

SEEING 'REGION' FROM INSIDE: THE CASE OF PARTICIPATION AT THE INTERNATIONAL PROJECT 'PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF GENETICS'

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ABSTRACT

To conduct an ethnographic research means to do a job of investigating something, which is always geographically located in a particular place: a village, a city, a country, or an area. A map is the first attribute of an ethnographer. But anytime we, as ethnographers, take the map and choose an ethnographic site to study it becomes immediately filled up in our imagination with the discourses already existing in historical, political, social, cultural, or local contexts. Then the question emerges about how does the view of *a priori* about the place come together with the 'practise' of fieldwork? The empirical ground of this article is my experience as of a researcher at the international EU project 'Public Understanding of Genetics: A Cross-Cultural and Ethnographic Study of the "New Genetics" and Social Identity (2002-2004)'. Thus in the article I would like to discuss the role of ethnographic research in the construction of images about the place. I would return to the initial idea that *region* is a conventional category. Place-names and maps like natural symbols crystallize and justify the essence of its identity.

KEY WORDS: anthropology, ethnographic field-works, definition of region, anthropological interest in kinship, definition of kinship.

ANOTACIJA

Straipsnio tikslas – aptarti, kaip tyrimo vietovė yra įprasminama siejant ją su geografiniu, politiniu, istoriniu, kultūriniu kontekstu ir kokį vaidmenį čia vaidina etnografiniai tyrimai, pateikdami apie ją naujų žinių. Čia yra ypač svarbus požiūris į regioną kaip į tam tikrą diskursą. Empirinis straipsnio pagrindas yra asmeninė autorės patirtis dalyvaujant tarptautiniame tarpkultūriniame ir etnografiniame Europos Sąjungos projekte „Viešasis genetikos supratimas (2002–2004)“. Straipsnis pagrįstas teorine prielaida, kad regionas yra sutartinė kategorija. Gali pasirodyti, kad jo samprata yra visų pirma vienareikšmiškai susijusi su geografiniu vietovės apibūdinimu, tačiau konkrečiu atveju pažvelgus iš arčiau matyti, kad regiono geografinės ribos dažnai yra neryškios, o jo tapatybę nustatantys kriterijai įvairūs. Straipsnyje siekiama parodyti, kaip tarptautinio projekto kontekste atliktas etnografinis lauko tyrimas ir jo pristatymas darbinuose seminaruose bei ataskaitose keitė tyrimo pradžioje suformuluotus vaizdinius apie Lietuvą. Straipsnyje pabrėžiama, kad tokiam vietos vaizdinių keitimuisi lemiamą įtaką turėjo tyrinėjama tema – giminystė.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: antropologija, etnografiniai tyrimai, regiono samprata, antropologinė giminystės teorija, giminystės samprata.

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To conduct an ethnographic research means to do a job of investigating something, which is always geographically located in a particular place: a village, a city, a country, or an area. A map is the first attribute of an ethnographer. But anytime we, as ethnographers, take the map and choose an ethnographic site to study it becomes immediately filled up in our imagination with the discourses already existing in historical, political, social, cultural, or local contexts. It looks that a place has its own identity, which is *a priori* of our view to it. Though when we enter the site it experiences the next turn - it becomes a 'practised place' in the sense of knowledge the fieldwork produces (Hastrup 2005). Then the question emerges about how does the view of *a priori* about the place come together with the 'practise' of fieldwork?

Gupta and Ferguson critically referred to the ‘naturalness’ of the images of the world, e. g., as a collection of ‘countries’ with their own distinctive cultures and societies, and suggested the need to re-evaluate the ‘assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture’ (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 34). In this article I follow their critical opinion. But I would also like to retain the aspect of ‘naturalness’ of images adding it with the Bauman's view of space as of a social product where the role of human perspective is significant in shaping its ‘objectivity’ (Bauman 1998). In this context of ‘naturalness’, and social construction I would set the notion of a *region* and discuss the relationship between the space and the discourse. My intentions here are to investigate the ways in which the sense of place is produced and re-produced through ethnographic practises and epistemological discourses.

