

Sport narratives and provincial urban space in Russian contemporary literature

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Abstract

This article investigates the interplay between sport and provincial urban space in contemporary Russian prose, focusing on works by Roman Senchin, Dmitrii Danilov, and Alisa Ganieva from the 2010s. The study examines the representation of Soviet-era sport in narratives set in modern provincial towns, highlighting how these sport narratives serve as a medium to explore various forms and aspects of nostalgia within the urban context. The research delves into the multifaceted relationship between sport and the city, considering personal memories, local cultural phenomena, and broader societal and national levels. This multi-scalar approach provides new perspectives and analytical tools for rethinking provincial spaces and conceptualizing nostalgia. The retrospective portrayal of sport in provincial settings is linked to broader societal and cultural issues, while also resonating with deeply personal experiences. This double exposure enhances our understanding of the role of provincial towns in contemporary Russian literature.

Keywords: urban space; provincial town; provinces; sport; stadium; contemporary Russian literature; nostalgia

1. Introduction

In this article, I explore the relationship between sport venues and provincial urban spaces in contemporary Russian prose, focusing on the role of nostalgia in shaping the protagonists' perceptions of these venues and spaces. The study analyzes works by three contemporary Russian authors, Roman Senchin, Dmitrii Danilov, and Alisa Ganieva, published in the 2010s and set in provincial¹ cities outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as small towns in the Moscow region. The sports discussed in the selected works include football (soccer), bandy, and a road running event.

I ask how writers use stadiums and other sport venues, sport teams and sports events in narrating provincial urban space, and examine how the interrelationship in which "... the city influences the stadium, just as the stadium influences the city" is reflected in contemporary prose (Nielsen 1995:21). I thus show how the ambiguity of the role of sport in contemporary literature reflects the paradoxical nature of provincial cities in the Russian cultural imagination.

The article analyzes the representations of Soviet sport and Soviet era sport venues in contemporary prose from the point of view of nostalgia. This article understands nostalgia as a concept that should be carefully (re)thought before applying it to any material, as a careless use of the concept can strengthen existing stereotypes rather than approaching them critically. Many of the protagonists in my material remember the Soviet past through sport, and their perspective on it is complex and even contradictory. Throughout my analysis, I demonstrate how sport narratives participate in the production of urban space in the Russian provinces, and how nostalgia influences on the perceptions of the urban space.

2. Material

The works analyzed in this article provide diverse perspectives on sport. The selection of these works is based on two primary criteria: the prominence of sport narratives within them and their settings in smaller cities and towns. Additionally, all three authors are renowned for their literary contributions that focus on the provinces or peripheries of contemporary Russia. The following section offers a brief overview of the research material.

Roman Senchin (b.1971) describes Russian peripheral life in many of his works, most famously in *Eltyshevy* (2009, "The Yeltyshevs") and in *Zona zatopleniia* (2015, "The Flood Zone"), which are set in Siberian villages. In this article, I focus on the depiction

¹ I use the word 'provincial' in my article to refer to towns and cities that are described in the literature as provincial or can be discussed in the context of provincial myth (see Parts 2018). I do not define particular places as 'provincial', rather it is a term that comes from the Russian literary tradition of portraying provinces. I also discuss several towns in the Moscow Oblast area in the context of the provinces because their representations contain several characteristics of provinciality.

of sport in his short story “Khokkei s miachom” (2013, “Bandy”), in which bandy invokes the protagonist’s memories about his youth. In “Khokkei s miachom”, the protagonist, Roman Burkov, an ordinary office worker in a large company in Moscow, travels from the capital to the small town of Noginsk, located only 50km from Moscow. After a short work visit to a factory in Noginsk, Burkov strolls around the town and happens to meet a group of young girls going to their bandy training in Obukhovo, an urban locality near Noginsk. He chats with the girls and ends up watching their training in a small sports ground in Obukhovo. The encounter invokes his memories of bandy training and his teenage years in the Southern Siberian city of Abakan where he grew up. In Senchin’s short story, the sport narrative is used to problematize the protagonist’s relationship with the Soviet past and his dislocation in the present-day world.

Dmitrii Danilov (b.1969) has written several novels, collection of poetry and plays. His plays have been staged in several theaters in Russia and his most famous play *Chelovek iz Podolska* (“A Man from Podolsk”) was awarded with the Zolotaia maska (“Golden Mask”) award in category “work of playwright”.² In his oeuvre, Danilov is interested in provincial towns and in sport, primarily football, and in some of his works he combines these two areas of interest. He has dedicated the novel *Opisanie goroda* (2012, “Description of a City”) and the collection of essays (ocherk) *Dvadtsat’ gorodov* (2017, “Twenty Cities”) to provincial towns. In these works, he describes some sport events. In his football novel, *Est’ veshchi povazhnee futbola* (2015, “There are things more important than football”), Danilov depicts dozens of football games. The genre of the book is ambiguous, since it is based on Danilov’s own experiences and written in a diary-like manner (all the matches followed are dated). It could be read as an autobiographical novel, though obviously one can read it in a more documentary way. There are three main storylines, and each chapter of the book is named after the storyline that it advances. That is, there is no actual plot in the novel, but the narrator-protagonist describes in a chronological order the different football games he visits during a year. The first story line is dedicated to games which Dynamo Moscow have played, and chapters describing that story line are titled with dates of the matches. The second story line, “Siuzhet 2”, (“Plot 2”) is dedicated to matches of OLIMP-Skopa, a small team which plays in the third division of group B of the Moscow-region zone. The third story line is “V fonovom rezhime”, “In the background”. In this storyline, the narrator tells about all the other teams and matches he follows. Danilov refers to classics of autobiographical sports writing in his novel, namely Nick Hornby’s *Fever Pitch* (1992) and Stephen King’s and Stewart O’Nan’s *Faithful* (2004). Both of these books have been translated into Russian.³ King’s and O’Nan’s book, which is about the 2004 season

² Golden Mask -festival’s website in the Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/20240417221227/https://www.goldenmask.ru/fest_24_187.html (Accessed 1 December 2024).

³ Hornby’s book is published in Russian under the names *Futbolnaia goriachka* (2003) and *Futbolnaia likhoradka* (Amfora, 2007), and King’s and O’Nan’s book as *Boleishchik* (AST, 2007).

of the Boston Red Sox baseball team, is a model for Danilov's writing about football. In his football novel, the sports narrative constructs a bigger picture about Russian football, including questions about the Soviet past and present-day sport. Football is also mentioned several times in Danilov's latest work, *Pustye poezda 2022 goda* (2023, "Empty trains of the year 2022").

