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Negotiating post-nuclear identities through tourism development in the 'atomic town' Visaginas

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ABSTRACT

This article considers how, by applying participatory approaches and involving stakeholders in tourism development as a process of interpretation of the nuclear past, present, and post-nuclear future, variant forms of tourism (energy, nuclear, Soviet industrial heritage, recreational) promoting different narratives might stimulate change and negotiation around local identity in the 'atomic' town Visaginas in Lithuania. This paper presents the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology that was employed to elaborate on the virtual nuclear tourism route in the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant region in an attempt to empower local communities through tourism development. The researchers have been collaborating with a variety of tourism stakeholders and endeavor to play a mediating role in complex negotiations around identity development through tourism. The authors pose the question as to how dissonance between practicing authentic identities and self-exoticization, community empowerment and commodification, participatory approach to heritagization and critical approach to negative legacy could be resolved.

KEYWORDS Nuclear tourism; atomic heritage; energy tourism; nuclear communities; tourism development; Visaginas; The Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant; industrial heritage tourism; Soviet industrial heritage; Soviet urban heritage

Introduction

With the decline of industry, the designated industrial regions need to find means to redirect and reformulate the trajectories of their economic and social development. Tourism could become an asset in the revitalization of the regions and foster (re) definition and (re)negotiation of post-industrial identities. The closure and decommissioning of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (INPP) in Lithuania has created a specific configuration of national, regional, and local factors determining new challenges for the nuclear community that has been undergoing a dramatic and complicated process of redefining its identity. The Lithuanian nuclear facility encompassing the RMBK reactor of Soviet design, commenced operation in the 1980s. The monoindustrial 'atom town' (*atomgrad*) was built as a satellite settlement of the INPP to accommodate staff and their families. The built city was named after the leader of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Sniečkus, in 1977, and after Lithuania regained its independence, the town was

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renamed Visaginas in 1992. Engineers, nuclear specialists, and construction workers arrived in the 1970s and 1980s from various regions and cities, as well as other nuclear power plants of the Soviet Union. These circumstances determined the city's distinctive multi-ethnic demographic profile. Today, the town is home to people of about 40 nationalities including Lithuanians, Russians, Latvians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Armenians, and Tatars. In 1979, the number of Lithuanians in Visaginas was 5.8%, and the number of Russians was 66.2% (Kavaliauskas 1999). According to the 2011 census, out of 22 thousand residents of the Visaginas district municipality, about 18% were Lithuanians and about 52% Russians.

Following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the planned development of the INNP that operated the RMBK-type reactor was halted. Even though the INPP implemented technical improvements that ensured safety, the design of this RMBK-type reactor was regarded as unsafe. The closure of the INPP has become a condition for the entry of Lithuania into the EU, and a decommissioning process is currently being implemented that will continue until 2038. The reality is that the closure of the nuclear power plant contributes to the decline of the major economy of the town and implies a growing need to reformulate the identity of the nuclear community that lives there. According to Baločkaitė (2010), Visaginas represents a complex and complicated case of socialist heritage, a Russian enclave, a migrant island isolated from the rest of the country both culturally and geographically, a mono industrial urban site, which is difficult to position in the post-Soviet cultural, political, and economic context.

Besides metaphor of island, the comparison with medieval castle and town is employed, speaking about interconnections of INPP and Visaginas, emphasizing social, economic, and technological estrangement from the rest of the national territory and referring to special and exceptional status of the project (Ackermann et al. 2016b). Several strategies have been employed in the post-nuclear period of the town including an attempt to disassociate from the 'atomic' town identity and to position the place as a green and comfortable town seeking to attract new settlers and/or visitors to the town as a touristic and recreational site. The intention to dissociate from the atomic identity reflects a process of disconnecting Visaginas from the INPP while the decommissioning is taking place, during which time the role of the INPP in shaping social identities in the town is changing (Ackermann et al. 2016b). Nevertheless, by undervaluing and neglecting its distinctive nuclear past and authenticity, the town diminishes its opportunities to further develop its identity and promote economic and social developments (including tourism).

This article considers the combination of diverse forms of tourism (energy, atomic heritage, Soviet industrial and urban heritage, recreational) in nuclear towns in the process of decommissioning. The research suggests that such combinations become a negotiation around the identity of nuclear communities, allow for the integration of divergent perspectives and views of the past and future, and elicit an altered perception of identity by applying a participatory approach through involving stakeholders in tourism development, and enhancing their agency. By citing the example of Visaginas town, the authors pose the question as to how dissonance and tension between the commodification and self-exoticization inevitable in the tourism arena, on the one hand, and the practice of authentic identities, on the other hand, could be resolved, and further, how community empowerment and participatory approaches could be combined with a critical approach to a negative and dissonant heritage.

Nuclear facilities and sites as a destination of energy and heritage tourism

Both extant and inoperative nuclear power plants have become tourist attractions over the past years. This process of 'touristification' of nuclear sites responds to the interest in atomic matters promoted by the broader cultural discourse and by the nuclear industry establishment and governments. For the past several decades, the nuclear industry has been actively engaged in communication and tourism at visitor centers where citizens become acquainted with the operating principles of reactors. Energy tourism has evolved from special interest tourism for experts in energy, engineers, and students at technical universities, to become an attraction for wider groups of visitors (school students, families with children, other citizens) demonstrating cutting-edge technologies, building 'energy literacy' and STEM competencies (Jiricka et al. 2010). The potential of nuclear tourism to address the environmental impact of nuclear industry energy and cultivate environmental education has previously been mentioned.

However, taking into consideration that this type of tourism is organized by the energy companies, there is growing criticism of the fact that it becomes a part of a branding strategy by means of which the energy industry seeks to foster loyal consumers and construct a positive image representing a particular energy sector as safe and economically beneficial. The energy companies seek to represent themselves as socially responsible and environmentally aware producers (Frantal and Urbankova 2017). Underlined is the perception that the nuclear industry undertakes an exercise in public relations through tourism activities that seek to construct a 'safety myth' (Sumihara 2003). The nuclear industry in its expositions avoids developing the discourse on insecurity and accidents, so narratives around the disastrous past of the nuclear industry move to other spaces – museums, art projects and exhibitions, and memorials (Storm, Krohn Andersson, and Rindzevičiūtė 2019).