The empirical ground of this article is my experience as of a researcher at the international EU project ‘Public Understanding of Genetics: A Cross-Cultural and Ethnographic Study of the “New Genetics” and Social Identity (2002-2004)’¹ where Darius Daukšas and I took part forming a Lithuanian team (Čepaitienė, Daukšas 2003). Our ethnographic case study was aimed to represent the reflections of Lithuanian people on the themes under study. But it provided the particular imaginings about Lithuania as well. Moreover, it appeared that during the course of the research these imaginings had changed, and our participation at the international project was a significant factor of this change. Thus in the article I would like to discuss the role of ethnographic research in the construction of images about the place.

A *region* – what is it?

It seems that the meaning of the word *region* is clear and unproblematic as it is geographically ‘material’. However looking at the common English dictionary one would find the variety of aspects. One would see that it refers to ‘a large area of land, usually without exact limits or borders’, as well as to ‘one of the areas that a country is divided into, that has its own customs and/or its own government’, to ‘*the regions* that is all of a country except capital’, and to ‘a part of the body, usually one that has a particular character or problem’ (Oxford 2000). All these explanations show that *region* is a conventional item represented through both the vagueness of its boundaries, and the variety of properties of its spatial identity.

But one point is clear- a *region* has its identity. To define it however one has to shift from the question of ‘What’ to the question of ‘From what point in space?’ (Bauman 1998: 32). To find an answer one has to employ topography, which implies ‘on a detailed description of landscapes that combines geography, settlements, political boundaries, legal realities, traces of past histories, place-names and so on into a comprehensive knowledge of particular spaces’ (Hastrup 2005: 145). Indeed, topography interrelates geographical ‘objectivity’ with social construction of space where places ‘are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over’, and in ‘the multiple ways [they] are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities’ (Feld, Basso 1996: 11). And this appears to be a significant issue of anthropological research today (Hastrup 2005).

The movement in space inscribes social life on the land. The space experienced by people becomes ‘naturalised’ and ‘materialised’ (see Hastrup 2005). Ethnographers and anthropologists en-

¹ The Public Understanding of Genetics: a cross-cultural and ethnographic study of the 'new genetics' and social identity, European Commission Fifth framework Programme: Quality of Life and management of Living Resources. Contract number: QLG7-CT-2001-01668.

gage in this 'materiality' of place in their own ways. Ethnographic accounts produce a kind of discourses in the form of 'area studies' or 'case studies' where places are made meaningful within 'tension between local ethnography and global theory' (Herzfeld 2001: 41). The 'case studies' become representations and social facts ambitiously holding the authority of the truth (see Rabinow 1986). Epistemological discourses of anthropologists and ethnographers is the way in which the 'local places' become translated into 'regions' provided not only with cultural, but also with political accounts of significance. As Herzfeld wrote 'anthropologists work, if to a varying extent, within intra-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary area studies milieu, and this produces both specialized vocabularies and seemingly esoteric preoccupations that themselves define political fields of academic discourse about the 'Mediterranean', 'China' or 'Melanesia' (Herzfeld 2001: 42). Place-names serve as icons and natural symbols representing the geographic and topographic realities inseparably related to the whole set of images filled up with cultural differences, historical backgrounds and political considerations.

It is common to look at Lithuania as being in 'Baltic Area', which geographically stretches along the Baltic Sea. The name of the sea, it seems, is transmitted to the whole area, region and a group of the countries around it. In fact the idea to name 'Lithuanians' as 'Balts' originated from linguistic account. Professor Georg Heinrich Ferdinand Nesselmann of the University of Königsberg in his book 'The Old Prussian Language' published in 1845 while speaking about Lithuanian, Latvian, Prussian languages included the sentence: 'I would suggest calling this group of languages the Baltic family of languages' (cited from Sabaliauskas 1993: 29). Thus the name of 'Balts' was ascribed to Latvians and Lithuanians. Later in the 20th century it became common to speak about Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as 'Baltic' countries².

In my article I will discuss the imaginings related to 'Lithuania', which is both the place of my ethnographic studies, and the place where I am living. Keeping in mind Herzfeld who spoke about 'understanding of what it means for people in "local places" to find themselves designated as "Melanesians", "refugees", "Gypsies", "stateless persons" (Herzfeld 2001: 43), or 'Balts' I will draw on my personal experience and attempts to define Lithuania as a site of my studies.

