

ANNA HOROLETS
University of Social Sciences and Humanities (SWPS)
Warsaw
Poland

RISKY ENCOUNTERS?
RISK IN TRAVEL NARRATIVES OF NICHE TOURISTS FROM
POLAND TO THE FORMER SOVIET UNION¹

One of the important motivations in tourism is the search for difference and the exotic. In the case of niche tourism, be it low budget backpacking or adventure tourism, breaking free from the daily routines and indulging in the unknown seems to be of particular pertinence. In the article I aim at demonstrating one type of experience that is used in the construction of difference in niche tourists' travel narratives. I will focus on risk, and treat it not only as a lived experience of travel but also as a figure of travel narratives, thus linking its practical and semiotic aspects. I will consider the ways in which risk is involved in constituting the meanings of travel and in drawing demarcation lines between „hosts” and „guests” (cf. Smith, ed., 1989). I hope that tackling the issues of risk and the search for the exotic can contribute to anthropological debates on tourism in Europe (Boissevain, ed., 1996), especially since it involves paying attention to the practices and contexts of „othering” that are not always obvious.

**Niche travel from Poland to the former Soviet Union:
research material**

The empirical material for this article is derived from an on-going research project „The cultural and social meanings of travel to the former Soviet Union in

¹ An earlier shorter version of the paper was published in Polish (Horolets 2009b). This article is a considerably extended and modified version. I thank the two anonymous reviewers of „Lud” for their useful comments, yet all the shortcomings of the final version of the text are solely my responsibility.

the narratives of Polish niche tourists”². The practice of self-organized low budget active tourism to the countries of the former Soviet Union (excluding Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which are currently the UE members) undertaken by the educated young adults³ from Poland is analyzed within the broader framework of postsocialist transition and Europeanization. After 1989 the number of Polish tourist visitors to the countries of the former Soviet Union (excluding Ukraine) has steadily decreased. In a survey on tourist destinations conducted in 2009, only 3% of the respondents mentioned Russia as a country where they travelled for leisure in the last 20 years, in a similar survey conducted in 1993 the number of people who claimed they travelled to Russia or former Soviet Union in the last 20 years amounted to 18% (*Polacy o swoich wyjazdach...* 2009: 6). Research by the World Tourism Organization demonstrated that only from 2007 to 2008 the number of Polish tourists travelling to Russia dropped by 18,55%, while the decrease between 2004 and 2008 was by 44,55%⁴. In statistical terms more people go „to the West” than „to the East”. Yet, the practices of those who choose the latter destination can be viewed as practices of drawing alternative mental maps (cf. Norton 2002: 50-51) of the postsocialist East as well as alternative images of the past.

The empirical material was gathered by the means of in-depth narrative interviews and observation as well as through the Internet: I surveyed fora, blogs and sites devoted to the selected forms of travel and destinations (e.g. going to Siberia, Baikal lake and Sajany mountains in particular; Kamchatka; Mount Elbrus, Kolskij Peninsula; Pamir and Tien-Shan mountains in order to do trekking, mountaineering or kayaking). These tours took place in the period between 1998 and 2011, mostly in summer, with the exceptions of few winter tours. Niche tourists prefer wildlife and nature sites to cultural sites although overall they can be called omnivorous in their taste for tourist attractions. Importantly, they often

² The project started in 2008; in 2010 it was financially supported by Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities as a statutory grant no. BST/WNHiS/01/2010.

³ The age of my interlocutors ranged from 20 to 56 years, with the prevalence of young adults in their thirties and late twenties. In terms of the position in social stratification system they can be placed within middle class on the basis of income as well as lifestyles. It has to be noted that sociologists estimate that over a quarter of Polish post-1989 middle class (approx. 25% of the population) is constituted by intelligentsia (specialists) and their share in the class is continuously growing due to the increasing availability of higher education (Domański 2000: 15; Wasilewski 2006: 79, 84). At the same time the use of term the „intelligentsia” cannot be limited to income and life style but also has an ethical dimension. In Andrzej Walicki’s work, for instance, it is emphasized that this group is characterized by a particular life path that makes intelligentsia representatives sensitive to the fate of those who are worse off than themselves: less educated and less wealthy, the working class and peasants (Walicki 2007). Not being able to elaborate on this point due to the limitations of space and different aim of this article, I only would like to signal that all my interlocutors are intelligentsia in the neutral sense and most of them also share intelligentsia ethos as outlined by Walicki.

⁴ These calculations are based on World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) data with regard to out-bound tourism from Poland. I would like to thank WTO office in Spain for providing this information for this research project.

emphasize that they are interested in meeting local people who are also a kind of „tourist attraction” to them. The word „travel” in the title of the project is used instead of „tourism” because it is an emic term. My interlocutors and the authors of Internet accounts describe their activities by the word travel (*podróż*) rather than tourism (*turystyka*) in order to emphasize the authenticity of their experiences and the difference from mass tourists (cf. Hall and Page 2006: 5, 78). Therefore the terms „niche tourists” and „travelers” are used interchangeably in the article.

