world” (Burima, 2014, p. 286); the second group contains travel texts representing “small towns and settlements located outside the popular tourist routes” (ibid.); while the third group of travelogues may include texts, the narration of which has been modelled on the basis of such anthropological structures, as “the Self-the Other and/or exotic” in various culture-critical discourses.

Alongside the geographical framework, travelogues can be analysed in the geopolitical discourse, which, unlike the constant or minimally fluctuating geographical discourse, is closely related to political, ethnic or religious conflicts, regimes, revolutions, wars, confrontations and conventions.

It’s worth mentioning that classical geopolitics is generally regarded as a subfield of political geography, political science, and international relations. The Finnish professor of spatial planning and policy Sami Moisio noticeably expands the scope of applying the concept of geopolitics, stating that “from a historical perspective, geopolitics must be understood not only as an academic theorizing of politics, but also as the political action of all sorts of actors who has sought to mold political spaces. Moreover, geopolitical scholarship has not only informed political practices, it has also been affected by the world’s political ruptures and the emergent and dominant political rationalities of a given time.” (Moisio, 2017, p. 220). Therefore, it should be specified that the present research is rather based on political geography, which deals with the spatial aspect of political processes and phenomena, as well as on geopolitics in the culture-critical context, focusing on spatial identities as social constructs rather than on the innate peculiarities of a certain area. In turn, the concept of geopolitics, which is designated in the title of

1 Here and further in the text the translation from Russian and Latvian is mine, in case the English translation is not available. – D. O.

the present research, connects all the three abovementioned forms of travel narrative representation, conceptually or episodically reflecting on the historically political processes of the depicted geographical areas.

In travel narratives, no geographical location is considered in isolation from the rest of the world, regardless of the specifics of the genre; each must be represented not only through what is going on in it, but also “in relation to the rest of the world” (Flint, 2022, p. 22). Besides, many geographical entities can be/are politicized due to various political movements influencing them (nationalistic movements, exiles, etc.). Thus, the geopolitical framework in a travel narrative represents both the ontology of the ideological framework of political systems and certain features of the country’s geographical uniqueness: its geographical position, natural resources, as well as the “living space” that depends on them. Colin Flint, in turn, indicates in his research on geopolitics that the concept has a wider application, being a component of human geography.

“The common theme of the geographic perspective is that geography and society are *mutually constructed*. For political geographers, this means that politics makes geography, and that the geographies that are made are not politically neutral.” (Flint, 2022, p. 2)

Making politics, therefore, “requires changing existing geographic understandings and making new ones” (*ibid.*), this is what mutual construction means. Thus, if human geography studies the uniqueness of places, as well as connections and interactions between places, political geography focuses on the political organization of a particular place or on the possibility to establish control over a totalitarian country.

One of the world’s geopolitical regions which has been constantly represented in travelogues, is Siberia. Over time, the emblematics of marginality, harshness, otherness or foreignness has been assigned to this place. According to Flint’s suggested definition of geopolitics in which this concept has been presented as

“the struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension, and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage” (Flint, 2022, p. 32),

it can be assumed that the initial marker of the uniqueness of the Siberian region was its vast territory and the evident exuberance of natural resources. However, against the backdrop of numerous political events, Siberia gradually starts being associated with a place of exile, deportation and imprisonment. The connotation of remoteness or isolation has been assigned to the Siberian toponym in the majority of contemporary travel narratives. Similar associative changes of geographical areas in the context of political shifts can be also observed in other countries. Due to its vast area, Australia, being for more than 60 years a part of the British empire in the 19th century, served as a penal colony for British convicts, including political prisoners. In addition, being remote from the better developed



European countries, the place offered minimum advantages of civilization and could become a perfect location for the unwanted.

Within the genre of travelogue geopolitics can be projected in several forms. The most significant of these has been featured throughout the present article: representation of space in travelogues; travelogues and cartography (geographical and mental); the comparative aspect of geopolitics in travel narratives. Hereinafter, these forms will be interpreted by projecting them on the depiction of the Siberian space in Latvian and American travel narratives.

In the frames of contemporary critical tradition the methodology of travelogues synthesizes various methods and approaches of different literary schools with an aim to excerpt the striking semantic features of travel narratives and to place these texts into social, political or economic context. The Siberian text has been excerpted using the structural semiotic method. By applying the cultural anthropological approach, places, events, landscapes, people, cultures and other elements have been considered in contemporary Latvian and American travelogues, where the signs of the Siberian chronotope are being viewed in a geopolitical paradigm. The cultural anthropological paradigm also determined the necessity to focus on the common feature of travel narratives, which is mental cartography. It reveals each traveller's subjective knowledge (including clichés) of spatial objects, the ratio of distance and time spent covering them, the emotional bond with the space in which mobility occurs. In the travelogues dedicated to Siberia, this paradigm of mental cartography is being supplemented with the historically conditioned Siberian marking, namely, political reputation, which has been interpreted with the tools of postcolonial criticism.