Alisa Ganieva (b.1985) broke through in Russian literature with her debut novella *Salam tebe, Dalgat!* (2010) which was awarded the Debut prize. The novella is set in Northern Caucasia and describes present-day Dagestan from the perspective of young adults. Ganieva has also dedicated her two later novels to Dagestan and its political tensions. After becoming famous as a voice of her generation from Dagestan, Ganieva published a novel, *Oskorblennye chuvstva* (2018, in English *Offended Sensibilities* 2022), set in an unnamed provincial city not in Dagestan, but elsewhere in Russia. The plot centers on the death of Andrei Ivanovich Lyamzin, the regional Minister of Economic Development. Nikolai, an employee in a local construction company, gives Lyamzin a lift one night, but Lyamzin dies in his car. Nikolai leaves the body on the roadside and later dies in an accident. Lyamzin's wife, Ella Sergeyevna, a school director, is later found dead in her bath. Marina Anatolyevna Semyonova, a construction company director and significant businesswoman who had an affair with Lyamzin, becomes later a suspect in his murder. Her company built a new ice arena for an upcoming sports festival. During a play premiere about Vladimir the Great, Ella Sergeyevna attacks Marina Semyonova in a local theater, blaming her for her husband's death. Vice-Minister Natalya Petrovna faces scandal when a compromising photo of her is circulated online. The ministry employee Tolya reposts a photoshopped version of the photo in his social media, and he is fined for it, on the bases of the law on "offending religious sensibilities". In the end of the novel, Lyamzin's assistant, Lenchka, who had a one-time sexual intercourse with him, is accused by investigator Viktor of being behind the deaths and the anonymous threats, sent to the different persons. Viktor claims she also published Natalya Petrovna's photo, which Natalya herself has sent to Lyamzin.

The novel combines a detective plot with political satire, portraying all characters as unpleasant. Ganieva critiques the provincial city's theater and art circles, depicts local ministers as idiots, and describes the hopeless perspectives of Russian society. The novel highlights contemporary Russian societal issues, using the provincial city as a microcosm. The novel ends with a sense of pervasive hopelessness, fear and mistrust among the provincials: "Lenchka was arrested, but the virus of calumny and backbiting permeated the town", but somewhere "[a] march was rehearsed for the Day of National Unity" (Ganieva 2022:247).⁴

⁴ The citations from *Offended Sensibilities* (2022), translated into English by Carol Apollonio, if not stated otherwise. All other translations from Russian originals by the author A.L. if not stated otherwise.

The town organizes a sports event, and even though sports play only a minor role in the novel, it serves to illustrate hopeless situation in authoritarian Russia (already in 2018, when the novel is published).

3. Theoretical framework and context

The theme of provinces has attracted wide scholarly attention during the last three decades both in Russia and in the West. My approach to provincial Russian space is mainly based on Lyudmila Part's (2018) and Anne Lounsbery's (2019) recent studies on provinces in the Russian cultural imagination.

The province has held a significant place in the history of Russian literature since the 19th century. The term *provintsiia* has its origins as an administrative designation, as an official administrative and territorial unit, positioned between the governorate (*guberniia*) and the *uezd*, established during Peter the Great's reforms between 1719 and 1727 (Zaionts 2000:14-15, Klubkova & Klubkov:2000, 21). The governorate reform by Catherine the Great in 1775 led to the abolition of the provinces, and word *provintsiia* lose its administrative meaning, and as Zaionts (2000, 19) proposes, the word *provintsiia* transforms into something close to a metaphor.

The dichotomy between the capital and the province is a pivotal element in the provincial myth of Russian literature. This dichotomy became prominent in Russian culture during the 1830s and 1840s (Savkina 1998:60), coinciding with the introduction of the term *provintsiia* in fictional literature (Stroganova 2000:196). Provinces have been, and continue to be, symbolically integral to Russian identity, providing 19th-century writers with a framework to explore "Russianness" and national identity (see Lounsbery 2005, 260). Despite the frequent contrast between capitals and provinces, the similarities between them are often more significant than their differences, as in Nikolai Gogol's works (Lounsbery 2005, 276). In literature, the province frequently serves as a microcosm for whole Russia. In Russian literature, provincial towns are often depicted as nameless "Towns of N.," characterized by their interchangeability and similarity. Belousov (2004:457) proposes that the namelessness "fits in the mythologized image of the province" since the province is portrayed as a uniform and indistinct space. The provinces in the 19th century literature are often characterized by *poshlost'* and repetitive cyclicity of life.⁵ On the other hand, as Bakhtin (1990, 247) writes, provincial towns occur in several different variant, including idyllic chronotope by "provincialists". The provinces, in a broad sense of the word (including village and country estate settings, not only provincial town), are often represented as idyllic. The country estate (*usadba*)

⁵ The meanings of *poshlost'* have been discussed by many scholars, and it is often defined as vulgarity, banality, and/or triviality, "the Russian version of banality" (see Boym 1994:41). See more about *poshlost'* as repetition in Boym (1994:46).

and its associated lifestyle are particularly portrayed as idyllic in Russian classical literature.⁶ This idyllic portrayal is related to the authenticity. As Lounsbery (2019, 35) argues, for Pushkin “provincial places are more likely to be the site of homey and reassuringly authentic Russianness, frequently tinged with affectionate irony”. Even though the estate and the provincial town are different toposes in Russian literature, it can be argued, that these toposes fusion in the late 19th century, especially in some Chekhov’s texts, as suggests Olga Bogdanova (2023, 16).

The renewed focus on the provinces in Russian cultural imagination since the 1990s can be linked to the quest for a new post-Soviet identity (see Parts 2018, 4). As Parts (2018:139) states: “[i]n post-Soviet times, the provinces is a cultural product packaged to be used in the discourse of national identity. Depending on the producer, it is presented as either appealing or hideous.” As Parts (2018:5-6) proposes, the provincial myth “continues to combine two opposing views of Russia’s noncapital space as both stifling environment (as depicted in the prose of Gogol, Chekhov, and Sologub) and idealized repository of ‘Russianness’”.

Since the view of the provincial town and of sport is often retrospective in my material, this article analyses the possible nostalgia in the texts in question. Nostalgia is often understood as a longing for a place, but in fact it is longing for a different time, for example for our childhood (Boym 2001:xv). Nostalgia often functions “as the search for continuity” (Tannock 1995:456). Boym (2001:xviii) distinguishes between two different types of nostalgia, the restorative and the reflective. According to Boym, restorative nostalgia “...attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” and “...protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (ibid.). Boym suggests that “[r]estorative nostalgia evokes the national past and the future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory” (ibid. 49). Reflective nostalgia is used in this article as one possible concept to interpret the complex aspects of nostalgia in the selected material. Some nostalgia critique associates the phenomenon of nostalgia with “dominant and conservative forces of the society” (Tannock 1995:454). As Tannock (1995:454) suggests, it is necessary to understand the “multiple and different nostalgias among individuals and communities of social groups”, since “[n]ostalgia responds to a diversity of personal needs and political desires”. In some of the texts examined in this article, nostalgia is called into question by means of irony, or it is sometimes unclear how the text actually positions itself in relation to nostalgia. This article searches for tools to understand the texts’ ambiguous relationships with nostalgia in situations in which the connection with the past is complex and contradictory.

