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Russia-EU borderlands after the Ukraine crisis: the case of Narva

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P O S T - S O V I E T P O L I T I C S



NEIGHBOURHOOD PERCEPTIONS OF THE UKRAINE CRISIS

From the Soviet Union into Eurasia?

GERHARD BESIER and KATARZYNA STOKŁOSA



Neighbourhood Perceptions of the Ukraine Crisis

Recent events in Ukraine and Russia and the subsequent incorporation of Crimea into the Russian state, with the support of some circles of inhabitants of the peninsula, have shown that the desire of people to belong to the Western part of Europe should not automatically be assumed. Discussing different perceptions of the Ukrainian–Russian war in neighbouring countries, this book offers an analysis of the conflicts and issues connected with the shifting of the border regions of Russia and Ukraine to show how ‘material’ and ‘psychological’ borders are never completely stable ideas. The contributors – historians, sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists from across Europe – use an interdisciplinary and comparative approach to explore the different national and transnational perceptions of a possible future role for Russia.

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7 **Russia–EU borderlands after the Ukraine crisis**

The case of Narva

Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk

Introduction

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the military insurgency in Ukraine's eastern provinces triggered political and academic debates on various issues related to post-Soviet borderlands,¹ above all those populated by Russian-speakers and culturally gravitating towards Russia. In this context the Estonian city of Narva became one of the hottest nodal points in heated international discussions over the prospects and possible modalities of a new Cold War between Russia and the West. In political parlance, Narva became a metaphor with an explicit conflictual semantics, yet what exactly stands behind this metaphor, and through the prism of what academic concepts can it be unpacked?

To answer these questions, the authors problematize the case of Narva as part of the Russian–Estonian border issues that in this article will be addressed from different research perspectives – cultural semiotics, critical border studies and critical geopolitics. This blend allows unpacking diverse meanings associated with Narva as a borderland located at the intersection of different cultural, linguistic and civilizational flows and spaces. We venture to identify two types of discourses on Narva – that of normalization and exceptionalization, and relate them to the concept of securitization that comes in two versions: geopolitical and biopolitical. Geopolitically, borders are constructed as dividing territories of military blocs balancing and competing with each other, while *biopolitics* aims to manage and take care of groups of population, as opposed to control over lands.

This article combines a search for conceptual vocabulary of studying cases as complicated as Narva with empirical material. Our sociological methods include a series of interviews with Russian speakers representing local cultural elites: producers, journalists and representatives of NGOs and materials of participant observation collected in spring 2015, along with discourse analysis of Estonian Russian speaking media after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Narva: What kind of borderland?

Our conceptualization of Narva is based on the idea of borderland, a crossroads territory with varied and contested 'in-between' identities. Cultural boundaries in this context are seen not as fixed divides, but rather as fuzzy 'lines in the sand.'

The story of Narva as a borderland can be based on the concept of *overdetermination*. Borrowed from post-structuralist social theory, in our context it has to be understood as a condensation of different meanings and their intermingling. The situation of overdetermination presupposes the coexistence of divergent 'regimes of truth' that form a multi-faced reality in which subjects are not pre-given either by their territorial location or essential identity, but always communicatively and discursively constituted. Their 'positioning is in no way fixed in social formations. There is no guarantee, then, that the subject with its corresponding identity would fill its predesignated position and perform its proper function as preordained. Thus the subject always remains open to be constituted and positioned in different ways at different moments in different spaces.'²

In the sphere of border studies, overdetermination implies semantic density of overlapping realities in general and bordering/de-bordering mechanisms in particular. It correlates with the idea of borderland not only as geographical, but mainly as cultural, economic, normative, symbolic and performative phenomenon³ that shapes mechanisms of identity-making in countries and territories located in-between dominating poles. In the case of Narva one might observe a double overdetermination. First, 'national border is not always a border between two states: local borders can also signify global divisions.'⁴ The border between Narva and Ivangorod, non-existent during the Soviet times, nowadays is simultaneously part of the border between Estonia and Russia, the EU and Russia, the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, the Schengen zone and non-Schengen area, the Eurozone and the rouble zone, NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization and – speaking in Huntingtonian terms – between European and Eurasian civilizations. Then, under a deeper scrutiny one may find another dimension of overdetermination: Narva is both a geopolitical and biopolitical borderland, with the distinction between the borderlands shedding light on one of substantial gaps in the collective identity of Narva – its vacillation between loyalty to the Estonian state and allegiance to the 'Russian world.'

