

An Old Town with Europe's Widest Waterfall: The Times and Scales of Kuldīga [pp. 215–237 of the print edition; images not included here]

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Introduction

Kuldīga is sometimes called the "Latvian Venice": in the town center, one can discover picturesque canals tucked away behind houses—one of those features travel websites typically describe as "untouched antiquity." However, getting to Kuldīga is not easy; there is no railway, and it takes three hours by bus from Riga—and just as long from the coast, specifically from Liepāja. Consequently, you cannot simply "pass through" Kuldīga; you have to make a deliberate trip there. Yet, in the summer, there are plenty of tourists: Latvians, Russians, Germans, Israelis, French, and even the Dutch. Baltic tour itineraries often include Kuldīga—after all, it is an "old town with the widest waterfall in Europe." From a tourist's perspective, it is truly delightful here; the town possesses what marketers call "atmosphere." Moreover, the center is highly picturesque, featuring a color palette of olive and light gray, subtle lemon and white on the buildings. Tourists stroll through the parks and main streets of the old center, sampling local food and drink. The absence of a railway line helped preserve the historic architecture, making a day or two in Kuldīga a genuine pleasure. One of the town's two rivers—the larger one—is the broad Venta; in summer, it is pleasant to swim there in the mornings. As you swim among ducks and water lilies, you can see the opposite bank, home to the history museum, and—further downstream—a brick arch bridge. From the bridge, you can see a waterfall—not high, but truly wide—with storks hiding in the reed beds; beyond all this lie the forests of Latvia. On weekends, open-air concerts are held in the parks, often followed by late-night discos, so it is best not to stay in the immediate vicinity—a minor detail, perhaps, but worth noting.

Who do tourists encounter here? Hotel and café owners, their staff, and other locals who, for one reason or another, did not leave for Riga, or for the UK or Ireland, in search of work. In the summer of 2016, I spent three weeks in Kuldīga at a writers' residency—a lovingly and tastefully restored early 20th-century manor at 14 Malu Street that occasionally serves as a haven for visiting photographers and artists. I was interested in two groups of people in Kuldīga: tourists and locals. The former are mobile, well-traveled, and affluent; the latter have lived in the town for decades. This essay is based on eighteen interviews with local residents and an equal number of conversations with visiting artisans—

who were selling their wares at the City Day festival—and tourists. Feedback from visitors is available online[1], and the very fact that tourists come to Kuldīga suggests the town has something to offer them. Yet, more tourists are needed—a sentiment echoed by almost every local I spoke with. Tourists, however—especially the few returning for a second or subsequent visit—would sigh: "If only everything could stay just as it is: uncrowded, peaceful..." The future of the local residents is widely seen as tied to how many outsiders visit the town, how much money they spend there, and what stories they share with their friends and family back home. My aim was to compare the views and assessments of these two groups of people. Another key question that occupied me was the perspective of the local residents. Drawing on their stories and remarks, I wanted to analyze common perceptions regarding the "depopulation" of Eastern Europe—a trend characteristic of the last 10–12 years. What do those who have stayed here think about life in the town? What are their "real opportunities," as one of them put it? Where do they situate themselves in time? What do they value and remember?

Jumping ahead: I saw the town's main problem as being the fact that Kuldīga is losing its own residents while attempting to attract people from other cities through its stonework. It tries to draw people in with history, architectural heritage, and the modest pleasures of a small, well-preserved town. In the twenty years since Latvia regained its independence, the authorities have poured their money and energy primarily into restoration, renovation, and repairs. Funds are spent on sprucing up the stonework, yet people are leaving. Can—and should—anything be done about this depopulation? Is it worth trying to keep locals from leaving? How could that be achieved, and if it is worth doing, who should undertake it? Questions of level, scale, and magnitude are crucial here—concepts that came to mind in Kuldīga because the town presents a fascinating case study of how state and local power structures intersect with supranational, pan-European institutions.

Kuldīga Between London and Brussels

When I asked who monitors migration at the national and local levels, a well-informed local official gave me this answer:

"There are no accurate statistics of this kind in the country. There is a statistical bureau and an address registry, but no one knows whether people actually live at a given address or not. Latvia is not particularly different from other Eastern European countries. We tend to think Estonians are better off and wealthier than us (thanks to their ties with Finland). Between 1990 and 2016, Kuldīga lost 20 percent of its population. But Ventspils lost even more! Kuldīga includes a

pagasts—a rural municipality. In the Kuldīga municipality, the population is split evenly between the town and the countryside. Historically, we didn't have villages in the Kurzeme region; during collectivization, many individual farmsteads were eliminated. While the population is growing in metropolitan areas—with new housing developments where wealthy people buy plots, especially near the coast—the rural population is generally shrinking as jobs, schools, and other services disappear. We don't know whether people are moving to Riga or going abroad; there are no reliable sources. In some cases, they go to Riga first, but I know plenty of people who left straight for foreign countries. After finishing school, young people enroll in universities, start working while studying, and end up staying there. That was the case in Soviet times, too. Those who return to provincial towns are the exception. It's a matter of personal choice. Only a few young people come back; some buy real estate. Some pensioners move here to live as well. There are advantages—a good environment for children, and the option for some to work remotely—but the overall trend remains negative.”