During the last few decades, the role that sport plays in Russian culture has attracted wide scholarly attention. Sports has a globally important role in nation building, and nationalist discourse is part of sport culture. Russian literature, art and sports have

⁶ The difference between the estate and the province as literary space and toposes, and the question if the estate can be interpreted as province, falls out of scope of this article. See more on this topic in Bogdanov (2023).

intertwined with one another in history in multiple ways, and their relationship became more pronounced during the Soviet era.

Organized, popular sports emerged relatively late in Russia, as a broader athletic movement only arose in the 1860s and remained a privilege of the upper classes until the turn of the twentieth century (Harte 2020:18). Football (soccer) came to Russia from England via Germany and in the 1914 there were 155 football clubs in 33 cities throughout Russia (Harte 2020:19). Harte (2020:20) argues that Pushkin and Lermontov referred to sports in some of their works, but it was through Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1875-77) that sports began to play a significant role in artistic culture as skating, tennis and horse racing all figured in the novel.

As Harte (2020:21) argues, “[f]rom the start, athletics afforded effective means by which to progress toward the radiant future that the Russian artistic intelligentsia so vividly envisioned and actively pursued at the time”. Later, modern sports provided “an important bridge between pre-1917 and post-1917 art” (Harte 2020:25). In Soviet Russia, modern athletics proved to be a suitable theme for artists “as they warily adapted to Stalinist ideology” (Harte 2020:229). The theme of sports figured prominently in Soviet cinematography, photography, art and literature. Aleksandr Rodchenko's sport photography is a famous example of the role sport played in the early Soviet period. He focused increasingly on sport events and *fizkultura* parades through the late 1920s and early 1930s, and is the best-known photographer of sport parades of that period (O'Mahony 2006:32, 86). One, perhaps the most significant Soviet era literary representation of football, is in Yuri Olesha's *Zavist'* (1927). The episode with a game of football is permeated by the confrontation between ‘Soviet’ and ‘foreign’ (Akmaldinova et. al. 2016:106). Olesha uses a football match “to draw a contrast between the Soviet New Person and his Western counterpart” (O'Mahony 2006:140).

Sport continues to be a theme in contemporary Russian high and mainstream culture. The theme of sport has occurred relatively prominently in the Russian cinema, and interestingly enough, in 2018, the three most-watched domestic films in Russia were related to sport in one way or another (Österberg 2019:95).⁷ As I will show, sports is also a prominent topic in the Russian prose of the 2010s.

The following subsections examine the different roles of sports in the chosen material, and they draw a scaled vision on the understanding of these roles in relation to provinciality. In Senchin's short story, sports are described on the par with subjective memories; in Danilov's works sports are approached, besides individual memories, as a culture and as a cultural phenomenon and in Ganieva's novel, sports are described on the same scale as nation and society. All these different-scale representations of sports

⁷ The films Österberg takes as an example in her short overview on the topic, are: *Dvizhenie vverkh* (“Upward Movement”, 2017), which describes the basketball game between USSR and USA in the München 1972 Olympics, *Liod* (“Ice”, 2018), a musical romantic comedy about the love story of a figure skater and a hockey player, and *Trener* (“A Coach”, 2018), in which a former top football player coaches a small football team.

offer the reader a different perspective on provincial town life, both as a physical space and as metonymy.

4. Sports venues invoking memories

In Senchin's short story "Bandy" the trip to a provincial city near Moscow is also the protagonist's journey to his inner feelings, and the sport and stadium experience invokes memories of his life as a teenager in Southern Siberia. He remembers the stadium called Saian in the city of Abakan, and how football teams played there during the summer and bandy teams in winter. Bandy was the most popular winter sport in the city:

The local team most often lost, especially to the eminent team "Enisei" from the neighbouring city of Krasnoyarsk, but the fans were not disappointed, because they rather liked the game itself more than the success of team "Sayan". (Senchin 2013)

Here the sport is depicted as something that unites rather than separates different cities: the game of bandy appears more significant than the competition. The importance of the stadium experience, namely sitting in the cold stadium with hundreds of other fans, is part of the representation of the sport (Senchin 2013). Burkov sees here a contradiction between his past in provincial Abakan, where he followed sports more actively, and his present life in the capital, where he has been too inactive to follow any sport.

Leaving Moscow and travelling to Noginsk seems to be an opportunity for Burkov to connect with his childhood. Furthermore, the trip to Noginsk serves as an escape from everyday life in Moscow, and both the small city and the small stadium of Obukhovo are loci of escape. For Burkov, the unreal world of the Obukhovo stadium shares the same illusory reality of sport as the stadiums in his memories, namely the Abakan stadium and the Luzhniki stadium in Moscow. Burkov remembers his small business in the 1990s in Luzhniki Park, and thinks about the 'unreal' world of sport, existing at the same time:

Behind a high mesh fence a guy with a pole was running along the path... Not realizing yet who it was, what he was doing, Burkov followed him with fear and bewilderment... The guy stuck the pole into the ground and took off. Amazing, marvellous, unreal. And funny at the same time. Indeed, around the boiling of reality, and there, on the island behind the net... (Senchin 2013)

In the reality of the 1990s: on one side of the fence of the Luzhniki Park, in the stadium, a young man is practicing pole vaulting, while people like Burkov are on the other side buying and selling things to make a living. Here "Bandy" refers to the specific historical period in the early 1990s when a large marketplace was established within the

territory of the Luzhniki Stadium.⁸ Similar marketplaces emerged during this period also at various other sport centers, and Luzhniki became emblematic of this type street trading.⁹ For Burkov, the world of the Luzhniki Stadium seemed to be unreal because it is so different from the Moscow of the 1990s surrounding it; it is a “distinct and easily identifiable locality” for escape.¹⁰ Stadiums, as places of escape, are characterized by duality. On the one hand, they are characterized by “placelessness”, since they are standardized, depersonalized and homogeneous, and on the other hand, stadium life “is empathetically tied to a particular place” (Nilsen 1995:24; 29). In Burkov’s memories, this contradictory nature of stadiums both as placeless and as tied to a particular place, are simultaneously present. For Burkov, these particular and different stadiums from different periods of his life form a single illusory, placeless stadium in his mind.