In constructivist border studies literature, borderlands are discussed not only as products of major actors' policies, but also as phenomena of their own. Yet in the case of Narva, local identity, with its specific double loyalty, is generically dependent on the three different grand narratives:

- the EU liberal narrative of democracy, human rights, tolerance, multiculturalism and pluralism;
- the Estonian nation-rebuilding narrative of monolingual national space, which might be in conflict with more inclusive EU approaches;⁵
- the Moscow-promoted concept of the 'Russian world' that stands in opposition to each of them.

These narratives form a complicated triangle that contains at least two structural cleavages. *First*, for EU and Estonian discourses, Russia is an external Other. Russia is viewed in Estonia as heritor to Soviet colonialism;⁶ the Russian speaking population as 'the immigrant community.'⁷ In the EU, Russia – at least, before the

Ukraine crisis – is treated as an ‘adaptable other’ that needs to undertake serious reforms before it can expect to get a status of equal partner.

Second, EU’s and Russia’s discourses are grounded – though in drastically different ways – in the idea of de-bordering. The EU tries to blur boundaries with its neighbours through a variety of mechanisms, including the Northern Dimension, the Baltic Sea Strategy etc., all of them implying policy transfer practices of an EU normative order for the adjacent countries. Russia’s strategy seeks to transcend borders through the doctrine of the ‘Russian world’ as a biopolitical tool to protect and take care of Russian-loyal groups of populations.

This situation of imbricated discourses and policies not only creates semantic polyphony and hybridity,⁸ but fragments local identity and turns it into a series of projections of Russian, Estonian or European grand narratives. The collective Self of Narva is largely constructed as dispersed objects of policies of actors each of whom – though with different degrees of otherness – might be considered as external. Only few of these projections are celebratory; in most cases articulations of local in-between identity are premised on feelings of despair, deprivation, disillusionment and abandonment – either by Russia or Estonia, or by both.

It is really hard to say what Russian-speaking non-citizens have in mind,’ comments one of the residents in Narva quoted by a French journalist, ‘They complain about Estonia, but don’t choose Russia either. There are parents who live in Estonia and lambaste it only to prevent their children from taking Estonian citizenship. They resemble a sect that likes to be dissimilar.’⁹

This structural dependence on Russian and Estonian discourses makes local identity hostage to the complicated state of EU–Russian and NATO–Russian relations. It was the annexation of Crimea and the military insurgency in eastern Ukraine that substantially complicated and sharpened the whole set of Russian–Estonian border issues, and in the meantime elucidated two discourses – those of normalization and exceptionalization.

Discourses of normalization

In spite of the widely spread academic theories of borderlands as specific territories with peculiar identities, for local residents in Narva, the border with Russia does not necessarily condition their everyday life; many of them even claim not to notice it: ‘We don’t feel it. We live a normal life.’¹⁰

The idea of normalcy in this framework can have more than one reading. It can be understood as a gradual and steady integration of Russian speakers into the Estonian cultural, linguistic and societal milieu, and/or as routinization of trans-border relations with Narva playing a role of a bridge, or a connection space between Russia and Estonia. In this section we shall dwell upon both interpretations.

