Of Homogenous ‘Freaks’ and Heterogenous Members: Cultural Minoritites and their Belonging in the Estonian Borderland

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the complex manifestations of belonging among minority groups while focusing on the narratives and spatial experiences of Russian speakers in Estonia. Engaging critically with previous studies on belonging and drawing on the ethnographic examples from the borderland city of Narva, this research reconstructs belonging as a complex relational process constituted through both the official spatial arrangements and individual social actions, meanings, and perceptions. It demonstrates how official state narratives and the reconfiguration of space in and around Narva alienate many of its Russian-speaking dwellers as outsiders and strangers but also, counterintuitively, lead to the emergence of numerous alternative heterogenous representations of the self, anchored in daily interactions in and with concrete material spaces.

Keywords: belonging, borderland, space, Russian speakers, Estonia

Introduction

This paper extends the dialogue on ethno-heterogenesis through a critical interrogation of the notion of belonging, which in the recent years has become increasingly central to discussions of ethnicity, minority integration, and socio-cultural change. It does so by examining the everyday practices of ‘Russian speakers’[1] who found themselves “beached” in Estonia when the Soviet borders suddenly receded (Laitin 1998: 29). Once a privileged national group in the Soviet Union, the Russophone populations experienced “a form of stationary or figurative displacement” as the political borders demarcating their homelands “moved over them” (Flynn 2007: 267). This geo-political reconfiguration implied the obliteration of established orders, the redefinition of community memberships, and the transformation of Russian speakers from being considered the rightful residents in the commonly non-Russian regions to being perceived as new minorities. To this day, especially following Russia’s contested annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, their loyalties, attachments, and belonging complicate the process of post-Soviet reconfiguration of political, cultural, and social landscapes.

Engaging with the peculiar case of the politically displaced Russian-speaking minorities in the Estonian borderland city of Narva, this paper explores the complex manifestations of belonging. In recent years, there has been sustained interdisciplinary academic scrutiny of the

[1] The broad term ‘Russian speakers’ encompasses Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Polish and other nationalities, who had migrated to the non-Russian regions and became heavily Russified both during the tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. However, without wishing to essentialize certain historical, linguistic, and cultural commonalities between Russian speakers, I consider the Russophone community as a complex phenomenon, engendering a broad variety of narrative and performative practices articulated within a specific spatio-temporal setting.

processes, practices, and theories of belonging (Antonsich 2010; Anthias 2006; Halse 2018; Miller 2003; Pfaff-Czarnezka 2011; Wright 2015; Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011). Heightened transnational interconnectedness, but also resurgent nationalism and conservatism have contributed profoundly to questions about what belonging could mean, how belonging is experienced in different ways, and how it might be structured by socio-political processes. This paper addresses such questions by bringing previous critical studies together with my own ethnographic data about tangible ways in which Russian speakers experience, materialize, and narrate their belonging.

In addition to attending to broader political discourses or the so-called "politics of belonging" (Yuval-Davis 2006) which define space and society, I also incorporate a micro-level analysis of the mundane activities and narratives of Russian-speaking individuals, and inquire particularly into their societal positionings, their perceptions of places they live in and the desires for alternative belonging. I build on and conduct a space-sensitive research (Fuller & Löw 2017; Savage et al. 2003; Youkhana 2015) that looks not only at different emotional articulations of belonging in a specific socio-political and cultural location but also at the capacity of concrete material spaces to facilitate the movement of people between different memberships. As such, this detailed analysis contributes to existing theoretical discourses on belonging, describing it as interrelated yet with "alterable attachments" (Youkhana 2015: 16) that come into being through simultaneous spatial practices of bordering and re-bordering.

Approaching belonging as a more fluid and less fixed conception, as a movement between 'inside' and 'outside' as well as between different cultural fields, allows us to better understand how the processes of 'othering', processes of distancing, as well as changes of ethnic framing and collective memberships occur. The empirical sections provide, therefore, vivid insights for the current special issue on ethnoheterogenous societies by demonstrating how belonging and affiliation of Russian speakers are shaped by the simultaneous entanglement of homo- and heterogenizing forces. That is how they move from being framed and perceiving themselves as 'freaks', as put by one of my interlocutors, or non-Estonian strangers, to Estonian 'rightful members', Estonianized Russians, and/or as essential parts of Europe.