Burkov’s retrospective gaze to his youth in a Siberian town, and on the other hand to the 1990s in Moscow, is a search for continuity that forms the story of his own life. For Burkov, the past seems to be a source for the identity that he is searching for, and it is “accessible only as objects of a private and insular reflection and retrospect” (see Tannock 1995:457-358). Moreover, the special time-space of the provinces is reflected here: as L.O. Zaionts (2004:428) writes about the prerevolutionary movement from the capital towards the periphery, it has often meant travelling in time, from the current day to the past. While travelling to Noginsk, Burkov is travelling back in time to his teenage years. The provincial location serves here as a space that is opposed to Moscow, and sport serves as a catalyst for nostalgic memories about another provincial place and time. The conflict between Burkov’s memories and present-day reality is concretized at the end of the novel when Burkov is accused of being a pedophile because he is a stranger who watches the teenager girls’ training. Burkov is forced to realize the difference between present-day provincial Noginsk/Obukhovo and the Abakan of his memories, and, more importantly, the difference in himself.

This conflict between the illusory time-space inside Burkov’s mind and the outer reality interestingly brings up the changing status of female bandy over the decades. Burkov remembers how girls in Abakan in his teens quickly quit bandy because training was “hard” (Senchin 2013). But there was one “persistent” girl, who went to Irkutsk where there was a women’s bandy team (ibid.). Burkov’s thoughts reflect on how historically “sport has come to be seen as a form of male entitlement” (Fuller 2006:6) and that “in most cases sports are expressions of masculinity” (Bale 1995:12). In Senchin’s storyline, the male protagonist from the capital represents non-change and female small-city dwellers represent change. From the point of view of the various time-

⁸ Sport-Ekspress, in Internet Archive <https://web.archive.org/web/20041111025333/http://www.sport-express.ru/art.shtml?24989> (Accessed 9 November 2024).

⁹ “Moskva vse razbazarila”, Kommersant 1 January 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5736254> (Accessed 9 November 2024).

¹⁰ I base my reading about sport as escape on Jeffrey O. Segrave’s analysis of how sport offers places to escape to both for spectators and for athletes. Segrave (2000:63) proposes that “sport offers us a distinct and easily identifiable locality for our escape; it offers us a place to escape to ...”.

spaces in the text, Burkov is more oriented towards the past, while the female bandy players are oriented towards the future, talking about their dreams of winning international matches. When Burkov asks from girls, if they are training bandy seriously, he get following answers:

— Russian bandy needs to be revitalized! added a girl with hockey stick on a shoulder. — The Swedish are getting boring. In three years, we will be the champions! — Whoa! shouted another one, wearing a jacket with text “Russia”. (Senchin 2013)

Here also the nationalistic ethos related to sport takes place. In this way, the perspective to the sport and to winning is not only related to the local provincial scale, like in Burkov’s memories about the stadium “Saiany” in Akaban, but also the nationwide scale of whole country.

In Russian literature, and in European literature more broadly, the chronotope of provincial towns is often characterized by “a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space” and is repetitive and cyclic (Bakhtin 1990:247-248). In “Bandy”, the expectations of the backward, sticky temporality of the provincial town clashes with future-orientedness, which is manifested in the new generation of bandy players. The protagonist and the reader are forced to realize that time in the provinces is actually flowing towards the future and that times have changed since the teenage years of the protagonist. As Bakhtin (1990:252) suggests, the different chronotopes of the text can have diverse interrelationships, including contradiction and opposition. In “Bandy”, the interrelationship between the chronotope of a provincial town and the minor chronotope of the stadium is of a dual nature. On the one hand, they both contribute to a temporality that only exists in Burkov’s memories. On the other, Burkov is dislocated in time, remembering his childhood, and the surrounding reality contradicts this chronotope of his memories. This results in the conflict of the story in which Burkov is not welcomed to follow the bandy training at the local sports ground.

5. A stadium at the centre of urban space

This subsection analyses how the depictions of football games and stadiums contribute to the urban experience in Danilov’s novel *Est’ veshchi povazhnee futbola*. This subsection examines the possibility of traces of idyll in the provincial stadiums and asks how we might rethink the concept of nostalgia in order to understand the protagonists’ uneasy relationship with the Soviet past.

Danilov’s first-person narrator portrays football games from the point of view of a spectator.¹¹ Danilov’s narrator concentrates on spectator behaviour, but he also gives

¹¹ Marianne Roivas (2009:9) proposes that when speaking about football writing, we cannot speak about a specific genre in a formal sense, but what is central to this group of works is that they are written from the point of view

considerable space to the game itself. In Danilov's novel, the detailed descriptions of matches offer the reader the position of a spectator,¹² inviting them to enter the multisensory world of stadiums together with the narrator.¹³ This documentary approach and the concentration on the spectator's experience offers the reader a perspective on sports as a cultural phenomenon and on the relationship between sports and the arts. Danilov's attempts to document football in the novel in question, and the provincial town, in the novel *Opisanie goroda* most notably, as detailed as possible, resemble each other. These representations pose questions about the relationship between the referential world and the text. In *Opisanie goroda*, Danilov's narration is elliptic, meaning that he does not reveal any toponyms, but describes them by giving the reader a chance to recognize and reconstruct real places, such as describing the street "which is named after one of the greatest villains in world history" (Danilov 2012:176). This article elaborates the elliptic narration more later.¹⁴

Danilov's novel *Est' veshchi povazhnee futbolu*, documents the sport in a very realistic and detailed manner. The novel represents a whole range of sport communities, from the national team to small towns. As in Senchin's work, in Danilov's novel as well a *provincial stadium* is a minor chronotope of its own inside the chronotope of the *provincial town*¹⁵. Furthermore, I examine the sensual experience of the stadium¹⁶ and examine how it is related to questions of nostalgia and escape.

The smaller stadiums of provincial towns play a significant role in Danilov's football novel. Characteristically, these venues are approached with the vocabulary of diminutiveness: "the championship of the Lyuberetsky district arouses special interest – one would also like to visit those *tiny, touching, countryside* stadiums sometimes." (Danilov 2015:17). Danilov repeats two words in several depictions of nonmetropolitan stadiums¹⁷: *stadionchik*, "small stadium," a diminutive form of the word for stadium,

of a spectator. Furthermore, Roivas argues that "spectator behaviour" is an important focus in the new football writing "on the level of the plot, characters, topics and thematic" (Ibid.,138). Alex Tadié (2012:1776-1777) proposes that works about football address two concerns: the first type focuses on heroes, and the second type has a stronger emphasis on the spectators "and the attitudes of spectators than on the game itself". /Tadié 2012:1776-1777).

¹² This idea of the parallel between the position of a reader and a spectator comes from Alex Tadié, who proposes that the fictional works he examines "suggest a parallel between the act of reading and the position of the spectator" (Tadié 2012:1786).

¹³ In addition, I consider that the novel also suggests a parallel between the act of writing and the position of the spectator. The narrator defines his task as writing a depiction of one year as a football spectator, and thus writing seems to be one motive for going to see the matches the year round.

¹⁴ About elliptic narration, see more in Lappela 2021.

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin (1990:252) suggests that every major chronotope can include an unlimited number of minor chronotopes.