At the same time, promotion of nuclear tourism is related to ongoing heritagization when nuclear memory is preserved, and the nuclear past is represented as something valuable and worthy of being remembered. The heritagization is fostered, in the first instance, by the nuclear industry governments, and other agencies. In the U.S., as a case in point, numerous institutions (e.g. The Atomic Heritage Foundation (AHF)) seek to preserve historical sites, the nuclear landscape, and artifacts of the Manhattan Project. Tourists are attracted to the sites to commemorate the history of the atomic age, nuclear developments, and research. It is noteworthy to mention that this contributes to the formation of the national identity by nurturing 'a sense of civic pride' for groundbreaking research on the nuclear (Berger 2006). On the other hand, nuclear heritage is associated with complex historical issues (creation of the atomic bomb, military use of nuclear energy, and the legacy of the Cold War). The nuclear industry itself is not inclined to develop narratives around accidents. Similarly, the nuclear military industry in heritagization practices avoids emphasizing the inhuman and damaging effects of atomic bombs.

Heritagization processes related to the memory work on nuclear accidents at nuclear power plants belong to the realm of difficult and dark pasts. Countries that survived the Chernobyl accident (Ukraine, Belarus, other countries in the region) underwent the process of nationalization of cultural 'nuclear trauma' and the formation of a collective identity on the basis of traumatic experience (Hannam and Yankovska 2018; Briukhovetska 2016). At the same time, it is noted by Wendland (2020) that 'being nuclear' is associated in Ukraine not only with the Chernobyl disaster but also the path

of resilience and recovery. Efficient crisis management and successful overcoming of the accident at Rivne-1 NPP in 1982 contributed to the maintaining of the professional pride of the nuclear staff in the actions of operators that had proven to be of a sufficient level of training and skills. Nuclearization of Ukraine in the post-Soviet period included adaptation and appropriation of nuclear technology by introducing new practices of modern nuclear safety culture in cooperation with international partners.

In Japan, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima became a 'foundational trauma' in the postwar Japanese identity (Saito 2006). Commemorative practices become a means to overcome a trauma even though traumatic remembering is usually socially contested. Regarding memory work and the process of historicization and musealization of Chernobyl, contesting mnemonic strategies and memory narratives have been noted (Briukhovetska 2016; Wendland 2020; Mažeikienė and Gerulaitienė 2021). In the National Museum of Chernobyl in Kyiv, while presenting the nuclear disaster, one of the prevailing mnemonic strategies and politics of remembering includes an emphasis on the heroic deeds and self-sacrifice of the Soviet people. An additional memory and narrative strategy deployed after the collapse of the Soviet state, represents Chernobyl as a story of victimization, decline, and suffering.

Recently, a critical attitude toward nuclear energy and related legacy has been particularly prominent in the public sphere worldwide. This broader cultural discourse that supports and feeds nuclear disaster tourism destinations, museums, and art exhibitions like Chernobyl Museum and Chernobyl Zone expresses public concerns around the environmental impact and harmful effects of nuclear power. Cultural projects that have gained considerable popularity, such as the HBO mini TV series *Chernobyl*, exemplify and at the same time stimulate the growing interest in nuclear issues by producing knowledge on heritage and history, as well as raising the question of the operational risks of nuclear industry and its impact on human health and the natural environment. Additionally, the series reveals the role of political management of, and interventions into, Soviet technoscience and the manner in which power relations and ideology shaped Soviet nuclearity (Rindzevičiūtė 2020).

Taking into consideration the political and ideological underpinning of nuclear legacy and its association with the terrain of the difficult past, it is understandable why historical memories of the Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine and other countries exposed to the radioactive contamination are intertwined with negative evaluations of the Soviet past. According to Wendland (2020), the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl and the nuclear legacy itself are viewed in Ukraine as an ambivalent and contested part of national identity and history. On the one hand, nuclear industry in Ukraine is considered an alien, Russian imperial project and is closely associated with the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl and a collective perception of other traumatizing historical events (Great Famine (Holodomor), World War II, and Stalinist repressions). On the other – after many decades of nuclearization of Ukraine, an alternate approach and perception of Atom has been established; 'a sense of technocratic pragmatism, professional pride, and ownership with respect to the local nuclear plant remains dominant in Ukrainian nuclear communities' (Wendland 2020, 1166).

In Lithuania, the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, a Soviet modernist project for developing nuclear energy industry with Soviet-type RMBK reactors in the 1970s and 1980s, is viewed as a Soviet legacy belonging to a dissonant heritage. Generally speaking, the inheritance of the industrial past in Lithuania is perceived as a problematic issue since the former industrial communities have not been claiming the heritage of Soviet

industry as their own and in that sense they have been disinherited (Drėmaitė 2012; Dovydaitytė 2021). Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) describe dissonant heritage as referring to discordance, discrepancy, lack of agreement or consistency. Dissonance leads to disinheritance when distinctive historical experiences are marginalized, discounted, distorted, or ignored (ibid.). In Lithuania, by associating the period of industrialization with the historical period of the Soviet occupation, a certain part of the legacy (historical experiences of work and everyday life) has not become heritage, and former industrial communities have been disinherited from both Soviet past and Soviet industry (Dovydaitytė 2021). In the post-Soviet period, heritagization was oriented toward the construction of new national identities. The process implied 'deconstructing' identities created during the socialist period, which is why many elements representing Soviet and communist identities were eliminated by both forgetting and erasing memory related to this period. However, it has been noticed that erasing memories of the communist past (including the renaming of streets and removing symbols of the former regimes in the public spaces, such as public statuary), were accompanied by frustration due to the enduring presence of the material legacy of communism (built heritage of communism) (Light 2000).