The integrationist interpretation of normalcy is grounded in the perception that it is ‘unlikely that Putin, if he ever decides to expand his empire westward, will

get much help from his Estonian compatriots. They may watch the propaganda shows, they may even toast Putin from time to time, but they won't go out in the streets for him.¹¹ Our interviews have confirmed the validity of this claim:

My children are fully integrated ... and I never feel any alienation ... We (Russians and Estonians. – A.M., A.Y.) mutually respect each other ... It is impossible to expect here anything like in Ukraine ... Culture erases tensions and discards challenges of making political choices ... We play Estonian music and love it a lot ... We are connected to the whole [of] Estonia ... We hold joint contests, festivals, etc. All doors are open to us.¹²

Of course, the picture is not always that one-sided. Having asked one of the experts about the dominating attitudes to Russia's policy in Ukraine among local Russian speakers, we received the following answer:

It's 'fifty-fifty': either 'Putin is great,' or 'I don't care.' But I don't know anybody who would like to migrate to Russia for a permanent residence. Perhaps, some would go for studies.¹³

The idea of normalizing the problem of Russian speakers strongly resonates in Estonian mainstream discourse as well. 'The integration of the Russian community is going fairly well – better than anyone would have imagined ... An ethnic Russian miner in Estonia makes 10 times as much as his counterpart in eastern Ukraine ... The last people who want to join Russia are in Narva,' says Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves.¹⁴ Equally optimistic is the 2015 report of Estonian Ministry of Culture on integration of Russian speaking communities that tracks a significant progress in bridging gaps between them and Estonian majority.¹⁵

'Although there is a sharp contrast between Estonian and Russian-speakers on support for NATO and perception of a threat from Moscow, more importantly, there is little difference regarding the will to defend their country,' argues Andres Kasekamp¹⁶ and then concludes that there are no grounds to securitize Narva to the point of expecting there a repetition of the 'Crimean scenario.' This assertion by and large is supported by one of our interviewees who claimed that Russian-speaking soldiers serving in Estonian Army 'first need to serve because they have to, and after that – because they love this country' (an ethnically Russian volunteer working for Estonian Defence League). However, when asked whether in case of a military conflict, Russians serving in the Estonian Army would shoot Russians on the opposite side, the interviewee admitted that 'he never asked this question.'

This type of normalization discourse is structurally incomplete not because of such omissions, but mainly because it unfolds against the backdrop of high securitization of Estonian identity.¹⁷ The salience of security arguments prevents normalization from developing a strong de-securitization momentum; in its stead, normalization becomes tantamount to a favourable reinterpretation of security logic: 'Visiting Tallinn in September 2014, US President Barack Obama stated that

the defence of Tallinn and Riga and Vilnius is just as important as the defence of Berlin, Paris and London. In order for the validity of this statement not to be tested, deterrence must be credible.’¹⁸ It is exactly this argument that demonstrates structural limitations of the normalization discourse and its grounding in security logic.

A second, though very much related version of normalcy consists of a ‘business as usual’ approach to the wider spectrum of issues related to liaisons between Estonia and Russia. Estonia intends to inscribe the Narva–Ivangorod partnership in wider trans-border projects supported by the EU, such as the Estonia–Russia–Latvia programme, or the ‘Two Cities–Two Friends’ children festival that is a part of the European Co-operation Days. This trans-border interaction is expected to boost Estonia’s role as the lead partner in projects such as ‘United by Borders,’ aiming to create a unique Estonian–Russia fortress ensemble as a single tourist product composed of two fortresses located at 150-meter distance from one another.¹⁹ Cultural arguments strongly resonated in our interviews as well: ‘The strength of the Narva musical school is the aggregation of post–Soviet cultures and our positioning between St. Petersburg and Tallinn. Mutual fertilization and hybridity is the key advantage.’²⁰

This narrative of normalcy can be interpreted through the prism of two interrelated concepts. One boils down to Lotman’s idea of boundaries as *membranes* that filter out external impacts and domesticate them. Another concept is the idea of the *suture* known in post-structuralist literature that has analogies in cultural semiotics. Both approach borderland from the vantage point of their specific function of integrative fusion of cultures and languages, aimed at knitting together the inside and the outside.²¹ To quote Slavoj Žižek, suture means that ‘self-enclosure is an impossible priority, that the excluded externality always leaves its traces within.’²² Suture denotes ‘a mode in which the exterior is inscribed in the interior’ to the point of erasing substantial differences and forming ‘a consistent, naturalised, organic whole.’ From this perspective, Narva indeed can be viewed as a space suturing Estonia (and Europe in a wider sense) with Russia. In terms of urban landscapes, Narva is a palimpsest: many street signs are in English and Estonian, some plaques in Swedish, while most of commercials – for practical reasons – are in Russian and Estonian. From the cross-border mobility perspective, Narva–Joensuu is known as an area of spa tourism basically designed for Russian clients, which for Estonia might become an important element of securing good, neighbourly relations with Russia.