¹⁶ I draw this concept from Gaffney and Bale (2004:26), who propose that all our senses are geographical: "[o]ur sensual experience of the stadium, rooted within places (seats, sections, sides, ends, boxes, etc.), rooted within space (the stadium), within a larger space (the city), within even larger spaces (region, state, nation, hemisphere, globe, solar system) contributes to the idea that all the senses are geographical".

¹⁷ There are several examples of the use of the word *stadionchik* in *Est' veshchi povazhnee futbolu* and in the collection of essays, *Dvadtsat gorodov*. In *Dvadtsat gorodov*, visiting the village of Susanino, Danilov depicts the

and tiny, *kroshechnyi*, as their attribute. Provincial stadiums are characterized as small and sympathetic in these texts, namely as “miniature worlds”.¹⁸ In 19th-century literature, the limited “miniature” world of provinces was represented negatively: according to Stroganova (2000:203), “the spatial remoteness of the provinces from the center, its isolation outside the main circle of life leads to the formation of the perception of spatial limitation, narrowness of provincial life, and as a consequence, to metonymically transpose those attributes to the spiritual state (*dukhovnoe sostoiianie*) of the province”. This spatial limitedness and its reflection in the atmosphere, the spiritual life, of the provinces alternates as something rather positive in Danilov’s version. Danilov’s novel observes and portrays the “miniature world” of the provinces sympathetically, and this world carries more positive connotations than the 19th-century “miniature world”. In Danilov’s material city, the “miniature world” of provinces offers a cozy, harmonious escape, not a banal place of *poshlost*. In this sense, the provincial stadiums carry traces of idyll in their representations. This, at least partial, presence of idyll amid the provincial urbanity offers us a starting point to examine Danilov’s complicated attitude to nostalgia.

In Danilov’s *Opisanie goroda*, the protagonist goes to see a football match in an unnamed provincial city.¹⁹ At the beginning of the game the protagonist observes the middle-aged male fans, *diady* (“uncles”). He remembers that such Soviet fans “were very numerous in the Soviet stadiums from the 1940s until the 1980s” (Danilov 2012:170). He describes them thus:

The Soviet fans brought a bottle of vodka, sandwiches, and pickled cucumbers with them, and started to pour out the vodka and eat (ibid.).

In this episode, food, and vodka play an important role in the ritual of the stadium event.²⁰ The ritual food consumption can be seen as a way of confirming “one’s temporary identity as a ‘stadium person’” (Nielsen 1995:39). In *Est’ veshchi povazhnee futbola*, the narrator portrays middle-aged football fans at the match in Bryansk thus:

“touching tiny stadium” on the main street (Danilov 2016:127). In *Est’ veshchi povazhnee futbola*, an older stadium in Ufa is also called *stadionchik* (Danilov 2015:53).

¹⁸ E. N. Stroganova (2000:203) writes about the “miniature” world of the provinces in the literature of the 1830s – 1840s, and the “narrow” and “vulgar” interests of life.

¹⁹ Danilov refers to the fact that when writing the novel *Opisanie goroda* in 2011 he attended a match between Dynamo Bryansk and Kuban, in the last sixteen of the Russian Cup (Danilov 2015:81).

²⁰ Chris Gaffney and John Bale examine the sensory experience of the stadium and analyse the role of smells and tastes in the stadium experience. They propose that “[t]he tastes of the stadium are part of the larger ritual processes of stadium events” and that “[t]his common sensory experience helps to create a ritualized experience that is not particular to any one stadium” (Gaffney and Bale 2004:33;34). Nielsen also formulates that the consumption of foodstuff in the stadium “has more to do with the ritual” than with food itself (Nielsen 1995:39).

In the stands there were lots of fans (*kuz'mich*)²¹ of the classic Soviet type [...] preparing for the match. Not so much that this type was predominant, but there were just very many of them, those Soviet-type fans (*kuz'mich*), compared with Muscovite stadiums, where not many of them were left anymore. (Danilov 2015:83)

Furthermore, the narrator thinks that the audience is older than in Moscow. Here the Soviet-type fans, older men consuming vodka, are represented as different from the Muscovite fans, who tend to be younger and “successful”. The spatial difference correlates here with the temporal: provincial fans represent the traces of the Soviet past, while Muscovite fans represent the contemporary world. Furthermore, in this description, the provincial fans seem to be working-class people, while in Moscow many of them are depicted as more middle-class, with certain reservations. I propose that here the different fans also represent the difference between living standards in the capital and in the provincial towns. As Parts (2018:118;132) shows, questions about the relationship between the capital and the provinces can be related to finance and wealth: provincials are portrayed as looking for wealth and richness in Moscow, and they are often portrayed as poor themselves. Thus, in some cases, the opposition provinces vs. capital(s) appears to be an opposition between classes. Having said this, the question of the representation of class in the context of sport spectatorship would deserve a study of its own.

The ritualized alcohol consuming stadium experience is also broadly related to the topic of provincialism. At two different games in two different stadiums, the narrator observes the alcohol consumption and the absence of policemen in the stadium:

Not a single stadium employee in sight. Not a single policemen in sight. One can, for example, completely freely consume alcohol while sitting in the stands. Which is what many spectators are doing. (Danilov 2015:30)

As always in local level football, the players and the spectators know each other. As always in local level football, in the stands people are quietly drinking. As always (almost always) in local, district level football, there is not a single policemen in the stadium (Danilov 2015:310)

This characterizes the provinces’ uncontrolled spaces outside the more strictly controlled space of the capital. Historically, literary representations of the provinces have emphasized the disorder and incoherence of the provinces (see Lounsbury 2019:28), and one can view the uncontrolled provincial stadium in this context. This

²¹ The word *kuz'mich* is a slang word used about passive football fans, who do not belong to a fanatical group. One definition states that *kuz'michi* go regularly to their club’s games and buy easily available fan merchandise and read the sports journal *Sport-Expressen* (Kozlov 2008:64). *Kuz'mich* is characterized in Danilov’s novel thus: “... *kuz'mich* is in some ways an extensible concept. A classical *kuz'mich* is a fan of a Soviet-proletarian type who wears a cap, has a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, and is possibly heavily addicted to sunflower seeds.” (Danilov 2015:71).

atmosphere of inadequate control makes smaller towns attractive places of escape, as I discuss later.²²

At the end of the novel, the narrator sums up his emotions after a one-year project of following football, and besides many home games in Moscow, he lists many trips to various non-metropolitan cities as central emotional experiences. This constant travelling to smaller cities proves a central experience for the narrator. Traveling to other cities is a ritual that is part and parcel of football. This ritual of travelling to watch football matches constructs the narrator's "topophilic"²³ relationship with various smaller stadiums.

