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Research by design and collaboration in the perspective of post-soviet 'nuclear' town Visaginas –RDCPP-SNTV

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Abstract

The role/perspective of a designer in the interdisciplinary project *Mapping Visaginas*, a former mono-functional town is studied. Conflict multilingual environment makes reconsider the designers' practice in the context of tensions between authority regulations and everyday communication practices as they are. As well as the re-evaluation of the position of the designer in the process of designing the projects for Visaginas. Language vulnerability of the local people from Visaginas reveals the degree to which designer is used to identifying him/herself with the authority. This raises the question what does is social dunction of designer in the context of changing cultural, political and economic circomstances such as soviet and post-soviet.

KEYWORDS: design research, multilingual typography, modernity, participatory design, post-soviet design

Introduction

Political, social and economic upheavals allow us to uncover those conventions that structure the professional design field. Thus, the study of design in the post-Soviet space is a testing ground for understanding such important issues as the position with which the designer is speaking (making design project) and algorithms, the trajectory of interaction between designer, communities and authorities. What make the designer's work satisfactory or even successful: ready solution embodied in the material product (whatever it could be) or process of creation/production of friendly regimes for visibility for those to whom the design project is addressed to?

To tackle the issue, it is proposed to analyze the designer perspective and participation in the interdisciplinary research project *Mapping Visaginas. Sources of urbanity in the former mono-functional town* that is being conducted at the European Humanities University by Laboratory

for Critical Urbanism. A number of research conferences, seminars and summer schools with the participation of researchers from different fields and students were held in Visaginas. Some courses of bachelor's and master's levels of European Humanities University are focused on the problems of the city of Visaginas. In the article will be considered those topics in the development of which the designers participated. The case of Visaginas shows that the development of a specific design solution can not give a tangible effect, only the creation of visibility regimes that allow the actor to build productive relations and connections in the community can be considered promising.

A brief history of Visaginas and issues discovered during research

The construction of the town of Sniečkus (initially – Sniečkus (After Lithuanian Communist Party leader Anatanas Sniečkus), later renamed Visaginas, is a city in Lithuania) was built from the scratch in 1975, as a city directly connected with Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (INPP). The city was built for INPP workers and their families. Nuclear scientists, engineers, construction workers and their family members brought from all over the Soviet Union, founded the city as a modernist project. The project of Sniečkus (now, Visaginas) was created in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and was a symmetrical composition in the form of a butterfly. The city is built with pre-fabricated panels and concrete structures popular in the 70s and 80s in the USSR. Thus, the city is a holistic modernist project, architecturally, socially, economically and politically. The city was a triumph of the technocratic approach, in which local contexts and traditions were not taken into account. Thus, since the founding of the city, INPP is the main employer and therefore the city is considered a mono-functional. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the city's residents became part of Lithuania, an independent state. Since 2004, it was decided to close INPP, which should be fully completed by 2038.

There was a contradictory situation in many respects, in which residents of the city who built it from the scratch in the 1970s and 1980s consider themselves as local residents, nevertheless, their integration is greatly hampered by a number of factors, some of which determined by language barrier. So, on the stage the construction of the city engineers, builders (people with a predominantly technical education) were invited from all over the USSR. After Soviet Union collapse they found out themselves in Lithuania, but neither Lithuanian culture, nor language weren't either considered in any way native or even familiar. Social, economic and political context is also difficult, which is especially evident when discussing the future of the city, as INPP is the main place of employment still today (in 70s 7000 employees, today about 2000). In Visaginas local identity is based primarily on professional belonging (nuclear scientists, engineers, construction workers and their family members) and the short term history of the town's construction, rather than on national culture and tradition. In addition, the lack of a large employer, such as INPP in the future and as a consequence labor migration and the growth of the number of empty flats in town. Depopulation leads to decline in the use of educational infrastructure (schools and kindergarden). The results of the Visaginas study on the results of various activities are published in the book *Mapping Visaginas. Sources of urbanity in the former mono-functional town* (Ackermann F., Cope B., Liubimau S. Eds., 2016).

Design as Mapping and Processing

The participation of designers in this interdisciplinary research and participatory project, along with sociologists, anthropologists, social geographers, political scientists, social historians, architects from Lithuania, Belarus, Germany, Ukraine, made it possible to identify specific aspects visible to designers.