Mental cartography which helps to interpret political changes, the dominant positions in the society as well as the authors' ideological position and their degree of subjectivity, is widely applied in the construction of the geopolitical discourse of travelogue. The application of the method in the context of the present research provides an opportunity to observe how the author of a narrative reflects on historical changes in the countries visited, and in domestic and foreign policy dominances. In order to trace the presence of the abovementioned key concepts in modern travel writing, the present article will consider the concepts of geographical and mental cartography of travelogues, as well as focus on the representation the Siberian space in travel narratives in the frames of geopolitical influences.

The hypothesis for the present research can be formulated as follows: the influence of historically-political processes affected the perception of Siberian toponym in both American and Latvian cultural space. However, travel writers reflected on these processes differently: Americans rather evaluate political influences from the outside, while Latvians tend to find explanations of historical processes through the moulds of national identity.

Two narratives from Latvian (2005 and 2016) and three from North American (1975, 1984, 2011) travel writings, the main topographic object of which is Siberia, have been selected to become the basis for the comparative analysis. Paul Theroux (b.1941), a contemporary American traveller and the author of numerous travelogues, while undertaking his four-months journey through Europe, Asia and the Middle East, finishes it with a mysterious region, Siberia. The final chapter of his travelogue *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia* (1975) represents the traveller's reflexion on the heterogeneity of the place with a focus on geopolitics in the context of Cold War conflict. In his travelogue *Travels in Siberia* (2011) another American, Ian Frazier (b. 1951), highlights the motive of exile, which is associated with the Siberian region. The Latvian travelogue writer Inga Abele (I. Ābele, b. 1972) describes Siberia in her travel diary *To the East from the Sun and to the North from the Earth* (2005), basing on her 3 weeks trip and living in Bobrovka village, Omsk region, a home of around 150 descendants of ethnic Latvians, who arrived in Siberia mainly with two waves of voluntary or forced movement: respectively in the turn of the 19th – 20th century during economic emigration and at the time of Soviet deportation. Further on, the thematic dominants of travelogues will be presented in the geopolitical aspect, and the specifics in the representation of the Siberian chronotope by the abovementioned and some other travellers and writers will be determined.

Representation of space in travelogues

Large cities and small towns, modern megacities and traditional villages, marginal or border areas, as well as geographical tourist attractions – lakes and rivers, mountains and deserts, waterfalls and caves – are widely represented in both American and Latvian contemporary travel narratives. The peculiarities of landscape and other geographical factors often become objects of comparison in the analysis of travel narratives. It is also essential to be aware of the fact that a mobility vector in travel writing never exists without a category of time. The concept of 'literary artistic chronotope' proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin (Михаил Бахтин), serves as a compositional principle of many travelogues, revealing "inseparability of space and time" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Space and time merge in a literary work: "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (ibid.); a certain place becomes the artistic space for the events reflected in the narrative, as the development of any action outside the real space is impossible. According to Bakhtin, chronotopes serve as the organizing centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel, so the sequence of events is related to both time and space categories of proximity and distance.

Applying the optics of Bakhtin's chronotope to travelogues, it becomes evident that in contemporary travel writing many emotional characteristics of places and their reputations created by earlier travel narrations have been deconstructed;



they may differ significantly from the chronotopic content of traditional travelogues, because the literary compass¹ can be modified by various historical, social, cultural or political processes. The artistic space of any travelogue is much more than just the environment; it is often a reflection of consequences of specific historical events and political influences. The authors of travel narrations construct and record the sense of the places visited, as the reception of a geographical location may be influenced by historically-political processes. There are territories that regularly turn into the object of geopolitical transformations and reallocation of borders; at the same time, there are areas that stand out for their geopolitical stability. Travelogues reveal equally great interest in both the abovementioned types of territories. If the specifics of a territory and its inhabitants has been mainly determined by the past or recent political upheavals or conquests, the geopolitical context emerges more clearly in the travelogues dedicated to these territories. Thus, the artistic space of such a travel narration becomes a projection of social, political and cultural values and forms.

Cartography and mental mapping in travelogues

The concepts of cartography² and mental mapping are of particular importance for the spatial orientation in the context of travel writing. The mapping of a route or itinerary is a strategic principle of text formation in the construction of space. Moving in space, a traveller converts the newly explored territories into subjective scales and projects them on the mental maps created by his experience. The function of a map is to proportionally, but to a lesser extent, visualize the location of a place in a geographically enclosed space. Mapping plays an important role in the paratextual apparatus of travelogues.