The fact that some of the smaller stadiums have not changed greatly since Soviet times is mentioned in many of Danilov's works. For example, in *Est' veshchi povazhnee futbola* the Elektron stadium in Kraskovo is one of the narrator's favourites. The narrator emphasizes that this is not because of the stadium facilities, which are among the worst in the league, with for example Soviet-era wooden benches (Danilov 2015:311). For the narrator, this stadium seems to represent provincial stadiums in general:

Stadium Elektron is small, unsightly, and charming, like almost all the stadiums at that kind of district level. There are no chairs, but only old Soviet-looking light blue wooden benches instead (ibid., 30).

The smaller stadiums can be read "as a historical text" (Gaffney and Bale 2004:35) in Danilov's novel, and this "historical text" brings up the question of the transformation of provincial space after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The provinces are described as places where modernization is almost impossible or is very slow is a familiar motif of earlier Russian writers (see Lounsbury 2019:56). Also here, the confrontation between wealthy capital and poorer smaller cities is present. Besides that, showing Soviet-era benches and a Soviet atmosphere in a positive light can be interpreted as something partly fitting to the category of "reflective nostalgia", if we agree with Svetlana Boym (2001:15), who proposes that the reflective nostalgic narrative "...is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary". Danilov's narrator's attitude towards the expressions of nostalgia is ironic. Otto Boele (2010) proposes, when speaking about Danilov's *Dvadtsat' gorodov* "...nowhere does the author indulge in nostalgia", and this seems to be possible to expand to describe his oeuvre more generally, with certain reservations. Still, at the same time, details like these wooden benches, invokes some nostalgic feelings in the narrator. This can be interpreted as some kind of internalized nostalgia, a positive perspective to the things, that remind the narrator from the lived

²² It can be argued, that this experience of the province as a non-controlled space is linked to the specific time, since in the 1990s, when stadiums and their surroundings were transformed as market places, as discussed earlier, this uncontrolled provinciality took place also in the center of Moscow. This, in turn, leads to reflection on how the capital(s) and the provinces actually are.

²³ Bale (2000:13) proposes that "[m]any stadiums generate what the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) termed 'topophilia' – a love of place." Yi-Fu Tuan (1974:4) defines "topophilia" as "the affective bond between people and place or setting".

past. I would propose that we need more categories rather than Boym's rather polarizing, even though very useful, "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgias. There are forms of memorizing the past that extend outwards from the concept of nostalgia. The concept of escape, introduced earlier, offers one alternative way to examine the relationship with the provincial sport and provincial town, even though we can see a clear connection between concepts of nostalgia and escape, since both concepts includes the presence of longing somewhere else, another time.

The pleasant atmosphere of the home stadium is the most important reason why Zheleznodorozhnyi's Olimp-SKOPA football club evokes the narrator's sympathy: "It is somehow very good to support the team there; there is something special there. And the town is very nice and comfortable." (Danilov 2015:74). This comfortable city and comfortable stadium are interrelated in this stadium experience, even interchangeable. The Elektron Stadium is also treated in a very idyllic way, and the narrator seems to feel emotionally involved with the stadium because he has visited it so many times and it has become familiar to him (Ibid. 311). Danilov's narrator's feelings for small stadiums could be construed in the context of escape: as Segrave (2000:63) proposes, sports and sports venues offer spectators a place of escape from everyday life. One example of escape is the narrator's visit to the "Elektron" stadium in Kraskovo:

A lovely summer evening, sunset, beautiful sky after the rain. Every now and then the commuter trains, heading towards Yaroslavl, pass by the stadium. The sound of passing trains is wonderful. It is also good in the "Elektron" stadium in Kraskovo – the evening, the sky, commuter trains. To sit and sit, and not to move, not to think about anything. But one should stand up ... (Danilov 2015:91)

In this depiction, the stadium experience has a meditative feeling ("not to think about anything"), and the nature elements have an important role in the experience (sunset, beautiful sky, rain). These aspects form the experience of escape. The atmosphere is calm and relaxed, and it is possible to interpret it as the opposite of the place where the protagonist should return (the capital). Thus, the depiction of the provincial stadium produces provincial urbanity, which is characterized by positive terms and traces of idyll. This kind of idyllic and even healing effect is rooted in the Russian literary tradition.

6. Urban space as a metonymy

In Danilov's novel *Opisanie goroda*, the protagonist visits an unnamed city (Bryansk) once a month. The namelessness of a provincial town is rooted in the Russian literary tradition, and it is one of the several narrational elements which Danilov uses for setting his novel in the specific provincial context of Russian literature. When visiting the city in September he ends up observing the *Kross nacji* ("National cross-country run"), an all-Russian running day. This depiction refers to a real event, organized yearly in Russia.

In my material, this episode is one of the few treatments of individual, amateur athletics, for in general the works are mostly focused on professional team sports. In this way, *Opisanie goroda* offers us a different perspective on sports as a cultural phenomenon.

Here the sports event is organized not in the stadium, but on the streets of the city. The narrator describes the running route in the unnamed city through references: the starting place of the run is defined as a square “named in honour of unofficial military units” and then continues along the main street “which is named after one of the greatest villains in world history”, and then goes along a street whose name contains “four letters” (Danilov 2012:176). If one looks at the actual map of Bryansk, and the information where the running route is briefly depicted, one can deduce that the starting place is the Square of Partisans, continues along Lenin Avenue and then turns into Duki Street.²⁴

This elliptic narration of the urban space that leaves the reader with the responsibility of reconstructing the place names throughout the text, creates a depiction of a provincial town that emphasizes the artistic vision of the provincial town, with references to the literary tradition of describing the provincial towns in Russian literature as similar and interchangeable. Still, at the same time, the description attempts to document a certain city in as detailed a way as possible. The text balances between these rather contradictory narrational tasks and creates art from this confrontation, asking questions about the relationship between the referential city and its textual representation. Furthermore, describing Lenin as one of the greatest villains in history shows that the novel leaves no room for “retrospective” nostalgia towards the Soviet Union.

According to the narrator of the novel, there should be a separate start and shorter distance for VIP runners (meaning here the administrative staff of the city/region and other significant people), but it is cancelled. The narrator creates a theory that perhaps the elite people were celebrating last evening and drank too much and used drugs, and were sleeping while the run was going on (Danilov 2012:188). His irony goes further when he speculates that there could be problems with those in power for the elite, because their absence in the All-Russian running day could be seen as a protest (ibid.). The distance for elite runners is meant to be 2014 meters in honor of the Olympics, which will be organized in 2014 “in a Russian city”, referring obviously to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. I discuss later how these Olympics are also mentioned, albeit in passing, in Alisa Ganieva’s novel.

In Danilov’s brief depiction of a running event, the relationship between the runners, the city and the nation is brought up with some irony. The ordinary people attend an all-Russian running day, while VIP runners make no appearance. In Danilov’s novel, the relationship between the runner and the nation seems to be “uneasy”, as Tadić (2015:294) suggests that this relationship can be in fiction.