For the purposes of this article, I have selected fragments of interviews and written texts containing the representations of risk and danger in travel accounts. Despite acknowledging that the perceptions and representations of risk by local residents can be rather diverse, I will not contrast the two in a systematic way. First, my aim is to focus on tourists. Second, there is no single bounded group of local residents in my material⁵. I will present several examples of what travelers perceive as risk-taking and what emotions are accompanying the experience of risk-taking. I will then interpret the meanings they attach to risk-taking by discussing several conceptual models of risk and applying them to travel narratives. Finally I will demonstrate how risk participates in the construction of the meaning of travel and in drawing the mental maps of the former Soviet Union that are alternative to some mainstream images of this region.

Risk in niche tourists’ accounts: an overview

Generally speaking risk was not a central but a recurrent theme of travel narratives. When speaking or writing about hazards, Polish travelers concentrated on nature-related hardships rather than on human-related risks such as crime. They accentuated dangers hidden in elemental forces (storms, fires and floods):

It was already dusk when we put up our tent. The empty, open and icy space was all around. There was no way to fix the tent in the ground because the glacier was too hard. So we brought some stones and put them on tent ropes. Yet our choice of resting location was dramatic in its consequences. Gale-force winds blew all the

⁵ This is quite unlike the Sherry Ortner’s account of the clash between Sherpas’ and Western travelers’ perceptions of risk and the meaning of mountaineering (Ortner 1997). She studied the two groups engaged in a single practice in a particular place, therefore she was able to powerfully state: „For the sahbs, the risk of death is what makes the sport glorious; for the Sherpas there is nothing noble about the risk at all; there is only a kind of threat that must be managed, negotiated. For the sahbs, ordinary life pales before the intensity of mountaineering; for the Sherpas, mountaineering is simply the best-paying way to support ordinary life” (Ortner 1997: 140). In my research, which is multi-sited and concentrates on individuals involved in various practices in different types of places, such clear-cut juxtaposition is not possible in principle.

night – we couldn't stay still in the tent so we didn't sleep a wink... The snow flew inside, the tent masts bended as if they were from rubber. We had to hold the entire structure so it didn't collapse.

Other threats were coming from plants, animals and insects or the possibility of an illnesses (e.g. Lyme disease):

The threat I encountered there for the first time were shepherd dogs. These dogs are very wise and they guard sheep. If one doesn't move to the sheep too closely, then nothing happens. But if one crosses a certain magic line, it gets dangerous. We did. Five or may be seven dogs surrounded us. We stood there, the three of us, close to each other, surrounded by the dogs. These dogs are huge, so there's nothing really you can do.

However, alongside signalling the potential risks, Polish travelers also demonstrated how these risks were or could be overcome and how they are meaningful to them. For example, travelers possessed „magic” objects (as they themselves jokingly called them, e.g. the „silver tape” that was useful in everything from putting parts of the kayak together to sticking bandage to a leg) that got them „impregnated” from natural forces. The risks were also curbed with the help of scientific knowledge and individual resourcefulness. One of the trekkers in Kolskij peninsula said that before going to sleep, they were: „building a fire as high as an adult and [went – A.H.] to sleep holding metal bowls, mugs and whistles, so [they could – A.H.] frighten a bear if it paid a visit”. Yet, the risky moments are also memorable ones: „When I come to the mountains an immense horror overwhelms me. I get dizzy on mountain peaks. But when you climb up the first and second mountain, this fear gradually disappears”.

Moreover, the meaningfulness of risk is linked to testing one's abilities and challenging ones fears and limitations: „We somehow couldn't master the map and the water sources on it and from time to time we ended up without no water at hand, and there was no rain. So we stoically accepted the fact that a person doesn't need to drink that often, and so we managed”.

In contrast to the nature related risks, human related risks, such as a risk of being robbed or beaten up were decisively mitigated or negated. Moreover, travelers openly contested a popularly shared view that some places and/or situations were risky. A woman who travelled with a colleague by train through Russia described the night they spent at the train station in a provincial town: „Nothing happened to us, despite all these notions that train stations in Russia are dangerous”.

One of Polish travelers told me a story about what happened to him in a border region in Caucasus. He and two other men were stopped by the border control. It turned out that the Polish travelers did not have necessary permits. They were searched by a military patrol, and taken away by men with shotguns to a built-

ding. My interlocutor claimed that they were afraid that these people could actually be kidnappers camouflaged as soldiers. Once in the building, they were waiting for the orders from some higher authorities, but as the time passed by: „it appeared [that – A.H.] the soldiers started to feel a bit stupid and offered us some food; we talked about what we did and what we were interested in. Then they took us to a waterfall, offered us some vodka, and then the party began”.

This story is quite typical and contains the themes that are shared by a number of travelers' narratives, i.e.: people are hospitable, cordial and open, although a bit „wild” or unpredictable at times; rules in post-communist countries are negotiable. The two combined mitigated potential risks of the encounter with unknown local people. Sometimes such encounters triggered in travelers a set of mixed emotions of fondness, irritation and awkwardness:

when we were getting water from a river, a young and rather intoxicated Buriat approached us with an unshakable desire to drink vodka together. Our excuses that we didn't have time, that we had sick livers, or that he had no vodka didn't help. In two minutes he was back with a bottle. After rather long negotiations he agreed that we share the drink with him only symbolically. We were not in the mood and were fed up with local folklore, but these people simply never take no for an answer. He also wanted to tell us about the mountains and their gods, explain to us what Buriat people believe in. He wasn't aggressive – we were his new friends. And although we wanted to get rid of him as soon as possible at the same time we also wanted, and had to, be respectful.