Cartography is a practice that reveals where the reader's knowledge of some travel destination starts and where it ends. Cartography helps to identify not just the information depicted on a map, but it also highlights the features beyond the boundaries of the specified objects. The function of fictional cartography is

1 The concept "literary compass" refers to the depiction of the four cardinal points in literature of the particular epoch or under the influence of the particular ideology. The term has been applied and widely used by Maija Burima (Burima, M. 2008. *The 1960s and 1970s: Transformations of the Latvian Literary Compass*. In: "Back to Baltic Memory: Lost and Found in Literature 1940-1968", p. 249-260.), highlighting transformations in the reception of society in relation to Western or Eastern countries that are being modeled under the influence of historical, social or political processes. In addition, certain forms of reception often reflect stereotypes or experiences accepted in society.

2 The term **cartography** comes from the French *cartographie* < *carte* 'map' and the ancient Greek *graphein*, which means 'to write'. Thus, the concept of cartography can be defined as a science and a branch of practice, which deals with the methods of compiling geographical maps and their further use. Cartography was generally defined as "manufacturing maps" until 1960s, when the meaning of the term changed fundamentally due to the rapid development in computer technology. Besides, the basic subject of cartography was put in the field of communication sciences, so not just manufacturing of maps, but also their use started to be regarded as belonging to the field of cartography. In the modern perspective the concept of cartography acquired an expanded definition of "conveying of geospatial information by means of maps" (Kraak, M., Ormeling, F. 2010. *Cartography: Visualization of Geospatial Data*. Pearson Education Limited. p. 40).

to transmit certain experience, to redefine literary conventions, basing on the specific features of a place and often emphasizing national experience, as well as to explore the functions of the particular society in the modern era. Geographic maps which project real journeys are not just a record of traveler's geographical knowledge or background illustrations for travelogues. They definitely provide a much more complex perspective than just impressing or entertaining a reader. In turn, the aesthetic and symbolic properties of the depicted places are fixed in mental maps.

Mental maps¹ are generally considered as a means of generating and visualizing thoughts and ideas, as well as a means of forming associations. It is a subjective idea that each individual or a group of individuals might have about a territory in its geographical sense, which is often driven by historical events or manifestations of a political regime. Although the concept of mental mapping is a psychological concept, it has been applied and is widely used in culture studies and literary studies. Mental maps reflect on the stereotypes and capture the notions that have been imprinted in the public mind as a result of various historically-political processes or ideological views. These maps can vary depending on the individuality and personal beliefs of a traveler, as well as on the collective ideology of the society, which may change over time.²

A leading Russian researcher of travelogue Evgeny Ponomarev (Евгений Пономарёв), analyzing the historical process of travel writing research in Russian literary studies, highlights the fact that in numerous contemporary studies of the genre, the concept of travel has been represented “with the help of a system of denials: escaping from the world, denial of the final destination, denial of the boundaries” (Ponomarev, 2020). The author believes that at this very point “the travelogue becomes an instrument for the formation of ideology” (Ponomarev, 2020), and it is the ideological vector that transforms the traditional travel narrative into a contemporary travelogue.

1 The term “mental map” or “cognitive map” was introduced in 1948 (*Cognitive Maps in Rats and Men*) by Professor Edward Chace Tolman (1886-1959), an American psychologist and a researcher of cognitive psychology. According to Downs and Stea (1973:15) mental or *cognitive mapping* is the product of a series of psychological processes that register, code, store, then call to mind and decode all information on our everyday spatial environment. (See: Downs, R. M., Stea, D. (Eds.). 1973. *Image and Environment: Cognitive Mapping and Spatial Behavior*. AldineTransaction.). In reference to travelogues, a Latvian literary scholar Maija Burima often accentuates the concept of mental cartography in her articles focusing on the reconstruction of mental borders in contemporary Latvian travel narratives (*Travelogues in Latvian Literature (late 20th – early 21st century): Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Mental Borders*. In: The Proceedings of the 1st SWS International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts SGEM 2014, Book 3, Volume 1, Section Anthropology, pp. 283-289), as well as analysing Latgale mental toponymy in literary works of contemporary Latvian writers (Burima, M. 2008. *The mental toponymy of Latgale in the recent Latvian literature // Latgale as a culture borderzone*, p. 246-253).

2 For example, the ideological context gradually disappears in the Latvian cultural space after the restoration of Latvia's independence (1990). Initially, the features of the Soviet ideology were highlighted alongside the cultural aspect, while the recent travel texts emphasize the depiction of psychological experience.



Scientists and practicing cartographers have different interpretations of the principles of mental mapping. Although the creation of maps is an analytical procedure, it can quite often comprise the cartographer's subjective experience, which manifests itself not only in one's knowledge of geography, but also in cultural values or even subjective ideological views. In addition, there exist different styles to represent spatial information in cartography. Each cartographer can choose projection, a type of painting or the use of a certain scale. Likewise, a traveller or the author of a travelogue may reflect one's personal experience in the description of some place, his/ her knowledge or impressions gained during the trip. In both cases, the author decides which features, images or descriptions are to be included or even emphasized in the work, or which are to be ignored and omitted.

