

# Russian Literature of the Baltics: Discreteness of Mentality

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**Abstract** The present study considers the specific features of contemporary Russian literature in the Baltic states. The research material of the study reflected in the article consists of two texts: the novel “The Argonaut” by Andrei Ivanov (Estonia) and the book by Alexey Evdokimov “Riga. The Near West, or Truth and Myths about Russian Europe” (Рига. Ближний Запад, или Правда и мифы о русской Европе = Riga. Blizhnyy Zapad, ili Pravda i mify o russkoy Yevrope). Both works are texts in which the Baltic space (Estonia/Latvia) and the specificity of Russian mentality of the Baltic space are modelled. The texts are genre and narrative structures; however, one can consider different principles of modelling Russian mentality that becomes discrete. Discreteness is manifested in the borderline location of the Russian, and as a result—an attempt to include the Russian in various cultural paradigms. The main character of A. Ivanov’s novel is a lone hero. The narrator of A. Evdokimov’s book is a public person. Nevertheless, it is possible to consider the general manifestation of discreteness, based on the dual perception of the status of the Russian as “one’s own/someone else’s.”

**Keywords** Russian literature; Baltic states; Emigration; Languages<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This research is one part of The Special Program of Zhejiang University “Studies on the Languages and Cultures in the Baltic Countries” supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities.

involvement of students of Master and Doctoral study programmes.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to examine the specificity of the Russian-language literature in the Baltics on the example of the literature of Latvia and Estonia. To achieve this aim, the works of two authors, Alexei Evdokimov and Andrei Ivanov, were selected as the object of analysis. The comparative approach is based on more locally applied methodologies: cultural criticism and structural-semiotic analysis. The issues of the literary process in the Baltic region have often been the object of analysis (Willner&Kaakinen). The issues of the development of the national literature in a specific historical and cultural context arouse the keen interest (this interest is especially noticeable within the framework of postcolonial studies). Within this framework, the processes taking place in modern Russian-language literature are relegated to the background, although they are no less original phenomenon. On the one hand, Russian literature in the Baltics can be presented as a logical part of the general phenomenon “Russian literature.” On the other hand, the literature developing in the diaspora has its own unique model characteristics. The parallel with the literature of the Russian diaspora, correlated with various waves of Russian emigration, is undoubtedly logical. But the main distinguishing feature of modern Russian literature in the Baltic countries lies precisely in the situation different from emigration. Both authors studied were born in the Baltics (A. Evdokimov - in the Ukraine, but as a child, his parents move to Riga, where the family has lived since 1950, A. Ivanov - in Tallinn). Thus, the concept of emigration as a movement to a space different from the homeland is inappropriate as concerns these authors. And the determining factor will be the language of the written texts and the orientation to a certain readership. Another biographical moment is also indicative - both authors obtained citizenship (respectively, of Latvia and Estonia) through the process of naturalization. In this article, one work of each author has been selected as the object of consideration, the principle of choice was based on the commonality of themes associated with the artistic space of each work - the actions are associated with the Baltic space and its capital topos - Riga and Tallinn: A. Evdokimov’s guide book “Riga. The Near West, or Truth and Myths about Russian Europe” (2015) and A. Ivanov’s novel “The Argonaut” (2016). The significant difference between the two works is also taken into account. The book by A. Evdokimov is a publicistic text, while “The Argonaut” by A. Ivanov is fiction. At the same time, both works allow us to speak about the commonality of the issues

of Russian literature in the Baltic region - the definition of the concept “Russian world” and one’s belonging to the space of the “Russian world” and the country of residence.

It should be noted that despite the unconditional commonality of the Baltic region countries, the political, cultural and linguistic situation in Estonia and Latvia is dramatically different. In particular, the Estonian literary environment is characterized by such a phenomenon as bilingualism. Irina Belobrovtsseva in her article “The Bilingual Writer: Two Estonian-Russian Cases and One Russian-Estonian Case 1” (Belobrovtsseva) has extensively studied this distinctive phenomenon. And no doubt, the presence of authors writing in two languages is a definite marker of the cultural space. This kind of bilingualism is not typical for the literary environment of Latvia. The representatives of the literary poetic association “Orbita” can be conditionally referred to as bilingual authors.

