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Dr. Julia Vassileva*

Lived Borders Amidst Geopolitics: The E.U./NATO-Russia Border in the City of Narva, Estonia

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Abstract: This article examines how residents of Narva experience and make sense of the Estonian-Russian border. While international relations are often understood through the actions of states and institutions, this study shifts the focus to everyday perspectives and experiences of people living at this border. Drawing on original interview data and ethnographic observations, the article examines how local residents perceive the border between East and West – between the European Union, NATO, and Russia – and how these perceptions are shaped by personal histories, emotions, and broader social and political narratives. By looking at the border from a bottom-up perspective, rather than from official state positions, the article highlights the human dimension of international borders. It argues that borders are not simply physical or political lines, but are deeply personal and symbolic spaces that carry meaning in people's daily lives. This exploration is particularly relevant in the context of heightened security concerns in the region due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. As geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West continue, borders like the one in Narva take on renewed symbolic and strategic

* **Corresponding author:** Dr. Julia Vassileva, e--mail:journal@baltdefcol.org. Harvard University, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the International Security Program as of 1 July 2025.

significance. Understanding how people living directly on such a fault line interpret and experience the border provides valuable insight into the local dimensions, perceptions, and implications of broader international dynamics.

Keywords: borders, international relations, E.U., NATO

I Introduction

This article explores how the residents of Narva experience and interpret the Estonian-Russian border. With almost 58,000 inhabitants, Narva is the third-largest city in Estonia; its population is more than 80% ethnic Russians, with Russian being their primary language, even though Estonian is the official state language (Koval, 2019). In addition to being a popular case study in academic literature on borders generally, Narva has been discussed in the context of European security and geopolitics, termed 'the Estonian border city where NATO and the E.U. meet Russia' (Gardner, 2022). In this context, the present study examines how local residents perceive the border between East and West – between the European Union (E.U.), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Russia – and how these perceptions are shaped by personal histories, emotions, and broader social and political narratives. While international relations are often understood through the actions of states and institutions, this study shifts the focus to everyday perspectives and experiences of residents living at an internationally significant border. This exploration is particularly relevant in the context of heightened security concerns in the region due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. As geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West continue, borders like the one in Narva take on renewed symbolic and strategic significance. Understanding how residents living directly on such a fault line interpret and experience the border provides valuable insight into the local dimensions, perceptions, and implications of broader international dynamics.

This article explores two interrelated questions: *What meanings does the Estonian-Russian border hold for the people of Narva*, and *how are these meanings constructed*

through lived experience? Using original data from interviews conducted in Narva, combined with ethnographic observations, the border between East and West, or more specifically between NATO, the E.U., and the Russian Federation, is examined from a 'bottom-up' as opposed to a 'top-down' perspective (Newman, 2006). This people-centric approach allows for analytical tracing of some of the socially constructed meanings the border entails for the residents of Narva; thus, by looking at the border from the ground up, rather than from official state positions, the article highlights the human dimension of international frontiers. This article argues that borders are not mere physical or political lines but are also deeply personal and symbolic spaces that carry meaning in people's daily lives. The findings shed light on how these everyday understandings of the border can shape and reflect wider international dynamics.

While Narva has drawn significant attention in recent years, particularly since 2014, and even more so after the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, much of the existing material comes in the form of journalistic reports, policy briefs, or top-down analyses that often frame the city in terms of vulnerability, geopolitical risk, or the role and marginalisation of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia. These accounts, though valuable, frequently treat Narva as a passive object of geopolitical analysis rather than as a site of complex, everyday meaning-making.

This article aims to offer a distinct contribution by shifting the focus from what Narva symbolises to outsiders to how Narva is experienced by those who live there. Through discourse analysis of in-depth interviews, combined with ethnographic observations, the article engages closely with the narratives, emotions, and ambivalences that shape how people construct the meaning of the Estonian–Russian border in their everyday lives. The study brings local voices and interpretations to the forefront, thereby complicating simplistic binaries of East versus West, secure versus insecure, or Estonian versus Russian. In doing so, the article contributes to a growing body of literature that sees borders not only as geopolitical artifacts, but as socially and

emotionally constructed spaces that are lived and contested in specific local contexts.