Some authors of travel texts indicate the "dark side to travel, as in voyages that are part of invasion, conflict and enforced transport" (Hart, 2021, p. 431), rather than focus on travel adventures, exploration of places, or represent journeys into the self as a way of self-exploration. There is a number of violent reasons why a person sets out for a foreign land: it can be an escape from the consequences of natural disasters, persecution, terror or genocide; a person may "travel" to the place of his imprisonment or exile; "travel may be a flight into and from reality" (Hart, 2021, p. 446). In the political discourse, travelogue as a genre combines two ways of thinking – colonial and postcolonial, as some of the territories described in travel narratives are considered to be potential objects of colonization.

Geopolitics in travelogues: comparative aspect

In the 21st century the borders of the world are becoming dynamic and multidimensional. Places and their reception are changing not just due to the general processes of globalization. They can also get transformed in human mind under the influence of historical changes as well as social and political processes. Thus, travel narratives where a certain geographical place (a country, a city or a region) that has attracted travellers, writers and readers over the centuries becomes anew an object of some literary plot, appear in contemporary travel literature. Tim Youngs refers to such kind of travel writing as the 'footsteps' genre; Peter Hulme calls it the 'ambulant gloss'; Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, in turn, reflects on it as the 'second journey', "in which the author-protagonists journey in the steps of earlier travellers" (Youngs, 2013, p. 184). The attitude towards such a variation of the genre is very controversial: some attempts are considered to be of artistic low-value, while some literary critics believe that this trend demonstrates a process of renewal, rather than exhaustion (Leavenworth, 2010, p. 192). The reception of a particular geographical location at different times is somewhat different from the previous experience, for generally accepted stereotypes collapse under the influence of subjective modelling of the modern world.

Such texts with a common theme or motif often become the object of comparative analysis. However, according to the Hungarian literary critic A. Dima, “while researching such a theme, traditions should be identified; the continuity of the topic, various references to it over the centuries, the originality of interpretations, the influence of some literary works on the other, etc. should be traced” (Dima, 1977, p. 102). One of such common geographical spaces in both Latvian and American travel writing is Siberia, which is often associated with two waves of the Soviet hegemony. The first wave affected the Soviet Latvians at the end of 1930s in a form of internal repressions¹, while the second, namely deportations of 1940s, influenced the fate of all three Baltic States which were violently incorporated into the Soviet Union. The echoes of these events formed the dramatic mode of Siberian travelogues. The motif of the forced power alongside the theme of assimilation and preserving the identity of the deported nations has been particularly widely represented in Latvian travel writing.

Geopolitical topicality of the Siberian chronotope in travel writing

The image of Siberia, with its heterogeneity, politically marked history, and often a landscape exotic for the narrator’s reception, has always fascinated both world travellers and writers. From the 17th century, the Siberian chronotope has acquired a number of interpretations, some of which have become clichéd over time. In the 18th century, the Siberian region acquired a connotation of remoteness, isolation and harshness, which sometimes led travellers to associate Siberia with Russia just relatively or indirectly. The original stereotype regarding the Siberian space that was often portrayed as a region of coldness (winter, snow, frost) or darkness (night) is persistent also in later centuries. On the other hand, “the depiction of the Siberian chronotope as of the rich and vast region gained its development in Odic poetry” (Gudkova, 2007), which evidently revealed the beauty and exuberance of the land². Moreover, the image of Siberia’s vastness and the richness of its natural resources was gradually widespread in the 19th century Russian fiction and popular scientific literature, when the locus of the romantic space moved from the Caucasus to Siberia. Due to the so-called deromantization of the Caucasus in the age of realism and the romanticization of “struggles for freedom” in all areas of culture and life, the uniqueness of the Siberian cultural space has been also emphasized. As a result, the isolated Siberian region is gradually becoming recognizable outside Russia. It is also marked in the topography of numerous travelogues, where its geographical and ethnic identity has been increasingly highlighted.

1 The phrase “unjustly repressed in 1937–1938” often appears in one form or another in Latvian travel narratives (e.g. Leitis, I, Briedis, U. “Searching for Latvians in Siberia”, 2016, p. 8).

2 For example, a prominent Russian scientist, historian and poet Mikhail Lomonosov (Михаил Васильевич Ломоносов) devoted many stanzas of his famous odes to the Siberian luxurious, grand and immense region. Moreover, the geographical chronotope of Siberia is filled with numerous hyperbolized metaphors of space in his poetry (e.g. «густостью животным тесны», «в роскоши прохладных теней», «Лена чистой быстринной, как Нил, народы напояет, / И бреги наконец теряет, / Сравнившись морю шириной»).



In travel writing the Siberian region is generally depicted as an ideal landscape with the traits of unaffected primitiveness and as a source of enrichment through the extraction of natural resources.

