Experimental

Our Freedom

Sovereignty in Contemporary Russia

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Abstract *Our Freedom*, the 52 min. documentary film explores everyday forms of individual freedom in contemporary rural Russia. Living remote and mostly beyond the reach of direct governmental intervention, the inhabitants of Pungino village live out their forms of sovereignty. In personal proximity to the protagonists, the film explores the possibilities and practices that emerge when money is scarce, time is abundant, and neither help nor control of the state seems present. While people garden, forage, hunt or reconstruct the local church, they address the philosophical question of what it means to have a good life: the connection with the natural environment and the protective role of community bonds surface as just as important as the capacity to act independently through self-sufficiency and craftsmanship.

Keywords human-environmental relationships, rural life, self-sufficiency, visual anthropology, Russia

You can watch the ethnographic documentary film here: <https://youtu.be/zQVq8ppNjgo> or on the *Extreme Anthropology Research Network* website: <https://www.extreme-anthropology.com/single-post/2018/11/09/Our-Freedom-SOVEREIGNTY-IN-CONTEMPORARY-RURAL-RUSSIA>

We find ourselves in the remote Russian village of Pungino, 900 km northeast from Moscow. It is the village where one of us – Yury Snigirev – is rooted through kinship. Our camera follows the sovereign but also the precarious strategies of Pungino's inhabitants: since there is little money and also little help to be expected from the government, general political disenchantment pervades the place.

Participation and freedom are not to be found in the official political sphere, but instead in the private sphere. Everyday life centers around those sets of relationships that take the identity as a citizen out of focus.

Our Freedom follows local perceptions of freedom and sovereignty situated in the political periphery of Russia's rural remoteness. Here, it is the strength of the community and trust in the reliability of

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166

nature that are of utmost importance, while ‘the state’ plays only a marginal role. The film is a product of an M.A. course of Visual Anthropology at Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, 2016 – 2017 and the result of a German-Russian collaboration of two becoming anthropologists.

Return to the Field, Return to the Topic: A Film Screening in Pungino

What the film tries to capture in a more subtle way was confirmed during our return to Pungino in 2017: after our fieldwork in 2016, we visited the village in the following summer in order to share the completed film with the inhabitants. By organizing a public screening in the local ‘House of Culture’ we had the chance to bring back our research result. Almost one quarter of the village, about seventy people, attended. Our Freedom was generally well received. After the screening and discussion of the film, the mayor asked people not to leave the venue just yet. Unexpectedly he started a political plea for the ruling party’s local candidate as the election of the region’s governor was approaching.

Witnessing this conversation, our return to the field became also a thematic return, as the film screening was transformed into a political event. In the discussion between the mayor and the villagers, people’s negative or indifferent attitude towards the political sphere became apparent once again. Even the mayor openly showed his indignation and disillusion, and openly acknowledged the minor impact of the election on village life:

You said they only remember us when it comes to the elections. But that's not true. There are some politicians [...] who keep their promises. The last election was over, and they had promised us a paved road. Even I had forgotten that promise. Then, one Saturday, road workers and cars arrived with asphalt and built this way for us! [points at a picture in his presentation showing a narrowly paved path, ending halfway]. Other politicians come with their speakers when elections are pending and promise everything. The next day people vote for them, and then nothing ever happens.

And now, about the upcoming elections. Actually, I didn't want to talk about this, but... [pointing to the prepared picture of the ruling party's candidate]. About the things he has already done for us... well, we do not know that yet. [...] [But I was asked] to vote for this candidate. Let's give him our votes! Is that so hard for you? The elections are approaching us and – frankly speaking – what difference does it make for us who sits up there? [the audience starts to murmur].

No Pension but Berries from the Forest

That day, all protagonists but one attended the film screening in the ‘House of Culture’. Only the 49 years old Alexander did not join the premiere despite being a central character of Our Freedom. During the previous summer, we had met him coincidentally during a walk through Pungino’s surrounding forest. He was sitting by the side of the highway that connects the region’s capital city Kirov with several cities in the southwest. Some plastic boxes with cranberries and blueberries stood next to him as well as a bucket of chanterelles, gathered on his usual forest tour in the morning. Alexander was waiting for car drivers to stop and buy some of his goods. However, this day’s offer did not attract potential customers - until midday, when we started to interview him, mushrooms and berries were standing untouched. Nevertheless, Alexander was optimistic:

Whenever I want, I can go to the forest with my wife, collect five liters of berries and offer them for sale at the road. If I sell them: good. If not, we make jam out of them. This year we already preserved 19 liters of jam. We'll probably have more than enough stocks, even without meat.

Beside some garden-grown vegetables, a couple of chicken and a goat, the forest was his only source of livelihood. As he had not gotten along well with any of his past employers, he had been without occupation for many years. Alexander neither received support from relatives or the village community nor governmental welfare. Answering our question whether he would receive any state pension one day, he said:

I don't even hope for it! First, you have to reach the age of 65 anyhow [laughs]. I don't make a big fuss about it. Time will tell. I don't know, that's still another 15 years...

Even the village community largely excluded him: Several of our interaction partners reprimanded him as 'a bad example of a villager' and did not understand why we had chosen him as a protagonist. Still, Alexander's interview shows a relevant aspect of what we aimed to touch upon: his sovereignty arose out of need and much more than for the other protagonists, his freedom is full of risk. Being outside of most societal structures, Alexander does not serve anybody but himself and his wife, solely relying on the forest:

When the mushroom and berry season is over, the time for cones and chaga-mushroom begins. I always find plenty of options. As long as your legs carry you and your head thinks a little, the forest will feed you.

Relevant Relationships

Alexander is the most extreme example of precarious sovereignty that we encountered. However, he has something in common with all the others: The notion of freedom of Pungino's inhabitants mainly seems to stand for being free from external influence – in equally positive and negative terms. The relation to 'the state' seems to be irrelevant for the great majority of the people. As little attention they receive from the state, as little they feel obliged to demonstrate any citizen loyalty (such as voting or paying taxes). Therefore, sovereignty is situated not in a political context but in private spaces and within the remoteness of 'nature'. 'The state', if appearing at all, is usually not perceived as a helping or protecting entity but rather as a hostile, money-grabbing and clearly outlined antagonist to 'ordinary people'.

In an environment characterized by an absence of protective official structures, the feeling of being left behind in the periphery sets an emotional baseline. Instead, people rely, appreciate and focus on other relationships that indeed have shown themselves to be much more sustainable over history: the immediate social and natural environment upholds functions that the state should have taken over, yet mostly failed to deliver. Strains caused by the generally weak economy, for example, are faced by 'simply planting more potatoes' and mainly trusting in 'one's own hands and abilities' including the help of friends and the local community.

Our Freedom traces the resulting kaleidoscope of do-it-yourself practices and sovereign actions, showing how people find personal ways and interpretations of being-in-the-world, carry embodied knowledge, are creative or poetically worship good food and reliable company. In the end, the film shows diverse facets of succeeded examples of personal freedom or – speaking with the words of a protagonist – of a "good life", which is "not rich but satisfied and well-off".