The two dimensions of normalcy identified above are of course interrelated. The fuller integration of Russian speakers into Estonian society might be conducive to their alienation from Russia and ultimately question the practicability of the suturing function: ‘I have been to Russia a couple of years ago – everything there is alien, and I thank God for living here ... I do watch Russian TV and take this information into consideration, but don’t identify myself with it.’²³

Respondents who deny communicative or linguistic problems with ethnic Estonians (‘when we try to say something in Estonian, they say – speak Russian, don’t bother yourself’), are in the meantime less prone to culturally suturing the two countries (‘When I go for class reunions to Russia, I do see how I have

changed ... and how I differ from them.’)²⁴ It is typical that assertions about ‘support from Estonians’ and ‘many rights given to us here’ are accompanied with scepticism towards sustainable connections with Russia (‘Submitting documents for Russian visa is awful, so time consuming and complicated ... We would better go[ing] to Europe.’)²⁵

The precarious status of Russia as an inner actor and simultaneously its own Other that needs to be domesticated reflects the duality of the suturing process. That is why the suturing of external reality is always incomplete; it is this irreducible and inassimilable otherness of Russia that leaves traces inside Estonia and internalizes external differences.

Discourses of exceptionalization and securitization

From an academic perspective, exceptionalization of Narva can be tackled through the prism of a Foucauldian concept of *heterotopia*. Utopias are non-localized imaginary constructs that reflect certain idealized expectations about future, while heterotopias are ‘counter-sites’ that don’t solidarize themselves with hegemonic discourses and disturb or undermine them.²⁶ In this regard, the “Russian world” can be seen as a utopian space of alleged unproblematic biopolitical agglomeration of people supposedly bound by common history, language and culture,’ while Narva is one of heterotopian places whose residents ‘appropriate but also subvert the identity categories that elites and outsiders would seek to impose on them from above.’²⁷ From a cultural semiotic perspective, the heterotopian Narva can be discussed as an example of an ‘*internal other*’ for whom Yurii Lotman found an illuminating metaphor of ‘*our strangers*,’ i.e. those groups that are only marginally integrated in the collective Self and whose identity does not fully correspond to the hegemonic one.

It is exactly this internal otherness that becomes a strong securitizing factor: ‘Russia is engaged in war propaganda, inciting and organising its diaspora. This is influencing people.’²⁸ The key security-generated factor for Estonia is the cultural intermingling with the ‘Russian world’: a significant part of the Russian speaking population sympathizes with the idea of a ‘great Russia’ able to protect its compatriots living abroad. Some foreign commentators claim that Russian speakers in Estonia are largely non-loyal to the Estonian state and can play a role of Kremlin’s fifth column in a hypothetical case of aggravation of bilateral relations.²⁹

Indeed, Estonia feels its national security being directly affected by the conflictual relations with Russia, which includes Moscow’s reaction to the Bronze Soldier relocation from downtown Tallinn to a military cemetery in 2007, and the allegedly Russian-provoked retaliatory attacks on Estonian cybersecurity. These incidents pushed Estonia to appeal to major EU member states to take a solidary stand against Russia’s revisionism. These security concerns are exacerbated by Moscow-promoted propagandistic discourse aimed to reach Russian speaking communities and convey a number of messages that purposefully challenge their integration in Estonian society. This discourse basically revolves around historical and political arguments that, as we have found in the interviews, reverberate around a significant part of ethnic Russians in Estonia.