Kuldīga is closely connected to the wider world beyond Latvia—primarily through those who have left. Many Latvians have departed their homeland to seek work in Western Europe, particularly in the UK and Ireland. Life there is not easy for them; the work is typical of labor migrants, and—judging by appearances—post-Brexit Britain is set to close its doors to them, though the Latvians already there will undoubtedly remain in their new home. There is a curious twist to this situation: residents of Latvia (including Kuldīga) primarily emigrate to Great Britain—a country that, as recently became clear, had always dreamed of leaving the European Union—while the EU itself, a pan-European supranational entity, funds the restoration and upkeep of emptying Eastern European towns. For whom, then, is all this work being done in places like Kuldīga, Sibiu in Romania, or Kraków in Poland (cities I visited recently)? It seems to me that the trend here involves a combination of mass labor migration by Eastern Europeans and an obsession with tourism and "heritage" on the part of local authorities and EU institutions. This paradox deserves closer examination through various examples.

EU funds have been used to rebuild Kuldīga's famous bridge, spruce up the central park, and "restore" the cobblestone streets in the town center. Yet, so many dilapidated houses and roads remain in the town—even in the very center! Far more money is needed. Other cities manage to secure "European" funding if, for instance, they are named a "European Capital of Culture" for a given year or are added to the UNESCO list of cities of cultural significance. In other words, if you want to do something for a city by drawing attention to its local "European cultural heritage," that heritage must first be recognized by international experts. Only then might you receive funds to restore the few remnants of "Old Europe" that have survived in an Eastern European town. To achieve this, however, the focus needs to be placed on the broader, pan-European layer of urban heritage. For instance, beyond the Baroque

center typical of so much of the European continent—one is found, for example, in the small Romanian town of Sibiu, wherein lies a mix of shabby Soviet-era housing (also, incidentally, pan-European, though from a period that is hard to "sell" to tourists) and cozy, old-fashioned village houses characteristic of the historic region of Transylvania. Yet, it is the locals who live there. Tourists from Germany and elsewhere come to Hermannstadt (the city's old name) and sit in the cafés on the central square. Similarly, in Kuldīga, tourists—including many Germans—generally stick to the old town, seeking out remnants of Goldingen (the city's old name) and admiring the waterfall, while the neighborhoods where most of the population actually lives almost never attract their interest.

Conversations I held in Kuldīga in July 2016 convinced me that both the cultural professionals involved in restoration and the "ordinary" residents cherish the town's historical heritage. For instance, everyone is pleased that the Soviet authorities' absurd plan to route buses along the narrow, central Liepājas Street never came to fruition; had it happened, the town would have lost its main tourist promenade. The locals' special regard for the historic center is also rooted in family histories: after all, those who today look out their apartment windows at a supermarket on the outskirts are the children of people who once lived in the old town-center houses and looked out at the waterfall. At one time, the prospect of escaping the need to chop wood and fetch water from a well—by moving into a modern apartment in a newly built Soviet high-rise—outweighed the value of beautiful views. While the bridge was being restored, townspeople followed the process with interest, sympathizing with the restoration specialists who had to source authentic historical brickwork, establish reliable drainage, and solve other technical challenges.

The history of European cities is inseparable from the civic history of Europe. The more keenly the consequences of post-war European homogenization are felt, and the more limited the independence of Eastern and Central European states becomes regarding certain domestic and foreign policy issues[2], the more crucial urban heritage becomes for legitimizing the very concept of the European Union. The classic medieval European city—characterized by powerful merchant and artisan guilds that maintained close, even institutionalized, business ties with partners (and sometimes rivals) across the continent—serves as a vital idea and an inspiring image. Trade, which underpinned many urban economies for centuries, is once again becoming significant for today's municipal authorities; they recognize that the industrial age has passed and that new ways must be found to provide employment

for the population.

One such opportunity lies in marketing the city itself. You are more likely to succeed in this if you avoid focusing on aspects of the city's history that do not fit the tourism narrative, and instead highlight the most appealing elements for both locals and visitors. For instance, the Kuldīga City History Museum features recreated interiors from the turn of the 20th century—a period considered by curators to mark the city's heyday. The display reconstructs the typical bourgeois interior of a spacious home belonging to a wealthy family—the kind where the head of the household could afford to import fashionable furniture and ornate stove tiles. The focus is placed not on the pre-war rural past or the Soviet era of Courland (and Latvia as a whole), but rather on a largely idealized past of bourgeois urban prosperity and affluence. One such recreation is a "lady's study," accompanied by an explanatory plaque that reads:

In the early 20th century, few women earned an income from work. A wealthy lady's duty was to be a good wife and a hospitable hostess, to raise children, and to manage the servants who cleaned the house, cooked meals, and stoked the stoves. In her private sitting room, the lady would receive guests, discussing current fashion trends, sharing travel experiences, and talking about the city's cultural events and social news. When alone, ladies filled their leisure time with reading, embroidery, and letter-writing. It was in this room that they drew up guest lists for dinner parties and discussed daily and festive menus with the housekeeper.

