



COMFORT REFUGEES AND UNCOMFORTABLE BELONGINGS

Affective Governance and East-to-West Migration in Europe

ONLINE SEMINAR

MoMO (Moving Mobilities Online) Lecture Series

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(University of Tartu / Tallinn University)

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This talk explores how affect operates both as a mode of governing migration and as a lived contradiction in national belonging within the landscape of East-to-West migration in post-enlargement Europe. In Estonia, public discourse has produced stigmatizing figures such as the “*comfort refugee*” — a stereotype depicting those who move abroad for better prospects as selfish, disloyal, or even traitorous. Such affectively charged narratives mobilize guilt, shame, and moral obligation as subtle technologies of *affective governance*, exposing the tension between what mobility promises in a free Europe and what it actually demands: between the desire for self-realization through movement and the moral debt imposed by those left behind.

Yet affect also “slips” beyond these frames. Ethnographic research with Estonian migrants reveals what I call “*affective contradiction*” in national belonging: strong feelings of pride and attachment to Estonia coexist with alienation from aspects of society associated with its Soviet past, conservative nationalism, or what my research participants describe as “*the Eastern European mentality*.” These contradictory ties show how migrants both affirm and distance themselves from their homeland, producing uneasy, ambivalent forms of belonging.

At the same time, my ethnography gestures toward alternative forms of affective and civic belonging that emerge when care and contribution are no longer defined through narrow, territorially bound terms. By tracing these dynamics through migrant narratives, this talk highlights how East-to-West migration in Europe is shaped not only by structural opportunities but also by affective economies of loyalty, betrayal, estrangement, and care.



Terje Toomistu, is an anthropologist and documentary filmmaker whose work bridges feminist theory, affect studies, and multimodal ethnography to explore gendered subjectivities, mobility, and affective belonging across post-socialist and postcolonial contexts. She holds research positions at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, and has been a Fulbright scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, as well as a visiting fellow at the University of Amsterdam.

Her research has focused on gender and sexuality in Indonesia, Soviet-era countercultures, and the contemporary Estonian diaspora. Approaching film and exhibition as epistemic forms of anthropological inquiry, she has curated exhibitions worldwide, and her documentaries — including *Soviet Hippies* (2017) and *Homing Beyond* (2022) — have received international recognition. Her work is marked by methodological innovation, interdisciplinary scope, and a strong commitment to public anthropology.