From a viewpoint of reinterpretation of history, one of main messages sent by Moscow is that the concept of the Soviet occupation is incorrect, and misrepresents the role played by the Soviet Union in Estonia.³⁰ This revisionist statement is complemented by claiming that secession of Estonia from the USSR, along with other Baltic States, was legally problematic. There is definitely fertile ground for such approaches in Narva:

Many came here because they were incited to raise industry (in Estonia. – A.M., A.Y.) from scratch, not because they wanted to occupy someone’s place. They were promised housing and decent job. We did all kind of work. People were wonderful ... They were doing demining here, all sort of dirty construction stuff, building power plant ... And then suddenly these people were pushed out of their jobs and deprived of any respect. This is how the wind of freedom blew – as if they (Estonians. – A.M., A.Y.) didn’t have freedom before.³¹

In their discourses, local residents don’t distance themselves from the Soviet time; on the contrary, they gladly associate themselves with it:

The “Baltiyets” factory in the Soviet times was known all across the country ... People from all Estonia came to share our experience ... We were able to take children groups to Moscow to see the Bolshoi Theatre ... And there were funds for all this ... When komsomol³² was in charge, everything was easier ... Yet then Estonia seceded ... Estonians first didn’t know themselves what to do with their freedom. They asked for economic autonomy, but Yeltsin gave them freedom.³³

This phenomenal combination of Soviet cultural stereotypes and historical diletantism contravenes one of the core arguments in Russia’s mainstream discourse on Russia being a victim of the Soviet regime to the same extent as other Soviet republics were.³⁴ A significant part of Russian speakers in Narva deny the objective factors that ultimately led to the decomposition of the Soviet Union, and don’t see reasons to regret what constitutes one of the pivots for the Estonian national narrative – mass deportations, Russification and subjugation to the Moscow rule. They prefer to look at the post-war period as that of industrialization rather than colonization, and expose surprising insensitivity to Estonian concerns about the erosion of Estonian majority during the Soviet times.³⁵

From a viewpoint of current political developments, Russia’s messages boil down to the claims of a crisis of the policy of multiculturalism in Europe in general and Estonia in particular.³⁶ Valery Tishkov, director of the Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, claimed that the idea of bilingualism in Estonia is equated to sexual deviations.³⁷ A group of authors from St. Petersburg State University conclude that Estonia – as well as other Baltic States – intentionally politicize relations with Russia through generating anti-Russian initiatives in Europe, for which it pays a dear economic price.³⁸ Sergey

Naryshkin, the speaker of the State Duma, claimed that it is due to an ‘inferiority complex’ that political elites of the Baltic States are cautious about expanding co-operation with Russia.³⁹ These speech acts are of particular resonance to Narva in the context of the conflict in Ukraine to be addressed in the next section.

The impact of the Russia–Ukraine conflict

In light of the growing confrontation between Russia and the West after the eruption of the Ukraine crisis, Narva can be described as a NATO ‘border-threshold,’⁴⁰ while ‘Estonia is a border country of the free world,’⁴¹ and thus, as a British journalist puts it, ‘must prepare for the storm.’⁴² In view of the dangers coming from the Russian side, the Estonian government is fortifying the border infrastructure⁴³ and welcomes a greater military presence of NATO troops on its territory as a guarantee for ‘article 5 of NATO to be enacted in case Putin decides to test the waters in Narva.’⁴⁴

In the meantime, Estonian security partners in the West take seriously the fact that the security guarantees from NATO can ‘entail going to war with a country that possesses the world’s biggest arsenal of nuclear weapons. So a conflict that begins on the shores of the Baltic could, in extremis, escalate into one that threatens the survival of humanity. NATO’s Baltic members do not possess a single jet fighter. They are entirely reliant on the alliance’s ‘Baltic Air Policing Mission’ to guard their airspace. The strength of this force was quadrupled last year – but only from four to sixteen NATO fighters. Russia’s air force, meanwhile, has 1,201 combat-capable aircrafts.’⁴⁵ In the words of David Ochmanek, senior defence analyst at RAND Corporation and former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defence for force development, the United States won’t be able to effectively protect the Baltics ‘even if all the U.S. and NATO troops stationed in Europe were dispatched to the Baltics – including the 82nd Airborne, which is supposed to be ready to go on 24 hours’ notice and is based at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.’⁴⁶