Naming an ethnographic place

The international project 'Public Understanding of Genetics (2002-2004)' (shortly PUG) was a cross-cultural and ethnographic project funded by European Commission. It aimed to investigate the ways in which different publics across Europe identify the social implications of new genetic technologies. As it is seen from its description it focused on 'a wide variety of European publics', 'citizens of Europe', 'a range of European sites', 'debate across Europe', and 'social, historical and cultural differences across European countries'. However the main site of research was not the countries or societies, but the issues of kinship, race and ethnicity, management and food. These issues were the questions of research of an international and multidisciplinary team, which included local groups from Britain, Spain, France, Norway, Hungary, Italy, and Lithuania.

Lithuanian team joined the project PUG with the theme of kinship as a primary suggestion for the local study. The theme emerged from the previous ethnographic research that elucidated Lithuanian people's quest for kinship and genealogical identities in the period of political, national

² I will not go deeper into this discussion, and will not speak about historical and geopolitical considerations, or the terms of, e. g., 'Baltic Germans' and 'Baltoskandija'.

and social transformations of 1990's. While presenting this ethnographic case study at the conference I localized it in Lithuania and put this place-name in the title of the article. The name of Lithuania for me was a culturally neutral term that referred to geographical place covering all small villages and towns of my field research. I even ignored long lasting tradition of Lithuanian ethnology to locate the study within the ethnic community of Lithuanians (e. g., Vyšniauskaitė 1964, Dundulienė 1982). I just took Lithuania as a country-name, which is more identifiable in international context rather than Skuodas, Panevėžys or Šiauliai countess – the actual my fieldwork sites.

From an ethnographic place to a 'specific' region

But cultural neutrality of the name of Lithuania was broken during the moment of joining the international project PUG. And I did it myself while formulating the aims and objectives of Lithuanian work package within the general framework of the project. The context of Europe, the aim to study public understanding of genetics, and the aspect of cross-culturality developed by the PUG made an impact on my rethinking of Lithuanian setting.

Trying to describe the local context I compared the social and cultural realities of 'public understanding of genetics' in Lithuania and in UK, Spain, France or Norway. Although in Lithuanian work package the issue of genetics was going closely with the question of kinship the subject of genetics at the very beginning for me became the key point helping to find local specificity. This specificity I laid in historical and political experience of Lithuania being in the Soviet Union where the attitude towards science of genetics was different to compare with the Western countries. Consequently I defined Lithuania within the framework of the Soviet discourse, and set the political and ideological questions as a priority. I would like to illustrate this with the part of my first description of the Lithuanian local project:

“Specifically, in Lithuanian context, I would like to say that the new genetic technologies and the open public discussions about them is one of the many innovations, which are entering into Lithuanian life. One must keep in mind that this involves the process of transition from closed regimented Soviet society where decisions were made in secret by a select few elite to open democratic discussions where facts are easily accessible and the majority of the public is actively involved in making decisions. I would like to add that the technical aspects of the new genetics have come to our attention not so very long ago. It was only in 1964 that the study of genetics reached real scientific status in the USSR.” (the introductory part of a draft of Lithuanian local project for PUG “Lay understanding of genetics and kinship in Lithuania”, year 2000)

Although the final version of this description is shorter and thicker, and not so much underlying the experience of Soviet society the contextualisation into 'specific European society' is retained.

This idea of specificity as of Post-Soviets is remained during the first year of ethnographic research as well. At the end of the year it resulted in the separate chapter of 'Preliminary/Interim findings' in the research report of Lithuanian team entitled 'The context of a particular society'. There we stated that looking over the literature on genetics in Lithuania, especially of 1990's, which deals with the history of science as well as with the activities of related institutions and clinics, we found that there was strong emphasis on political and ideological intervention into science of genetics during the Soviet era, and that it made an impact on contemporary state of the art of genetics in Lithuania.