Taking into consideration the dissonant nature of the Soviet heritage, tourism development based on this legacy seems to be problematic in Lithuania and other post-communist regions. Lithuanian scholars (Radzevičius and Jurėnienė 2014) analyzing the potential of Soviet heritage tourism in Lithuania reveal its ambivalent nature. Nowadays, tourist attractions attributed to this type of heritage are provided in venues such as Grūtas Park, Plokštinė Missile Base, The Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (informally referred to as the KGB Museum), the Soviet Bunker, and so on. The research indicated that the Soviet cultural and industrial heritage as a travel destination is perceived more positively by younger tourists (aged 18–45 years) and seen as more attractive for people living in cities (Ibid). The research participants stressed their preference for a tourist experience encompassing entertainment and learning. A preponderance of research participants in the age group of 46–60 years assesses Soviet heritage tourism negatively. Concomitantly, tourism experts in Lithuania point out possible issues and obstacles related to Soviet heritage tourism, stressing that the sector still comprises a small part of the market due to little demand as it touches on sensitive historical memories and faces unfavorable public opinion and ignorance of the Soviet past. The Soviet heritage is thus perceived as problematic due to divergent interpretations of this heritage (ibid.).

The theoretical and empirical observations provided above demonstrate that the emerging nuclear and industrial tourism in the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant region in Lithuania creates economic and social opportunities and contributes to reinforcing place identity. However, the inclusion of Visaginas as an object of socialist heritage within tourism development created specific challenges. The town is considered a showcase for the implementation of Soviet industrialization policy as an example of planned Soviet urban environment and as an embodiment of Soviet ideology and an attempt to create a socialist welfare utopia (Freimane 2016).

The above suggests that the process of tourism development and construction of post-industrial and post-nuclear identity would imply a negotiation between the local nuclear communities undergoing a dramatic process of identity change and stakeholders and institutions representing dominant discourses of memory that could lead to diminishing the discordance and discrepancy in interpreting the past.

Empowering the community and promoting stakeholder collaboration through tourism

The concept of dissonant heritage reveals issues of participation within local communities in tourism development. According to Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), dissonance is inherent in the process of the creation of a homogeneous heritage tourist product that disinherits minorities and marginalizes social, ethnic, and regional groups. By seeking to reach social cohesion and support local identity by maintaining ethnic and cultural variety, by accepting regional and local differences, a heterogeneous heritage tourist product should be created (ibid. p. 23). A participatory approach to community involvement in which various social groups provide divergent views of the past and create contrasting heritages and place-products allows for the negative impact of disinheritance on the identity development of the local community to be avoided.

That members of the host community should be involved in tourism planning because they (a) have a historical understanding of how the region adapts to the change; (b) will be the ones most closely affected by tourism; and (c) will be expected to become an integral part of the tourism product and create a hospitality atmosphere (Simmons 1994 cit. by Nyaupane, Morais, and Dowler 2006). Community involvement in heritage projects can influence residents' sense of belonging, aid in the development of social networks with others, and improve residents' pride and understanding of the value of the local area (Nicholas, Thapa, and Ko 2009). Involvement of the local community creates a bond through mutual understanding and trust and helps to reduce potential conflicts (Bramwell and Sharman 1999).

An extensive body of literature affirms the importance of collaboration between various stakeholders in developing tourism that establishes a suitable balance between economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects in order to ensure its long-term sustainability (Yodsuwan and Butcher 2012). However, ensuring stakeholder collaboration is a great challenge due to diverse and competing interests from a wide variety of actors (Wondirad, Tolkach, and King 2020): representatives of national, regional, and local government organizations; local communities; private tourism institutions (tour operators, guides); non-governmental organizations, and so on.

Jackson (2006) developed a framework to foster the process of community participation and involvement in tourism development. He demonstrated that the process begins with the identification of key stakeholders and interest groups and the establishment of communication mechanisms, and information flow channels among stakeholders. Major elements are the timing of involvement, representativeness, resource accessibility, independence, influence and power, transparency, and the decision-making structure (Tosun 2006).

Tourism as an experience economy is oriented toward gaining new experiences, feelings, and impressions that arise and emerge when extraordinary and unusual objects are exposed to tourists (Bujdosó et al. 2015) and that is why tourist products should be specific, surprising, different from other experiences, and exotic in order to attract tourists and create memorable experiences. Tourism should be based on the local capacity to set attractive and engaging stages with experiential value created through surprise (Jeannerat 2012). At the same time, tourists are looking for 'authentic' experiences and the experience economy is oriented toward the creation of a feeling of authenticity in individuals (Olsen 2002; Jeannerat 2012).

However, commercialism renders tourist experiences inauthentic due to the play of power, dependency, and monetary transaction (Olsen 2002). As tourism projects are implemented, local communities could become concerned about how their tradition and heritage are portrayed to tourists (Gonzalez 2008, cit. by Xie 2015).

Scholars highlight the ambiguity of the 'sharing culture' in the tourism industry when culture and identity, traditions, and cultural practices are 'sold out', transformed into tourism products and representations, and become a commodity (Bunten 2008; Cassel and Maureira 2017), At the same time, the self-commodification implies the self-exoticizing as the Other. Auto-exoticism involves the representation of culture as a simplifying and unifying trope (Bunten 2010). Empowering strategies for stakeholders in the process of (self)commodification would imply maintaining resistance to objectification according to stereotypes (Bunten 2008). According to Olsen (2002), existential authenticity, closeness, and sincerity in relations between tourists and hosts (local community participating in tourist activities) can be achieved when 'the tourist role' is altered or removed and the impact of commodification and alienation is diminished.

Method

This paper employs the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology that was adopted in order to elaborate on the virtual nuclear tourism route in the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant region in Lithuania and seeks to empower local communities through tourism development. The researchers collaborate with a variety of tourism stakeholders and attempt to play a mediating role in complex negotiations around identity development through tourism. Participatory Action Research (Tekin and Kotaman 2013) generates collective knowledge and empowers communities to improve their lives. The research process offers opportunities for active interaction, dialog, and negotiation in an effort to transform reality through several cyclic stages of planning, action, observation, systematization, and reflection (ibid.). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, discussion groups, participant observation, and reflection. The research was initiated in June 2017, when a group of researchers held several meetings at Visaginas municipality (with the mayor of the town, the vice-mayor, the director of administrations, heads, and staff of municipality departments), with representatives of local communities, cultural institutions, comprehensive schools, and so on. Meetings with the CEO of the INPP Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant and deputies, the staff of the communication department, engineers, and other employees were arranged, and a tour around the INPP Information Center was conducted. Following all this activity, the research concept regarding the development of nuclear tourism in the region as a way to empower the local community through tourism development was elaborated.