²⁴ For news about the All-Russian running day and the route on the site of the Bryansk region, see <http://www.bryanskobl.ru/news/2019/09/19/10944> (Accessed 9.5.2024)

Furthermore, Soviet-era sports songs are played in the running event. One of the songs that the narrator ironically comments on, includes the lyrics “the whole country is our stadium”, which makes the narrator think that “the whole depicted city is our (their) stadium” (Danilov 2012:183). The song here is “Stadium of my dreams” (Stadion moei mechty), performed by Muslim Magomayev. The narrator comments on its lyrics, positioning himself in an ironic relationship with the song. This emphasizes that he does not feel nostalgic in the way that the song invites people to feel. Here, the narrator seems to be “aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia and seeks to expose those through irony.” (Hutcheon and Valdés 2000:22). In the novel, both the surrounding city space, with its Soviet-era street names and buildings, and the Soviet-era music in the running event, are treated with irony. In the novel, nostalgia “gets both called up, exploited and *ironized*” as Linda Hutcheon proposes happens in postmodern culture (Hutcheon and Valdés 2000:22, their italics). Still, at the same time, some internalized nostalgia towards the past is present in glimpses. In *Opisanie goroda*, the urban space, in the context of the running event, becomes a metonymy for the entire nation and the narrator’s speculations about the running event and the music. His irony towards nostalgia invites the reader to contemplate the complexity and problematics of this metaphor.

7. Sports as a tool for societal critique

In Ganieva’s novel, *Oskorblennye chuvstva*, the unnamed provincial city is organizing a sports event. The novel details the frenetic preparations for an event, with couple of key characters employed by a construction company tasked with building a new ice arena. Although the sports event itself plays a minor role in the narrative, an entire chapter is devoted to its opening ceremony. Ganieva employs the motif of sport to explore broader national issues concerning contemporary Russia and its future. Her perspective is critical, utilizing the sports event as a vehicle for societal critique. Additionally, Ganieva’s portrayal of the provincial town is laced with irony, rejecting the idyllic or otherwise positive representations of provincial life.

The novel interweaves urban space and sport within its framework of societal critique. The narrator envisions the potential impact of a high-profile guest from Moscow on the city. Here the guest means the president of Russia:

They knew that just before the official jet has landed, loiters would be rounded up, the streets would empty out, advertising flyers would disappear from the intersections, and litter would be cleared from the roadsides. (Ganieva 2022:119)²⁵

This scenario has historical precedence; during a previous visit, the city undertook extensive preparations, including the installation of new computers in hospitals and the

²⁵ In the original, “official jet” is *bort nomer odin*, “airplane number one”, which in Russian refers to the plane used by the president (and it is also used about Air Force One).

restoration of park benches. However, following the departure of the Guest, the computers were removed, and the other improvements reverted to their former state (Ganieva 2022:121). The narrator imagines how for the visit of an important guest, ugly old cars will be taken away and only beautiful and expensive cars will be left on the streets (Ganieva 2022:119).²⁶ Old houses in poor areas are made to look like they are under construction:

Workers in orange vests would wash the concrete columns clean, would restripe the streets, toss green netting onto the bodies of dying buildings, like water nymphs, to make it look as though there was construction work going on. The sick, moldy facades, pitted with efflorescence, would be sheathed in in colorful painted screens depicting windows with decorative shutters against a background of rustic timbers. The Guest would visit the stadium and the sport facilities that made such a rich woman of the insatiable Marina Semyonova. (ibid.119-120)²⁷

In this imaginary of the visit, the contradiction between provincial reality and the imagined better future is realized. Lounsbury (2019:29) proposes that "...a key feature of *provintsiia* in literature would seem to be precisely the dissonance between grandiose claims and shabby realities". She writes about the tension between "the state's imperfectly imposed ideas and the provincial town's messy, intractable facts" (ibid.), and something like that is discussed in *Oskorblennye chuvstva* in relation to urban space. Furthermore, the log cabins and ornate shutters refers to idyllic version of the province as the locale of authentic and homey Russianness. The urban development of the town is mentioned in a speech given at Marina Semyonova's birthday party:

Let's drink to Marina Anatolyevna! Our precious treasure. The manager from her construction company is here tonight. These fine people, ladies and gentlemen, have poured their energy to into rejuvenating and modernizing our town. They've built an ice arena, a new bridge, and all of this have come about to thanks to the vigor, brains and perseverance, and of course beauty of our very own Marina Semyonova. (Ganieva 2022:153)

The rejuvenating and modernizing of the town are in the speech related to the new ice arena, and all this ironically illustrates the lack of real urban development. Furthermore, in the speculations about the visit of the important Guest, the concept of escape is present. Lenchka dreams to ask from the Guest if he needs an assistant:

"I do" would he answer, overwhelmed by her lush feminine aura. "My assistants are such airheads. Come back with me to the Kremlin." And off would they go. They would get into the car and sit next to each other, and right there, in the darkness behind the tinted windows she would feel his taut muscles, the heat of his rugged torso. (Ganieva 2022:121-122)

²⁶A similar situation occurred before the BRICS Summit in Kazan in 2024. Reports in the Russian-language media suggested that residents were advised not to drive old cars during the summit to maintain the city's image. However, this claim was later refuted. See for example TASS 15.10.2024: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/22128857> (Accessed 6 January 2025)

²⁷ Citations from the English translation *Offended Sensibilities* (2022) by Carol Apollonio.

In Lenchka's dreams, the figure of a "provincial Cinderella" appears, a concept discussed by Parts (2018) writes in the context of contemporary Russian popular cinema. According to Parts (2018:116), in this type of cinema, "provincial Cinderella" arrives in Moscow "in search of either a prince or professional fulfillment", and typically, the provincial girl takes on a job in the service of a wealthy man. Ganieva seems to treat this provincial Cinderella narrative with strong irony through the character of Lenchka when the object of her dreams is the president of Russia.

In Danilov's and Senchin's texts, told stadiums represented the slowness of the modernization process, reminding one of the Soviet era. In Ganieva's novel, the brand new ice arena represents the other side of the same coin: the new ice arena does not represent the real development of a provincial city, but emphasizes the contradiction between it and the reality of provincial life. Furthermore, this depiction of the lack of modernization can be read reflecting the cyclicity of time, of which Bakhtin (1990, 247-248) writes, that time in a provincial town "has no advancing historical movement". In Ganieva's novel, the failing urban development of a provincial town is attributed to *poshlost'*, the triviality and vulgarity of everyday life in a provincial city (see Boym 1994:19).

Ganieva uses the provincial town as a metonymy of the whole of Russia, and besides the national and local aspects, Ganieva brings in the international level as part of her critique:

Indeed, the town was festooned with banners. The festival was to showcase the traditional folk games. The competitions would begin on the main town square. Athletes had been invited from China, Zimbabwe, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela. With all the excitement, the governor had taken to adding several drops of hawthorn extract to his evening cup of chamomile. The mayor was racked with insomnia. The minister of tourism and sports lost two kilos from worry. (Ganieva 2022:152-153).