In the frames of contemporary travel writing, the reception of the Siberian cultural space as well as its critical interpretation is multi-layered. The British researchers of the genre Tim Youngs and Peter Hulme introduce the concept of “extreme travel” (Hulme & Youngs, 2002, p. 96), which they believe could become a new significant sub-genre of travelogue. In the sense of modernity, extreme travels are associated with peripheral places, such as Siberia, Alaska, southern Patagonia, the mountains of Nepal or the polar regions. In extreme travel narrations, the journey usually has priority over the writing about it. In the narratives by American travelers, Siberia is often depicted as an idiosyncratic land, which is not always congenial for the majority of travelers. It has been often perceived by travel writers as an absolute periphery, something remote from civilization that brings embarrassment or even fear being compared to the western world. For many of them, modern Siberia is completely unfamiliar, but people’s lifestyle has been often represented as primitive according to the standards of modern world development.

Postcolonial geopolitical secession of states has strengthened the idea of the “civilised” West and the “uncivilised” rest of the world. This tendency is quite strongly marked in the works of American travelogue writers. The concept of “the West and the rest” was introduced by an American author Robert Kaplan (b. 1952). His books reproduce a problematic geographical perception that endows the Western world with the function of secure and civilized states, while considering the rest of the world to be uncivilised and even dangerous (Kaplan, 1997). Professor in politics and international relations at Queen’s University Belfast Debbie Lisle expresses a very similar idea in her book that is devoted to contemporary travel writing in the context of the global politics. She suggests that “the travelogue’s geographical distinction of home/ elsewhere relies on underlying assumption about civilization and security: there are civilised places on the globe that are safe, and there are uncivilised places that are dangerous” (Lisle, 2011, p. 24).

Analysing the space of Siberia, one should rather refer to it as a location than a place. The basic difference would be that places are commonly viewed as “the settings of people’s everyday lives”, while a location is rather “the role a place plays in the world” (Flint, 2022, p. 24-25). In this connection the particular location can be considered as a place of resort, a military area or a place for exile, as represented by the Siberian region.

Constellations of Siberian chronotope in travel narratives by contemporary Latvian and American writers

Constellations of the Siberian chronotope in Latvian and American travelogues have a wide range of representations. In terms of literary compass, Siberia is

the northern vector, which represents captivity, marginality, limited opportunities and the dark side of the past. Focusing on the geopolitical discourse, Siberia's image in contemporary travelogues is commonly depicted as a place of exile and Stalin's Gulag. Although it reveals a stereotype rather than a tendency, travel narrative authors of both the countries tend to discover the traces of politically-oriented discrimination even today, after many years of Soviet repressions and Stalin's totalitarian regime.

"The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia" (1979), a travelogue by the American novelist Paul Theroux, is most likely based on the stereotypes that have developed over time concerning the region's landscape, culture and historical events. Ian Frazier's travel narrative "Travels in Siberia" (2010) reveals the traveler's reception of the Siberian region as a place of exile. A similar motif regarding the historical dominance in the representation of Siberia also appears in Latvian travel texts. Inga Abele's travel diary "East of the Sun and North of the Earth" (2005) highlights the presence of past dramatic events (totalitarian terror, deportation of the Baltic population) in the memories, everyday traditions, landscape and infrastructure of modern Siberians. Ingvars Leitis and Uldis Briedis estimate this region and the culture of its inhabitants in their travel diary "Searching for Latvians in Siberia" (2016) from the point of view of Latvian people assimilation and preservation of their identity. The famous Canadian Farley Mowat suggests his own, slightly unusual, interpretation of the Soviet Siberia in his travelogue "The Siberians" (1970), where he evidently idealizes and romanticises the place and its people.

The American traveller and novelist Paul Theroux who, starting from 1970s, marked new trends in the genre of travelogue in American travel writing, went on a four-month trip to Europe, Asia and the Middle East, finishing it in Siberia. The last chapter of his travel narrative "The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia", entitled "The Trans-Siberian Express", has been dedicated to this exotic region. In the traveller's representation the Siberian space primarily possesses a mental image of coldness and silence. The rhythm of its life is monotonous, but the surrounding atmosphere is gloomy. At the beginning of his journey, while crossing the Japanese Sea on the way to Nakhodka, Theroux catches a comment of some Australian regarding the Siberian coldness, which quickly leads him to the following conclusion: "When he said, 'Hey, I hear it's cold in Siberia,' I knew it would be a rough crossing" (Theroux, 2006, p. 169). Approaching the Russian coast, Theroux sees everything in dark and gloomy colours: "Surprisingly, it was bare of snow. It was brown, flat, and treeless, the grimmest landscape I had ever laid eyes on, like an immense beach of frozen dirt washed by an oily black sea" (Theroux, 2006, p. 172). One of the main objects of Theroux's interest depicted in his travelogue is landscape that he observes through the windows of the Trans-Siberian Express while travelling from Japan to Moscow, as well as people, their appearance, speech, behaviour, interests and attitudes towards other people, historical events or political situations. Siberia is hardly a place of particular interest where the American



traveller would have decided to go purposefully. In the course of his journey, Theroux does not attempt to delve into historical, social or cultural processes; he is satisfied to describe the train itself, adding to his descriptions some anecdotes about the people he meets at each stage of his journey. Moreover, hardly any geopolitical features could be revealed in his travelogue.