A fairly detailed book on the city's history[3] focuses far more on stone and the buildings constructed from it than on the dynasties of local merchants or the successful entrepreneurs of the era. The city's central historical figure is Jacob Kettler, the Duke of Courland and Semigallia, who reigned in the 17th century. He is regarded here as a cultural hero and even, to some extent, a role model. A recently erected monument to him notes that he fostered the region's economic growth by establishing manufactories and spurring the development of industry, crafts, and trade. Also mentioned are the ruler's colonial achievements—feats somewhat exotic for this region: he founded Courland colonies in West Africa (in the Gambia area) and on the island of Tobago (both territories were acquired through trade deals rather than conquest). On one hand, the local historical narrative echoes the familiar trope of Latvians having long been subject to German rule; on the other, the local museum invites both residents and tourists to immerse themselves in a myth—flattering to all—about Kuldīga's glorious past. Entrepreneurship, trade, and the social gatherings they made possible are viewed as a tradition vital to this small town. For the people of Kuldīga, this tradition is a source of pride in their ancestors'

established prosperity, while visitors see proof that early 20th-century European fashion reached even this corner of the world.

The restoration of historic city districts is part of the European Union's large-scale urban policy. The European Commission's regional policy website outlines urban development priorities as follows:

Cities are viewed both as a source of today's economic, environmental, and social challenges and as the answer to them. Two-thirds of the European Union's population live in Europe's cities and suburbs; they consume 80% of Europe's energy and generate 80% of its gross national product." These urban areas are the engines of the European economy and catalysts for creativity and innovation across the European Union. However, they also face persistent challenges: unemployment, segregation, and poverty are particularly acute within them. Urban policy is therefore important everywhere, and urban development is a central component of the European Union's regional policy[4].

The website lists hundreds of European cities vying for the European Union's attention and funding. For these cities, having their "European character" validated by transnational organizations is becoming virtually the only way to secure revenue through tourism and grants for the restoration of historical heritage. Local administrations are forced to learn how to prepare applications for such grants and investments—otherwise, residents face bleak job prospects. At least, that is the prevailing view within the EU today.

The largest grant secured to date by the authorities of Kuldīga was for the restoration of the aforementioned brick bridge. The European Regional Development Fund allocated €1,420,000 for the project. The Fund's website justifies the restoration by highlighting the structure's importance to local business prosperity, even citing Guntis Freimanis, a local entrepreneur and owner of the "Ventas Rumba" hostel:

"The restoration of the historic bridge is a benefit for me, as my hostel is situated between two major tourist attractions—the old bridge and Europe's widest waterfall, the Venta Rapid—allowing my guests to enjoy a beautiful view. The technical restoration of the bridge is also crucial, as water no longer pools on its surface."

That is all true, yet the number of tourists in the area is not currently increasing—at least, that is what my "field observations" from the summer of 2016 suggest. Consequently, the following statement on

the Foundation's website seems somewhat fanciful:

The underlying goal of the restoration was to stimulate regional development, particularly tourism. The historic bridge is Kuldīga's most important tourist attraction and thus plays a pivotal role in achieving the project's objectives. The surrounding cultural landscapes, improved access to the waterfalls, and the spectacular bridge with its new look now offer an exciting destination for both tourists and locals alike.

What has been said above hardly squares with the fact that, on a summer weekday morning, you might encounter no more than one or two cyclists on the bridge. There are few tourists, either; one of the guests at the hostel told me:

"Well, sure, you can stop here for half an hour—just to tick the box, so to speak—but it's actually really awkward to go for a swim here: by the time you reach the waterfall, your legs are all scratched up... And the bridge... well, what about the bridge? It's just a bridge; there are probably plenty like it."

Interestingly, a short section with the optimistic title "Old and New Unite for Future Development" was added to the text about the bridge on the Foundation's website; it claims the following:

New features [of the bridge] included a new lighting system, a new rainwater drainage system, and thickened arches for added structural integrity. Viewing platforms were built nearby, and the steps next to the remains of the old castle were renovated to improve access to the waterfall.

As this text suggests, the town's future is linked to the ability to walk unimpeded to the ruins of the old castle (green hills marking the site of former towers and walls)[5]. The message of the text is simple: there are towns in Europe whose prospects depend on how many tourists they can attract to admire the traces of a bygone era. This constitutes their primary purpose and their future. Curiously, according to Kuldīga municipal officials, no specific studies are being conducted to track trends in tourist interest; the town lacks the resources for this, barely managing to scrape together funds to commission surveys on the popularity of the mayor and the municipality (as elsewhere, electoral priorities are clear). Such studies receive no support at the national or European levels either—which is why the mantras regarding the importance of attracting tourism are not backed by statistical data.

