

My Dear Yakutia



The image is one from an on-going series entitled *My Dear Yakutia* by photographer Alexey Vasilyev, who describes the series as a photographic 'love letter' to Yakutia (officially The Sakha Republic of the Russian Federation) looking at the impact environmental factors have on its inhabitants. According to Vasilyev's website his work [... focuses on the daily life of people in the far North and their national identity in the global world] (Vasilyev, 2019).

Yakutia is Russia's largest geographical republic and has some claims to national status as the region was originally delineated based on the area inhabited by the Yakut people. The question of national identity is not a new one for the region with Sergen Ardiakap, a high

ranking official, presenting his *Plan on Yakut People* to Tsarina Catherine II in 1770. More recently the fall of Communism in 1989 led to demographic changes in the region, resulting in an increase in the proportion of the native Yakut population and a decline in the proportion of ethnic Russians. As a result, Sakha nationalism and national identity are undergoing something of a resurgence.

It is necessary to define the term national identity in order to distinguish it from nationalism and national stereotypes. Writing in 2002 Dr Tim Edensor, Reader in Cultural Geography at Manchester Metropolitan University stated '...identity is believed to be primarily anchored in the national space. Partly, then, the space in which culture and everyday life operates is conceived to be indisputably the nation...' (p.1). The key elements in this definition are anchored in the national space and everyday life operates. This idea, that national identity is derived from the day-to-day experiences of people in a nation as opposed to an exceptional event that may draw worldwide attention; or alternatively, experiences that are essentially local, that would not be recognised by most of the population. In thinking about the UK this may mean that, from an external perspective national identity might be represented by red London buses or black cabs, however, from the point of view of someone living in the UK, the NHS might be a more universal element of national identity as it is a service which virtually all the population will have experienced at some time but is not well known or utilised by those outside the UK.

The photograph is clearly an image from everyday life, however, what is not obvious is how it conveys information that relates uniquely to the national identity of Yakutia. In order to understand why this image represents Yakutia's national identity it is necessary to look at the context of the image and most notably the title of the series, *My Dear Yakutia*. The title explicitly references the national space, and so by exploring the narrative of the image and placing it in the context of the overall series, the photograph communicates information about the national identity of the people of Yakutia.

The fact that a photographer from Yakutia, who is creating a series about the region, in part focusing on national identity, selected this image signifies that to him the picture represents elements of national identity. Denoted in the image are three broad elements, commerce, environment and social interaction. These can be connoted as representing the abundance of food in the region; the cold, harsh climate; and the stoicism of the inhabitants. These elements in turn can be interpreted by the viewer as representing features of national identity that the photographer sought to communicate.

It is worth noting that whilst the image does represent some facets of national identity it is not intended to do so on its own and that a more comprehensive picture of national identity is communicated by viewing the complete series.

Within the image there is a striking contrast between the frozen items on sale and the empty banana boxes being moved by the central figure in the picture. The bright yellow and blue of the Dole box on the ground is the punctum of the image and contrasts with the overall more muted tones of the photograph. The banana boxes are not only the punctum, they are signifiers of global trade flows; i.e. globalisation.

Globalisation is defined as ‘... the increasing worldwide integration of economic, cultural, political, religious, and social systems. Economic globalization is the process by which the whole world becomes a single market...’ (Hashimzade, Myles and Black, 2019).

Vasilyev’s photograph highlights that, in spite of its remoteness and sparse population, Yakutia is part of a global trading network and the image establishes a link between Yakutia, one of the coldest regions on the planet, and the tropical regions of Latin America and the Caribbean, where the bananas are grown.

Examining the context brings into focus another feature of globalisation. The series *My Dear Yakutia* has been published and reviewed on several websites including: *The Guardian* (The Guardian, 2019) and *Lensculture* (LensCulture, 2019) Vasilyev’s use of the internet to present his work to viewers outside Yakutia is a demonstration of the impact of globalisation on this remote region, and in doing so he has been able to use one of the key tools of globalisation to present his work to a worldwide audience.

Despite this photograph being only one of an on-going series, I think as a standalone image it fulfils the objectives Vasilyev set for himself, namely ‘to represent the daily lives, national identity and the region’s place in a global world’. The photograph is self-evidently an image from daily life and shopping at a market is a scene that most viewers will recognise. Vasilyev’s aim for the image to convey something of the national identity of Yakutia is more subtle; however, the act of choosing this image as part of the series signifies that Vasilyev, as someone who was born in, lived and worked in the region, believes the photograph represents some of those elements which are important to his notion of national identity. This is implicitly represented, and each viewer will connote different characteristics from the elements denoted in the image. Lastly, Vasilyev’s intention was to put the lives and national identity of the inhabitants of Yakutia in a global context.

The image demonstrates how the lives of people in Yakutia are touched by globalisation by showing how tropical fruits from thousands of miles away are sold beside more local produce. Perhaps more telling of the impact of globalisation on the region is the fact the photographer has succeeded in getting his 'love letter' to his home distributed worldwide and in doing so encouraging people with little or no knowledge of the region to learn more about Yakutia.

(1,099 words)

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