This quote is characteristic in that explanation of roughness of local dwellers is achieved by ascribing them the features of Rousseauian „noble savages”. Even when Polish travelers evoked stories of being pick-pocketed, cheated or forced to give a bribe, they often tried to explain most of these incidents by claiming that „it could have happened everywhere”, or juxtaposed mean behavior of some locals with generosity of the others.

In short, selected nature-related risks were put at the foreground in most travel narratives, while human-related risks were of secondary salience. In some cases travelers took a moderate pride in being perceived as distinct from mainstream tourists due to their risk-taking. The pride of being able to enter into risky situations was more prominent in written narratives of male interlocutors, while oral narratives of female interlocutors more often mentioned fear as an emotion that is part and parcel of such situations. The presence of risk in travel narratives and experience calls for interpreting risk in the context of tourist encounter and relations between „hosts” and „guests”. Below I will try to offer some tentative interpretations of the representations of risk in travel narratives by referring to various meanings of risk.

Facets of risk in selected theoretical models and „lay knowledges of risk”

According to Mary Douglas (1990) the term risk emerged in European public discourse together with the ideas of „probability” or „chance” (e.g. in ship insurance or in business). It then took on the meaning of „danger” which has become its predominant semantic component in post-industrial societies. Semantically, apart from the meanings of danger and uncertainty the word risk also implies both something unpleasant and freedom (Hamilton, Adolphs and Nerlich 2007). The studies of „lay knowledges of risk”, i.e. its emic meanings, in situations of symbolic border crossing (immigration and diaspora experience, sexuality and ageing) bring to the fore more context-specific connotations of the concept including health hazards, fear of unemployment or personal failure, or the need to decide whether to act or not (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 7, 15). The authors have also discovered that while women were more concerned with risks in the context of sex and violence, men talked more often of risk in sports, travel and daring acts (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 25). Deborah Lupton argued that risk-taking is a „gendered performance”, which in the case of men is part of the scenario of leading a „heroic life” (the term coined by Mike Featherstone, quoted in Lupton 1999: 157). Some of the risk-related narratives of men travelling to the former Soviet Union strongly corroborate with this thesis (e.g. Pałkiewicz 2006; Hugo-Bader 2002, 2009).

John Tulloch and Deborah Lupton come up with four types of risk: 1. embodied risks (health and physical risks; violence), 2. financial risks (employment, retirement), 3. intimate risks (romantic, marital and family relations), and 4. risk of foreign travel or migration (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 25). Beside the fact that the last category of risks is questionable (for it seems to be derived from a different principle than the previous three), the typology is useful as an overview of the various areas of risk. Yet, it does not allow for differentiating between degrees and means of risk control, which seems to be crucial for theorising risk from the sociological and anthropological perspective.

In her analysis Douglas had a revealing anthropological point. By comparing risk to sin and taboo, she contended that risk „looks forward”, in the sense that when speaking of risks we anticipate hazards (Douglas 1990: 5). The very idea that risks can be controlled implies that human or institutional subjects are responsible for risk. At the same time there are risks that are seen as beyond one’s control – these are placed in the domain of fate. Tulloch and Lupton point out that in contemporary public discourse as well as in „lay knowledges of risk” there is a paradoxical conflation between seeing risk as something both under and beyond human control. The post-modern (control-centred) and pre-modern (fate-centred) notions of risk are thus conflated (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 29).

In his original essay on the philosophy of adventure Georg Simmel compared adventurer to a gambler (Simmel 1958). At the face value, gambler may be seen as the one who irrationally relies solely on fate, yet at a closer scrutiny gambler's trust in fate can be seen as an alternative means of control, i.e. they seek a deeper meaning of the world by relying on „blind fate”. Thus in Simmel's model risk and voluntary risk-taking are theorized as an „alternative” means of control by recourse to fate.

The tension between risk avoidance or risk containment, on the one hand, and voluntary risk-taking, on the other, has an axiological dimension too. When the increased ability for risk containment is viewed as a result of modernization, risk control acquired a positive normative meaning of the ability „to rationalize and regulate self and the body, to avoid the vicissitudes of fate” (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 10). The authors argue that in the contemporary public, expert and popular culture discourses the hegemonic view of risk maintains that people live in fear of risk, try avoid risks and see those who take unnecessary risks as careless or even deviant.

There is an alternative discourse of positively evaluated voluntary risk-taking parallel to the dominant discourses or rather as the means of resisting it⁶. In his new framework for the study of leisure Chris Rojek emphasized the necessity of including illegal – and thus risk-laden – activities in it (cf. Rojek 2010: 41, 49). Apart from risk stemming from illegality, overall, high risk activities are increasingly more popular (or more acceptable) in leisure and sports (e.g. Stranger 1999). These are voluntary risk-taking activities (or „edgework”⁷) in the sense that they are perceived as risky by those who undertake them and they are undertaken deliberately. The emphasis on choice allows to distinguish voluntary risk-taking from the cases when activities of this sort are not subject to choice (cf. Ortner 1997), or when activities are perceived as risky by those who observe them but not by actors who perform them, like some of circus tricks (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 11).