Here is another telling story. The EU allocated the exact same amount of funding used for the Kuldīga

bridge renovation to a project known as "Protolab"—a cross-border network of entrepreneurs from Latvia and Estonia. The goal of "Protolab" is to bring together Estonian and Latvian companies and establish joint ventures to address the following objectives:

[Enabling them] to bring their products to market faster and gain better access to a global audience. [...] Establishing a competence center to provide local entrepreneurs and startup founders in Estonia and Latvia with specialized support in product development and access to modern engineering equipment, including advanced visualization tools[6].

When reading about this project—while immersed in the atmosphere of Kuldīga and recalling locals' envious remarks about "rich Estonians getting help from Scandinavian countries"—one begins to sense the EU officials' perception of the "division of labor" between Latvia and Estonia. Estonia is seen as capable of organizing high-tech manufacturing, while Latvia is left to focus on its historical heritage. On that same website, the project's initiators—who describe Estonia as "Europe's answer to America's Silicon Valley" and promise to organize international visits, roundtables, and knowledge exchanges—likely never even gave Kuldīga a thought. Listening to residents compare Lithuanians, Estonians, and Latvians—often unfavorably toward the latter—one realizes that a certain mutual jealousy among the populations of small neighboring countries is inevitable. Here is one such self-critical assessment:

"Estonians are structured; they are 'kickstarters.' They know what they want. Lithuanians are more entrepreneurial: they rent out apartments, they make an effort to ensure everything looks good..."

The integration of new European Union members into a "Greater Europe" has complicated the continent's socio-spatial structure. How can diverse regions and historical areas—including remote, traditional, and overlooked corners—be encouraged to interact effectively and support one another? This is a formidable challenge. New networks of connections and transport corridors are being established between regions, cities, and territories, while polycentric entities are taking shape, bringing together businesspeople, politicians, engineers, and experts. Kuldīga, for instance, has received significant assistance from Norway; notably, the Norwegian Centre for Crafts provided funding in 2009 for the restoration of the town museum's façade and the establishment of a center for the restoration of wooden architecture. Yet, the development of a united Europe remains characterized by extreme selectivity: while oases of cutting-edge high-tech emerge or secure stable funding—attracting concentrations of highly skilled workers—life in many other places seems to have ground to a halt.

Researchers studying the knowledge economy in a united Europe often cite an EU official who stated:

“Not every region needs to be Silicon Valley. [...But every region,] depending on its potential, can integrate into the knowledge economy to varying degrees by developing the capacity to generate and process innovations”[7].

In some instances, the "degree of integration" of certain localities into Europe's advanced economy may be virtually nil; indeed, the only innovations that the enthusiasts driving Kuldīga's development seem to rely on seriously are those linked to the "creative industries."

Gender, Family, and Religion in Kuldīga

Saint Catherine of Alexandria is considered the city's patron saint; the city's coat of arms features the symbol of her martyrdom—a wheel. During the grand City Day celebration in July 2016, the fireworks display included a pyrotechnic piece named "Catherine's Wheel" in her honor. Visitors attending the festival might briefly pop into the churches, but—as one visitor put it—"churches are boring; it's tedious reading all those explanations about who painted what and in which century. It's far more pleasant to sit by the Venta River and have a beer." The town itself is considered religious; it was so even during the Soviet era, when there were families here where one sibling might become a pastor while the other attended the Higher Party School.

Saint Catherine's patronage extends beyond the religious realm; here, it is also a matter of gender dynamics. The local women did not strike me as particularly devout, yet they face life's hardships with a resilience worthy of a saint. Indeed, whether during the city festival or on an ordinary weekday, one immediately notices the predominance of middle-aged and elderly women. Some, having raised their children, remain in the family home, struggling to keep up with the house and garden. Others have moved to Kuldīga from elsewhere—often from major cities—for personal reasons. Some are saving up to move to Riga, while others are waiting for money from adult children who have left for Ireland. In short, the situations vary.

“I know five couples who moved here from Riga and other places. For those who can work remotely, it's a great option. There's a school, a hospital, and a music school here. It's quiet and safe, and the cost of living is much lower than in Riga. While the children are growing up, it's a really good choice.”

It seemed to me that there were fewer families than singles at the City Day celebrations. Among the fairground attractions, the "Hague Organ"—brought by a Dutch group—was a particular hit; it featured a giant antique harmonium adorned with intricate Baroque-style figures and played mostly 1980s Euro-disco hits. Giant wheels of cheese and wooden clogs lay in front of the instrument—Holland as we know it. A man dressed as a pirate—a stately, silver-haired, handsome older gentleman—helped operate the harmonium. He invited anyone interested to take a photo with him. The women of Kuldīga—young and old, somber and cheerful—all wanted to be pictured alongside the handsome visiting performer. One of them joked, "What a [splendid] gene pool is going to waste!"