Narva represents a telling site in the study of local belonging and social change. Following Estonia's independence in 1991, the new borderland city has been geographically marginalized and discursively alienated from the rest of Estonia. It came to connote peripherality and internal otherness, Orientalized due to its demographics, location, and cultural connections with Russia and the so-called 'Russian World'. To date, the city is populated predominantly by Russian-speaking inhabitants (comprising over 90% of the local population), most of whom arrived in Narva during the reconstruction years following the end of World War II. The large flow of newcomers from Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union considerably shifted the ethnic composition of its population, turning the city into a "Russian-speaking working-class environment" (Pfoser 2017: 392), where ethnic Estonians represent a minority. Today this demographic situation stimulates much discussion into the status of Narva – whether, for example, Narva should be considered a 'Russian enclave', "detached from Estonian political and cultural mainstream" and capable of secession (Makarychev 2018: 9).

Although the borderland city is approached predominantly through the frameworks of securitization and marginalization, Makarychev (Ibid.) notes how Narva should be studied as a "connecting point", "bridge", and a "hybrid space" that integrates "a fusion of cultures and languages" (Makarychev & Yatsyk 2016: 101). As an "epistemological frontline" between different spatial and temporal scales of the global, national, and local, Soviet, and post-Soviet (Kaiser & Nikiforova 2008: 545), Narva enables a closer look into the relationship between geographic borders and potential boundaries of belonging. Studying

the variegated practices through which Russian-speaking Narvans position themselves in relation to internal and external spaces makes visible how the dividing lines between and the saturation of different cultural codes and lifestyles occur, opening thereby new perspectives into the broader research on borders, belonging, and space.

The first part of this article situates the research in the literature on belonging, developing a space-sensitive definition of the concept. In the second part, I provide a schematic account of individual meanings and practices of belonging while drawing on the ethnographic examples gathered in the Estonian borderland city of Narva between February and April, 2017. In this analysis, I focus, on the one hand, on the major reconfigurations of space that occurred in the borderland city following the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the official state narratives that often exclude Russian speakers from the Estonian community on both formal and informal levels. On the other, I trace different ways in which societal positionings and alternative modalities of belonging emerge and are negotiated in the so-called spatial narratives of Russian speakers constructed in reference to specific places.

Belonging Through Spatial Lens

Although belonging has been less rigorously theorized than many other foundational terms (Wright 2015: 391), there are several noteworthy studies that seek to make sense of ubiquity and the contradictory nature of the concept by elaborating its different facets. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006), for example, suggests that belonging is a dynamic process constructed through different dimensions: individuals' social locations that relate to a particular age-group, kinship group or a certain profession; individuals' identifications and emotional attachment to various collectives and groups; and discursive processes or 'politics of belonging' that make belonging possible. At the center of her argument lies the perspective that belonging is always influenced by different historical trajectories and social realities and is negotiated 'intersectionally', that is, alongside multiple power axes. Floya Anthias (2006) follows a similar argument and situates belonging at the interface between the local and the global, between different locations and contexts from which it is imagined and narrated. To understand belonging, then, is to understand a "translocational positionality": that is, how individual positionalities are "complexly tied to situation, meaning and the interplay of our social locations" (Anthias 2006: 29). This interpretation breaks with the essentialized categorizations of social difference and bridges the gap between structure and agency, between different localities and scales.

To fruitfully deepen understandings of belonging, Sarah Wright (2015) suggests a "weak theory", which neither attempts to categorize nor model the lives of people. Instead, a weak theory ponders belonging as constituted "by and through emotional attachments" as well as "the practices of a wide range of human and more-than-human agents, including animals, places, emotions, things and flows" (Wright 2015: 392). It is, thus, a "circuit of action and reaction" (Ibid.: 393) that emphasizes the agency of place and its co-constitution with people. Mike Savage et al. (2003) and Marco Antonsich (2010) also stress the spatial reference of belonging, which is often related to particular localities and territorialities. According to Antonsich (2010: 645), who builds on research by Yuval-Davis, belonging may range between two major analytical dimensions – one that connotes a personal, intimate, feeling of being 'at home' (place-belongingness) and the other that refers to "a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion" (politics of belonging). As such, belonging develops gradually through daily spatial performances and feelings of safety while being situated within and affected by more public-oriented formal structures.