Research on voluntary risk-taking in leisure and sport was devoted to the groups and activities as diverse as American sky-divers (Lyng 1978), young male criminals (Collinson 1996), Australian surfers (Stranger 1999), young men drinking and fighting (Canaan 1996) and female boxers (Hargreaves 1997). Overall, the findings of these authors unravel several motivations of „edgework”: actors wish to face and conquer fear, display courage. They seek emotions such as excitement, adrenaline rush, elation, the feeling of being swept-away. They can be

⁶ This is the matter of further studies, to what extent voluntary risk-taking has increased since the 1950s, and to what extent it has been systematically overlooked in social sciences in 1950s and 1960s when they were more concerned with other aspects of social practice.

⁷ The term „edgework” was borrowed by Lyng (1978) from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson (1972) and is currently used in social sciences to refer to voluntary takings risks in order to break routine (cf. Lyng, ed., 2005).

motivated by the desire for discovery, self-actualization, a sense personal agency or may wish to either conform to or challenge gender stereotypes. „The emotions produced by risk-taking are seen to give access to authenticity of self-hood by confronting the barriers of convention or social expectation” (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 35).

Edgework brings forth a purified and magnified sense of the self. Tulloch and Lupton summarise their findings on the meanings of voluntary risk-taking thus:

Our study revealed three major discourses employed by our interviewees to describe the pleasures and benefits of voluntary risk-taking. The **discourse of self-improvement** was employed to describe the importance of working on the continuing project of the self through taking risks, while the **discourse of emotional engagement** drew on a neo-Romantic ideal of the body/self allowed to extend itself beyond strictures of culture and society (...). **The third discourse, that of control**, in some way counters that of emotional engagement in privileging control over one’s emotions and bodily responses as a valued aspect of engaging in risky activities. All three discourses represent a life without risk as too tightly bounded and restricted, as not offering enough challenge (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 37, emphasis original).

The findings of Tulloch and Lupton are instructive not only in that they discern several layers of meanings of voluntary risk-taking or edgework in „lay knowledges of risk” but also in that they attempt to embed these in a social context, e.g. by indicating that risk-taking can be viewed as an alternative discourse of modernity.

The notion that risk is linked to modernization has been developed in the 1980s with the rise of awareness of environmental and nuclear hazards and their critical assessment by the social sciences. In their *Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers* Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982) analyzed the cultural mechanisms involved in the social construction of risk. Douglas contended elsewhere (1990) that risks are quite real in that there are certain dangers typical of a given epoch (as high infant mortality in the pre-modern era), but the way in which risks are linked to power relations, legitimacy and responsibility are culturally and politically constructed. Socio-historical perspective on risk that allowed linking risk to social change was presented in the influential book *Risk Society* by Ulrich Beck (1992). The notion of risk can be used to refer to „those practices and methods by which the future consequences of individual and institutional decisions are controlled in the present” (Beck 2000: xii). In this sense risk is a way of controlling uncertainties generated by individual actors and social institutions. It implies responsibility for taking risks and for predicting the consequences of risky doings. Risk is conceptualized by Beck as a product of modernization understood as a process of acquiring improved means

of human control over the natural and social environment. According to Beck the crucial change occurred in the second part of the twentieth century, when a new category of risk emerged:

We are no longer talking about comets crashing to earth or accidents with a greater or lesser degree of probability of occurring. Rather, what is at issue are rapid advances of modernisation that are *successful* in terms of their degree of impact and range of consequences – the triumph of human genetics, for example – but which generate radical uncertainty because no one is able to assess their consequences (Beck 2000: xii).

In other words, the late modern risks are beyond control not because actors face powerful forces of nature or fate but because actors can no longer meaningfully define the scope of risk. The new meanings of lack of control over risks by actors contribute to the crisis of rational thinking and rational choice, and therefore call for means of risk containment other than rational calculation. Georg Simmel's adventurer-gambler model fits this framework as a viable alternative for risk containment in contemporary society: trusting in fate is no less rational than trusting in human capacities of risk control. The propensity for undertaking edgework in leisure described above could be therefore interpreted in this context. At the same time risk-taking as seen by onlookers should be opposed to the subjective view of experiencing risk by those who undertake leisure activities (e.g. niche tourists who are the subject of this article) and the explanatory framework should be expanded to meanings and motivations more complex than mere search for adrenaline rush.

Risk-taking and „risk talking” in niche tourists’ narratives

Tourist experience can considerably alter what is perceived as risky and safe. The liminality of time/space in travel shifts the definitions of danger, uncertainty and control:

[b]eing a tourist seems to involve some striking changes in what is perceived to be risky. For example, visitors to an area may be willing to risk illness, through eating contaminated foods (such as local shellfish) or having sexual relations with strangers, because of the forms of exotic visual consumption that place such activities in a different context from what is normal and everyday. It is claimed that tourism is a liminal state in which conventional calculations of safety and risk are disrupted. On the other hand there is social pollution (Urry 1995: 188; cf. Bachórz 2009).