That's a sad joke. There are far fewer men than women on the streets of Latvian towns. I have no desire to perpetuate stereotypes about labor migration ("if you want to make something of yourself, leave your depressed hometown"), and I am certain that many of those who have stayed in Kuldīga have found a niche that suits them. Yet, the number of men drinking in the supermarket bar first thing in the morning—or simply appearing to have nothing to do—is quite high. "They don't want to do anything, even if there is work available. If they live in their own houses, they don't even plant potatoes—they don't plant anything... Well, what can you do..." locals lament. Active and relatively well-off Kuldīga residents speak critically of their neighbors—the "truly local locals," as one interviewee put it—who "don't go anywhere: neither to the river beach (which they don't consider a real beach) nor to the Old Town (where they see nothing to do)." According to one respondent, travel—provided one can afford it—broadens one's perspective on local life and makes it more objective, as it offers a basis for comparison.

"When you're not going places and just lounging around, everything seems bad, and the government appears idle. Yet when I ask why people don't participate in political life, the answer is usually, 'I don't have the time—I've got the garden, the kids...'"

The windows of some houses in Kuldīga's town center are set low; as you walk past—especially in the evening—you can see into many rooms furnished in the style of the 1960s and 70s. There are plenty of chests of drawers, shelving units, lace doilies, and overgrown houseplants. The lady of the house is usually either watching television or tidying up the kitchen. The best years of life are behind them, and they may never buy new furniture again; overall, the interiors suggest that time in this town stood still not in the 18th century, but in the late Soviet era. The history of Kuldīga and its residents encompasses

several decades of Soviet life. Notably, the large "Vulkāns" factory was once located here; its whistle used to wake the workers in the 1950s and 60s. Now, only ruins remain: "Some guy from Ventspils bought it but couldn't do anything with it; it kept getting looted, and when there was nothing left to steal, they set it on fire." This factory wasteland creates a gaping hole in the town's urban fabric: apple trees from the factory orchard still bear fruit, the skeletons of workshops loom overhead, and broken glass crunches underfoot. The objects adorning the homes bear witness to the fact that the factory provided stable incomes for many during the late Soviet period. But the situation has changed since then.

Supporters of the town's "creative reprogramming" dream of opening a design-focused branch of the Art Academy of Latvia here in 2018. One of these enthusiasts says:

"The problem is that from October to April, there are very few people in town—even locals. Everything goes quiet after five in the evening. It's all empty. Young people leave. Once the university opens, young people from western Latvia might come here to study; if we manage to create a really good program, they might even come from Riga—or perhaps from abroad."

Skeptics warn that this is a challenging task, as it requires facilities, a library, and good—even renowned—instructors. Furthermore, there needs to be constant activity in the town so students don't get bored. Yet, supporters of the branch campus remain optimistic. So, if it makes sense to describe any urban projects in terms of faith, this is the one I would put at the top of the list.

Visitors and locals: the challenges of entrepreneurship

Beyond "mere tourists," some people come to Kuldīga for work: photographers, filmmakers, performers, and production crews for theater and music shows. These are acts that tour across Latvia—and even the wider Baltic region. An audio equipment technician said to me:

"What matters most to us? Getting paid well and on time. If that means coming to Kuldīga, sure! But as for actually hanging out and exploring? I'll do that somewhere else!"

Holidays and festivals are a proven recipe for drawing attention to a town these days; there is even a master schedule of such events across Latvia. Vendors selling trinkets and small goods also travel from town to town, hoping to earn enough during the summer season to get through the winter. They are

often reluctant to talk about what led them into the small-scale production of souvenirs, food, or clothing, but once you strike up a conversation, the stories you hear are much the same. Some of them were formerly teachers, engineers, or technicians—or held degrees in architecture or technical fields—but either failed to find work in their professions or lost their jobs.

This type of person—traveling from one festival to the next selling goods they have produced themselves—can be found in any country. At the Kuldīga festival, one could buy gingerbread and berry liqueurs, ceramics with a distinctive local flair, leather goods, farm cheeses, and much more—the kind of items found at almost any city festival in Europe today. Artisans praised the organization of the event in Kuldīga, considering it fair that vendors selling wine and liqueurs faced the highest municipal fees for stall rentals.

A woman from Riga selling beaded bracelets at the festival mentioned that she had arrived with her entire family and was staying at an estate 25 kilometers from Kuldīga, where the owners grew lavender (I will return to the subject of the lavender field later). Another interviewee emphasized that, beyond business goals, the Kuldīga festival was also a source of entertainment for her—a chance to attend concerts or enjoy a glass of wine at a café with a friend.

The goods displayed at the festival stalls speak volumes about the structure of production in Latvia. Of course, the country has its "lucky" cities, such as Kuldīga's wealthy neighbor, Ventspils. Oil transit and a major port are powerful assets, but the city administration also consistently succeeds in securing European Union grants. Attitudes toward this vary in Kuldīga. For some, Ventspils is an obstacle; in their view, the lobbying prowess of its notorious mayor, Aivars Lembergs, will always yield greater results than the restrained policy of the Kuldīga administration:

"Kuldīga and Ventspils receive different amounts of funding. There is a very pronounced dictatorship there. Many people dislike it, but the money brought in—by hook or by crook—appeals to ordinary residents. Mind you, the ethnic makeup there is different, too."

Others, meanwhile, are captivated by Lembergs's brand of populism:

"He builds parks for children!"