With regard to the fieldwork, the research commenced with the organization of several round table discussions with Visaginas authorities, the academic community, representatives from the Tourism Information Center, the INPP, and other interested parties in 2018–2019. Also, within 2018–2020, the research team conducted fieldwork by organizing research trips to Visaginas and its surroundings, and participated in town festivals for the purpose of actively observing the surroundings and the community. The researchers conducted more than 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives from the local government, the administrative staff of the neighborhood, representatives of social projects, and community members, artists, teachers, and

the administration of local schools, as well as representatives of the tourism information center, tour operators, and so on. The data collected shed light on how the community members identify themselves. It also detailed their expectations of, and attitude toward, tourism management and the prospects of becoming an authentic and unique town. Several public discussions were held with different groups of stakeholders to present the concept of a virtual route for nuclear tourism, and participation in various public meetings with the community together with events based on the idea of tourism development and heritage management became an important part of the investigation.

Additionally, the research included the investigation of physical spaces and local landscapes, visits to, and analysis of, art projects, and participation in excursions and tours provided by local tour operators in Visaginas and at the INNP. Social mapping and identification of resources allowed for an evaluation of both the needs and resources available and possible solutions to the problems in the community. The researchers gained many valuable insights from the participatory research project *The Laboratory of Critical Urbanism* (Ackermann, Cope, and Liubimau 2016a). This revealed the dilemmas of contemporary urbanization, the changing meanings and functions of the Soviet built environment, and suggested Visaginas community projects and interventions to enhance inclusion of community within the new forms of urbanity.

Identifying stakeholders and resources for the tourism development in the (post)nuclear site

The research identified diverse groups of stakeholders whose interpretation of the past and estimation of how attractive the town is for tourists differed. The researchers themselves became important players who facilitated the elaboration of the concept of nuclear tourism and contributed to the development of a virtual nuclear tourism tour (https://atominisvisaginas.lt/lt/). The work on this educational tourist product included cooperation with educational experts and teachers in Lithuania, bringing the route closer to the school curriculum and other educational activities, and responding to the needs of diverse tourists and learners.

The INPP, one of the major stakeholders, develops the narrative within the tours including the entrance to the power plant (where currently the demolition works are taking place) and in the Information Center. The INPP propagates a narrative that more likely complies with the conception of energy tourism that represents the prominent role played by nuclear energy in the country's economy until 2009, when the second reactor was brought to a stop. Visitors become acquainted with specific features of nuclear energy – how electricity is produced from the heat generated by nuclear fission chain reactions. The main features of radioactivity, nuclear fission chain reaction, and the principles of how the reactor operates are detailed (a model of the nuclear power plant is presented). Characteristics of the landscape are described and explained – how it was important to select the water body when constructing the power plant (the power plant was constructed near a Drūkšių lake); the technical aspects of decommissioning and nuclear waste management are introduced emphasizing the reliability and safety of the technologies. Additionally, the performance culture and safety standards that ensure the reliability of nuclear energy are discussed.

Moreover, the narration includes the elements of industrial heritage tourism: at the beginning of the tour, the construction of the nuclear power plant in the 1970s and the development of the satellite town are introduced. The narration radiates with professional pride in the first generation of the nuclear community emphasizing that the construction was a large ambitious project and that many resources were allocated from the entire Soviet Union. The arrival of the constructors of the INPP, engineers, and experts in nuclear energy from other regions of the large country; the quality and speed of the construction; the enthusiasm and devotion to the building of the enterprise and town; and the creation of the town 'for themselves' were all underlined. The feeling of professional pride related to the grandeur and ambitiousness of the construction of the INPP project, the exceptional professional standards of its operation, and the competence of nuclear staff demonstrate a nuclear exceptionalism (Hecht 2009, Wendland 2016) that is reflected in numerous symbolic, political and social practices, and attitudes and the self-perception of the nuclear workers. The INPP as an active tourism organizer and an institution promoting atomic heritage represents in its narratives a specific organizational culture and the work ethics of the nuclear industry.

Even though the enterprise no longer produces electricity and there is no necessity for increasing its attraction for energy consumers, important decommissioning works will be continuing until 2038; thus, through communication, tourism, and educational activities, the enterprise is enhancing its reputation and contributes to the nuclear staff retaining their professional pride. Schmid (2015) considers the professional identity of *atomshchiki* (nuclear workers) shaped in the Soviet civilian nuclear industry one more sign of nuclear exceptionalism.

A visit to the interior of the INPP includes a performance of the 'security theater', a concept described by Schneier (2007) and later applied to the nuclear energy sector by Storm, Krohn Andersson, and Rindzevičiūtė (2019). The 'security theater' refers to security measures taken at nuclear power plants that offer a 'side effect', i.e., a special experience for the tourist, the intensified sense of danger, and risk. The 'security theater' at the INPP, described by Gerulaitienė and Mažeikienė (2021), is one of the main tourist attractions.

The educational purpose of the energy tourism being implemented at the INPP in the information center's exposition is to educate for energy literacy, to develop STEM education. Topics on environmental education are being partly introduced, for example, narration and emphasis on the ongoing decommissioning while employing safe and advanced technology that is harmless to the environment and people. Discussions are held about how the said nuclear facilities will be securely hidden underground (a model of the storage is exhibited). It is worth noting that relatively a small part of the Information Center's exposition is dedicated to the effect on both the environment and people of the radioactivity of the elements used in the nuclear energy sector. The exposition ends (in a marginal place) with a displayed text that recounts the long duration (thousands of years) of decay of radioactive substances.

It is interesting to note that a broader cultural discourse questions this INPP narrative about the safety of nuclear energy. The series *Chernobyl* that was launched in May 2019 aroused interest in nuclear energy globally. The series depicted the Chernobyl catastrophe, the causes of the disaster, and reconstructed the process, and the clean-up work after the accident. The movie series reveals the nature of nuclearity as a technopolitical regime (Hecht 2009), in which the nuclear energy sector, as a science-based economy, operated from within a specific political regime. The series depicted

important features of the Soviet nuclear energy sector: secrecy, how the political regime operated controlling the nuclear energy sector, and how important information was concealed.