Generalising I would say that at the initial phase of the project the discourse of Soviet and Post-Soviet society played a role in framing my image of Lithuania. This discourse was a way in which I saw the specificity of our society comparing to British, Spanish, French or Norwegian. And it was my view of an 'insider'. I would emphasise that such image of Lithuania stretched far beyond the political meanings although in my descriptions I made references to historical and political considerations. Mainly, it was cultural, or, to say more concrete, it contained cultural meanings, which I was projecting to find out in the field.

The context of 'one big thing'

The grand narration of Soviet and Post-Soviet in anthropology defines quite a large geographical territory from Europe to Asia. It includes a variety of countries of former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe, and China as well. Lithuania together with Latvia and Estonia are also there. There is a lot of literature theorizing on particular aspects of Soviet and Post-Soviet societies (e. g., Berdahl 1999; Burawoy & Verdery 1999; Juška 1999; Rausing 2004; Skultans 1998; Verdery 1996; Wanner 1998, Hohnen 2004, and the others). Majority of ethnographic studies, which were carried out in the countries of this region during last decade, took into account the Soviet era experience of these societies, and basically focused on the issues emerging from this experience. These case studies are presented in the form of articles and monographs, and they have the categories of 'Soviet', 'Post-Soviet', 'Post-Socialist' or 'Post-Communist' in their titles. These works also include the large chapters on Soviet period, and discuss the cultural matters in relation to Soviet and Post-Soviet life-styles of people living there (e.g. Bunkše 1999; Klumbytė 2003; Rausing 2004; Skultans 1998, 2001; Wanner 1998, Hohnen 2004). It seems that the political map is a significant agent in shaping not only the knowledge and imaginings about these places, but also their identities.

The discourses of Soviet and Post-Soviet establish 'geographical' links between all these different countries of Europe and Asia. Their assumed similarities unite them into the large territory seen as a specific cultural region. And it happens so that, for example, analysing the questions of national identities of Lithuania, Byelorussia and Ukraine one might speak about 'Post-Soviet Eurasia'³. In respect to this I would call on Hannerz and his phrase of 'one big thing' (Hannerz 2002), which seems to be appropriate here. I suggest to look at the map formed by Soviet and Post-Soviet discourses as 'one big thing'. The place-names of such political map serve as natural symbols, and points of *a priori* in defining cultural identities of the places. In this space the idea about Soviet and Post-Soviet specificity emerges 'naturally', and becomes a context and a source of ethnographic and theoretical imaginings about the countries and people living in this large region. My own attempts to find the particularity of Lithuania in these discourses show that I as well as many others was captured by the grand idea of Soviet as 'one big thing'.

A small place, and a large issue

But the project PUG challenged this 'clear' and logical thinking. The macro narrative of Soviet and Post-Soviet was destabilized by multiple of questions Lithuanian team used to receive during the workshops of the PUG. And it appeared that we were not able to find the answers in the dis-

³ See, for example, Abdelal Rawi, 2002, Memories of nations and states: Institutional history and national identity in Post-Soviet Eurasia, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 459-484.

courses of Soviet and Post-Soviet. This stimulated us to draw on a wider social and cultural space, which extended over the Soviet narrative. However in this challenge the most provocative were not the questions of our colleagues, but the issues of family and kinship, and the projection to study them within cross-cultural framework. Undoubtedly the subject of kinship this time (like many times before) collected its influential ‘power’ in shaping our research as well as our imaginings about the site of this research. I would like to show how it happened.

Darius and I began the study on ‘public understanding of genetics’ with getting to know more about genetics in Lithuania. We visited Lithuanian Bioethics Committee, the Library of Medicine, and, mainly, the institution of genetic counselling, research and education - Human Genetic Centre at the Vilnius University Clinic. Such choice of the site was the continuity of our previous emphasis on the issue of genetics. However later we made a cardinal shift – we left the clinic, and went to the fieldwork in one local community. The reason was that the issues of family and kinship instead of ‘genetics’ began to organise the selection of sites. This changing of priorities for us was a consequence of our methodological considerations. At the very beginning of the research we intended to be sensitive to the actual public discourse of the time and the society under research. We programmed ourselves to take into account all the events that would happen during the research period, and all the situations we would encounter while doing the fieldwork. The clarifications to any questions that would emerge during the entire course of the study we decided to find in ethnographic realities of the field. And our movement along the research sites was inspired by the problematical biases and themes that surfaced during the research.