The Russian political commentator Andrey Piontkovsky has polemically re-actualized an old debate on the ‘red lines’ in Europe by formulating the ‘Narva dilemma for the West.’ In his interpretation, this Estonian city became a double metaphor – it signifies both the remnants of Russian military glory that after the fall of the USSR were detached from Russia, and simultaneously the unwillingness of the West to fight with Russia for Baltic States, of which Putin is aware.⁴⁷ Piontkovsky formulated ‘the Narva paradox’ as ‘Putin’s ability by one single move to make the entire West face an unthinkable choice – humiliating capitulation and marginalization, or a nuclear war with someone who lives in a different reality.’⁴⁸ Hypothetical scenarios of developing Russian irredentism in Narva were discussed in international media outlets as potentially conducive to a painful defeat for NATO due to its probable inaction vis-à-vis Russia-supported rebellion.⁴⁹

Arguably, for the West the only response to this challenge would be to reverse the question and ask whether Russians themselves are ready to give their lives for Narva. In this light, it was highly symbolic that the military parade on the occasion of the Estonian Independence Day on 24 February 2015, with participation

of UK and U.S. military personnel was held in Narva, only 300 meters from the Russian border.⁵⁰ In Piontkovsky's words, 'now, should "little green men"⁵¹ appear in Narva, America would automatically find itself in war with Russia ... This is exactly what Putin tried to avoid, threatening to use nuclear weapons.'⁵²

The 'Narva paradox' is part of a long story of Estonian–Russian border-related troubles that includes debates over and procrastinations with signing and ratifying the Border Treaty that Moscow considers as a reward to Estonia rather than as a mutually beneficial act, as well as an incident with an Estonian border guard officer Eston Kohver who in 2014 was allegedly kidnapped by Russian security services and sentenced for espionage. All this creates a highly securitized context in which the case of Narva is deployed. Narva is twinned with Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, controlled by pro-Russian separatists. In 2015 the Narva city council received a letter from the 'Donetsk People's Republic' (DNR) asking to provide support against the Ukrainian government.⁵³ In these break-away territories, Narva is portrayed as generically similar to eastern Ukraine: 'Nowadays the Russian Narva looks with hope to Russia, while Estonian government is afraid of a second Crimea.'⁵⁴

Even some of the most loyal to the Estonian state among our interviewees expressed their approval of Russian policy in Ukraine. An interviewee who made a strong case for a lack of any discrimination in Estonia ('We, as a Russian choir, were invited to sing in front of the Estonian President – what kind of inequality you are talking about?'), nevertheless supported Russia's policy towards Ukraine ('It is abnormal that in Ukraine Russian language is banned ... We all watch Russian TV and see all the hoop-la from the other [Ukrainian. – A.M., A.Y.] side.')55

Paradoxically, this double-edged identity gives many of local residents a feeling of security: people feel relatively protected being citizens or residents of Estonia, but in the meantime, they might find it acceptable to identify themselves with Russia and even welcome some sort of protection from the Russian side. Most of Russian speakers would intentionally or unwittingly reproduce the basic tenets of Kremlin's Ukraine discourse and share the perception of Ukraine as an artificial state with contingent borders; many would project onto themselves the conflict in Eastern Ukraine as a legitimate struggle of Russians for speaking their own language:

Russian speakers here support the rebels. Secession of Crimea is quite normal to us. It all used to be Soviet.⁵⁶

An incident with the DNR flag in Narva at the celebration of 9 May in 2015,⁵⁷ reported by local journalists, can serve as gesture of symbolic solidarity with 'Novorossiia.' The parallels between Narva and Donetsk are discussed online in web resources sympathetic to rebels in eastern Ukraine:

Only Russians living in Estonia know what they had to go through: they were coerced to study Estonian and humiliated by exams for citizenship and 'grey

passports' ... Comparisons between Donetsk and Narva give you a mirror analogy. Both are proletarian, factory-centred cities with attributed criminal connotations ... The rupture with Moscow when the Soviet Union was blown up in both cases was equally painful: there were attempts to institute South-Eastern Republic in Ukraine with Kharkiv as its capital, while in Estonia there were ideas about autonomous Narva ... Narva couldn't forgive Tallinn the relocation of the Bronze Soldier, as Donetsk is averse to demolition of Lenin's statues all across Ukraine ... Moreover, unlike in Donetsk, sport fans in Narva always support Russian teams.⁵⁸