Indeed, Polish niche tourists to the former Soviet Union were ready to try local food in Kyzyl and Irkutsk, and these same people were afraid of food-poisoning in fast-food bars in Warsaw or Poznań.

After coming back home I started paying attention that, when I said I was in Russia, all people – my acquaintances – would say: „wow”, Russia, it’s dangerous there, isn’t it; but I felt safer in trains there, because there was a provodnik [Rus.: carriage steward – A.H.] who kept watch over everything, while in Polish night trains there was no one like this.

Some of niche tourists can be said to like active and adventurous recreation both „at home” and „en route”, other prefer to spend time „at home” quietly – practicing yoga or reading. I do not think that niche tourists as a group are particularly risk-seeking. When embarking on a journey, however, they become more carefree. The trust in fate and treating trip as a liminal time/space can be held accountable for the tourists’ fearlessness of potential dangers (e.g. when they purposefully engage in travel without a plan).

At the same time travel narratives contain evidence against straightforward identification of travel with the state of liminality. Rather often risks were anticipated and perceived, but they were curbed with the help of scientific knowledge and individual willpower. These narratives fitted into what Tulloch and Lupton called the third discourse of risk, which concentrated on the individual ability of control (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 37). For instance, one professional traveler wrote: „fortunately, sheer willpower enabled us to escape the river, but the dangers of hypothermia and freezing to death were ever present” (Pałkiewicz 2006). Low temperatures were combated with adequate training, diet and clothes, but also with an appropriate attitude. The sense of personal agency was being achieved (and re-enacted in front of the to the listeners/readers) through confronting and overcoming risks.

In order to face danger, however, one had to deliberately „arrange” travel in such a way as to encounter hazards. Thus dangers are culturally constructed, although elemental forces of nature can be used as building blocks for these constructs. Gabriela Nouzeilles, for instance, paid attention to the link between the state of being „in the wild” and the state of being „in the real” through the experience of going „back to the primitive” in alternative tourists’ project of travel experience:

Living dangerously in the midst of nature is associated with the primitive as the marker of the real. By travestyng rivers and deserts, climbing mountains, and surviving on a minimal diet for long periods, the traveller not only visits the habitats associated with the vanishing Other, pushed to extinction or irreversibly transformed by modern civilization, but also experiences primitiveness by getting in touch with his own dormant, primal Other through physical exertion (Nouzeilles 2008: 198).

Risk and danger thus become figures or emblems of „being different” (a positive feature for a reflexive post-modern individual) and may therefore precede or

be superimposed over the experience of risk as such in travel. Superimposing of risk as an emblem of individuality over risk as an experience can be also read in the narratives of some Polish niche tourists traveling to the former USSR. One of them claimed for instance: „I value silence, wilderness, risk and powerful impressions”. This tourist described his return home as „going back to the Matrix”, thus inscribing the tourist experience in the opposition between „the real” and „the artificial” („out there” and „at home”, respectively). Balancing on the border of control over one’s body and physical exertion brings thrill and excitement. Risk thus becomes an emblem of a heroic attitude to life. The fact that they dared to face challenges, experienced and overcame them gives tourists (and should give the listeners/readers) the sense of their self-worth and uniqueness.

On average, however, risk component of travel experience (associated with effort, exhaustion, fear as described above) is consistently backgrounded in the narratives of Polish niche tourists. This is done by the means of backgrounding or negating „human” risks as well as purposefully understating the centrality of nature risks or negotiating risk. The explanation of the risk component of niche tourists’ narratives should be therefore more nuanced. Possible motivations for „backgrounding” risk in narratives include the motivation to:

1. be perceived as brave and to make a „face-embellishing”⁸ effort,
2. emphasize a very positive attitude to the countries and the people visited,
3. differentiate from other tourists who emphasize risk and personal attainment, especially affluent Western adventure tourists⁹,
4. generate a vision of the post-Soviet „East” different from the commonsensual and popular one and thus to differentiate between themselves and rank-and-file Poles who hardly travel.

Consider the third intention: the denial that travel to the former Soviet Union involves risk-taking is juxtaposed to emphasis on risk and personal attainment that constitutes the key motivation for Western adventure tourists who choose this destination (cf. Kalder 2006:11). Polish travelers do not take risks for the sake of risks, since they are not (yet) bored with quiet and predictable domestic life. They take risks only inasmuch as it is necessary to come in a closer contact with wild nature. Besides, Polish niche tourists claim that the „emasculated” Westerners exaggerate the risks they face and ridicule them: „An American used an ice axe for climbing a totally flat slope, and he was aided by two local guides, one pulling him by a rope from the front and the other pushing him from the back”.

Another salient feature is the emphasis on „insanity” or „craziness” ascribed to them by others (both at the destination and in Poland) often ascribed to their

⁸ In this phrase I relate to Erving Goffman’s (1982) concept of face and interactive rituals of maintaining face.