In turn, another American traveller and writer Ian Frazier offers his own reception of Siberia, which differs significantly from the impressions represented by Theroux. In his travelogue “Travels in Siberia”, he shares his travel experience, highlighting the fact that this region, its geography and history have already been familiar to him. The author emphasizes not only the geographical stereotypes of the place, such as the vastness of its territory¹, the specifics of its natural areas (taiga, tundra, steppe) or the coldness of the taiga², but also reveals his historically-political associations with Siberia. On the basis of his preliminary knowledge of the place, Frazier forms his subjective list of advantages and disadvantages of the Siberian region. “For most people, Siberia is not the place itself but a figure of speech” (Frazier, 2011, p. 3), the traveller remarks at the beginning of his narrative, which gives the Siberian space a metaphorical image of coldness, remoteness and exile. The traveler highlights the essential and widely known historical events, being associated with Siberia, e.g.: “Almost all the missile arcs went over Siberia. In the Cold War Siberia provided the “cold”; Siberia was the blankness in between the space through which apocalypse flew” (Frazier, 2011, p. 6). The theme of exile is constantly pervading Frazier’s travelogue. He describes his visit to Barguzin, “the classic village of Siberian exile since tsarist times”, where all kinds of people were exiled starting from 1830s.

“Multiple representations of the Siberian toponym” (Burima, 2008, p. 247) which are related to the historical memory of the Latvian people, appear in the recent Latvian travel literature. Geopolitical motives in the reception of the Siberian image form the main line in the travelogues of contemporary Latvian authors. They reveal the political vector, as in the mind of the Latvian nation the Siberian space over time has been associated with a place for the forced collectivization of the Soviet Latvians under the internal repressions in the late 1930s, as well as a place of exile in the periods of 1941 and 1949 deportations. Ieva Melgalve notes that “Memories of the USSR still leave great impression on the Latvian literature today” (Melgalve, 2015), when literature was subject to the definite centralized structure making it one of the “ideology architects and formers” (ibid.). The present article reflects the theme of internal repressions of the late 1930s, being the central to the Latvian public discourse, and, thus, widely depicted in numerous recent

1 “Siberia of course is huge. Three-fourths of Russia today is Siberia. Siberia takes up one-twelfths of all the land on earth”. Frazier, I. (2008). *Travels in Siberia*. Picador. P. 4.
2 “Much of Siberia’s taiga rests on permafrost [...] Permafrost also covers all the tundra region.” Frazier, I. (2008). *Travels in Siberia*. Picador. P. 8.

Latvian travelogues, rather than the topic of 1940s deportations, which haven't been widely accentuated in the travel texts under consideration.

In the travel diary "To the East from the Sun and to the North from the Earth" which could be marked as cultural and historical narration with a structure of a story, the traveler and writer Inga Abele reveals the Siberian space to the 21st century reader, basing on her three-week trip to Bobrovka Village, Omsk Region. Abele describes a Latvian settlement which is a small populated area in the periphery of Russia beyond the direct view of tourists, but where around 150 Latvian immigrants live until today, being forcibly collected in 1937 into one kolhoz. On June 10, 2003, the writer together with the theater expert Ieva Zole decided to join the expedition of Latvian artisans and folklorists to Bobrovka. In the frames of the expedition, two weeks of craft and folklore lessons were planned in groups of children and adults, conducted by Latvian weavers, wood-carvers, potters and members of folk groups. For Abele, it was her carefully planned trip to visit the Latvian settlement in Siberia, to meet its inhabitants, as well as to get to know their traditions and way of life. It could also be assumed that Abele's diaries overlap with an essay in which the journey itself becomes an opportunity for extended observations of the nation and people. She depicts the lifestyle of the local population of the Latvian origin, describes their most typical traditions (both preserved and newly created), and shows her interest in people occupation. She notices and reflects on the assimilation¹ processes in that part of the society she has learned about during her journey: the Latvians borrow and implement several Russian folk traditions, while the Russians learn and sing Latvian songs with great pleasure. Being precise with the events and activities of her trip, Abele particularly emphasizes the historical and cultural heritage of the Siberian region. The author has a very positive attitude towards the place itself and its inhabitants; moreover, her attitude towards the past is neutral rather than politicized. In her descriptions, Abele almost never uses clichés, so she portrays Siberia as a place historically developed under the influence of various laws and incidents. Although the writer does not ignore the historical memory and points to Siberia in her diary both as a place of migration in 1895, when the Russian tsar promised the land, and as a place of deportation, when "in 1937, Stalin chased them together by force in the village" (Abele, 2005, p. 41), she "does not impose the current Siberian image marked by the past shadows on the reader" (Burima, 2008). Burima assumes that the main strategy of Inga Abele is not to emphasize the "dominance of the past vector" (ibid.),