"They even have their own currency there."

"He's done so much to make people forget about the Soviet military bases—yet there was a time when the city seemed to consist of nothing but those bases!"

Vendors calmly noted that they would move more merchandise in Ventspils (where the city festival was coming up in late July), expressing disappointment with Kuldīga in this regard: people there preferred admiring the goods on display rather than buying them.

A hypothetical "start-up entrepreneur" in Kuldīga—even a local resident—would face a host of hurdles, ranging from initial capital and production to sales and distribution. Lavender growers, for instance, complain of financial difficulties; one such grower operates the field located just 20 kilometers from Kuldīga. Rihards Čeltniņš and his wife, Inga Purava, voice grievances against both banks and tax authorities, detailing the various traps the state and business partners have set for their unconventional venture. Bank loans come with such predatory terms that using one's own capital is preferable. But what are those without accumulated savings to do? While securing contracts with retail chains might seem like a solution, how does one account for the weather and other unpredictable factors? Latvian winters can be harsh, whereas lavender is a plant that thrives in southern climates. Retail chains impose strict terms on entrepreneurs: failure to deliver goods incurs penalties—something to be avoided, given that the business is not yet profitable. Finally, attempts to sell scented sachets based on a "Made and Grown in Latvia" concept were not entirely successful; for instance, manufacturers of the linen pouches charge prices so high that—if one wants to save money—it is easier to buy them from the source where everyone buys everything: China[8]. Residents of Kuldīga struggle to suggest other types of production that could be established, citing several past projects that municipal councilors discussed but ultimately did not support. Danish businesspeople proposed building a pig farm in Kuldīga, but such operations are notoriously polluting, and the initiating company's reputation was questionable. Local animal rights activists opposed the construction of a fur farm. There was also an idea to build a wind farm, but it was rejected on the grounds that it would not generate many local jobs.

To the local administration's credit, it does consult with the public. For example, the question of how residents felt about the construction of new "Maxima" and "Rimi" supermarkets was included in a survey on the quality of local governance recently conducted by the administration. Supermarket owners pushed for the new buildings, raising concerns among architects and urban planners that the developments would draw people away from the historic center. As the survey showed, local residents

also do not want new supermarkets; some have only enough money for modest purchases at existing stores. Although the administration has not succeeded in creating new high-paying jobs, its performance consistently receives high marks. The reason is that people see that "at least something is being done—look, they fixed the roads in the center." Municipal employees, for their part, emphasize: "When we were redeveloping public infrastructure, jobs were indeed created for locals." On one hand, few of my informants showed much interest in discussing what kind of manufacturing might be established in Kuldīga, given the current demographic makeup and the fact that the country must now align its economic development with European Union requirements. On the other hand, waiting for the European Regional Development Fund to allocate money for yet another restoration project—and relying solely on that to create jobs—does not strike me as particularly rational.

The narrative surrounding "EU handouts" has spawned a whole mythology in Kuldīga. Traces of this can be found in the graffiti of the town's most famous street artist, who works under the pseudonym GenZ (it is worth recalling that Kuldīga's historical name is Goldingen). From the wall of a woodshed in the park, a genie with a neatly parted hairstyle gazes intently at passersby: could this be a Brussels bureaucrat, the very person whose decision determines how much funding Kuldīga receives for restoration and development?

Another version of this mythology centers on the supposedly unique temporality of the "Latvian national character":

"I am Latvian, I love Latvia, but I have to say that Latvians are always waiting for something. For nine months of the year, we wait for summer, we wait for Līgo—then it's all over in a flash, and... oh, it's autumn already. We waited a long time to be admitted to the European Union, working on all those 'criteria,' blah, blah, blah... Okay, we're in the Union, but nothing has changed! Then we start waiting to join NATO. Okay, we're in! What's next? And today, Latvia is in a tough spot because there's nothing left to wait for. We just have to live. But that's different from waiting. So, perhaps the UNESCO project simply caters to our habit of waiting."

The "UNESCO project" in question stems from the Kuldīga authorities' ambition to secure the organization's protected cultural heritage status. However, hopes that tourism might help the city overcome its challenges are tempered by the sober realization that Europe has no shortage of historic towns; standing out is essential. There is a story about a visit from a UNESCO inspector who saw nothing in Kuldīga that would warrant its inclusion on that coveted list. Local authorities plan to

reapply, hoping that if the status is eventually granted, it will help attract tourists.

It turns out that, unlike Tartu and other Estonian cities, the only thing "high-tech" about Kuldīga is the sound and stage equipment used for pop concerts in local parks. Yet, a city trying to market itself to tourists and donors as a sanctuary of "authentic, old, unspoiled Europe" likely expects nothing else. The municipality's website states:

We say that Kuldīga is a city with a soul because the people who live, work, and play here do so with passion, grace, and heart. Those of you wishing to explore a part of the Baltic region that has changed little over the last three hundred years will find a true destination in the Courland region and its ancient capital, Kuldīga[9].