#### **A. Evdokimov vs A. Ivanov**

Alexey Evdokimov (1975) debuted in 2001 with the novel “Puzzle,” co-authored with A. Garros. This was followed by a number of joint novels, and after the death of A. Garros in 2017, A. Evdokimov begins an independent literary career, mainly working in the genre of a detective adventure novel. A. Evdokimov’s works are published in Russia’s publishing houses, therefore, they are mainly focused on the Russian book market. In 2015, the author turns to journalism and publishes the guide book “Riga. The Near West, or Truth and Myths about Russian Europe.” The book is published within the series “Cities of Dreams” and is in many ways an order of the Russia-based publishing house, which has determined the style of the narration. In numerous interviews A. Evdokimov does not hide the fact that his book is an appeal to Russians, with the aim of debunking their mythological idea of Riga and the principles of European life in it. At the same time, the book is certainly not devoid of the author’s subjective beginning: the author’s wish to describe Riga is combined with a pronounced desire to tell his story, and not only his vision of Riga, but also the idea of his “Russian world,” among which the author reckons himself.

The author of the guide book explicitly emphasizes his belonging to the world of literature, since literary citations, intersexuality form the basis of the book’s composition. The table of contents of the guide book evokes an allusion of the table of contents of Andrei Bitov’s novel “Pushkin House”: this is a multi-stage division into parts, chapters and sub-chapters in the title of which quotes, the names of utterances from literary and cinematic texts are intriguingly rephrased or interpreted: Чемодан—вокзал—Рига (Suitcase - Station—Riga), История с топографией

(History with topography), Восемьсот лет между (Eight hundred years between), Ты виноват уж тем, что хочется мне кушать (You are to blame for the fact that I want to eat), Веселится и лигует весь народ (All the people are having fun and celebrating Ligo), Вино из одуванчиков (Dandelion wine), Жить или не жить (To live or not to live?), По долинам и по взгорьям (Through valleys and hills), etc.. With all the specified documentary nature, the book claims the status of a literary text, in which the author's "Ego," the narrator's "Ego" are being structure-forming. A. Evdokimov explicitly and deliberately uses references to primary sources in his text, thereby emphasizing the documentary nature of the material. But the documentary nature of these sources is obviously a play: these are mainly links to Internet pages, and the nature of their appearance in the text is quite selective - there are no direct references and quotations in the book.

The book is structured according to the principle of defining the main myths. The principle set initially by the author is the coverage of historical moments. But quite deliberately in the first part of the book the emphasis is laid on the pre-war and war period, which is defined by two key concepts - "occupation" and "May 9."

The word 'occupation' is encountered 48 times in the text, and most of the usage occurs at the beginning of the book - this is a topic explicitly set by the author to attract the attention of a certain circle of readers. "By elementary logic, anyone who recognizes (as required by law!) the events of 1940 as occupation, thereby recognizes everyone who moved to Latvia from other republics of the USSR in the following half century as occupiers. And their descendants are the descendants of the occupiers. The overwhelming majority of the Latvian Russians belong to those who arrived or their descendants (I myself, for example, - a descendant in the third generation). The well-known Latvian historian Inesis Feldmanis, by the way a member of the historical commission under the President, said outright, "There are currently 700 thousand civic occupiers in the country" (and *ibid*: "The occupation is the red line of our history"). Of course, if I write in the blog or even in a newspaper, something like, I refuse to consider myself an occupier, the next day I will not be taken away in handcuffs by the Security Police (the local analogue of the FSB). But the atmosphere within the bicommunal Latvian society is quite clearly demonstrated by the collision with this law" (Evdokimov 27). In a small fragment, the word "occupation" is stylistically exaggerated in terms of its frequency. In this context, the word is used from the position of authorities. It is significant that in one of his interviews with the local portal A. Evdokimov changes his rhetoric and ironically says, "I am a descendant of the occupiers."