A local resident, interviewed by a journalist, confirms pro-Russian sympathies in Narva:

I guess most of the folks here are on Russia's side. In Ukraine, something tough is going on there ... This is basically what we talk about among ourselves ... Estonia doesn't cover much this, while Russia does. Since we are Russians, we watch news from Russia. The First Channel is the most popular here.⁵⁹

Two facets of security

Our analysis of security repercussions of the Ukraine crisis in Estonia is based on distinguishing two referent objects of security: territory and population. Therefore, there are two different types of 'security analytics' – geopolitical and biopolitical, to be scrutinized in the next section.

Narva as a geopolitical borderland

What stands behind the raising conflictual momentum in EU–Russian relations is the structure of communication between the two parties, which reproduces and even reinforces the logic of binary oppositions. It is in this context that the concept of the border ought to be discussed as defining the discursively constructed distinctions between 'the secure' and 'the insecure,' 'the ordered' and 'the disordered,' 'the allowed' and 'the disallowed.'⁶⁰ These and other dichotomies strongly resonate in the variety of Russian–Estonian contexts.

In spite of multiple attempts to get rid of the hegemony of grand narratives through post-modernist deconstructions of the Cold War-style East–West divide, binary oppositions demonstrate a significant degree of adaptability and endurance. It is the 'either/or' and 'black/white' binary thinking that dominates in Russian and European discourses. Two factors – the polarity of the EU–Russia structure of interactions and the blurred borders between them – were conducive to the eruption of the conflict in Ukraine. Russia and Europe invested a lot in discursively constructing each other's role identities: Russia as a harbinger of conservatism resisting to the liberal emancipatory Europe (in the Moscow hegemonic discourse), and Europe as a promoter of democratic normative order in which the

authoritarian Russia does not fit (in the Brussels discourse). With two identities becoming more self-referential and self-sufficient, the EU and Russia paved the way for the inevitable geopolitical collision.

It is the binary structure of Russian–European communication that was conducive to what in Lotman’s terms could be dubbed ‘an explosion’ – a dramatic ‘collision of misunderstandings’⁶¹ grounded in a conflictual encounter of two mutually incompatible and irreconcilable logics. Binary structures that were politically ostracized at times of the end of the Cold War again reappeared. For Lotman it was axiomatic that ‘the space of reality cannot be embraced by one single language’⁶² – yet this is exactly what happened in relations between the EU and Russia, with each of the two parties bent on its own political vocabulary and their own beliefs in the ultimate truth. This self-reproduced collision tends to be eventually aimed at destroying everything that is ‘tainted by incorrigible sins.’⁶³ Needless to say that these ‘sins’ are drastically different: for the EU it is Russia’s corrupt and aggressive authoritarianism, while for Russia it is the European emancipatory liberalism.

The post–Cold War ideas of a ‘networked Europe,’ cross-border flows and de-territorialization were supposed to stretch beyond experiences of modernity and ‘provide margins with possibilities for constitutive action.’⁶⁴ Yet liminality as ‘a condition being betwixt and between socially established categories ... could also be the condition of being suspended or even trapped between two different sets of role expectations, a condition often leading to impassivity, or even to a social impasse.’⁶⁵

With all the unfixed and instability of borders, binary structures of conflicting discourses often tend to be self-reproducing, which poses enormous challenges to borderlands. The (geo)political content of borders can be expressed through the metaphor of ‘the politics of the line’⁶⁶ that can, in the meantime, be able to re-actualize a seemingly old security practice strongly associated with the Cold War. The case of the Estonian government’s intention to build a wall at the border with Russia is a good reminder of the resilience of practices of geopolitical partitions and divisions that are discernible, though in different forms, in other parts of Europe as well.