II Theoretical Foundation

The complex issue of 'politics of borders' (Longo, 2017b) was long examined in the literature mostly under the umbrella topic of state power, sovereignty, and security. Within this dominant framework, borders are often portrayed as instruments of territorial control, expressions of national sovereignty, and mechanisms for exerting authority over movement. Scholars have argued that securitised borders can 'reinforce state strength' (Longo, 2017a), and have demonstrated the 'conceptual linking of borders, states and sovereignty'; e.g. by situating 'borders' and 'frontiers' on a continuum of state power (Longo, 2017a, p.578). Borders are also often seen as expressions of power relations and visualisations of control of those who cross them, where 'politics articulates at and connects with borders' (Casaglia, 2020, p.28). Borders are accordingly 'materialized in steel and concrete, patrolled and 'performed' by state apparatuses and sensing technologies' (Mattern, 2018). They have been often linked to topics of national security, visual state separation, and government control.

In contrast, some authors on borders in international relations and politics have pointed out various ways in which borders can, and perhaps should, be understood more broadly and beyond the state-centric and security-focused narratives. Among those scholars, John Agnew argues, particularly since the end of the Cold War, that there is a need to reconsider the territoriality of states in a historical context (Agnew, 2008, p.54; also see Paasi, 2018). Borders have been termed 'lines in the sand' (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009, p.582) with some academics advocating for reframing borders as 'merely human acts to draw fixed and tangible territorial lines' (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009, p.582) in order to demonstrate the need to 'conceptualise/re-theorise' and 'expand' the concept of borders broadly (Paasi, 2018).

One example is Anssi Paasi's concept of the 'institutionalisation of regions' that stresses how borders emerge through narratives, symbols, and social practices rather than being merely drawn or imposed, emphasising 'the

differences between the classical categories of geographical thought, region and place, and their relation to the societal context and the day-to-day practices of individuals' (1986, p.105). Another expansion in the concept of borders is reflected in David Newman's notion of bordering that encompasses 'the diverse types of border and boundary experience' (Newman, 2003b, p.13), where borders are a process that encompasses identity construction, spatial imaginaries, and everyday practices (see Newman, 2003a; Newman, 2006). Borders are therefore not only territorial demarcations but also cognitive and emotional constructs, making Newman's theory of bordering a useful example on how scholars have argued beyond traditional territorial understandings and have tackled the essence of a border as also serving to 'separate the "self" from the "other"' (Newman, 2003b, p.14). Similarly, work by Hastings Donnan & Thomas M. Wilson examines comparative perspectives on culture at border regions, and the role of the state, ethnicity, transnationalism, border symbols, rituals, identity, and nationalism at local, national, and international levels (1999).

In recent years, increasingly people-centred and personalised approaches to borders have gained prominence, especially as a response to global migration, crises of state sovereignty, and the increasing role of non-state actors in shaping border regimes. This has led to discussions on concepts such as 'borderwork' exploring the everyday activities of individuals and communities that challenge or reinforce border meanings (Rumford, 2008). An example of these daily activities is how 'the supermarket checkout has come to resemble a border; a border in the midst of society' (Rumford, 2008, p.1; also see Goodchild and Lashmar, 2007). From this borderwork perspective, borders are not only imposed from above but are also produced and negotiated from below, in people's everyday lives. Scholars argue that increased attention should also be given to the 'border aesthetics and cultural distancing' (Schimanski, 2015; also see Dell'Agnese and Amilhat Szary, 2015); dimensions of 'thinking, mapping, acting and living borders under contemporary

globalisation' (Brambilla *et al.*, 2016); and exploring the imagination and practices of border making (Brambilla, Laine, & Bocchi, 2016).

This analytical lens is especially valuable when examining specific border contexts such as that between Estonia and Russia. While traditional accounts have focused on the post-Soviet realignment of borders and the geopolitical tensions that accompany it, more recent scholarship has emphasised the lived experiences and meaning-making practices of border communities. Berg and Oras (2000) demonstrate how the Estonian nation and state are interpreted and embodied by those living on the frontier, while Kaiser and Nikiforova (2008) highlight how the border in Narva produces complex effects that impact identity, belonging, and mobility. In some of her work, Alena Pfoser conveys how memories of the past play an important part in the symbolic construction of borders, and that processes of remembering are central to how citizens produce borders in everyday life (Pfoser, 2022). This scholarship addresses the dimensions of memory, history, identity, and language as factors in conceptualising the Estonian-Russian border beyond traditional understandings (Pfoser, 2022).