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The complicated situation in Visaginas puts into question the focus of design work on creation / production and gives an opportunity to focus on the research and process, considering design as creative practice. What kind of research is productive for the designer and how can the knowledge gained about Visaginas be transformed into a design project relevant to the city?

In 70s transformation of workplace driven by introduction of computers led to reconsidering and re-configuration of design practices resulted in appearance of participatory approach to design (Robertson and Simonsen 2013, Greenwood, D. J. & Levin, M., 1998). The development of different scenarios for the future of the city of Visaginas could lead to the transformation of many spheres of city life and therefore presents an interesting case for testing the approaches in which the designer acts as facilitator in order to create a mode of visibility for all participants in the process. Therefore, it is important for designers to involve decision makers and those who will be affected by them.

Of particular significance is the historical reconstruction of Visaginas' routine practices, including communication, to understand the context in which the design project can be implemented, in order for the designer to form his own position: instead of identifying himself with a position of power (a Taylorists approach to design), oriented to solutions rather than to design of interaction process.

This is a continuing project; at the moment it is possible to speak about the first stage – cartography or critical mapping. It was important to discover the visual forms in the public space contributing to interaction and configuring routine everyday life. Based on the results of mapping, it is planned to develop projects for various institutions of Visaginas, which participates in the development of scenarios of the city future. Mapping results with the participation of local residents have been already published in the book *Mapping Visaginas. Sources of urbanity in the former mono-functional town* (Ackermann F., Cope B., Liubimau S. Eds., 2016). The article presents the results of the research determined by designer's professional optics, and which supposedly reveals visual forms of representation of the routine forms of communication that have been developed in the past. The results of the study of the visual forms of communication of public spaces make it possible to formulate questions about how the communication in the city can be configured in the future, what contribution of designers could be, taking into account emerging scenarios for city development.

Public Space Typography in Visaginas

Typography of public spaces allowed to map those tensions that touch communications in the city. So, in the city both in the Soviet, and post-Soviet periods visual communication of public spaces were structured in a similar way, but reproduce different meanings and values. In visual communication (signboards, shop windows, advertising) there are both industrially created signboards, and hand-made or written in manual. In Soviet times, the hierarchy of significant plots in visual agitation throughout the country were reproduced (the decisions of the Communist Party of Soviet Union, the five-year plans and obligations were industrially produced, high-quality typography) in Russian within Cyrillic alphabet, and hand-made plots that were significant for a particular enterprise or sometimes cities (the foremost producers, or those who failed to fit the obligations of socialists' competition were named) (Fig1,2). In the visual communication of soviet times standardized policy for communication in public spaces were used with the thematic hierarchy, which is aimed at creating a homogeneous ideological space (a similar thematic hierarchy and graphic means were used for its presentation in public space in all republics of the USSR).

In the post-Soviet period, international (mainly Scandinavian) brands fill the public space, with the Latin alphabet and the Lithuanian language (the only official language in Lithuania). At the same time small entrepreneurs manifest themselves in the public space via signage using the Cyrillic alphabet, in Russian, sometimes with translation into Lithuanian. Visual communication of the post-Soviet period reproduces tensions between the official language

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policy of Lithuania and the language used in everyday communication by local residents. This circumstance leads to Visaginas being manipulatively labeled as potentially disloyal to the Lithuanian state in the context of current tension between Russia and NATO. Meanwhile, the fact of the town's housing blocks were collectively constructed by residents in the 1970s and 1980s facilitated local belonging and an identification with place. That is why locals feel they have the right to use their native language (most often Russian) in communication in public spaces (hand-made signs of workshops, advertising of public organizations and centers) (Fig3,4,5,6).

Mapping public space communication through newspapers headlines design

Communication in public spaces were studied within visual communication in newspapers, that reveals institutional logic of communication and the way it deals within the language tensions.

Newspapers "Energetik" in russian and "Energetikas" in lithuanian with the same content were issued in Visaginas between 1980 and 1989. In the late Soviet period, the newspaper "Peaceful atom" was launched in 1988-89. Then, the newspapers were united under the name "Peaceful Energetik". It can be seen from the newspaper's article that all the materials of Energetikas, Energetik, were prepared in Visaginas, but newspaper were printed in Vilnius.