The accent on May 9 from the first pages is not accidental, either. In the narra-

tion, a spatial axis is built: the Freedom Monument - the Victory Monument (topographically, this axis is not pronounced and is obviously corrected by the will of the author of the book). Thus, having defined his task as breaking stereotypes and myths, the author works to strengthen stereotypical thinking. The society of Latvia is presented as bicomunal, and this bicommunality is proved precisely by the presence of two monuments. Latvians come to the Freedom Monument on March 16 to greet the legionnaires. Russians come on May 9 to the Victory Monument. One chapter creates the myth of spatial, temporal and ethnic binarity. The author's attitude (which coincides indeed with the position of a part of the Russian-speaking population) presents in the text the attitude of the Russian community in Latvia. And in this attitude of the author, everything related to Latvian is marked as "theirs," and everything related to the Russian position is marked as "ours." Moreover, constructing the text on the basis of his personal judgments, A. Evdokimov reproduces the Latvian component rather conditionally: a significant number of state events take place at the Freedom Monument, and the procession of SS veterans is a numerically insignificant event that is not supported by the government. It should be noted that the author periodically makes some kind of correction to the binary constructions, but this is an attempt to superficially, just in case, note the presence of a different point of view. The author's superficial attention to everything that is outside the concepts of "Russian," "Soviet" (i.e. biographically related to the author) is observed not only in the transmission of facts concerning the Latvian component. An example is the chapters dedicated to the events of the Holocaust: the narrative is laconic, brief, impersonal and unemotional, three sub-chapters related to this topic give the impression of understatement. The name of the sub-chapter "Capital of the Holocaust" seems controversial from the ethical point of view.

One of the components of the Russian model of Latvia, as expected, happens to be the Russian language, "The language of interethnic communication, as Russian was called in the Soviet Union, in present-day Riga (where, let me remind you, the Russian language has no official status) performs exactly this function - a means of interethnic communication. The cruel logic of the market makes even young Latvian waitresses, who did not learn any Russian at school, to babble in a mangled language of "occupiers": the client is always right, no matter where he comes from" (Evdokimov 121).

In an effort to remove a mythological dichotomy "West—the Russian" (in his understanding) in the scope of the history and culture of Riga, the author confirms a number of mythological formations. This can be justified by targeting a certain readership and taking into account the ideological interests of that certain audience.

In Latvia, the book was published without much attention.

Andrei Ivanov (1971) began publishing in 2007 outside of the Estonian and Russian space (the first works are published in Finland and the USA), in Estonia his works have been published since 2009. He is a winner of many literary awards, both Russian and Estonian. In 2020, he was awarded the Order of the White Star of class IV by the President of Estonia.

In the article dedicated to the work of A. Ivanov, Irina Belobrovtsseva highlights the concept used by the author himself and which has become significant for the characterization of his model character - the narrator - “Non-belonger”; not belonging to any particular place; a stranger, an outsider (isn’t it that inspired some critics to compare Ivanov with Camus?). However, the translators of Rushdie into Russian have found, perhaps, a more appropriate meaning for this word - restless, and this definition exhaustively characterizes the characters-narrators of A. Ivanov.” (Belobrovtsseva, 2014). It is this definition that contains the main characteristics of the narrator, and he, in turn, determines the very model of the narrative. This is a loner character who does not accept the world and people living in this world, even very close ones, this is a character who declares his degradation (drugs, asociality) to be a philosophical theory. But at the same time I. Belobrovtsseva emphasizes one very important point - A. Ivanov’s prose is not a typical emigre prose (this is a definition that appears in a number of articles and reviews dedicated to individual works of the writer), “but A. Ivanov’s character is complicated: an idyllic image of Russia-Atlantis does not work in his case, since the vanished homeland - the Soviet Union—does not reach the ideal, and the writer himself, similarly to the narrators of the “saga” and “Rakitin cycle” created by him, was born in Estonia.” (Belobrovtsseva, *Pisatelstvo*.. 268).

The setting of the novel “The Argonaut” is modern Estonia and its characters are average residents of Tallinn, Russian-speaking both in terms of their belonging to the Russian culture, and in terms of their inner text - thinking, and many—in terms of their professional belonging - teachers of the Russian language, authors writing in Russian. Actually, their belonging to the “Russian world” becomes that unifying characteristic, the core which the narrative is based on. But it is here that the author raises a key question, which, perhaps, also distinguishes it from a number of Russian-language authors abroad - for Andrei Ivanov, the “Russian world” is a myth, it is something far-fetched and non-existent, and in contrast to classical myths (for example, the myths about the Argonauts), this myth is doomed to disappear quickly.