In the world of the novel, Russia seems to have the closest international relations with these countries, which all have serious problems with democracy, freedom of speech and human rights in the real world. This obvious critique to the Russian authoritarian political system is tied to the sport narrative, and this is done with the tone of irony. This way of using other countries in the narration of the provincial town seems to be different from most provincial texts. As Parts (2018:19) proposes, "the concept of provinciality, with attending concepts of inauthenticity and backwardness, is central to Russia's self-identity as 'a provincial' in Europe". Part's (2018:19) ternary model of the Russian provincial myth, the provinces – the capital – the West, proposes, that the provinces versus capital binary follows the same model as the Russia versus the West binary (Parts bases her thought on Lounsbury's argument). Moreover, the provinces are either seen as superior or inferior in comparison to the capital, and Russia is seen as either inferior or superior in comparison with the West (and vice versa) (Parts 2018:19). Ganieva develops her own critical vision of the provinces in which other countries that have serious problems with human rights are the points of reference for Russia rather than the

West. Here the emphasis is not on the difference (like with the West) but with the proposed similarity of Russia with the mentioned countries. Still, as Parts (2018:19) argues, “[t]he provinces function as the symbolic locale where major Russian cultural myths are negotiated and, most importantly, a national idea is articulated”. In Ganieva’s representation, the province is a locale for articulating the critique of the national idea.

The West is referred to, without naming it, for example in the speech the governor is delivering at the opening ceremony:

(...) when filthy try stories are told about us, about doping year after year, when our athletic teams are accused of cheating, when we are banned from international competitions, we do not sulk and whimper like beaten dogs. We manage on our own! (Ganieva 2022:213)

Later the governor praises the Russian athletes: “The supplest gymnasts. The strongest musclemen. We will not let anyone to hound us!” (Ganieva 2022:213). This speech seems to reflect official Russian discourse concerning Russian doping scandals, which started in 2016. In 2016 Russia’s systematic doping programme, which the state had tried to hide, was revealed in a report that the WADA requested from Richard McLaren and his research group.²⁸ Thereafter, many Russian athletes were excluded from international competitions. Russia’s separation and self-isolation from the rest of the world is a hopeless future view, and in Ganieva’s novel, the sports narrative brings this topic up most clearly.

In Ganieva’s novel, the Minister of Sport in his speech praises the history of Russian sport:

The first soccer was played in our country in 1897 in Petersburg. And the first national soccer championship in Russia took place in 1912. Moscow crushed Kharkov with a score of six to one (Ganieva 2022:221).

He also tells about the history of skiing in Russia, and the first ice hockey match in St. Petersburg in 1899 (Ibid. 221). This remembrance of sport in pre-revolutionary Russia can be seen as an attempt to construct a collective national cultural memory by means of sport. This kind of official remembering of past sports achievements is very different from the intimate personal memories and sports experiences of the protagonists in Senchin’s and Danilov’s texts. Moreover, the role of music in the nostalgia in Ganieva’s and in Danilov’s texts offers an interesting starting point. In Danilov’s novel, *Opisanie goroda*, Soviet-era songs play a role in the running of the event, and the narrator comments on it slightly ironically, as shown above.

In Ganieva’s (2022:219) novel, a Soviet-era song interrupts the activists’ demand that the city officials protect the park, and the lyrics “The brightest athletes win the

²⁸ <https://www.wada-ama.org/en/resources/doping-control-process/mclaren-independent-investigation-report-part-i> (Accessed 17.6.2024)

prize,/And shine with pure integrity”²⁹ are placed in a very critical light when the activists accuse the city administration of dishonest behaviour, and the Russian doping scandal is discussed. Furthermore, the authorities’ and the activists’ (and their supporters’) different perspective to history is described when the Minister of Culture cries: “All misfortunes begin with disrespect for history!” and a lady in the public, next to Lenchka, says: “What about the park? Isn’t that history?” (Ganieva 2022:224).

In addition to all this, the Minister of Sport is described to wear an Olympic suit from the “era of Ochakov and conquest of Crimea”,³⁰ with logo “Sochi-2014” on the trouser striping. This citation from Alexander Griboyedov’s comedy *Gore ot uma* (1825, *Woe from Wit*) can be used to refer to something absolutely outdated. Still, Ganieva obviously uses it also to refer to the annexation of Crimea, which happened right after the Sochi Olympics. Thus, the novel mentions those Olympics in very critical and ironic light.

In Ganieva’s novel, the people in power represent restorative nostalgia and use sports for nation-building. In Senchin’s short story, the protagonist feels nostalgic for his youth, and in Danilov’s novels, the narrator do not feel nostalgic towards the Soviet Union as such, and in places ironizes it, but has some internalized nostalgia for the past. The provincial town, sports and nostalgia are intertwined in the research material of this article, but none of these texts offers the reader an easy interpretation of nostalgia.

8. Conclusions

This article analyzed sport narratives as part of representations of provincial urban space in contemporary Russian fiction. Sport narratives offer a multifaceted perspective on post-Soviet nostalgia, which is described, discussed, criticized and ironized in this material. As shown, in Senchin’s short story *Khokkei s miachom*, nostalgia drives the main conflict; in Danilov’s novels, it is ironized; and in Ganieva’s work, nostalgia is less central but used as nationalist propaganda by the authorities.

The article offers a scaled view of sport and nostalgia: from Senchin’s protagonist’s intimate memories to Danilov’s observations on sports as a cultural phenomenon, and to Ganieva’s novel’s metonymic representations of a provincial town as a microcosm of the country. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that provincial towns and sport are central to the protagonists’ and narrators’ understanding of their place in the world (Senchin) and their country’s place in the world (Ganieva). Besides nostalgia, escape is a key concept for interpreting both provincial towns and sports. In Senchin’s and Danilov’s texts, provincial towns are places of escape from everyday life and a journey

²⁹ In the Russian original: ”V sporte nado zhit’ iarko/Nado pobezhdat’ chestno!” (Ganieva 2018:278). The song “Geroi sporta”, “Sports Heroes”, performed by singer Muslim Magomayev, as “Stadion moei mechty”, discussed earlier in this article.

³⁰ In the Russian original: ”ministr sporta, zachem-to odetyi v olimpiiskii kostumchik vremen Ochakovskih i pokoreniia Kryma”, translated into English by the author A.L.

back in time, while in Ganieva's novel, the provincial town is a closed entity with no escape, reminiscent of 19th-century depictions of limited provincial spaces.

Additionally, the sports narratives offer perspectives on the urban development of post-Soviet Russia, with provincial towns and their sport venues depicted as lagging in this process. Given sport's intrinsic link to nation-building and politics, it uniquely combines local and national scales in urban representation.

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