Building on the literature, the present study adopts a perspective which puts people who are confronted with the border in Narva, Estonia on a daily basis at the centre of attention. It focuses on the everyday practices, narratives, and emotional responses of residents in Narva – a city marked by its proximity to Russia and its symbolic weight in both Estonian national identity and broader geopolitical discourse. This shift in focus allows for an exploration of the concept of borders without preliminary assumptions and expectations while observing how the border is constructed in the opinions, emotions, and narratives of inhabitants of the city. The aims of this article are to unpack the concept of borders and to argue that a border is not always just a fence, it is also very much something 'in our heads', constructed by the meaning which humans assign to it. This work situates itself within the wider effort to understand borders as complex socio-symbolic phenomena and lived experiences.

III Methodology

The two research questions (what meanings does the Estonian-Russian border hold for the people of Narva, and how are these meanings constructed through lived experience?) are examined using an interpretivist research design allowing for analytical emphasis on meanings, context, and the unpacking of concepts through discourse analysis (Della Porta & Keating, 2008). The focus of this study is on meaning-making. It seeks to better understand how people and societies make individual and collective sense of their particular worlds (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013); in this case the 'border'. In interpretive research, human beings are understood not as objects, but as agents. Such persons are seen as actively and collaboratively constructing their polities, societies, and cultures – along with their institutions, organisations, practices, physical artefacts, and language and concepts that populate these (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). In the context of the Estonian-Russian border at the city of Narva, this approach allows for an exploration of the agency of residents living near the border, and the meaning they assign to it.

This research is designed as a single-case study that offers a preliminary examination of the Estonian-Russian border city of Narva. As it is only possible to unpack the meaning of the border in the lives of residents through interaction and communication with the local population, exploring this case aims to lead to a better understanding of a broader phenomenon and to draw conclusions for theory building and application. This ethnographic approach allows for examination of the ways in which borders are constructed in international affairs, not only through 'hard' power, fences, security, and checkpoints, but also in the minds of people, in their discourses, and within social meaning-making.

I employ discourse analysis of four in-depth interviews conducted in the city of Narva in April 2023. Discourse analysis is a method originating from linguistics which has been adopted by scholars of social sciences. Going

deeper than content analysis alone, discourse analysis explores the socially situated meaning and imagery behind the particular use of words, sentences, phrases, conversations, and texts. Discourse is understood as 'the practices of talking and writing [...] the interrelated texts, conversations and practices associated with a particular object' (Burnham *et al.*, 2008, p.250). Key characteristics of discourse analysis are that discourse frames and constrains given courses of action and signifies and gives meaning to objects in the material world (Burnham *et al.*, 2008, pp.249-255). When it comes to discourse based on assumptions, discourse analysis illuminates and also problematises and critiques said assumptions.

In the present case, the analysis involved several steps. First, interview transcripts were translated from Russian to English and coded for recurring themes, metaphors, and narrative structures – especially those that relate to themes of security, identity, history, marginalisation, fears, and practical aspects such as economy. Second, the language used to describe the border was analysed in terms of what it does: how it positions the speaker, constructs collective identities (e.g. 'us' versus 'them'), and legitimises or challenges particular political imaginaries. For example, phrases like 'Russia is close but foreign' or 'we are Estonians, not Russians' are interpreted not simply as factual claims, but as discursive acts that frame Narva's place within the Estonian nation and its relationship to the 'other' (Russian Federation) across the river. The study is less interested in uncovering a single 'truth' about the border and more focused on analysing how different meanings of the border are expressed and experienced by residents of Narva who live alongside it – and what these meanings tell us about broader dynamics of the meaning of the border for the people of Narva.

