Simon Roberts (1974) is a British documentary photographer, whose work is often based on observing his environments based specifically on defined societal unrest or intensive activities. During his research he concentrates on creating image structures that capture the everyday life of the people. The work has an almost realistic character of a newspaper photographer, who uses a very naturalistic technique to expose the contradictions between his homeland and Russia and the disillusion of their political system. Karl Kukharev, a member of Magnum Photos, when he saw its photos a similar view, albeit from the other end of Europe. His publication, Zone (2003), documents the world of a Siberian priest. The collection shows the priest as the real political character of the USBRF environment. Both Dana Knydrová (Rusko/Russia, 1987-present) and Karel Cudić (Ukraine,Russia,1992-present) worked with the image techniques of portraiture and icons in their works.

Unfortunately photographs in the style of humanist documentaries – based on the phenomena of poverty, suffering and the collapse of political systems – have become an almost traditional view of the former Soviet republics. Roberts claims that he tried to remove the pretense of being Russian themselves and the views of the country in Western eyes from his commentaries. His testimony is meant to be comprised of a combination of values accepted by the locals and also those that can be understood and seen by external observers of events. Yet despite an intensive effort to penetrate the mentality of a people whose culture is so different from that of the British, this subjective response cannot be considered an independent description of Russian identity.

The focal point of strong documentary photography is first and foremost the offering of a new view of the known and of deeper known things and sites that creates a certain tension between reality and the internal experience. The difference between image reporting and art is primarily in its content. On one hand it is difficult to find rules for establishing boundaries, and on the other hand aestheticisation should not suppress the message. Otherwise stated, the creative form should support content. With photographs and film the scale of image possibilities is more levied (graduated) than with other media. It is necessary to carefully consider the mean of using these technical images and the bond with regard to their moral usage and to the most marked stereotypes in portrait.

Simon Roberts speaks of parallels between photographing the East and the West. His work is based on the theme of landscapes and the colonial tendencies of the new-age world. The feeling of supremacy and power that the photos taken here evoke stems from the combination of their inherent attributes as recording material or the contemporary consumer system, in which the photos fill the symbolic function of a weapon, which is a means of forced acquisition of virtual plunder. Thanks to the photographed object the viewer gains a feeling of ownership of the portrayed image ([7,8]). Travelling has become an image hunt; a hunt for images that have a direct effect on our present.

The social movement taking place in the area mentioned plays itself out both internally and externally. Nonetheless each of them fulfills in most cases a different function. Moving from the Arab Spring during periods of perpetual darkness, or portraits of the Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov (2006) 

The question of a former Eastern Bloc countries has its own pitfall, not so different from classic images of Africa as the last spot on earth marked by civilization, or Cuba – a living mausoleum to a socialist regime. In her recent works, Russian photographer André Rouble distinguishes between humanist photography, which we know as a strong, post-war tendency toward photographic documentary containing a strong, monolingual, autist, and humanitarian photography, which is an artistic take on powerlessness and suffering. Its message is at the core non-constructional. It tends rather to contribute to overall scopicism.

Simon Roberts’ work traverses several genres from staged portraits to landscape photography. His largest published series so far, Motherland - homeland in translation, develops from a strong feeling of Russian pride in one’s origins and from a land, whose specific optimism, which exists despite social and political problems that Russia has to deal with. In his photos we rarely find the common, everyday life that the artist is trying to discover. Rather we see remnants of the Soviet aesthetic, symbols of a national self-awareness or romantic shots of landscapes. The photographer expresses the country’s contradictory nature through connecting strong gestures and looks in pensive poised in portraits with the misery of the environment in which they exist.

Roberts chose a different approach for his largest series so far, We English, 2007–2008, in which contrary to his Russian essay he focuses on his home country, specifically on how the British spend their leisure time. This includes landscape photos, in which the viewer gets lost due to his own minuteness. He is seamlessly a negligible part of a larger space and yet he plays a no less important role. The main theme of his collection is the human sample that man creates through his social stratification in sport or through other means of ariantation. The photos drew on Dutch landscape painting from the 17th century: there is no single note of criticism of consumer or political systems, as is commonly done in describing the theme of leisure time in contemporary works. We English is the photographer’s subjective look at his countrymen. In the visual media that he used for this collection, he emphasises that which interested him most from the very start of his artistic career: earth, men and beauty.

Simon Roberts’ photography can be divided into two categories: nonetheless, the boundaries are very vague. One emphasises landscape, where man is the impulse that gives it a specific character (for example, the series: We English (2005-present), Polar Nights (2005), Winter Blast (2002), Russian Riviera (2009)) and the second concentrates rather on the internal structure of cultural-political relationships in society, which are of course again closely tied to a specific place, whether materially or through activities (Living with Lenin (2005-7), Ramzan Kadyrov (2008), Islamic Extremism (2004), Boxing Boys (2003), Patriot Flames (2001), Our Roads (2000)). Roberts takes notice of indicators, fragments of that which the human past has left at a particular site, and examining this problem even despite its political subtype is a first and foremost about investigating the genre topic. Motherland is a series through which it is possible to move in the direction of the past by deciphering stories that the artist inserted into the photos.

We look at portraits of common people, but focus on the stylistic details and the psychological insights that we see in their gestures and the background opening up behind them. Through this we can read the characteristic level of psycho-social behaviour.

The Russian desire for luxury and the corresponding inappropriateness to fulfill these aspirations can be considered noble. And there is a large number of photo series on the country that work with this very basic visual joke. In the prologue to his publication, Motherland, Roberts speaks of his desire to portray Russia as a country full of optimism and beauty, i.e. not as an environment marred by socialism and poverty.

In his documentary Roberts combined a romanticising exhibit of photos with realistic portraits. The ferrate-like images on one hand contradict the attempt to show real life. Nonetheless, in some scenes this poetic level evokes a feeling of Russian monumentality and a desire to believe in big ideals. Creating an essay on Russian identity is a more difficult task, and it is not clear whether photography, i.e. seemingly real images, has the possibility to capture its essence.

The concept of social maps is the basis on which Simon Roberts will build his further photographic series. Parcels, as we people, have these histories and this is an inexhaustible topic for artistic respects. It is necessary to see and realise what from our ancestors has remained in us. Similarly, it is necessary to respect original processes taking place here on earth. Let’s hope that art will help in this respect.

Tanya Yurevna and friends, Bishkek, Kirgizia, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2004

2 André Rouble, Fotografen, Krakow 2007, pg. 165.
Zhanya and his pregnant fence Mia, Yakutsk, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2004

Identical twins, Megadan, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2004

Meat market, Pyatigorsk, Northern Caucasus, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2005
Ananui Nikitin, cruise ship, Volga River, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2005

Untitled 1, Magadan, Russia, from the series Polyanye Noci, 2005

Watching a Ground Bomb, Arizona, from the series Winter Blast, 2002