There is now a growing acknowledgement that belonging should be anchored in socio-material circumstances, spatialities surrounding people, and their everyday practices (Anthias 2013;

Bennet 2012; Youkhana 2015). Eva Youkhana (2015: 11), for example, notes how, in order to reflect upon the changing everyday belongingness, socio-spatial production processes must be better integrated into our conceptual thinking. Belonging, in her words, could be then defined as "a socio-material resource that arises my means of multiple and situated appropriation processes" and describes "alterable attachments that can be social, imagined, and sensual-material in nature" (Youkhana 2015: 16). These attachments come into being "between people and things, and between people and people, through material conditions". To stress the intersectional entanglement of belonging with the politics of boundary-making, Youkhana proposes to use space as a useful analytical category that reflects complex relations between people, circulating objects, artefacts, and changing social, political and cultural landscapes (Ibid.: 10). In other words, this analytical approach gives the researcher an opportunity to trace not only the complex relations of individuals with other people but also the importance of concrete places or things for the constitution of the social relations (Halse 2018).

This article considers a space-sensitive theorization of belonging.[2] Building on previous research, it looks at belonging as an ongoing spatial process, defined by power relations which shape and are shaped by practices of bordering and de-bordering. The spatial approach to belonging, which is by its very nature relational and dynamic, allows one to overcome many difficulties associated with problematic ideas of groupism or static attitudes towards people's self-positioning. Instead, this approach views membership roles as inherently situative within specific power relations (Tiesler 2018) and draws our attention to social, political, economic, ideological, and technological processes that define space and society. These processes are usually tied with the so-called 'politics of belonging' through which both political institutions and the society at large create structures and draw boundaries, shaping and encoding the built environment with meanings that affect the individual experiences in place. At the same time, it also considers the mundane, habitual activities and tactics (e.g. social exchanges, memories, images, and daily interaction in and with material settings) that people use to negotiate their way through or around social structures. As an analytical tool, space, thus, does not overemphasize individual agency nor prioritizes 'politics of belonging', but sees them as products of inherent interrelation responsive to the movements and specifications of time.

Adopting a relational space-based approach, this paper concentrates on artefacts in public space of Narva – buildings, streets, monuments – and their role in the processes through which Russian speakers negotiate belonging within the Estonian collective, transgress dominant ideologies, political practices, and the politics of social boundary-making. Central to the analysis are individuals' narratives of social relationships and belonging, emerging out of their daily routines and dwelling. Instead of asking the direct questions of where and whether one belongs or feels at home, I employed naturally occurring data that arose in the conversations about the aspects of everyday life, friendships, leisure, and favorite places. Therefore, apart from conducting scheduled interviews, I also turned to the ethnographic practice of 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998; Ingold 2004), that is, sharing experiences in a variety of places by strolling through the city with my interlocutors, visiting their homes, and having numerous conversations about life outside the formal interview structures in cafes or bars.

[2] Following Low (2017: 32), I understand 'space' in a broader sense, as a social construct, "produced by bodies and groups of people, as well as historical and political forces". 'Place', on the other hand, is a spatial location inhabited and appropriated by individuals through ascription of personal meanings and feelings (Cresswell 2015: 15). It is by filling spaces with social, cultural, and affective attributes that space becomes place – a "particular space on which senses of belonging, property rights, and authority can be projected" (Blommaert 2005: 222).

The data used in the sections below stems from Russian-speaking interlocutors whom I met through a technique of a snowballing (with a maximum of one subsequent referral per respondent): I encountered some people on the streets, while I met others through personal contacts or through the language café, the informal meetings organized by the Integration and Migration Foundation (MISA) with the purpose to help people improve their Estonian language skills.[3] My analysis builds on extensive ethnographic observations, visual materials, or photographs of favorite places that my interlocutors shared with me, as well as twenty-seven semi-structured interviews that took place in the Russian language with the city-dwellers between eighteen and sixty-six years old. These individuals represented a range of professional backgrounds with different levels of education and varying degrees of engagement in civic activities: some were university students, while others were teachers, engineers, lawyers, shop assistants, housewives, unemployed workers, or pensioners.

My ethnographic findings of everyday belonging equally combine immersion with estrangement, my own interiority as a Russian speaker from Estonia, and my exteriority as a person from Tallinn who entered into the urban environment of Narva for the first time. Establishing contacts with the local dwellers was not a difficult task, as many responded positively to my own heritage, taking me as one of their own, as someone who not only understands the language, but is situated in the same socio-political context. At the same time, I had to compensate for my 'spectral distance' with a lot of explorative strolls to sense the intensities of everyday affective cityscapes, to discover the *Geist* of Narva. This inside/outside positionality turned out to be useful for paying careful attention to different materialities and registering the distinctive public feelings they generate, or to the complex entanglement of cultural styles which overlap, mutate, and condition each other (Ferguson 1999). Most importantly, it helped uncover diverse, complex, and contested practices of social membership that Russian speakers were forming in the context of day-to-day social and spatial interactions.