The small number of interviews has allowed for an in-depth exploration of different themes in the text. I spent four immersive days in Narva conducting the interviews, and this data is supplemented by longer-term, ethnographic insights gathered from my time living in Estonia's capital, Tallinn, just a 2-hour drive from Narva. The extended period I spent in Tallinn provided a contrasting context that helped situate the experiences and narratives from Narva within broader national and cultural frameworks. Living in Tallinn

enabled me to observe how narratives of the border and identity are constructed and communicated in the Estonian context generally. The differences between the experiences of the border in Narva and Tallinn, which are shaped by the physical distance and the historical, political, and social factors at play, provide a valuable comparative perspective on how borders are framed and experienced within Estonia. Together, the observations in both Narva and Tallinn provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the socio-political and cultural dimensions of the Estonia-Russia border.

This in-depth analysis of research material, including historical accounts, aims to provide a better understanding of the 'construction' of the border, even before the presence of organisations such as the E.U. and NATO, and before the relevance of the border for their separation from the Russian Federation. Thereby, the article demonstrate that borders are indeed what people feel and experience. In addition, I examine two issues concerning the relevance of borders for security: how the Narva border is significant in terms of security given the current geopolitical tensions between the 'East' and the 'West', and how this issue is perceived by people in Narva. Linked to the interview data, I explore if, as well as to what extent, the aspect of security matters to them, whether security is troubling, and whether and how it determines the daily life of people in the region. It can then be scrutinised and gauged how these results are related to the theoretical expectation of the border being an important security issue.

The interview questions and related prompts are listed in Annex 1 and were created based on the literature review. The listed categories of meaning-making are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of Meaning-Making

Border Seen as an Issue of:		
Security	Border protecting security	Border a threat to security
Culture	Cultural similarity	Cultural division

Language	Language as a unifier	Language as a divisive issue
Economy	Border important and positive for trade	Border as dividing trade, Complicating the situation
People-People Relations	Border as uniting	Border as dividing
Division Overall	Border not creating division	Border dividing opinions and people
Any Other Comments	Border as something positive, 'A beautiful river'	Border as something negative, 'Othering' of the Russian side

The aim is to gain insights from long in-depth interviews, as opposed to sampling a large number of interviewees for shorter, more superficial interviews. For this purpose of completeness, in the case of Narva, I sampled four interviewees with strong knowledge and experience in the context, all of whom work in professions where they interact with many people in Narva daily. The interviewees fall into the following categories:

(1) Ages:
    a. 18-40: the 'younger generation' who were born shortly before or after the dissolution of the Soviet Union
    b. 40+: those born before dissolution of the Soviet Union who remember the times when 'there was no border'
(2) Backgrounds and ethnicities:
    a. Russian-speaking Estonian citizens
    b. Russian citizens
    c. Persons holding a grey passport (meaning that they are without citizenship)
(3) Profession:
    a. Education sector
    b. Public sector
    c. Legal sector
(4) Proximity to the border:
    a. living directly in Narva
    b. living further away from the border – to examine whether this impacts perception

The data collected in this research can be compared to how people speak about borders in a variety of contexts and studies in the literature on this topic. Not an exhaustive set of examples, but to highlight some articles which could generate engaging analysis in comparison with the present study are those that examine how 'borders are artefacts of dominant discursive processes that have led to the fencing off of chunks of territory and people from one another' (Agnew, 2008, p.1); 'how a narrative approach can contribute to our understanding of borderland identities' (Prokkola, 2009, p.21); and 'how state designed infrastructures are lived, experienced, patrolled, naturalized and subverted across scales and locations' (Krichker & Sarma, 2021, p.813).

The limitation of the study lies in the generalisability of the results. Certainly, Narva is not the only important border city where two major blocks or powers meet, hence the results will not be generalisable for any other such city or context. Different contexts and different borders might lead to a different outcome, and borders might be understood in diverse ways depending on geography, timing, history, and other factors. Furthermore, both interviews and ethnographic observations are limited techniques, as the scope of the method can never entail the entire population (e.g. of the city of Narva or the region of Ida-Virumaa in Estonia) nor fully encompass all views that exist within the population. It is also the case that this type of data is subjective and based on personal opinions and the bias of interviewees and researcher.