1 The term **assimilation** usually refers to the merging of one people with another, taking over their language and culture. Doctor of Law Eriks Trels expands the scope of this concept and offers the following definition of **assimilation** in his created dictionary: it is a process, „during which a human loses own culture and identity, overtaking culture and identity of another group, or its elements... There is also *free assimilation* (happening spontaneously, without organized outer intervention, through free contacts of people, upon own choice) and *forced assimilation* (as a result of state decisions or external pressure, people are forced to give up their identity and culture or elements of it in favor of others)." Kolčanovs B., Zankovska-Odiņa S., Zālītis K. (2010). *A different client in diverse Latvia*. Riga: Latvian Human Rights Center. P. 11. <http://www.trels.lv/vardnica.html>



but to “characterize the contemporary Siberian Latvian space of life and rhythm of life” (ibid.).

A similar idea, regarding the influence of political processes on the reception of places visited, appears in the research of Debbie Lisle, who states in her study that the western travelogue “makes problematic claims about its own literary heritage, the foundations of modern subjectivity, bifurcated global cartography [...]” (Lisle, 2011, p. 265). The scholar also declares that “contemporary travelogues are ultimately depoliticising: they cover over the inherited power relations of Empire by telling supposedly neutral and objective stories about encounters with difference”. (ibid.)

The Canadian traveler and writer Farley Mowat represents just such a depoliticized reception of the Siberian region; he idealises this place and offers the reader its peculiar, even hyperbolized conception. In his travelogue “The Siberians”, he calls Siberia the “sleeping land”. The purpose of Mowat’s trip was to compare the Siberian region with the North American Arctic, so during his trip he mainly focused on local ethnic groups, the “small peoples” as Mowat calls them, such as the Yukaghirs, Yakuts or Chukchees, who are close relatives of the Canadian Eskimos. Impressed by the magnificence of nature and the hospitality of the Siberians, Mowat never sounds negative or critical; he also ignores the politically marked fact that Siberia was once a place of exile. From his perspective, Soviet Siberia is a paradise, as compared to Canada with a number of insufficiencies and badly treated indigenous people.

The politics of belonging and non-belonging identity¹, which is based on geographical location and quite often related to the Siberian cultural space, has been also highlighted in travelogues of the post-Soviet Latvia. Considering people’s identity C. Flint (2022) identifies the concept with a number of collective identities, such as gender, race, nationality, profession, etc., adding place to the list. “Sense of place is a collective identity tied to a particular place, perhaps best thought of as a unique “character” of a place. People are guided in their actions by particular identities that say who they are and what they can and cannot, should and should not, do” (Flint, 2022, p. 25). The travelogue “In Search of Latvians in Siberia”, written by two Latvians I. Leisis and U. Briedis and published in 2016, depicts not only the adventures of the two young people during their travel in 1975, but also focuses on the image of the Latvian nation and reflects the lifestyle in numerous Latvian settlements in Siberia. The travelogue helps to determine the signs of Latvian immigrants’ identity preserved over many years, to identify the spheres of their assimila-

1 **Identity** is what defines the existence; a typical feature, peculiarity, exclusivity. The concept of national identity is widely considered by a Latvian scholar of law Erik Trels, and it appears in his dictionary stating that it is “part of a person’s identity that unites him with other persons sharing similar national-cultural features. A set of language, values, behavioral patterns, cultural symbols and social memory is the basis on which a person’s belonging to a nation, the mutual unity of those belonging to the nation, is formed and maintained. National identity includes the idea on each nation’s uniqueness, but not the superiority, difference from other nations, idea about mutual unity of people belonging to the nation and idea on nations’ continuity”.
<http://www.trels.lv/vardnica.html>

tion, as well as to analyze the influence of the Soviet regime on the destiny of the Latvian nation. The researchers of travel writing often express such an idea that forced mobility and forced staying in a foreign land can also be treated as a lifelong journey. It is a significant fact that the diary was written and published in the 21st century – in a different epoch and under different ideological conditions. It is also difficult to give a clear answer to the question why it took so long for the diary to come into the world. Analyzing the historically political situation of that time, it shall be assumed that the censorship of the 1970s would never allow publishing such kind of a narration, because “each book had to receive permission for being published, and even after being published, the work was subjected to a thorough review according to the latest censorship requirements” (Melgalve, 2015). Burima expresses an idea that “the vector of the former Soviet Union is actualized in the works of authors who were traveling during the Soviet Union. They share their texts, which were not published at the time, because at the time they were not sure that censorship would allow them to be published due to the banned topics” (Burima, 2014, p. 285). So, the image of Siberia in the travelogue by Leisis and Briedis acquires modern representation of the Soviet regime. Their travel diary is another look at the destiny of the Latvian diaspora in the Far East, where people’s culture, language, traditions and daily life has been represented through historical events and life stories. Such a perspective looks grim and full of pessimism, but it is still an integral part of Latvian history.