The concrete event, which made an impact on such ethnographic turn, was the issue of the draft bill of the Law on Artificial Insemination in the year of 2002. This was the first year of our research, and we observed the debate on assisted reproductive technologies (ART) in mass media. We decided to follow this stream of social actuality, and to look at lay people’s opinion on assisted reproduction in relation to family, kinship and ethnicity. Practically it resulted in the ‘travel’ to a community of a small town Kuršėnai in autumn of 2002.

However such turn to community and the choice of Kuršėnai was not only our personal idea. It was an idea inspired by cross-cultural perspective of the project PUG. It emerged during our conversation with Edwards in 2002 on the future of our local research project. And we decided to go to Kuršėnai to look at the people’s opinion on assisted reproduction in the same way as Jeanette Edwards did it in her ethnographic enquiry in Northwest England town of Alltown (Edwards 1993, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002). The small town of Kuršėnai was selected intentionally to make the comparison possible. Although I did not stay here as a permanent inhabitant as Edwards did in Alltown (Bacup) I knew this place before. I was doing field research on kinship and ethnicity in the summer of 1999, and spoke with many people there. I knew also that it was a town in some sense - the population census and a degree of industrialisation - comparable to Alltown although the industrial, social and political histories of United Kingdom and Lithuania were evidently different.

The localisation of the research on kinship and ART in the community of Kuršėnai became crucially meaningful in elucidating local thinking on family and kinship in Lithuania. Ethnographic material from Kuršėnai enlarged the epistemological space around the issue of kinship, which in Lithuanian ethnography never had been of particular interest. Moreover, the perspective of comparison established a dialogue between people of Kuršėnai and residents of Alltown. As Jeanette Edwards shows in this volume it gave voice to locals to discuss the same questions in similar and contrasting ways.

The issue of kinship also allowed me to approach the community more closely. The stories I used to listen during interviews presented cultural and historical diversity of people's lives. And the small place of Kuršėnai fragmented my previous grand narration on Soviet and Post-Soviet. I noticed that the residents from Kuršėnai did not treat the Soviet era as something great, universal and persistent, which totally covers their lives and minds, and which is crucially meaningful in understanding of kinship. I observed instead that it was an episodic although sometimes dramatic fragment in people's biographies and life experiences. The stories of interviewees showed that it was rather one of historically identified eras in the development of the community. It was related to particular events, symbols or values, which however went together with many other things sometimes more important than Soviet experience. Actually while presenting the history of the town, and its social context it was impossible to leave behind those 'other things' and facts. For example, when speaking about the industries of the town I had to draw on inter-war period of Independent Lithuania and to describe the construction of Pavenčiai Sugar Factory at the end of 1930's, and the pottery crafts, which were traditional in this place since long ago. While showing the 'society' of Kuršėnai I had to keep in mind the history of Lithuanian Grand Duchy, the social processes of Lithuanian State in the 20th century, and the events of World War II and post-war times. Generally it became evident, that Soviet and Post-Soviet discourse is not the main one, which has an authority to organize the story about the local place of Kuršėnai.

I would underline that the subject of 'kinship', and the 'practise' of studying it opened the world of local people's lives, and presented the diversity of stories different than my primary imaginings. The small town of Kuršėnai situated in Western Lithuania, which geographically was a tiny point not always seen on the map, appeared to be significant in getting insight into the large issue of anthropological enterprise on kinship (Eriksen 2001). And this established a challenging perspective to re-produce the new images about the place as well.

Instead of conclusion

Finally I would return to the initial idea that *region* is a conventional category. Place-names and maps like natural symbols crystallize and justify the essence of its identity. However they are just social constructions where the position of a viewer, and the perspective of looking is the main (Bauman 1998). But I suggest that in this process no less is important the subject or the question, with which one is approaching the place, as it implies on organisation of social and epistemological discourse as well. In the case discussed here it is the subject of 'kinship', which 'has always been the core topic in anthropology' (Eriksen 2001: 93), that inspired reconfiguration of imaginings about Lithuania. And close to the image of Lithuania as a country located in the large region of Soviet and Post-Soviet appeared the small concrete place of the Kuršėnai full of stories on family and kinship with variety of experiences, attitudes, values, and moral considerations. They showed that people's worlds were wider than Soviet and Post-Soviet experiences.