Both newspapers cover local INPP news, as well as news from the cultural, sporting life of the city. The first version the newspaper's headline, which lasted the first two issues, were a bizarre combination of writing and technical drawing. The second version of the headline design was written by hand with a wide-angle (poster) pen with a strong right slope. The third version of the headline was based on sans serifs font, written by hand, but imitating mechanical typesetting. All versions of the newspapers "Energetikas", "Energetik" headlines drawn by hand, but refer to the machine produced aesthetics and in different degrees refer to the aesthetics of the technical drawing, engineering graphics. This kind of approach to design of hand-written typefaces was typical for soviet culture as it was discovered by Youri Gordon, such kind of typefaces was used even in the textbooks for children who starts to master writing skills (Gordon 2010).

The publication of the newspaper in two languages, based on two alphabets: Latin and Cyrillic, entails the creation of an equivalent design of the newspaper's headline. Difficulties in realizing this task lie in the fact that the traditions of teaching and practice of writing in Cyrillic and Latin are significantly different. At least, in Soviet arts Latin writing were less influenced by technical drawing and engineering graphics, then Cyrillic (particularly in Soviet context) one as it is evidenced from the collection of proposed typefaces for visual agitation in handbooks published in USSR. Thus, the general framework of modernity and the aim of the establishment of a homogeneous space created a result that, though seen by Soviet authorities and designers as legitimate, was highly questionable in terms of graphic quality (Fig. 7,8,9,10). Comparing Latin and Cyrillic headlines, judging their visual characteristics: how balanced is the lower baseline, the uniformity of the rhythm, the organic nature of the letters, we can assume that in Lithuanian title the basic line is much worse than in Russian, the rhythm in the first part of the word "Energe" differs from the second "tikas", it looks more discharged in comparison with the first part of the word. This means that the handwritten font was originally developed for the Cyrillic script and at first Cyrillic version of the headline of the newspaper was designed, and then on its basis created the newspaper's title in Lithuanian.

An assumption that Lithuanian version on the headline design on the basis of Latin alphabet had appeared after Cyrillic is surprising, because the tradition of writing and the degree of elaboration of fonts and letters in the Latin alphabet is much larger. After all, in the books by Villu Toots and Paul Luhtin (the most significant typeface designers in Baltic States during

late Soviet time), the alphabet developed in Latin in some cases is expanded to Cyrillic. In their books the secondary character of the Cyrillic alphabet is stressed in many ways. In the third version of the headline of the newspaper, sans serif font is used, still written by hand. Sans serif font allows to create a more convincing version of the equivalent of the Cyrillic and Latin inscriptions. Nevertheless, in the third version the Cyrillic and Latin inscriptions are made with different quality. The inscription in Russian looks more complete, while in Lithuanian the name of the newspaper splits into several parts: "Ener" "ge" "tikas". Designer didn't made kerning in a number of letters couples. This also push to the conclusion that the headline in Lithuanian was also created after the Russian one.

Reproduction of this kind of hierarchical relations is unusual for Lithuania and for the rest of the world, since a deeper history and much greater development of Latin fonts, both calligraphic and typographical. In the books on fonts and calligraphy of Villu Toots and Paul Luhtin, the hierarchy is reproduced by the placement of the Cyrillic alphabet, which clearly indicates its secondary nature. In the later book of 1986 Taranov, another significant soviet type designer and calligrapher with origins from Ukraine (Cyrillics region), raises the question of graphical translation of Latin scripts and typefaces to Cyrillic one, but this is done by establishing analogies between the letters of the Latin script and the Cyrillic alphabet. In most cases, it is suggested to borrow a letter form Latin alphabet if the grapheme coincides, in cases where there is no similar letter, for example, the letter "Ж", then it is suggested to collect from two letters "K" being flipped horizontally (Taranov 1986). For typography and calligraphy - this is an extremely superficial approach, since it ignores the technique of writing and the historicity of the graphics of the letter.