Through the narrative of different characters, the author retransmits the idea of

theatricality, artificiality of the myth about the salvation of Russians in the Baltics. Actually, the Russian issue is being raised with the aim of ensuring one's political career or financial well-being, "now they are preparing a new project called "Native Speech" — the salvation of the Russian language, as you might guess. She offered me to teach classes in Russian literature. All this is vulgarly oriented towards some kind of pseudo-gymnasium curriculum with a taste of pre-revolutionary times. I hate vintage, especially in the post-Soviet frame, with an Orthodox note and other archaic stuff, in short, understanding which way the wind is blowing and what it is carrying, I hardly hold back vomiting. Under such a project, it will be possible to beg money even from Russian tycoons" (Ivanov 348).

In the minds of A. Ivanov's characters, there is a clear line between the Russian-speaking people of Estonia and the Russians from Russia. An episode in a cafe where Semenov is watching a neighboring table is indicative: those sitting at the table (in the narrative they are defined as "tourists from Russia") mistakenly take Semenov for an Estonian. The Russians acquire a clear pronominal marking "these," which includes the whole set of ideas about Russian nouveau riches who discuss their surrounding in Russian with the confidence that no one will understand them (in fact, this is a direct opposition to the opinion of a certain part of Russians that everyone should know Russian).

Estonia turns out to be a relatively ideal space for the narrator, and this relativity is determined by comparison. On one side of the comparative axis are Sweden, London, San Sebastian, Venice and other points of cultural and social civilization. On the other side is Russia, in which all possible prospects for cultural and social development are crossed out by a political vector. In this regard, it is Estonia that happens to be that golden mean, the place "in between." This spatial "in between" by A. Ivanov differs significantly from the ideological "in between" by A. Evdokimov. For A. Ivanov, it is rather connected with the definition of the country, the characters of the novel only express their attitude to this locality. For A. Evdokimov, this is a demonstrative position of the author-narrator, although in the very title of the book and the description of the space of Riga this intermediate position is also emphasized, but in the author's narrative the irony prevails in relation to this position, as he also ironically connects himself with duality. The irony is also characteristic of A. Ivanov's narrative. In particular, the definition of Estonia as a possible paradise ("The real Paradise is a leisurely measured life, where people instead of messianism care about each other" (Ivanov 370) is also quite ironic, but this is another example of how biblical mythology is assigned the status of an everyday myth.

At the very beginning of the novel, the main character of the narrative, Pavel Bogolepov, tells the story of his family coming to Estonia, “the same could have happened to us, because we were the most typical family of Soviet ghouls, the most useless bloodsuckers, lazybones, parasites (vene okkupandid raisk!), they could have immediately drown us, in a bucket, like kittens; but no, they took care of us, they gave us documents, they didn’t even shoot my father, when he, a moron, returned from Paris in 1946, against the will of his parents, and in 91 the Estonians had mercy on us, they didn’t flush us down the toilet with shit, they gave out blue passports, through the mother’s line whose ancestors have lived here since the time of Alexander III (according to the programme of Russification in the outskirts, a family of small traders with small allowance had been first sent to Finland, and then the “Pineapple” of the autocracy threw them into Courland, where they put down roots)” (Ivanov 46). The notorious word “occupier” is encountered in Bogolepov’s narrative, moreover, as a quote in Estonian. In this narrative, one can feel both the author’s irony and the bitter recognition that the Bogolepov family has come to foreign territory. It is characteristic that the Soviet period is not mentioned here as the time of golden childhood, despite the fact that the artistic world of “Argonaut” is characterized by an appeal to the world of childhood, the world of the past, as a saving light (if escape from reality in the real world turns out to be impossible, then for many characters an escape into the world of childhood turns out to be the only salvation). But one more thing is important: in the very finale of the novel, Bogolepov, after the funeral of his father, learns another truth about his father, and in this other truth it turns out that the father returns from Paris to Russia just at the request (stupid and strange) of his father, in order to save his sisters, the father ends up in a camp, where his inner world will be broken: at night in a barrack, experiencing the humiliation of trusties, he curses his family. And this revelation significantly changes the attitude of Bogolepov to his family. But at the same time, the main thing in the understanding by the author and his characters of the concept of history is preserved: historical truth is conditional, there are different points of view on history. But it is the person himself who bears responsibility for his own destiny.