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MATANT REGIONĄ „IŠ VIDAUS“: PATIRTIS DALYVAUJANT TARPTAUTINIAME PROJEKTE „VIEŠASIS GENETIKOS SUPRATIMAS“

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Santrauka

Atlikti etnografinį tyrimą reiškia tyrinėti tai, kas yra fiksuotina geografiškai lokalizuotoje konkrečioje vietovėje – kaime, mieste, šalyje ar regione. Žemėlapis yra pirmasis etnografo atributas. Tačiau kiekvieną kartą, kai mes, etnografai, pasiimame žemėlapi ir renkamės vietovę savo tyrimams, mūsų vaizduotėje ji išskyla užpildyta jau esančiais istoriniais, politiniais ir kultūriniais vaizdiniais. Atrodo, kad ši vieta turi savąją tapatybę *a priori*. Kita vertus, bet kuris etnografinis lauko tyrimas pateikia naujos medžiagos ir žinių apie vietovę, taip papildydamas bei patikslindamas jau gyvuojančius stereotipinius įvaizdžius.

Šio straipsnio tikslas yra aptarti, kaip tyrimo vietovė yra įprasminama siejant ją su geografiniu, politiniu, istoriniu, kultūriniu kontekstu ir kokį vaidmenį čia vaidina etnografiniai tyrimai, pateikdami naujas žinias apie ją. Čia yra ypač svarbus požiūris į *regioną* kaip į tam tikrą diskursą. Empirinis straipsnio pagrindas yra asmeninė patirtis dalyvaujant tarptautiniame tarpkultūriniame ir etnografiniame Europos Sąjungos projekte „Viešasis genetikos supratimas“. Straipsnis pagrįstas teorine prielaida, kad *regionas* yra sutartinė kategorija. Gali pasirodyti, kad jo samprata yra visų pirma vienareikšmiškai susijusi su geografiniu vietovės apibūdinimu, tačiau konkrečiu atveju pažvelgus iš arčiau matyti, kad *regiono* geografinės ribos dažnai yra neryškios, o jo tapatybę nustatantys kriterijai įvairūs. Straipsnyje siekiama parodyti, kaip tarptautinio projekto kontekste atliktas etnografinis lauko tyrimas ir jo pristatymas darbinuose seminaruose bei ataskaitose keitė tyrimo pradžioje suformuluotus vaizdinius apie Lietuvą. Individualiu autorės suvokimu anksčiau apibūdinta kaip šalis ir vieta, esanti sovietinėje ir posovietinėje erdvėje, besidriekiančioje nuo Europos iki Azijos, Lietuvos samprata pamažu tapo šalies, turinčios sudėtingesnę istoriją, vertybes ir moralines nuostatas, įvaizdžiu. Jos istorinė ir kultūrinė erdvė kartais nusidriekdavo netgi toliau nei sovietinis diskursas. Straipsnyje pabrėžiama, kad tokiam vietos vaizdinių keitimuisi lemiamą įtaką turėjo tyrinėjama tema – giminystė. Būtent ji iškėlė tuos klausimus, į kuriuos neįmanoma buvo atsakyti ieškant sąsajų su sovietiniu ir posovietiniu gyvensenos pobūdžiu bei konkrečiais jo apraiškų atvejais. Be to, giminystės tema šiame tarpkultūriniame tyrime tarsi užmezgė „dialogą“ tarp Lietuvos lauko tyrimuose dalyvavusių mažo Kuršėnų miestelio pateikėjų ir kitų tarptautiniame projekte dalyvavusių šalių gyventojų. Šiame projekte paaiškėjo požiūrių skirtumai ir panašumai, ne visada paaiškinami sovietine patirtimi. Svarbu, kad giminystės tema, laikoma fundamentalia antropologijos mokslo sritimi, tapo reikšmingu veiksmu, suardžiusiu stereotipinę Lietuvos sampratą. Ji atvėrė galimybes naujų vaizdinių apie mūsų šalį formavimuisi ir jų plėtrai.

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