⁹ „As in many areas of tourism there is no definitive definition of adventure tourism, but many subsequent definitions have retained the centrality of elements of risk through active outdoors participation in wilderness or exotic, away from home locations” (Kane and Tucker 2004: 220, cf. Ewert 1994: 5).

risk-taking. This feature is paradigmatic of self-image of different types of adventure tourists (commercial and self-organized). For example white water package tour kayakers described by Kane and Tucker (2004: 229) built their identity on a reflected image: their neighbors at home called them „nutters”, „crack case” and similar half-derogatory and half-praising epithets, referring to their choice of the mode of tourism. The reflected self-image was positively evaluated by the kayakers, they were glad to hear that others were shocked or surprised by their experiences. This shock dignified them because it emphasized the uniqueness of their choice and of their experience.

This meaning of being „out of the ordinary” is not the most important, however. The crucial one is the sense of spiritual journey that is assigned to travel. It is worth mentioning that in the conceptual models of adventure tourism as well risk-taking as a motivation is being gradually removed from a central place.

The dominant focus on risk in adventure recreation (...) obscures some of the other experiences of those involved, such as problem solving, testing skills, meaningful social interaction, stress management, fun, exhilaration, excitement, and accomplishment (Kane and Tucker 2004: 220).

Alf Walle suggested that the experience of adventure tourism, set within a natural environment, was „a quest for personal insight or enlightenment” and not the search for risk (Walle 1997: 280). The deep experience of nature, not risk, becomes a source of insight. It is comparable to exclusive authenticity, which those alienated in modern society seek through the experience of tourism (Mac-Cannell 1999: 96-100).

The spiritual goals are articulated quite straightforwardly in Polish niche tourists narratives and written travel accounts. The search for the sense of heightened living and discovery of internal strength or the quest for the truer and deeper self appear to be important motivations for engaging in this type of travel:

We think that the world has emerged out of this place. The sun hides behind the pines’ belt, but it is still light; dark blue clouds cluttered in a thick dense bulk rapidly fly above us. There is nobody around within 200 kilometers... This place is awesome, full of magic... There are even less mosquitoes here.

He went to all those places in the middle of nowhere all by himself and managed on his own. This guy was totally unbelievable, the guy who – when in taiga – cried at night out of fear of wolves, who faced his own weakness, the nature. For him these trips are a spiritual experience.

However, unlike in many similar accounts by Western alternative tourists (cf. Nouzeilles 2008), Polish niche tourists to the former Soviet republics repeatedly indicate the local people as a source for spiritual experience. The spiritual

elation is achieved not only through interacting with nature, not only as a result of physical effort that pushes human body to its limits, but also in local people's openness and hospitality and their unique ability to break conventions:

They were poor people, one could really see it with a bare eye, but they hosted us with everything they had, you could tell: they put the white table cloth, and all these goodies: fish, cream, tomatoes, and they even did not sat near us but were just making sure we helped ourselves. We were some complete strangers to them, and still they shared with us all they had. We were touched.

These representations of people from the former Soviet Union expressed in the narratives are indisputably linked to the second motivation I have above: the wish to express a positive attitude to the visited places, to emphasize empathy towards the local population. Niche tourists repeat that they seek contact with local dwellers. They often stress their ability to find common language with the locals – not only because Russian language serves as a *lingua franca*. They also draw parallels between their and local people's daily occupations. As a consequence, they separate themselves from mass tourists who treat local dwellers instrumentally and rarely interact with them.

The fourth intention distinguished above works through this narrative strategy as well: by emphasizing their similitude and equality with the local dwellers they challenge dominant representations of the former Soviet Union in Polish public, private and semi-public discourses. They thus participate in constructing an alternative to the ideologically and politically entangled as well as historically rooted image of this region.

The emphasis put on sameness does not completely eradicate representations of difference. Yet again, the perceptions of risk play a boundary-marking role: local residents present nature (and sometimes other people) as a source of potential dangers, while tourists present nature as a space of discovery and give accounts of overcoming natural hazards. This relates to a distinction suggested by Beck (2000) – the early modern fear of elemental forces as opposed to the late modern control and containment of these. Niche tourists often question the local dwellers' definitions of risk and danger.

A short essay on alpine tourism by Georg Simmel can be instrumental in tackling this issue. Simmel expressed his scepticism about ethical aspects of the quest for enlightenment undertaken by adventure travelers (Simmel 1991; cf. Ortner 1997). He presented Western amateur climbers as posh and selfish risk-takers who are motivated by boredom and egoism, rather than as romantics seeking to reconcile culture with nature. Inequalities in risk perceptions are outcomes of unequal power and economic resources. Perceptions of risk thus depend on whether risk is taken voluntarily or constitutes a necessity. If a truck driver has to go along a very dangerous mountain road or difficult muddy road several times

a week as a part of his job, this is hardly part of his spiritual search (although some elements of manly or heroic identity might be a by-product of this occupation), while hitch-hiking tourists riding on the very same truck might treat this experience as something resembling a rite of passage.

Moreover, deeming some experiences risky or not often signals a boundary between the powerful and the powerless. „[T]hose with more power and greater socioeconomic advantage (...) are less likely to see the world as dangerous than the others” (Tulloch and Lupton 2003: 8). Therefore when Polish travelers repeatedly claim they do not see dangers where other Poles and some locals see them, they narratively place themselves in a more privileged social position by suggesting this: we are strong enough to easily overcome what seems like a threat to the weaker others¹⁰. One declares: „There are at least 10 poisonous species of which the giursa, the efa and the cobra are the most dangerous. The locals say: «There are lots of them», but, as all over the world, they exaggerate the risk”¹¹.