Chernobyl was filmed in Lithuania (residential neighborhoods built in Vilnius city in the Soviet times), in the territory of the INPP and the physical environment in many instances resembles that of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. During the filming of the movie, the HBO creative crew received many pieces of advice from representatives of the local creative crew concerning the peculiarities and artifacts of the Soviet epoch, which lent more authenticity to the narration. The presentation of the series in Lithuania raised an interest in the filming of the series – this prompted the development of cinematographic tourism. Several tours exploring the film locations took place in Kaunas and Vilnius.

In addition, the series triggered a wave of nuclear tourism to the INPP and the interest of both local and foreign visitors increased[1].[1] It should be admitted that the price of the tour, approx. EUR 60, is quite high with respect to the overall socioeconomic context in Lithuania. The INPP commenced making reservations for tours to the reactor hall 1 year in advance. Previously underemphasized elements, such as the similarity of the INPP to Chernobyl (the RMBK-type reactor), and explanations by the INPP staff as to how the accident could have happened in Chernobyl, now became part of the narrative that also underlined that despite similarities to the RMBK reactor, the INPP was safe, and similar catastrophe could not have happened in the INPP. At the same time, the enterprise engaged with cinematographic tourism, since particular circumstances of the filming are introduced to the visitors. Thus, due to the actions of various external factors: the creators of the *Chernobyl* series, the HBO, as the largest commercial TV channel in the U.S. and a creative crew who drew on abundant archive materials on the catastrophe, as well as the Nobel Prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich's book 'Chernobyl Prayer', the staff of the INPP included in the narration material concerning Chernobyl and disaster tourism, information that is not characteristic of nuclear energy enterprises that usually avoid addressing nuclear catastrophes and disasters. In such a way, the narrative is being revised, reshaped, and renegotiated.

It is important to highlight that the theme of criticism of the nuclear energy sector as a specific technopolitical regime is not, though, reflected in the narrative of the INPP, where the perspective of energy tourism and industrial heritage dominates. The narrative of the INPP does not emphasize Soviet legacy and does not present any critical evaluation of the Soviet past. As various scholars who contributed to research project presented in the article (Dovydaitytė 2021) noted, the Soviet story line is almost eliminated in the narrative of the INPP.

It needs to be mentioned that the introduction and representation of the INPP as a Soviet industrial heritage object would incorporate a revelation of the features of Soviet nuclearity. The Soviet nuclear power industry operated in the context of 'extraordinary institutional penetration of the party-state', and it became 'a *fusion* between politics and economics' (Bunce 1999; cited by Schmid 2015 (p. 24)). Nuclear industry is not a banal economy, not only because of the use of nuclear reaction and radioactive materials that pose potential danger and risks to human health but also because this

[1] In 2019, almost 5 thousand people from Lithuania and foreign countries visited the INPP, about 500 tours excursions were organized. In 2018, the INPP organized 240 tours excursions (which was is twice less) for comprising over 2 thousand people.

sector is highly politicized and embedded within complex relations between the technical and the political (Hecht 2009). The Soviet nuclear industry was balancing between two competing bureaucracies and operated under the jurisdiction of different ministries – the conventional power industry and the nuclear weapons complex where responsibility was split between the civilian organization, the Ministry of Energy and Electrification (Minergo), and the Ministry of Medium Machine Building (Sredmash) running the Soviet Union's military nuclear program (Schmid 2015). The ministry *Sredmash* supervised the entire Soviet nuclear industry, including the production of nuclear warheads. The nuclear industry facilities were managed by the *Sredmash* ministry that operated in compliance with a highly secret regime and strict discipline. In secret Soviet documentation, nuclear power plants were encoded as a post office box number, specifically the INPP in the period of construction had a specific encoded secret title.

When designing the tourist route (https://atominisvisaginas.lt/lt/), the EDUATOM project research team (presented in this article) treat this historical narrative on secrecy as a feature that could be highly interesting and attractive to tourists. Historical connections to the military nuclear industry turn the INPP into a tourist entity that is similar to other military nuclear tourism attractions in Lithuania: the Nuclear Bunker in Kaunas, a former Soviet military nuclear site, and the Plokštinė Missile Base (Museum of Cold War). After the issue of the *Chernobyl* series in 2019, the tourism portal in Lithuania, www.lithuania.travel, created an account 'Nuclear Tourism', where, additionally to the INPP, links to a number of objects of Soviet military nuclear tourism were provided (https://www.lithuania.travel/en/news/nuclear-tourism-experience-in-lithuania-for-fans-of-the-chernobyl-tv-series). The tourist attraction 'Plokštinė Missile Base. Museum of Cold War' recounts the secret Soviet Union's nuclear military industry and the nuclear arming in the era of the Cold War. This Soviet legacy is represented negatively and in a critical manner. Constructing this investigation and discussion so as to include the topic of Soviet legacy in the virtual nuclear tourism route, the research team define this topic as a field of tension and at the same time, a domain of potential negotiation between the representatives of the INPP and the Visaginas community around the interpretation and presentation of the past to tourists. Such an explanation of the Soviet industrial past is attributed to the dissonant heritage, in which different stakeholders interpret, evaluate, and introduce the past of the INPP through a tourist product in different ways. A possible solution and a means to reduce that tension might be achieved by splitting the story of the history of the INPP into different historical stages, and moving the narration from the secret strategic industrial object of the Soviet epoch to the power plant in independent Lithuania, which currently is carrying out the important mission of decommissioning.

Positioning Visaginas as a tourist attraction: identity of 'green and young town' versus a site of soviet industrial heritage

In 2018, during group discussions and individual interviews with local policy-makers, cultural institutions, and tourism providers, the researchers sought to find out how representatives of official institutions viewed Visaginas's distinct identity features, and the uniqueness of the town following the closure of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. The representatives of the public authorities emphasized the importance of natural resources in the INPP region and the multicultural, multilingual, and multi-ethnic profile

of the town, which provides opportunities for recreational and cultural tourism. The main tourist attractions in the region include sports and leisure activities (including walking, cycling, boating, kayaking), the multicultural cuisine of the region, music festivals, and other events. Analysis of the Visaginas strategic development plan for 2016–2022 revealed that the municipality seeks to create attractive and effective use of existing leisure and sports facilities. The research participants point out that for several decades the town was developing non-formal education and sports branches of acrobatics, swimming, and rowing, as distinctive elements of the town. However, it has been admitted in conversations that other neighboring towns of the region (Ignalina and Zarasai) offer more attractive natural resources and facilities.