But what exactly do the "people who live, work, and play here" do "with passion"? There are sawmills near the town, municipal and central government offices within it, and some people work in the service sector. Yet, it is disheartening that the town's engagement with the European Union is driven solely by "heritage" priorities, with the local authorities' attention fixated on door handles and restored cobblestone streets. The story of the paving, however, has taken an interesting turn. When the renovation of streets—which had been paved over with asphalt during the Soviet era—began, architects wanted to restore the round cobblestones (resembling those laid 300–400 years ago). This sparked strong protests from residents unwilling to sacrifice their cars for the sake of historical authenticity. Ultimately, the municipality struck a compromise: they built high-quality roads while laying historical cobblestones only in the town's most "historic" areas frequented by tourists.

River, Forest, Bridge, and Town

In the entrance hall of the building for visiting lecturers and researchers at the University of Helsinki—where I am currently finishing this text—there is a mural. It depicts an arched brick bridge strikingly similar to the one in Kuldīga, a yacht with red sails, a train speeding across the bridge, and an airplane in a clear sky. Maneesinkatu—a short street in a Helsinki district known for its monumental Jugendstil buildings—and the fresco embody the belief that technological innovations were the essence of a young, new style and a young, new century.

The brick bridge stands as a symbol of the progress and modernity of the industrial age. While bridges once merely connected two banks for convenience or economic necessity, "modernity" heightened their

symbolic significance. By uniting technological innovation with the creators' aesthetic preferences, a bridge helps shape the identity of both community and place—and for Kuldīga, its bridge is of great importance. Its image appears everywhere: on T-shirts, postcards, and candy boxes.

Historically, Latvia had few bridges, and those that existed were often narrow and made of wood. Since rivers served as primary transport routes, bridges posed obstacles to timber rafting and navigation. According to the authors of a recently published book on Kuldīga's architecture and history, the town's first wooden bridge on stone piers was erected as early as the beginning of the 15th century, featuring a drawbridge section adjacent to the castle[10]. It eventually collapsed, and the next bridge was not built for another 259 years. Construction began in 1872 based on a design by Riga engineer Friedrich Staprani and architect Otto Dietze; the site chosen was a narrow stretch of the river where the bed consisted of a thick layer of limestone. The 164-meter bridge was completed within two years, followed by a grand opening ceremony; at that time, two or three carriages per week would cross it, traveling from Kuldīga to Tukums, Liepāja, and Ventspils[11]. The bridge was the only one in Kuldīga until 1988 and served well, even though it had been damaged when the Russian army tried to blow it up while retreating in 1915. During the Soviet era, the original cobblestone surface was covered with asphalt.

Kuldīga's bridge, churches, waterfall, and market square have frequently appeared on old postcards. In 1985, the town served as the filming location for **The Mischiefs of a Rascal** (Prodeki sorvantsa), a TV movie directed by Varis Brasla based on Astrid Lindgren's books about Emil of Lönneberga [12]. Kathult—the farmstead near the town of Lönneberga where Lindgren's hero lived—was recreated in Kuldīga for the Latvian film, while the town's bridge, square, and historic buildings provided the backdrop for the Emil family's excursions. While Kuldīga played the role of a Swedish province at the turn of the 20th century in that film, it portrayed a German province in the 2008 TV movie **The Bridge** (Die Brücke) by German director Wolfgang Panzer. Although critics gave a lukewarm reception to this remake of the 1959 war classic, local residents valued the fact that Kuldīga could "pass" for a small Bavarian town and that the bridge featured in the film was their own—Kuldīga's bridge [13].

Nearly three and a half million euros were spent on production, making this instance of German film

production "outsourced" to the Baltic region particularly interesting. While the capitals of the Baltic republics once stood in for a generic "West" in Soviet detective films and adaptations of works by Conan Doyle and Somerset Maugham during the socialist era, the modern Baltic provinces appeal to German filmmakers as a setting that can represent a generic wartime location. One critic writes:

The fact that producers utilized Baltic locations and services—where forty years of communist isolation preserved wartime landscapes that had long since vanished from most of Germany—is a sign of one of the decisive advantages held by small Eastern European studios[14].

Few people here are aware of these cultural representations. For some locals, the bridge is the site of a curious urban ritual: during the summer solstice festival of Līgo, residents stage a nude run across it. It is said that not everyone in the town is pleased with this invented pagan tradition. Kuldīga is generally conservative regarding morality, especially concerning sex; one need only recall the indignant letter local residents sent to the municipality protesting a nude male figure installed on the roof of a newly opened art gallery. The local community's aesthetic tastes can hardly be described as modernist, either—there were even objections to the monument of Duke Jacob Kettler on Liepājas Street, which was designed as a "time portal." To convey the dynamism of a temporal leap, the sculptor depicted the ruler of Courland stepping with one foot out of a "time membrane" and into our era. Some people wondered where the Duke's other leg was.