Needless to add, the reasons why local residents tell tourists about potential dangers can be rather different from what travelers assume. For example, a small group of tourists stayed two nights in a house of a woman in a village by a lake in Kyrgyzstan. When they talked and explained that they were going to the mountains, she expressed anxiety and tried to convince them to stay at the lake. While travelers interpreted her behavior as described above, she most probably regarded them as merely children and also her guests, so she was hospitable, protective and polite towards them rather than afraid of mountains as such.

As already mentioned, Beck (1992) suggested to link risk with processes of modernization. He argued that the transition from a pre-modern state through modernity to late modernity is at the same time a leap from nature-related dangers through human-generated dangers that can be predicted and controlled to human-generated dangers that dodge human control or even definition. Such a perspective explains why Polish niche tourists go to the former Soviet Union in order to face nature-related risks. Either as Simmel’s adventurer-gamblers they seek a deeper meaning in life through their reliance on fate, or they use their knowledge and abilities to overcome natural dangers, thus enacting the modernist model of risk. Their travel to the former Soviet Union becomes thus a journey to the earlier stages of modernization. They view the imaginary or hypothetical past as represented by the realities of the former Soviet Union slightly nostalgically. While back at home risks are rather human-related, money-related and work-related, and increasingly escape

¹⁰ Compare a slightly different logic of an orientalizing explanation for the locals’ reaction to danger by one of Everest climbers noted in 1951: „When confronted by real hardships and dangers [the Sherpas – A.H.] have their tails down like the majority of primitive people with whom the conception of honour has not yet arisen” (Klaus Becker Larsen, quoted in Ortner 1997: 142). He connects meekness to underdevelopment but emphasizes that axiological evolution (not growing technical or economic might) is central to developmental project.

¹¹ Jacek Palkiewicz. *Adventure & Explorations*, <http://www.palkiewicz.com/ekspedycje/index.php?p=karakum> (20.10.2010).

any means of containment; while travelling to the former Soviet Union niche tourists are free from the limitations of late modernity and indulge in the pre-modern and seemingly less contaminated and more pristine world.

As a consequence, the former Soviet Union emerges as a pre-modern region marked by purity and naiveté (cf. Urry 1995: 188). On the one hand, this image is an alternative to the discourse of the postsocialist transition as the former Soviet Union is not demonized (as is the case in the mainstream discourse), but romanticized or viewed nostalgically. On the other hand, this same discourse petrifies an image of the former Soviet Union as an illusionary region, the one from the past¹².

Key words: niche tourism, risk, Poland, former Soviet Union

REFERENCES

- Bachórz A.
2009 *Niecodzienność, egzotyczna codzienność, inna codzienność? Podróż jako obszar gry między „tu i teraz” a „tam i wtedy”*, in: S. Rudnicki, J. Stypińska, K. Wojnicka (eds.), *Spoleczeństwo i codzienność. W stronę nowej socjologii*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie i Profesjonalne, pp. 144-162.
- Beck U.
1992 *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage.
2000 *Foreword*, in: S. Allan, B. Adam, C. Carter (eds.), *Environmental Risks and the Media*, London: Routledge, pp. xii-xv.
- Boissevain J. (ed.)
1996 *Coping with Tourists: European Reactions to Mass Tourism*, Oxford, New York: Berghahn.
- Canaan J.
1996 *„One Thing Leads to Another”: Fighting, Drinking and Working Class Masculinities*, in: M. Mac an Ghail (ed.), *Understanding Masculinities: Social Relations and Cultural Arenas*, Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, pp. 114-125.
- Collinson M.
1996 *In Search of the High Life: Drugs, Crime, Masculinities and Consumption*, „British Journal of Criminology” 36: 3, pp. 428-444.
- Domański H.
2000 *Hierarchie i bariery społeczne w latach dziewięćdziesiątych*, Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych.
- Douglas M.
1990 *Risk as a Forensic Resource*, „Daedalus” 119: 4, pp. 1-16.

¹² I have analyzed the „pastness” of the former Soviet Union in niche tourists’ narratives in more detail elsewhere (Horolets 2009a).