The research confirmed an observation made by other scholars (Baločkaitė 2010) pointing out that representatives of the local authorities tend to minimize the socialist past while constructing the place identity and emphasize the de-ideologized image of Visaginas as a young and green town offering comfortable conditions for life and leisure time. The opportunity to position the town in tourism development as a former socialist town built for the Soviet nuclear energy industry was negatively gaged by representatives of public authorities, official cultural organizations, and tourism organizations that took part in the discussions. It should be noted that, during the discussions held by the research team in 2017–2018, representatives of the said official town organizations negatively evaluated the positioning of Visaginas as a former Soviet town but, on the other hand, they did not highlight the image of the atomic town closely connected to the INPP either.

This provision can be explained by admitting that the town is trying to find a new identity that would discover another direction for the development after the closure of the major industry maintaining this mono-industrial town. It is interesting to note that while eliminating nuclear and Soviet heritage from being positioned in tourism, it would be hard not to admit that sports and non-formal education were formerly a part of the Soviet social welfare. Likewise, the town's multicultural and multilingual characters as a specific feature cannot be explained without connecting it to the labor-based migration inside the country in the Soviet epoch and the foundation of the atomic town.

Such an attitude from authorities and official stakeholders reflects a complex positioning of the place identity in the planned former socialist atomic town. Despite authentic experiences and retained memory of the Soviet past, there are attempts to position the place's identity in a way similar to that of other towns in Lithuania, so that Visaginas would not differ from other places and be positioned as the Other. In terms of the dominating policy of identity and memory, the memory of the Soviet period industrialization is not being cultivated in Lithuania, cultural and industrial heritages are not considered as valuable and positive; therefore, the identity formation has been going through both an elimination of the Soviet identity and active forgetting of the Soviet socialist past (Baločkaitė 2010). As one of the research participants said in the individual interview, 'The residents and the municipality do not need this dissonant heritage, we are a town anyway, which is not perceived by many because of the linguistic barrier, the Russian language prevails, we cannot be proud of that, we must be an acceptable town, understandable to all, clear and beautiful' (research participant Y).

In this case, we observe that the place identity is being positioned in the town branding and tourism with reference to the dominating discourses by weakening the socialist legacy in the identity and history of the town. However, this provision does not

match the general logic of self-commodification in tourism when culture and identity are transformed into tourism products for sale and, therefore, tourism products are offered through self-exoticizing and self-positioning as the Other. According to this logic, the town should look for distinctive features of identity that could attract tourists.

The role of local community in maintaining place identity and heritage and developing tourist products

Representatives of the town's local community and developers of tourism initiatives are attempting to dissolve this tension, and cultural organizations, and private tour operators encourage place storytelling. The local community, as a major stakeholder in the development of tourism as identity, is not homogeneous in Visaginas. The town is home to the residents of three generations: the senior generation (older than 55 years) – those who built the town and specialists in the nuclear industry who arrived in Lithuania in the 1970–1980s from other regions of the Soviet Union; the middle (aged 40–55), and the youngest (aged 25–40) (Šliavaitė 2012), who differ in terms of their economic activities, cultural and social capital, and hold their own specific cultural identity. In terms of professional performance, the representatives of the first two generations are connected to the operation of the nuclear power plant. A part of the second generation comprises Lithuanians who arrived in Visaginas from other cities and towns in Lithuania to work as professionals. A relatively large number of this group works in the area of public administration and forms the town's place identity at the institutional level. Lithuanians who arrived to work and live there relate that they, as young specialists were offered jobs and accommodation in Visaginas after graduating from university. The specialized economic activities and type of occupation in which the first and second generations were employed (work at the nuclear power plant), and the use of Russian as first language both for work and at home, as well as an insufficient command of Lithuanian, considerably limited social relationships outside the town. The closure of the nuclear power plant has also become a factor that limits integration into broader networks, and diminishes possibilities to shift to other economic activities (ibid.). Meanwhile, the role of the third, youngest, generation in the development of the town's new identity in the post-industrial and post-nuclear period is important. This group holds a specific linguistic and cultural identity. Those who were born in independent Lithuania are fluent in Lithuanian and English languages and many of them were educated in the humanities and social sciences related to arts, creative industries, and management, and have lived and studied both in other cities in Lithuania and abroad. They maintain social relationships outside of Visaginas and are active on various social networks. This group most actively responds to invitations from external participants to engage in various artistic projects and initiatives[2], and they actively participate in creating new tourism services and products.

Furthermore, they become 'negotiators' and mediators between the generations of their grandparents and parents for whom the Soviet era is the 'positive past', the time of their youth, when they were working, building this town and creating the nuclear

[2]In 2017, Lithuanian National Drama Theater staged a play "A Green Lawn" (Lith. Žalia pievelė) based on narratives of employees of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant and Visaginas residents (dir. J.Tertelis, K. Werner). Residents of Visaginas (mostly the youth, representatives of the third generation) acted in this documentary performance and narrated their stories.

industry, building families, and the external groups (tourists and other citizens of Lithuania, artists, and scholars) who treat the socialist past and heritage as a tourist attraction or as a source of inspiration for their artistic projects. Thus, this generation of youth is ready to mediate between various groups of stakeholders and perform the role of facilitators in changing the nuclear identity of the town in the post-nuclear stage. On the one hand, they enshrine and represent the authentic experience of the first two generations, their pride in the built town and nuclear power plant, and express their existential authenticity and nostalgia for the past. On the other hand, this group is creating and constructing the tourist product that has specific 'Socialism for Sale' elements to be consumed by foreigners and a particular segment of Lithuanian tourists.

In addition, this group is conscious of the prevailing official policy on identity and memory that treats the Soviet legacy as a 'negative'. Moreover, there is an attempt to reduce the differentness, otherness, and alienation past of Visaginas and present it as a town similar to other towns of Lithuania with a similar Soviet industrial and urban heritage.