Conclusion

The local residents' comments on Kuldīga presented here are, naturally, more compelling than the opinions of visitors. This is understandable—they know the town "from the inside." Yet, it is surprising how few tourists take an interest in the town's history, architecture, and inhabitants. Alas, this is a characteristic of modern mass tourism, but it is intriguing to contrast the Kuldīga authorities' efforts to "historicize" the town with the indifference toward the past shown by those who visit. This raises questions about the effectiveness of the EU's "preservationist" urban policies in general—and whether investments in this type of activity are justified in their current form. In any case, it is a pity that the lack of reliable tourism statistics makes it impossible to calculate the proportion of so-called "quality tourists."

It seems to me that the street artist GenZ captures this contradictory situation quite accurately through

his work. The town "sells" itself as a fragment of preserved European history, while the artist speaks to passersby about its contemporary reality. I met with GenZ while in Kuldīga. He turned out to be an optimist: he plans to combine street stencils and murals with experiments in other art forms to gather enough material for an exhibition. He has no desire to leave the town ("I love this city; it has so much history"), at least not for the long term or permanently. He describes the purpose of his work this way: "People will look at the wall with my drawing and, if they get it, they'll smile!" GenZ recognizes the shortage of funds for renovating old buildings—no matter how historically significant they may be—but he wants passersby to "see" familiar old structures alongside—sometimes absurd—new developments. GenZ creates site-specific art that engages directly with the location itself—inventively incorporating forgotten pipe sections and adorning massive woodsheds with murals. When we first arrived in Kuldīga, I worried that the experience would be entirely focused on history; while I was initially delighted by a single witty little drawing on a nearby gate, hunting down GenZ's works soon turned into a sort of quest. One mural depicts a man sucking something red out of the ground—a commentary, perhaps, on oil dependency? Audrey Hepburn, Miles Davis, and Alfred Hitchcock gaze out from his stencils. These portraits of last-century pop icons may well hint—among other things—that the city administration has gone a bit overboard in glorifying Duke Jacob, that a great deal of water has flowed under the bridge since the 17th century, and that the townspeople—especially the young ones—might have other heroes...

NOTES

[1] See, for example: <http://turbina.ru/guide/Kuldiga-Latviya-121128/Zametki/Ne-kuda-nibud-a-v-Kuldigu-82452/>; www.tury.ru/otzyv/id/167743; www.ferretingoutthefun.com/2015/03/20/exploring-kuldiga-latvia/; www.reinisfischer.com/venta-waterfall-rapid-widest-europe; www.onlatvia.com/kuldiga-304-304; [www.bookdifferent.com/en/blog/medieval-romance-in-the-ancient-town-of-kuldiga-latvia\(w801\).html](http://www.bookdifferent.com/en/blog/medieval-romance-in-the-ancient-town-of-kuldiga-latvia(w801).html); www.issp.lv/en/news/flaneur-new-urban-narratives; www.ferretingoutthefun.com/2015/03/20/exploring-kuldiga-latvia/; <https://liviheri.wordpress.com/2015/10/14/kuldiga/>.

[2] Bohle D., Greskovits B. The State, Internationalization, and Capitalist Diversity in Eastern Europe // *Competition & Change*. 2007. Vol. 11. No. 2. P. 89–115; Tosun J., Schulze K. Compliance with EU Biofuel Targets in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe: Do Interest Groups Matter? // *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*. 2015. Vol. 33. No. 5. P. 950–968.

[3] Krastinš J. (Ed.). *Kuldiga. Architecture and Urbanism*. Kuldiga: Kuldigas Novada Pašvaldība, 2013.

[4] http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/latvia/restoration-produces-eye-catching-bridge.

[5] Ibid.

[6] http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/estonia/protolab-a-cross-border-network-for-entrepreneurs.

[7] Luukkonen J., Moisio S. On the Socio-Technical Practices of the European Union Territory // Environment and Planning A. 2016. Vol. 48. No. 8. P. 1465–1466.

[8] More details about this unusual business can be found on the entrepreneurs' website (www.lillaslavender.com/en/par-mums) and in the article: Vakhtina O. Inga Purava: "Lavender is my pension!" (www.mklat.lv/obschestvo/34129-inga-purava-lavanda-eto-moya-pensiya).

[9] www.kuldiga.lv/en/.

[10] Krastinš J. (Ed.). Op. cit. P. 65.

[11] Ibid. P. 73.

[12] Thanks to Gustavs Strenga for drawing my attention to the film.

[13] The Kuldīga Bridge appears briefly in the film's trailer at the 16-second mark (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c7YtqzGTtk).

[14] Holdsworth N. On Location: Lithuania // Variety. 2008. June 25 (<http://variety.com/2008/film/features/on-location-lithuania-1117988093/>).

PHOTO CREDITS

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Ill. 2. Kuldiga, old town. Photo by Artis Gustovskis.

Ill. 3. Kuldiga, city hall. Photo by Artis Gustovskis.

Ill. 4. Kuldiga Bridge. Photo by Laima Gutmane.

Ill. 5. Kuldiga, waterfall. Photo by Laima Gutmane.

Ill. 6. GenZ graffiti. Photo by Laima Gutmane.

Ill. 7. GenZ graffiti. Photo by Laima Gutmane.

Ill. 8. GenZ graffiti. Photo by Laima Gutmane.