Debunking the “Russian world” of Estonia, A. Ivanov also creates in the novel the image of a Russian-language writer, a typical representative of which is Semenov, and Bogolepov gives him a characterization, “Bogolepov long ago noticed that all the Russians who write in Estonia used to suffer from one and the same disease: they dressed badly, lived in flophouses, looked terrible, drank a lot and wrote terribly” (Ivanov 253). This characterization combines external and everyday ugliness with an inability to write: in fact, this definition does not contain the word “writer,”



but the italicized “writers” appear, which emphasizes the presence of physical action but indicates the absence of creativity as a creative process.

The modeling of the artistic space is undoubtedly significant. The space of Tallinn was initially declared as not primary. Moreover, the places visited by the characters abroad seem more real and tangible: hotels (like on Booking), concert halls, parks. The toponymy of Tallinn is being announced gradually, and these are not single-point places, but rather the designation of some included spaces: the sea, Kadriorg. Tallinn is perceived as a place freed from the Soviet darkness, but at the same time in the minds of the characters the idea arises that the destruction of the Soviet as disastrous is possible only in external manifestations (reorganization of buildings), the internal changes (a person’s world perception) are more complex. It is symbolic, but a polyclinic happens to be a place that could not remove the stamp of the Soviet past, the place, which in Bogolepov’s consciousness, is associated with the awareness of imminent death.

The world of Andrei Ivanov’s novel is not just based on the myth of the Argonauts, as stated in the title. The novel is filled with mythology of various kinds. The narrative structure, built as a polyphonic one, also includes several neo-mythological models: here is the literary myth about Aelita, which includes the image of the Martian from the novel by A. Tolstoy, and Nabokov’s “Lolita,” and the mass cultural myth (“Elvira - the Mistress of the Dark”), by means of which a seemingly random set of names is being explained, and a biblical myth, and it is the biblical myth that has been relegated to the status of an everyday one (for Bogolepov’s father, going to the summer house equates in meaning to the Exodus).

The narrative system, like the system of characters in “The Argonaut,” is quite complex. Each chapter is narrated on behalf of a different character. But the principle of defamiliarization operates for all of them, which combines both the point of view of the character himself (his inner text) and the author’s view of him (a view from the outside). Using the terminology of J. Genette, we are talking about the “act of a narrative utterance” (Genette). One and the same event is transmitted both from the point of view of the author and from the point of view of different characters. In the narrative, the pronoun of the first person “I” is the most frequent, but it constantly changes its affiliation, by means of which the author creates a unique narrative model in which objectivity and subjectivity happen to be ambivalent concepts.

Each of the characters of the novel is a kind of an Argonaut, a gold digger who had gone to Colchis, but lost his way or made a mistake in his life having acquired gold. The characters seem to be familiar and related to each other and represent a team of Argonauts. But just as the ancient lists of the Argonauts, which continue to

appear in different versions, have not been saved, the Argonauts of the novel exist separately from each other and their very existence is ghostly.

### Conclusion

Taking into account the specificity of the two analyzed texts, we can nevertheless speak of the model differences of Russian literature in Latvia and Estonia. Russian literature in Latvia seems to be a closed phenomenon, more focused on finding a reader outside Latvia. The process of separating Russian literature is two-way. On the one hand, taking into account the publishing policy, the publication of books in Russian is unbeneficial and not supported on the part of the state. On the other hand, Russian literature positions itself as different, not belonging to the Latvian cultural space, not interested in this cultural space. In turn, an attempt to compete with the Russian literature of Russia is quite controversial and the desire to find one's own reader, as a rule, affects the artistry of individual works.

Russian literature of Estonia is literature that has found its place in the context of Estonian culture, and has not lost its connection with the literature of the metropole. The complex world built in the works by A. Ivanov is a marker of the high quality of his authorship skill, when the desire to please (economic one) a certain circle of readers is relegated to the background, whereas the author's creative self-expression becomes defining. In this sense, the characteristics of both considered authors in biographical Internet sources are demonstrative: A. Evdokimov is a Russian writer living in Latvia, A. Ivanov is Estonia's Russian writer.

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