A company called 'LitWild'[3], one of the successfully performing private tour operators, whose owners are third-generation Visaginas residents, organizes adventure tourism in Aukštaitija National Park. Tourists are invited to private, customized eco-tours that include bike riding and hiking through dense forests, along beautiful lakes, and close to spongy swamps. These activities in nature are marketed through the use of poetic language and invitations to engage in esthetic and bodily experiences in nature: 'In winter, immerse in a snowy forest fairy-tale, walk on frozen lakes and enjoy the silence of sleeping nature'[4] Additionally, these tours include cultural activities involving ethnographic acquaintance with surrounding villages, in which tourists are able to talk to residents of these villages, listen to their authentic stories, legends, visit a sauna, and taste genuine rustic food. Acquaintance with the atomic town Visaginas is another cultural activity offered to tourists. These customized group tours offer visits to the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant Control Room Simulator and tours of the interior of the INPP, as well as walks around the atomic town Visaginas. This tourist product offered in several languages (Lithuanian, English, Russian) is an attempt to address place identity by utilizing all important elements of the region to create an experience that would be rich, beautiful, and picturesque in an environment used for adventure and nature-based tourism. Nuclear power plant facilities as tourist attractions involve nuclear heritage; tours to Russian-speaking Visaginas towns reveal the peculiarities of the Soviet atomic city. It is important to underline that an opportunity for Lithuanian and foreign tourists to become acquainted with residents of households around the Ignalina region and their rural living involves the place identity that is connected to Lithuanian heritage in this area before the construction of the INPP, in the pre-Soviet period. Thus, this tourist route 'sells' relaxation in nature as a major tourist attraction for Lithuanian citizens and foreigners, thus appealing to the heritage and this has positive-affirmative value (natural and ethnographic cultural heritage) coinciding with the prevailing identity policy that considers nature the 'true' Lithuanian treasure. Additionally, this tourism product offers the features and attractions of a very 'exotic' place (nuclear and Soviet industrial and cultural heritage). It should be noted that we find such a merging of rural tourism

[3] https://litwildtravel.com/home. Anton and Anastasia Jevtiuchovs are the owners of this company and organizers of tourism.
[4] https://litwildtravel.com/hiking-tours.

with nuclear tourism, in another nuclear heritage space in Lithuania, 'Plokštinė' Missile Base. 'The Museum of Cold War', which is near Plateliai lake, is a very popular site for tourists and holiday-makers. It is interesting to note that this hidden interconnection of nature-based tourism and nuclear tourism is related to the specific feature of nuclear territories. Nuclear power plants were built near lakes due to 'the need for uninterrupted access to large amounts of water to cool the atomic fission process directed the nuclear territorialization to seashores, lakesides and riverbanks' (Storm 2020, 320). The natural environment and wild areas around nuclear power plants became security buffer zones which were given the status of nature reserves (ibid. 320). Tours around Visaginas provided by the cultural initiative NGO 'Urban Stories'[5] are another example of the tourism product that recounts the town's history for both local residents and tourists arriving from other towns and cities of Lithuania. This NGO receives funding from various cultural foundations and programs. The tours encompass, in the first instance, features of industrial tourism by appealing to both tangible and intangible industrial heritage. A further feature lies in introducing Visaginas as a socialist urban planning case in point that represents the Soviet urban heritage. This feature alone does not make this town an exclusive tourism destination since almost every city and town in Lithuania has buildings attributed to Soviet-era architecture. It is the history of the atomic settlement (*atomgrad*) reflecting the foundation of a planned town with Soviet architecture within the Soviet atomic program and in the period of industrialization that makes Visaginas exceptional. This town, named Sniečkus, after a long-time Lithuanian communist leader, exemplifies the ideal of Soviet welfare for workers in the nuclear industry. It featured the natural environment and higher housing standards as well as the reward of salaries several times higher than the Lithuanian average, which made Sniečkus something of a socialist paradise and elite place. Most of the dwellings were built of red brick – an exceptional attitude toward the welfare of the atomic workers as red brick represented the 'improved' quality of housing (Cinis et al., 2008). Thus, the topic of the Soviet architectural heritage, in this case, is merged in this tourism product with the functionality of the mono-industrial atomic town, and thus, with the atomic heritage. This tourist route and tours around Visaginas were developed by the tour operators after field studies involving interviews with local residents mostly belonging to the first generation, and the analysis of historical documents. The storyline of this tour encompasses the narratives around the history of the creation of the town, buildings and symbols, and the life stories of people residing there. This is a feature of industrial heritage tourism that demonstrates a strong relationship between the place identity and industry rooted within the communities employing the oral history narrative of industry workers as well as introducing their experiences, memories, stories, and anecdotes. These narratives promote and represent to tourists an existential authenticity of the local residents, and develop a closeness and sincerity in relationships between the local community and tourists. Industrial heritage becomes the reconstruction of 'landscapes of nostalgia' (Halewood and Hannam 2001, 566, cit. by Xie 2015); in this way, tourism supports nostalgia and the pride of local residents in their role in the former industry. The tour includes a visit to the stela bearing an image of a crane symbolizing the peaceful nucleus and the Geiger counter (currently out of order), which reflects the nuclear identity of the town and a monument to commemorate the victims of the Chernobyl catastrophe (including a narrative about how this nuclear disaster was

[5] Oksana Denisenko, resident of Visaginas town, is the leader of the company "Urban Stories".

interpreted in the town). In addition, fountains, pedestrian walks and streets, sculptures, and elements of small buildings signify the foundation of the town and specific stages of its history. An important part of the narrative is to introduce the manner in which the town was built as well as the available leisure, recreational and social life of the first generation who arrived to build the town (builders and *atomshchiks*). Urban storytelling included in the touristic route has become a place-identity-building, reconstruction, and negotiation process. Storytelling becomes a way to collect and share the intangible heritage of the industrial and atomic town and exemplify the cultural identity of its creators and bearers. At the same time, this intangible heritage together with a unique built and physical environment constitutes the authenticity as 'a real history of the place'. The authenticity is described as the 'place of the soul' encompassing 'a world of imagination, passion, fantasy, reflection, that is neither physical and material, on the one hand, nor spiritual and abstract on the other, and yet bound to them both' (Hillman 1998, cit. by Xie 2015).