Another Visaginas newspaper "Mirnyj atom" (Peaceful atom) (Fig.11) was also affiliated with the INPP, supposedly the headline was designed following an example from the book by Snarsky O. Such kind of typeface was recommended to use for visual propaganda, as "Examples of using gas-light tubes in fonts for visual agitation" (Snarsky 1978). The design of the newspaper fits into the general setting of the Modernity: an original composition is created from the standard elements, in this case, a graphic solution for the newspaper's headline, in which a neon tube motif and a letter with a pen were combined. The production of heat and light by the nuclear power plant is combined with the metaphor of heat/warmth in the communal life and brotherly attitude of city residents to each other, the newspaper emphasizes in every way the unity in the common affair. The combination of the machine set and the execution the newspaper's headlines by hand, imitating machine set or technical drawing softened the Cold War confrontation and rivalry associated with nuclear industry. The reference to the context of the Cold War is represented through the title of the newspaper, where peacefulness is put on the first place.

In 1989, the two Visaginas' newspapers merged into one " Mirnyj Energetik" (Peaceful NPP worker, literally energy worker), "Taikus Energetikas" (Peaceful NPP worker), the merge occurs in a design of the headlines as well: the style of the word "Mirnyj"/"peaceful" is taken from the newspaper "Peaceful atom", and "energetik" from the newspaper "Energetik". All particularities and flows in headline's design were preserved in Cyrillic and Latin version of newly emerged issues (Fig. 12, 13). As Russian version is placed under Lithuanian in public space communication, but Lithuanian headline was designed after Russian one in the newspaper, the controversial hierarchy were reproduced in routine everyday communication of Visaginas.

The bilingual inscription of the newspaper 'Energetik' as a form of visual representation embodies the desire for progress, expressed in the mechanization of labor, but in the Soviet context, combined with increasing demand in manual labor. Therefore, different approaches and forms of simulation of automated labor, in particular by means of a hand-drawn font, were becoming widespread in graphic production. The combination of manually made newspaper's headlines and the mechanical set of the rest of the newspaper, also represents the principle of the importance of the subjective, hand-made dimension of Soviet modernity. Soviet culture and language policy expressed in the slogan: national in form, Soviet in

content, juxtaposed to local and national traditions. Within the framework of the modernist program, the declared totality and homogeneity are realized in the form of tension, the visual expression of which is the malfunctions of hierarchies in communication in public spaces, as it happens with the headline design of Visaginas newspapers and in public space communication as it was revealed in previous part of the article.

Collaborative design as a design of visibility regimes

Designer's professional optics allows to make focus on typography as part of city communication. Conflicting multilingual environment makes reconsider visual communication of the city in the context of tensions between authorities' regulations and everyday practices. As well as re-evaluate the position of the designer in the process of designing the projects, particularly connected with public space communication. Language vulnerability of Visaginas population reveals that designer is used (is made) to identify her/himself with the authority with intention to reach high level of functionality reducing or amalgamating differences (Scott J. 1999).

Study of the Visaginas case with the category of everyday life, in the interpretation of Michel de Certeaux (Certeau Michel de, 1990; Certeau Michel de, 2011), shows how important is the collaborative design process, aimed at production of visibility modes for tactics could be produced (voice, those who do not have access to legitimate channels of communication in public space). The educational interdisciplinary project, as a result, can be oriented towards design of the scenarios of reconfiguration of the institutional order, the strategies, according to de Certeaux concept of coexistence of oral and written communication.

The analytical model of the investigation of everyday life proposed by Michel de Certeaux, which posits the simultaneous existence of oral and written paradigms that explain the logic of disparate everyday practices, make it possible to study public space communication in the context of oral and written types of communication. The dominance of the oral paradigm in Soviet culture allows us to understand the function of writing as a daily practice and in the context of public space communication. The written paradigm actualizes cultural mechanisms that are structured according to „law“, private property, the "conquest" of space and individualization, while the oral paradigm is focused on the repetition of the familiar. In a culture where the oral type of communication dominates, "law" and private property do not matter, whereas everything that can maintain the integrity of the collective as a unity is highly appreciated. Taking into account that in the Soviet Union a huge amount of effort was directed first at the elimination of illiteracy, and then at the introduction of compulsory, eight-year, full secondary education, and that large quantities of literature, newspapers and periodicals were published, - the conclusion that in Soviet culture the oral communication type of communication was dominant may seem paradoxical. However, the role of the image (in comparison with text) in the dominant style of "socialist realism", legal practice, the distribution of "telephone justice", the absence of private property and so on, show that the practice of writing was aimed at consolidating the status quo of the dominance of the oral paradigm (Bonnell V. (1999), Boobbyer P. (2000), Greenwood, D. J. & Levin, M., (1998), Ong W. (2002).