Spatial Reconfiguration of Narva: Producing a Community of 'Freaks'

Wider socio-spatial contexts serve as a backdrop against which to interpret individual and group encounters as well as their feelings of belonging. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the process of nationalization in Estonia has become pervasive, with the state conducting wide-ranging campaigns to reassert national identity and sovereignty. The agenda of nation-building aimed in particular at an impetuous departure from the Soviet past, at revising and reifying national narratives, at reasserting the language, demographic position, economic flourishing and political hegemony of the nominally state-bearing nation (Diener & Hagen 2013). The efforts to create specific cultural and political narratives were reflected in two specific ways: First, with the creation of a citizenship policy, which excluded as non-citizens everyone who moved to Estonia after 1940 (initially comprising 39% of the total population). Second, through language and education laws, which sought to prioritize the Estonian language and version of history. At the same time, the national revival crystallized spatially in the urban landscapes through the replacement of the street names, the creation of historical landmarks that commemorate specific national narratives while forgetting or trivializing the narratives of local minorities as those of the undesirable past.

This nationalization was acutely felt in Narva, where the Russian-speaking inhabitants were forced to deal with a new physical border while observing how many of their previous practices

[3] The several meetings that I observed were attended by a very broad spectrum of Russian-speaking people: pensioners (who sought a company of others rather than necessarily learning the language itself), mothers on maternity leave and unemployed people (who wanted to use their time effectively and improve their Estonian), as well as several current employees (who were required by their employers to pass the language qualification test).

came abruptly to a halt. A large-scale de-Sovietization campaign was launched to exteriorize Russia and Russianness from the time-space of Narva, replacing it with Estonian and European narratives instead. During this process, not only several Soviet-era monuments were eliminated, but also the street names, names of buildings, schools, or cultural landscapes of the city. The first monuments to be demolished were those of Lenin. The main statue, which is the last of its kind in Estonia, was relocated from the city square to the yard of the Narva Fortress, built during Denmark's rule in the thirteenth century. Stripped of its former powerful position today it serves rather as a "kitschy local tourist attraction metaphorically captured and subordinated to Europe" (Kaiser & Nikiforova 2008: 549).

This radical transformation affected the city in other ways, as well. The disappearance of familiar cultural geographies through creation of new symbols and narratives coupled with the corrosive political project, which left old factories, culture houses, and parks to decompose. The Krenholm area, which was once the liveliest part of the city with own library, house of culture, hospital, schools, kindergartens, and housing for the factory workers, "the centerpiece of proletarian internationalism" (Kaiser & Nikiforova 2008: 549), has undergone the most devastating decline. Once the largest textile factory of the Russian Empire and a space for employment during Soviet times, Krenholm could be now regarded as an artefact of hardships that the city has endured since the early 1990s. What is left of it are ruins which mark growing state disengagement while transmitting a sense of marginality for its population. In my conversation with Sveta, a thirty-four-year-old housewife, she remarked how the 1990s have dramatically affected the city and the lives of the people. Born in the Krenholm area, where she also spent most of her childhood, Sveta is upset by the negligence of favorite places, which today represent a rupture between a good life of Soviet prosperity and a present decline, economic insecurities and unemployment:

> The Gerasimov Culture House, I cannot look at it without tears in my eyes. It is a wreck; even the windows are all knocked out. Nothing is left of this place. Once, this culture house used to be surrounded by a beautiful park with fountains, full of kids. All parades and celebrations in the city used to take place there, on the ninth of May, the first of May. Numerous cultural events, gymnastics and music classes all used to happen at Gerasimov. There was life and there was real movement. What we see now is a few shabby columns and slowly, quietly corroding swings of the demolished amusement park.

Attempts to integrate Narva into Estonia and to introduce the Estonian language and culture through the education system or cultural events and festivals thus border uncomfortably with the visible distortion or even erosion of the public spaces.[4] This distortion comes alongside counterproductive narratives that reconstruct the city as a separate kind, as "not quite Estonian" (Pfoser 2017: 397). For example, Katri Raik, the former director of Narva College and a current member of the Estonian parliament, wrote a book tenderly named *Minu Narva* (My Narva) in which she attempts to overcome the negative images often attached to the city. In a thrilling manner, Raik describes her positive impressions of the everyday life in Narva but slips almost simultaneously to reproduce the stereotypes and ostracize the city as "neither Estonian nor Russian" but rather Soviet (2014: 28), as a place with its own way of governing (*politika na narvskii maner*), as a place where the people think of Russia as their homeland (Ibid.: 26).