The concept of geopolitics can be applied not only to the manifestations of other cultures in the traveler’s mental reception; it also affects the homeland. In the process of geocritical analysis, it acquires a new vector of perceiving the “self”. Changing authorities separate the present from the past; what was local before and was probably “silenced” and marginalized due to the political restrictions and ideological influences, revives and, in the interpretation of travelers, acquires significance in new dimensions.

In the post-Soviet decade and in the recent Latvian literature such travelogues appear, in which the authors depict the regions of their home country, describing them from a new perspective. Inga Abele’s travel diaries “To the East from the Sun and to the North from the Earth” contain the travel texts not just about Germany, Estonia and Siberia, but also about some towns in Latgale¹. It turns out to be significant that periphery of some country may be also positioned as “foreign”, “the Other”, even in some way “exotic”, which determines the belonging of this place simultaneously to two text groups: thus, the multicultural Latgale, with its small towns, which cannot be attributed to the popular tourist routes, is represented in Abele’s diary as the Other, because the language dialect and the relations with the neighboring countries assign specific racy features to this region of Latvia, as well as something not quite esthetic or attractive. The places mentioned by Abele

1 Latgale is one of the four Latvian cultural and historical regions between Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Zemgale, located in the eastern part of the country.



are commonly marked with certain colors; landscapes in Latgale are usually light: green Daugavpils square, yellow sun, light blue sky, velvety evening, etc.; however, some places are depicted as grey and black¹, which often makes a reader feel sad and depressed. In her travel diaries, Abele represents everything she faces through the prism of her own experience, adventures, reflections and feelings.

Laima Muktupavela's travelogue "It Happens in Latvia" (2006) is focused on 29 remote places in Latvia, which for various reasons have toponyms unusual even for the locals (for instance, Menta, Dupšas, Krievragciems, Zādzene, Gambija, Turki etc.). Besides, the author assigns some "character features like those for people" (Muktupavela, 2006, p. 9) almost to every place. Each of these described places form a micro- world, where global processes hardly resonate. This is the world where "life passes by" (ibid.). The structure of Muktupavela's text is concise: the highlighted real culturally historical facts being mixed with legends and narratives of the locals, have been assigned to the particular location. In her text, Muktupavela reveals to the reader "a sample of such a world, where man has been left all alone. With himself and his life" (ibid.). Life goes on in each of the villages "as in some parallel world, beyond conformities to natural laws and beyond preliminary predictability" (2006, p. 10), where everybody stays alone in monotonous daily life. Literary excursus of the writer into the Latvian provinces breaks the binary stereotype "center-periphery", where the center is to be associated with progress, while the periphery – with stagnation. Muktupavela emphasizes the specific nature and the uniqueness of territorial marginalia, and she indicates the significance of anthropologic and ethnographic heritage of the periphery in the common national identity.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that in the recent decades travel horizons rapidly expand, the types of journeys get more and more diverse, the range of spatial objects depicted in travelogues widen, but the reasons for mobility become striking in their ambiguity. At the same time, the concept of geopolitics gets integrated into contemporary travel writing, which results in a fact that both Latvian and American travel narratives demonstrate heterogeneous representation of geopolitical discourse from postcolonial perspective.

There are numerous places in the world which get politicised over time. It happens due to various reasons caused by social and political processes. One of such commonly recognized geopolitical regions is Siberia, a space which has acquired numerous literary images and subjective receptions over time. The Siberian text in a geopolitical discourse represents controversial cultural

1 Especially Daugavpils, which is named by the author many times as "the bandit town" with clarification "with 'saint' bell towers"; and it reminds her something dark and sometimes even frightening; a monument near Daugava river looks like a "black monster", and Daugavpils itself is described as "bright and at the same time gloomy". Abele, I. (2005). *East of the sun and north of the earth*. Diaries and travelogues. Riga: Atēna. Pages 80, 89, 90, 91.

clichés and stereotypes caused by different historical paradigms and ideological processes. In addition, the travellers' subjective perceptions and individual modeling of the world, including the Siberian region, is the result of mental cartography and its mechanisms.

The present research has revealed that although there are certain parallels in North American and Latvian representation of the Siberian region (cold and remote land with vast territory and exotic landscape), the reception of Siberia is very specific in each particular case. Moreover, Latvian travel narratives not just highlight the stereotypes associated with this region, as generally is the case of Western travel writing, but often contain a motif of search, when travellers tend to find the traces of the forced mobility consequences, which is the Latvian diaspora in remote Siberian regions. Thus, Latvian travel narratives about Siberia reveal geopolitical results of historically-political processes of the past, portraying the victims of the Soviet totalitarian empire and indicating the gradual assimilation of the deported people in the Siberian space.

In a certain way, the present study sets up a framework for a more extensive research into the geopolitical discourse with a future perspective of considering other geopolitical regions represented in the recent travel writing.

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