In collaboration with young architects and artists, the cultural initiative 'Urban Stories' prepared a tour including an artistic performance around extraordinary and urban features of Visaginas. The tour, as a specific tourism product, tells the story of the architectural planning and construction of the planned atomic town, and the architectural characteristics of dwellings and public buildings. It introduced a recounting of how architects from Leningrad (present-day St Petersburg) who designed the town used the example of typical housing projects from other cities of the Soviet Union: Leningrad, Obninsk (a nuclear power plant operated in this city, too), other cities of Lithuania: Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda. The tour chronicles the role of Lithuanian architects in the designing of public buildings in Visaginas. Thus, this narrative, on the one hand, connects the architectural features of Visaginas town with the Soviet urban and architectural heritage. On the other hand, the relationship of Visaginas to other cities and towns of Lithuania is revealed by presenting the Soviet buildings as a fragment of the history of Lithuanian architecture. In this way, Visaginas tourist operators and cultural tourism staff engage with the debates taking place in Lithuania around the value of Soviet urban heritage and contribute to an understanding and interpretation of this historical architecture.

The launching of the *Chernobyl* series on screen in May and June 2019 impacted the self-representation of the INPP through communication and tourism, and also influenced the formation of place identity in tourism in Visaginas. The surge of tourists to Visaginas together with many publications on national media portals provided convincing arguments suggesting that the atomic identity of the town Visaginas is a feature that defines the uniqueness, the particularity of the town. In July 2019, the researchers (authors of this article) participated in several meetings with stakeholders: municipality, tourism operators, and developers, as well as local residents. The meeting and discussions with a newly elected mayor of Visaginas and his administration staff revealed their determination to position the atomic town's identity in communication and tourism.

In July 2019, a group of local residents, representatives of the third generation of the local community, submitted their proposals for tourism development to the municipality. The suggestions included the enhancement of the town's atomic brand, the transformation of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant Control Room simulator situated in the town into a more attractive site that would include the organization of educational and artistic events. The group of tourism developers-enthusiasts suggested designing

a model-simulation of the nuclear reactor in the town, and preparing nuclear bunkers (fallout shelters) to attract tourists. In addition, the group suggested the municipality develops the ethno-route that would realize the idea of cultural tourism – to introduce the multi-ethnic and multilingual uniqueness of Visaginas that encompasses some 40 ethnic groups. They suggested presenting the multitude of cultures by creating a theme sculpture park based on the images of ethnic fairy tales to be arranged in the forest and swamps around the town. Moreover, there was a suggestion to develop eco-tourism including a self-guided path around Visaginas lake for water activities, fishing, tourist hikes, and information about the swamp habitat. Another suggestion was to position Visaginas within an Arts Route showcasing pieces by young artists and subcultures, murals on walls of buildings around the town, a skateboarding and graffiti park, and the installations of futuristic sculptures and atomic themes. These visions have become another example of how the third generation view the particularity of Visaginas as the atomic, multicultural, and artists' town. It is a specific attempt to 'negotiate' around the new place identity, merging the industrial and atomic identity of grandparents and parents with the development of the post-Soviet town by employing art, tourism, and creative industries.

Concluding remarks

The stakeholders in the atomic town of Visaginas provide different interpretations of the past and contribute to creating heterogeneous heritage tourism products that represent contrasting narratives. At the same time, these diverse narratives express the nature of particular forms of tourism (energy, nuclear, industrial, and urban heritage, adventure). Since by nature, the Soviet nuclear legacy and atomic heritage are multilayered, disparate social groups and communities engage in negotiation around interpretation and representation of the past and place identity in the tourism narratives and products. The researchers recognized de-ideologized and depoliticized representations of the past and present as well as depictions of nuclear energy industry and urban life without any reference to Soviet legacy, as a strategy for constructing identity in the tourism products promoted by the key player – the atomic industry company (the INPP). These de-ideologized tourism narratives are aimed at maintaining the corporate reputation of nuclear industry, expressing nuclear workers' and residents' pride in the past, maintaining and rebuilding ('repairing') the self-esteem and dignity of the local nuclear community. It is not surprising that these strategies for constructing the place identity and self-representations in the tourism products turn the industrial place of Visaginas into a 'site of nostalgia'.

Meanwhile, new narratives and tourism products emerge through engaging with external stakeholders from creative industries and the arts, academia, and education. These actors produce and support broader cultural, ideological, and educational discourses on environmental concerns and critiques of the Soviet legacy. Among external stakeholders, there are institutions that participate in sustaining and implementing dominant policies of memory and identity. Young residents of the nuclear town, the third generation of the nuclear community, fulfill the prominent role of mediators who address the notion of place identity and facilitate the process of negotiation. Their specific cultural and social capital, participation in external networks, and willingness to work in the specific economy – tourism and cultural industries – allow for negotiation around the interests and expectations of different groups with diverging interpretations

of heritage and local identity. This negotiation combines several strategies that allow a shift from nuclear to post-nuclear identity. On the one hand, it could be achieved by creating narratives that maintain the self-esteem and professional pride of the two first generations of the *atomshchiki* (nuclear workers), and on the other hand, by aligning narratives of the tourist route to cultural and ideological beliefs and values held by tourists. One further strategy would incorporate engaging in collaboration with external players (architects, artists, scholars, educators and teachers, journalists, funding institutions, etc.) who interpret the past and envisage the future of the atomic town differently from the local nuclear community.

The research revealed emerging tensions between commodification and community authenticity. Tourism as an economic activity is designed to develop 'commodified hospitality' and seeks to offer tourist attractions that reflect the logic of the market – the search for exceptional and 'memorable' experiences, entertainment, and distinctive ('exotic') products. The logic of commodification creates incentives to include narratives about secrecy, mystery, and the danger of nuclear energy, the negative approach to Soviet legacy. In addition, the logic of the market implies a need to combine tours at nuclear facilities with entertaining activities (nature-based, adventure, and recreational tourism) that might target other segments of population and increase the number of visitors. Therefore, the creation of heterogeneous heritage tourist products with multi-layered narratives around atomic heritage and Soviet nuclear legacy reflecting diverse perspectives and views of divergent groups of nuclear community and external players contribute to strengthening the agency of stakeholders and a sense of belonging, developing a new place identity in the community and become a promising strategy for attracting diverse groups of tourists with diverse cultural needs.

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