- Douglas M., Wildavsky A.
1982 *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ewert A.W.
1989 *Outdoor Adventure Pursuits: Foundations, Models and Theories*, Columbus, OH: Publishing Horizons.
1994 *Playing the Edge: Motivation and Risk Taking in a High Altitude Wilderness-Like Environment*, „Environment and Behaviour” 26: 1, pp. 3-24.
- Goffman E.
1982 *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hall C.M., Page S.
2006 *The Geography of Tourism and Recreation: Environment, Place and Space*, Oxford: Routledge.
- Hamilton C., Adolphs S., Nerlich B.
2007 *The Meanings of „Risk”: A View from Corpus Linguistics*, „Discourse and Society” 18: 2, pp. 163-181.
- Hargreaves J.
1997 *Women’s Boxing and Related Activities: Introducing Images and Meanings*, „Body and Society” 3: 4, pp. 33-49.
- Horolets A.
2009a *Doświadczenia przestrzeni i czasu w narracjach Polaków podróżujących do Rosji*, in: D. Rancew-Sikora (ed.), *Podróż i miejsce w perspektywie antropologicznej*, Gdańsk: University of Gdańsk Press, pp. 73-86.
2009b *Kulturowe znaczenia ryzyka w narracjach Polaków podróżujących po Rosji*, in: M. Kostaszuk-Romanowska, A. Wieczorkiewicz (eds.), *Wizje kultury własnej, obcej i wspólnej w sytuacji kontaktu*, Białystok: Galeria im. Śleńdzińskich, pp. 137-148.
- Hugo-Bader J.
2002 *W rajskiej dolinie wśród zielska*, Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka.
2009 *Biała gorączka*, Wołowiec: Czarne.
- Kalder D.
2006 *Lost Cosmonaut: Observations of an Anti-Tourist*, New York: Scribner.
- Kane M.J., Tucker H.
2004 *Adventure Tourism. The Freedom to Play with Reality*, „Tourist Studies” 4: 3, pp. 217-234.
- Lupton D.
1999 *Risk*, London: Routledge.
- Lyng S.
1978 *Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk-Taking*, „American Journal of Sociology” 95: 4, pp. 851-886.
- Lyng S. (ed.)
2005 *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk Taking*, London: Routledge.
- MacCannell D.
1999 [1976] *The Tourist. A New Theory of Leisure Class*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Norton W.
2002 *Human Geography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nouzeilles G.
2008 *Touching the Real: Alternative Travel and Landscapes of Fear*, in: J. Zilcosky (ed.), *Writing Travel. The Poetics and Politics of Modern Journey*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 195-210.
- Ortner S.
1997 *Thick Resistance: Death and the Cultural Construction of Agency in Himalayan Mountaineering*, „Representations” 59, pp. 135-162.
- Pałkiewicz J.
2006 *Syberia. Wyprawa na biegun zimna*, Poznań: Zysk i S-ka.
Polacy o swoich wyjazdach...
2009 *Polacy o swoich wyjazdach zagranicznych i znajomości języków obcych*, Komunikat z badań, BS/111/2009, Warszawa: Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej.
- Rojek Ch.
2010 *The Labour of Leisure. The Culture of Free Time*, London: Sage.
- Simmel G.
1958 *The Adventure*, in: K. Wolff (ed.), *Georg Simmel 1858-1918*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, pp. 248-258.
1991 *The Alpine Journey*, „Theory Culture and Society” 8: 3, pp. 95-98.
- Smith V.L. (ed.)
1989 *Hosts and Guests. The Anthropology of Tourism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stranger M.
1999 *The Aesthetics of Risk: A Study of Surfing*, „International Review for the Sociology of Sport” 34: 3, pp. 265-276.
- Thompson H.S.
1972 *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, New York: Random House.
- Tulloch J., Lupton D.
2003 *Risk and Everyday Life*, London: Sage.
- Urry J.
1995 *Consuming Places*, London: Routledge.
- Walicki A.
2007 *O inteligencji, liberalizmach i o Rosji*, Kraków: Universitas.
- Walle A.H.
1997 *Pursuing Risk or Insight*, „Annals of Tourism Research” 24: 2, pp. 265-282.
- Wasilewski J.
2006 *Formowanie się nowej struktury społecznej*, in: J. Wasilewski (ed.), *Współczesne społeczeństwo polskie. Dynamika zmian*, Warszawa: Scholar, pp. 47-102.

Internet sources:

Jacek Pałkiewicz. *Adventure & Explorations*, <http://www.palkiewicz.com/ekspedycje/index.php?p=karakum> (20.10.2010).

Anna Horolets

RISKY ENCOUNTERS?
RISK IN TRAVEL NARRATIVES OF NICHE TOURISTS FROM POLAND
TO THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

(Summary)

The article is devoted to the role of risk in tourist experience. It particularly concentrates on risk as a figure of travel narratives, the identity boundaries marker. The empirical material comes from a study on Polish niche tourism to the countries of the former USSR, the rarely chosen destination in post-1989 Poland. The niche status of tourists is defined by the choice of destination and the mode of travel (budget self-organized tourism usually involving some contacts with nature and local dwellers). Risk is present in tourist accounts yet it is not central – the interlocutors do not see themselves as adventure tourists. The theoretical models of risk are presented in the second part of the article to the end of establishing the cultural and historically specific meanings of risk such as uncertainty or change as well as the correlation between risk and control, including control over one's destiny. In the final part of the article the empirical material is analyzed through the lens of presented theoretical models. The strategy of backgrounding risk in narratives serves several goals. It produces counter-hegemonic (affirmative) representations of the visited region; it also creates the image of tourists as exceptional and different thus boosting their social status at home. The side effect of these strategies of risk presentation is however the image of the countries of the former USSR as pre-modern, outdated and pristine, as opposed to the (late) modern sophisticated Europe, with which the tourists associate themselves.

Key words: niche tourism, risk, Poland, former Soviet Union