This book was mentioned to me by several of my interlocutors, who were convinced that it does not do justice neither to the city nor to them. Rather, it strengthens the perception of Narva as an adjacent element that consists of foreign people:

[4] Note that Ida-Viry County, of which Narva is a part, has the highest registered unemployment rates (9.2% in 2020) in the country. See, for example: https://news.err.ee/1025237/more-job-seekers-in-ida-viru-county-are-finding-work-away-from-home.

> Very little attention is paid to us. Neither politicians nor people know much about us. This is not to say that we are a separate world. No. We pay taxes and everything that happens in Estonia affects us in the same way. Narvans want to be accepted. It's like every family has a freak and we are this freak (*v semye ne bez urodov i etim urodom okazalis' my*). This is upsetting. And when Estonians say like we are not Estonia . . . How come? At least geographically. Yes, we are Estonians, Estonia … not Estonians, but Estonia. And a lot of Narva dwellers, simple workers, working in factories or in shops, they value Estonia and love living here. (Yulia, twenty-four years old, student)

For Russian speakers like Yulia, the de-construction and temporal ruptures that the city experiences are not seen as their own failures to adapt to the new realities in the country – as it is commonly framed by political and medial discourses (Malloy 2009). Instead, it is depicted as a deliberate attempt of the state to abandon the city and position Russian speakers as 'other'. This feeds largely into the feelings of alienation, often self-induced, as a seemingly homogenous Russian-speaking community of 'freaks' (*urody*) who are estranged from the larger Estonian collective. Another interlocutor, Natalya, a museum worker in her fifties, also talked to me at length about the internal 'otherness' of Narva and its dwellers. In our conversation, she reconstructs the painful decline of Narva from a hardworking city into the 'city of beggars' where everyone, including herself, must change jobs on a regular basis and then wait for their employers to eventually pay them. They become a kind of problem child for Estonian politicians: 'But we didn't come up with this life. And now Estonia can't stand Ida-Virumaa. It is like an ulcer on the Estonian body (*yazva na tele Estonii*)'. As a stateless person, Natalya feels particularly affected by these changes. Despite being born here and paying her taxes, she confessed later, Estonian official citizenship and integration policies only exacerbate her alienation and impede a sense of belonging to the Estonian nation-state.[5]

The interaction with fellow ethnic Estonians who often demonstrate unwillingness to accept Russian speakers as 'own people' complicates the situation further. In a conversation, Vera, a forty-year-old social worker, expressed her unease with not being considered a legitimate part of Estonian community, which was related strongly to her lack of knowledge of the Estonian language. Vera was born in Soviet Estonia and welcomed its independence in 1991; she considers the country her only homeland. She learned the Estonian language, attends different events in Estonian across Narva, but the feeling of being a foreigner never subsides. Such boundaries that demarcate Estonia's 'own people' from Russian-speaking non-belongers feed further into the homogenous images of Narva as a "mentally imagined place, a small fatherland" separated from the rest of Estonia (Zabrodskaya & Ehala 2010). But with every separation, as I demonstrate below, comes also a new connection. In other words, as much as boundaries separate, they simultaneously enable space for transgression and a reconfiguration of one's own representations in multiple heterogenous ways.

Heterogenous Belonging: Re-Assembling Narva as a Plural World

The Tank – A Place of Russian Alterity

The widespread campaign of nationalization and naturalization of Estonian national narratives eliminated numerous Soviet commemorative sites across Narva. Although the memorials to the victory of the Red Army in World War II, such as the 'Tank T-34' (Fig. 1), were not physi-

[5] Based on the idea of legal continuity of the Estonian Republic of 1918-1940 and illegal occupation by the Soviet Union, the citizenship law, adopted in 1992, helped to disenfranchise large groups of the population by denying Soviet era settlers and their descendants citizenship rights and forcing them to undergo strict naturalization process. Note, however, that the number of stateless people has dropped from over 30% in 1992 to approximately 6.1% in 2016. This is primarily because stateless people have decided to undertake 'naturalization' or have, instead, acquired Russian citizenship. For more on the relationship between citizenship and belonging in the context of Estonia see Jašina-Schäfer & Cheskin (2020) or Nimmerfeldt (2011).