In the post-Soviet period of Visaginas, attachment to previous forms of identity is preserved, i.e. 'professional' engineer background and Russian language (not a legitimate language after Soviet Union collapse – which is given a negative meaning in the current political situation) within oral type communication. Identity of local population, built around "professional" attachment to Soviet elites (nuclear power was a fairly privileged sphere), is considered in opposition to an identity based on national traditions, proposed by the Lithuanian authorities.

The questions on the floor are about strategies for integrating the Soviet past and the degree to which Soviet modernism is essential for identity in the global world for post-soviet countries. The issues of re-programming, reconfiguration, and refreshing the existing infrastructure in the context of creative industries, the global economy are also important.

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Different views on language by authorities and locals lead to the co-existence of official and partisan systems of visual communication in Visaginas. This raises the question what kind of approach to design of public communication should be chosen, in the context of changing social, political and economical environments such as Visaginas in its transition period from 'nuclear' past to unclear future. The participatory design (Greenwood, D. J. & Levin, M., 1998) leads to the idea of empowerment of local communities with the ability to more effectively control their destiny, in the case of Visaginas, it is more important to create channels for communication that will allow developing scenarios of the city future in collaboration.

Conclusion

The research conducted in Visaginas has following framework:

Slow pace of the project and focus on visual representation of different stages the research allows to reveal sensitive topics and develop compassion to different social groups in Visaginas.

Elements of ethnographic approach to research allows to collect feedback on the way sensitive topics such as language issue are articulated and presented in the public space.

Results of the project are presented in as a book and uploaded in open access (Visagino 2016).

The malfunctions in reproduction of the language hierarchy may signify the identification of the residents of Visaginas with the Soviet paradigm of Modernity, with regard to invent an imaginary community.

The Soviet modernity were aimed not at production needs and demand, rather than industrial products, especially in the late Soviet period. This approach is based on the creation of social hierarchies, consumer requests were satisfied in accordance with established hierarchies (Oushakine 2014). Efforts to produce nuclear energy, as well as the city itself, the relatively privileged position of the technical intelligentsia in the socialist hierarchy of consumption of goods and services, created the prerequisites for the formation of an imagined community, which continue to exist nowadays.

Productivistic efforts in the Soviet era to produce the future literally (production plans and five-year commitments and intentions for their over fulfillment) and in the metaphorical (shifts in the language hierarchy in the newspapers - this is the production of a cosmopolitan future for the city, in which the connection with the national context was of small significance). In post-Soviet period the course of action is changing and directed to the production of the past, or rather, the production of the future in the past and legitimization of a Modernity project as a past which defines the future.

As design is institutionalized by the modernist program as a method of rational problem-solving, Visaginas, being a rational project, is a perfect space for the application of designers' efforts to reconsider the framework of professional foundations. The fact of participation and cooperation in the life of local communities of Visaginas, in dialogues with authorities allows us to consider the design as a facilitator in communication between authority and Visaginas population, to identify and make visible by mapping those processes that configure Visaginas' everyday life. The design project here is a process in which local communities, the municipality, political parties, non-governmental organizations are involved, creating an acceptable mode of visibility for each other, which is hardly possible with such degree of the existing political and cultural tensions.

In the process of reflection on what position the designer occupies in the process of researching the city of Visaginas as a case studies, rises the issue of sensitivity of designers toward cultural and historical, public issues and their interpretations toward current societal challenges. It allows to reveal the degree of emancipation of designers from traditional focus on production and socially-driven practice of consumption. Particularly it is important for Alla Pigalskaya

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post-soviet space where design as professional field is still in the process of institutional, economical reconfiguration.