Narva as a biopolitical borderland

Some scholars claim that security policies of many countries tend to shift from protecting/conquering territories to taking care of people, or from geopolitics to biopolitics. The objects of the latter can be compatriots or culturally akin ethnic groups living beyond borders of a specific nation state. These policies might range from distributing passports to residents of foreign countries to programs of cultural patronage and protection. Thus, sovereign power has to be viewed not through the lens of ‘fixed territorial borders located at the outer edge of the state, but rather infused through bodies and diffused throughout everyday life.’⁶⁷

Territorially, residents of Narva, by and large, associate themselves with the country they reside in, and seem unlikely to move to Russia. Yet biopolitically,

it is Russia with whom they might feel a strong cultural, linguistic and religious affinity. Large groups of Russian speakers 'do not see themselves part of their current homeland but long back to the old Soviet days.'⁶⁸ This puts at the core of the biopolitical agenda issues of residence and citizenship,⁶⁹ but also of cultural and linguistic detachment of Russian-speaking groups from Estonian linguistic landscapes and toponimics.⁷⁰

In this respect, Narva can be viewed as part of what the Kremlin calls the 'Russian world' – a mythical, and in many respects utopian, space where all descendants from Russia share a spiritual macro-identity. Most of its dwellers physically 'reside in Estonia, but live in a world created by Kremlin-controlled television news ... Narva has a history that echoes that of Donetsk and Lugansk ... Its residents trust the authorities in Moscow more than they trust the authorities in Tallinn ... The land around Narva is arguably far less valuable to Moscow than a population.'⁷¹ In the meantime, as seen from the other perspective, 'NATO tanks cannot prevent Putin's agents from infiltrating Narva, but local Russians can oppose them if they are invested in being on the Western side of Putin's new Iron Curtain.'⁷²

The specificity of the biopolitical reading of borderland security consists of a socially and semantically constructed nature of the object of threat, which is the (presumably) collective identity of Russians living abroad, with the concept of the 'Russian world' as its epitome. Yet biopolitical security discourses not only create a sense of protection for specific groups of population, but also 'produce the audience' and 'constitute speech communities in which particular forms of representation are intelligible and legitimate and others unintelligible and illegitimate.'⁷³ Consequently, biopolitical discourses articulate and shape the whole idea of the 'Russian world' that, as our empirical material showed, remains a highly fragmented archipelago of different narratives, perceptions, expectations and policy strategies.

Classical security discourse presumes, by one means or another, that it is dealing with a fixed object. Biopolitical security discourses and techniques deal with an object that is continuously undergoing transformation and change through the manifold circuits of production and reproduction.⁷⁴ In this sense, borderlands such as Narva discursively co-produce 'a biopolitical community-in-the-making' of the 'Russian world.'

Conclusion

In this study we have found proof for arguing that cultural, societal, ethnic, religious, linguistic and other borders are social constructs that delineate and engage, involve and marginalize, and in this sense are instrumental for understanding the multifaceted dynamics and mechanisms of making political subjectivities. The different modalities of securitization of the Narva discourse reaffirms that borderlands can be terrains for 'hegemonic and competing narratives ... of identity, citizenship, political and territorial loyalties or the territorialization

of memory.⁷⁵ In many respects, these findings contravene the opinion of those proponents of globalization who deem that ‘the national notion of borders as delimiting two sovereign territorial states is not quite in play.’⁷⁶

In this article we concluded that deployment of Narva in various security contexts is inevitable, and singled out two dimensions of securitization – geopolitical and biopolitical – that usually go hand in hand with each other in extending the Russian Collective Self beyond Russia’s borders. Being under strong Russian cultural and political influence, yet in the meantime eager to integrate into Estonia (though on its own conditions), the Russian-speaking community is split among these two allegiances and in many respects disoriented, which reduces its capability to produce an authentic identity discourse and thus play a suturing role in relations between Estonia and Russia. As a political community, Narva is surrounded by multiple borders and boundaries and reproduced them, with local discourses mostly replicating the logics of the ‘Russian world’ or Estonian national narrative, rather than producing their own storylines.

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