Figure 1: Tank T-34. Photograph by Alina Jašina-Schäfer, July 2020.

cally removed, numerous state efforts have been made to redefine their meanings from a symbol of liberation from fascism to monuments marking victimhood and suffering of the Estonian people at the hands of the Soviet aggressor. Despite the efforts to dispose of the undesired historical narratives, many of my interlocutors highlighted the importance that the Tank has retained as a place of remembrance, representing a durable form of the past that bears its mark on people's lives.

Located on the outskirts of the city, the tank has been the gathering point during the celebrations of the Victory Day on the ninth of May when people come to lay flowers and honor the memory of the fallen soldiers. The act of remembering occurs also on a more mundane basis when people retell the monument's history or directly demonstrate it to the city visitors like myself. Artur, a thirty-nine-year-old IT-specialist is, for example, convinced that the tank bears a very symbolic meaning in Narva, representing to him personally a reservoir of his childhood memories and his Russianness:

> If I ever leave, I will miss my tank. The tank is the best thing that we have here. When I was a child, we would often go by bus with the kindergarten group to Ust' Narva and drive past the memorial. Lucky were the ones who were sitting next to the window and could see the tank. So really this goes back to my childhood. And if you sat at the wrong side of the bus, you would be considered a loser for the rest of the day. Well, in general, I think every Narvan associates their life with this tank. People even come here for weddings, it is a must, a tradition. […] The tank symbolizes history, different battles that took place here. Narva suffered a lot during the war, it was almost completely destroyed. Everyone here knows this tank. I think it contains some kind of Russianness; I mean, I haven't seen Estonians coming here. It is rather the monument that symbolizes the Russian nation, especially for those who fought in the war and those who lived in the Soviet Union. But I might be mistaken.

As such, for people like Artur, the tank highlights the gap between socialist and post-socialist visual

representations of the city. It serves as cultural heritage that projects the heroic involvement of Russian people in World War II as opposed to the official state narratives of repression and occupation. But it is also a material historical witness that helps cementing the spatio-temporal continuity of Russian speakers embedded in the Soviet past as opposed to ruptures and discontinuity promoted by the agenda of nation-building. The continuity emerges not only through the celebration of the ninth of May, but especially through the repetitive performance of the wedding routes in the city – a custom that has its roots in Soviet times. As a traditional wedding location, Artur recalls later, the tank still attracts newlyweds to pose for pictures and tie ribbons around the cannon as a symbol of a family as strong as the armor.

For Artur, the tank is an eloquent memorial, a symbol of communal Russianness grounded in historical narratives of continuity. For others, however, it can be an overlooked location that remains invisible in everyday life. Especially those born in independent Estonia seem to rely less and less on the Soviet World War II memories as a marker of Russianness, redefining thereby the meanings of it altogether. Yulia noted to me, for example, that she has many friends who do not associate themselves with anything Soviet and even less so with Russia: 'There is no place for them in Russia, they don't have *their* Russian culture [as in culture of Russia]. Many don't celebrate Russian holidays. Don't talk about the victory day, what it is. Don't lay flowers next to the tank. This is a different generation'. Indeed, I went with the younger interlocutors to the nearby city of Narva-Jõesuu on several occasions, and we simply drove past the monument without even making a stop or uttering a word about it. The tank solitarily stood on the roadside as we rushed towards the abundant cafés, spas, and parks in Narva-Jõesuu.

The departure from the Soviet/Russian of which Yulia speaks does not necessarily strip Russian speakers of their 'Russianness', nor should this example suggest the insignificance of the Soviet past for their present experiences. Rather, it is to complicate our understanding of the socialization environment within which individuals move and interact. Already in 2003, opinion polls indicated that Russian speakers started to increasingly value globalizing popular and consumer culture which opens possibilities for new cultural styles to emerge (Lauristin and Vihalemm 2009). In the process of dwelling rooted in Estonia and Europe comes a change in their social and political ideas, activities and behaviors, whereby we witness how 'being Russian' becomes highly heterogenous – attached to and detached from Russia, attached to and detached from the memories of the Soviet past.