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Figure 1 Manifestation dedicated to the celebration Labour Day on 1st of May, 1981

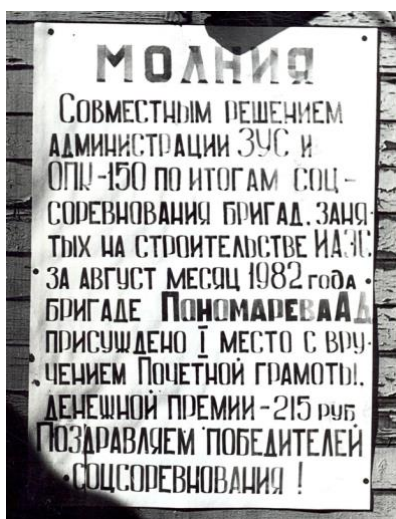


Figure 2 The Lightning – hand-made newspaper produced by NPP workers, the beginning of 80s



Figure 3 Hand-made signboard from Visaginas, 2016. Photo by Pigalskaya Alla

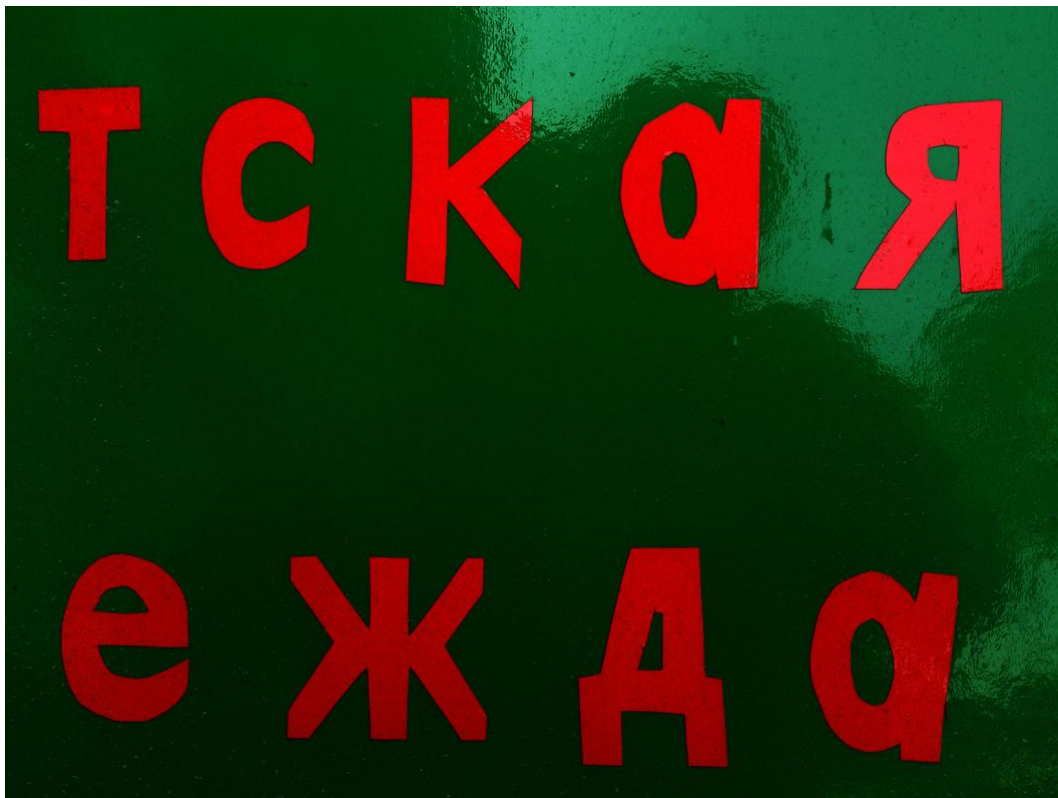


Figure 4 Fragment of hand-made signboard from Visaginas, 2016. Photo by Pigalskaya Alla



Figure 5 Hand-made signboard from Visaginas, 2016. Photo by Pigalskaya Alla



Figure 9 Newspaper, issued in Visaginas Energetikas /NPP Energy worker, 1980



Figure 10 Newspaper, issued in Visaginas Energetikas /NPP Energy worker, 1981



Figure 11 Newspaper, issued in Visaginas Мирный атом/Peaceful Atom, 1988



Figure 12 Newspaper, issued in Visaginas Мирный Энергетик/Peaceful Nuclear Energy Worker, 1989



Figure 13 Newspaper, issued in Visaginas *Taikus energetikas/Peaceful Nuclear Energy Worker*, 1989