The College as Architect(ure) of New Sociability

The ability to perform heterogenous 'Russian culture' around spaces like the tank does not necessarily help Russian speakers overcome the perception of Narva as a space mentally divorced from the rest of Estonia and Estonians. This much desired transgression of alterity, as many of my interlocutors noted, occurs rather in a different space, a space imagined as inclusive for all dwellers of the city and beyond. It is a future-oriented space that does not attempt to mend the past narratives, which in the context of Estonia are still painfully disjointed, nor rejects or trivializes the narratives of Russian-speaking minorities. Instead, it is determined to create unity based on progressive thinking and common interests.

A newer building of Narva College (Fig. 2), which opened in 2012, is in many ways the object of such a hopeful outlook. It is situated at the heart of Narva's no-longer-existing old town and, through its peculiar design and location, entangles different temporalities and spatialities: the façade is filled with the elements that pay homage to the demolished stock exchange building of the baroque Narva, representing city's long and unique history within Estonia; it has both a café called *Muna* (egg) and egg-shaped furniture, which are elements that symbolize the beginning of a new life in Narva. The building also celebrates its borderland location, whereby

Figure 2: Narva College. Photograph by Alina Jašina-Schäfer, July 2020.

two separate wings stand for the cities of Narva and Russia's Ivangorod, and the gutter represents the river Narova that today separates the two cities.

The college is not only open for students, but hosts numerous public events, jazz nights, book clubs, memory games, in both Estonian and Russian languages. These events are equally accessible to locals and outside visitors. For example, the memory games, in which I too actively participated, take place at the café with a relaxing atmosphere, which encourages mingling and socializing between different people, such as Estonian and Russian speakers, and older and younger generations alike. Drinks are sold at the counter, the questions are asked in two languages, and the tables are located close enough for communication to extend beyond one's own group. When, by the end of the evening, a man with an Estonian accent eagerly proclaimed– *my pobedim* ('we will win' in Russian), you could clearly sense the erasure of boundaries between the Russian- and Estonian-speaking worlds. Whereby the building and people inside of it turned, even if for one night, into an 'open society', a spatial counterpart to forms of social exchange on the outside.

My interlocutors, of varying ages and professions, often come to hang out at the college. For example, a sixty-six-year-old pensioner named Raisa thought Café Muna would be an excellent start for our explorative stroll around the city. Many others would agree, as they understood the café, and the college in general, to be a place where the feeling of being a foreigner disappears As put by forty-year-old Vera:

> When the new college was opened, I realized immediately that I wanted to study here even despite my age, which is not so good for education (laughs). So, I fulfilled my dream and came here to study. […] Narva College is the only place here in the city where I hear the Estonian language, and I am very happy about it. It is like an immersion with Estonian for me.

It is a place that offers an abundance of opportunities to generate new friendships, as noted by Vova, a student in his twenties:

> There is a lot happening in the college. A jazz club takes place twice a month, and the locals come for the jazz. Various meetings with politicians, ministers and significant people in the city are being held here too. The idea behind it is to meet, to think and to work together. The last event I remember was organized by the Narva Youth Centre regarding the student self-governance in schools. Back then a lot of student representatives from the whole Estonia came here. Even Töötukassa (state unemployment insurance fund) holds events in here. Sometimes I come to study and can't even enter the place because of some event taking place.

As such, the structure and internal operation of the college make room for those whose opinions remain marginal to the Estonian mainstream. They seem to enable equal participation, break down the ethno-hierarchy still prevalent outside of the building, and help Russian speakers to overcome the tacit exclusions sedimented through the project of nation-building. The college and the people interrupt the 'normal' order of space and become the architects of new sociability in which both Russian and Estonian speakers are essential to the Estonian community. Such sociability does not only exist within the walls of the college but spreads slowly across the city with different smaller and bigger local initiatives taking place. Be it through building collectively the "Bench of Reconciliation" or participating together in the campaigns to make the borderland city the next capital of culture, locals continue reconfiguring Narva from a foreign space into a space 'suturing' different histories and cultural styles.

The Multilocal River Promenade

Another important location where I often went with my Russian-speaking interlocutors was the River Promenade. Recently revamped with the help of the money from the European Union (EU), it is now one of the local population's favorite places, where they take their children to the playground, do outdoor sports, take a stroll, or attend open-air concerts and other events (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: The River Promenade. Photograph by Alina Jašina-Schäfer, July 2020.

The promenade is a long pedestrian street along the river embankment and as such represents "the basic unit of public life in the city" (Tonkiss 2005: 68). While it might seem to be less about direct sociability and encounter between people, it too is subject to different uses and meanings.

Located in the immediate vicinity of the border to the Russian Federation, the Promenade represents the fusion of distinctive "cultural styles" (Ferguson 1999): Estonian, European, Russian, and 'local'. Each of these styles has been naturalized through everyday use, and each intersects and reconfigures the other. On the one hand, the medieval ensemble of the Narva tower signifies to Russian speakers the long history of Narva in Estonia, whereby having personal childhood memories of it and interacting with it helps to strengthen one's own sense of belonging to a larger Estonian collective:

> I will tell you now one of my school memories. We travelled a lot with my class. We went to Moscow, to St. Petersburg. I liked it everywhere. But there is this turn to Narva, when our castle becomes vis-

ible. When the bus would turn, and you would see the Hermann Tower. I would immediately tear up – this is *rodnoe* (native space), this is my home. And I would say: I am finally home. (Nadezhda, forty-five years old, kindergarten teacher)

On the other hand, the promenade represents the symbol of European power – it is a place where the European Union (EU) starts. Walking along the 'European' alley, illuminated by twenty-eight lamps each symbolizing a member of the EU, Dmitrii, a local businessman in his forties, pointed to the other side of the river, to the small and, in comparison to Narva, rather unspectacular promenade of Russia's Ivangorod and its semi-ruined castle. The striking difference between two cities that were separated by the river helped Dmitrii to demonstrate cultural superiority of Narva over Russia and its clear belonging to a geocultural space of 'Europe':

Life in Russia is savage […]. You stand out there and see Russian river promenade and think – oh, hell with it. Ours is much better, and this plays an important role. […] Why should I go there? Should I look at their architecture that was built by their grandads? Well, the grandads were fine fellows and not the new generation of Russians that is uncultured.

The non-belonging of Russian speakers to Russia based on their Europeanness was noted also by Yulia:

When I went to visit my relatives in Bryansk [a city in Russia], I understood how different we are. They are so…The guys there are like Russian fairy-tale figure of Ivan the Fool. They don't buckle up, don't wear light reflectors, don't look around before crossing the roads. I think it is my Europeanness that speaks now. Careless, this word describes Russians well. It permeates everything – the driving, their attitude to life, their relationship to family. In Europe we began to appreciate that parents spend time with children and pay attention to teenagers. In Russia, they are far from there. Schools are different. We went to a university in Pskov for a lecture, told them how old we were, and they treated us like little unreasonable children. It infuriated us, but it suits their students. You come back to Narva and think, Lord, where was I … in some wilderness or something?

Invoking this array of spatial narratives, Russian speakers clearly expose the limits of the 'nationalizing state' that feeds off their otherness. Instead, they move between multiple heterogenous memberships and reconstruct themselves, often against the geographical and cultural space of Russia, as different but quintessentially Estonian and European.

Conclusion

In a context of a highly transnational, fluid, and fragmented world, belonging remains a fundamental resource that defines the quality of everyday life. Drawing on the narratives and spatial experiences of Russian speakers in the Estonian borderland city of Narva, the aim here was to disentangle or, at least, to begin to better understand the meanings that belonging connotes to minorities situated within specific power relations and socio-political contexts. The case of Narva adds, as such, further empirical insights into the conceptualization of belonging as a complex ethnoheterogenous process constituted relationally through official spatial arrangements, on the one hand, and individual social action, meanings, and perceptions, on the other.

Being once a prosperous Soviet industrial city, in this paper I vividly showed how Narva has suffered dramatic re-scaling into a foreign space that occurred under the influence of state nationalization policies. This re-scaling, in turn, led to the emergence of seemingly bounded notion of belonging that relies on imposed conceptions of collective identities reproduced to homogenize Narvan Russian speakers as outsiders who have seemingly no place in the new Estonian social order. However, the destabilization of social codes and previous daily experiences, I contend, also meant the emergence of numerous alternative heterogenous representations of the self and the meanings of one's own belonging. As such, the world of Narva was and continues to be built anew as a space that bridges different histories and cultural styles, and moves between different versions of Estonianness, Russianness, and Europeanness. What understandings Narvan Russian

speakers develop of their cultural location, and how they constitute socio-cultural, political, and geographical distinctions depend in many ways on their intersecting, though this is not reducible to each other's social positioning. Thus, in order to be able to extend our understanding of everyday bordering practices and belonging, future research should be more cognizant of these broader social hierarchies and their effects upon ideas and behaviors among Russian speakers in particular and minorities in general across space and time.

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