However, the study can provide one way to understand and visualise the construction of borders through social discourses and understandings. For the purpose of unpacking meanings of a complex concept such as 'borders', interviews illustrate subjective perceptions and opinions and map a landscape of meaning-making through the discourse of human beings. Albeit seemingly limited in number, the interviewees were able to give insights on societal trends and opinions more generally, due to the fact that all of them work in professions and contexts in which they interact with various different people on a daily basis. These sectors include education of diverse age groups as well as public sector and legal service. By analysing the interview data, I argue that

borders are subject to socially constructed meanings, and that how people speak and think about borders determines their significance in international politics.

IV Discourse Analysis and Thematic Interpretation of the Collected Interview Data

The following section analyses the data collection from the four in-depth (meaning more than one hour long) semi-structured interviews conducted in Narva in April 2023. Interviews were conducted in Russian, as this was the native language of all interviewees.

Guided by the interview questions, interviewee responses were grouped in the following thematic sections:

i. Security
ii. Culture
iii. Language
iv. Economy
v. People-to-People Relations
vi. Division Overall and Further Aspects of the Border

Once divided into the above thematic sections, the constructed meanings of the border refer to the ways in which the interviewees understand, interpret, and emotionally relate to the Estonian-Russian border are able to be identified. These meanings are not fixed nor universal; rather, they are shaped through personal experience, historical memory, identity, language, and everyday life practices. The supplemental ethnographic observations explore how the border is 'lived' by the people around it.

Security

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has certainly changed security perception in all of the Baltic states, and equally so in the city of Narva, Estonia. Interviewees commented that developments from the Russian side are unpredictable and that what the Russian government does and how it will act in the future is unclear. The border itself has remained the same, but the perception is that

the border might have become 'less secure' since the beginning and developments of the war in Ukraine.

The notion that the border is perceived as 'less secure' invites a critical examination of what 'security' actually means in the context of everyday life in a border city like Narva. While traditional state-centric views frame border security in terms of impermeability, such as protecting territorial integrity through control and power, local perspectives may define security quite differently. For some residents, a 'secure' border may mean more openness with the ability to cross easily to visit family, engage in trade, or access cultural spaces on the other side. In this view, a hardening of the border due to geopolitical tensions or war can feel insecure, as it disrupts routines and connections that foster a sense of normalcy and stability. Conversely, others might view increased militarisation or surveillance as necessary to ensure national safety and identity, especially in light of Russia's war in Ukraine.

This divergence illustrates that security is not a fixed nor objective idea, but a socially constructed and situational concept. What is seen as 'secure' by the state may be experienced as threatening or alienating by individuals living at the border. For the local population, the border itself in Narva is very visible and very present, and it is a daily reminder of the proximity of the Russian Federation on the other side of the river. While in the everyday life of people, not much has changed, interviewees commented there does exist a feeling that it is unclear what could happen in the future which does link to a security concern. One interviewee shared that:

'When you walk along the promenade, or to Narva Castle, or in the streets of Narva, of course, you don't think about this all the time. But a change in perception is certainly there. What before seemed unthinkable, the invasion of a country, has now become a reality and a possibility'.[1]

When asked whether there is fear, the interviewees response was that fear is not the exactly correct word for the perception. It is rather a better

[1] Personal Interview 1, Narva, April 2023.

understanding that an attack is now a possibility. Before the full-scale war in Ukraine there used to be peace, and the perception was that military confrontation was relatively unthinkable.

On the fact that the border divides E.U./NATO and Russia, interviewees seemed to consider this reality less important. In fact, they mostly seemed surprised that this topic is raised and commented that they had not necessarily thought about it in this way previously. Interviewees found that this issue is less discussed.

'This division between worlds is known as a fact, but as every border, when you see it on the map, it looks like a line, and maybe the country on one side is coloured in red, and on the other side in yellow or blue, and you can see a distinction. But then when you actually go to the border, you see that geographically, you could not really say that this is a border. In that sense, a border is fluid, and in everyday life, you don't really think about things in this way' [AN: People do not internalise the world in concepts such as E.U./NATO, Russia, wars, geopolitics].[2]

While not necessarily considered in terms of geopolitical divides between E.U./NATO and the Russian Federation, there is still a strong perception of a security threat due to the proximity of Russia – which is just on the other side of a rather narrow river. Interviewees commented on the fact that they do have the sense that they *'do not wish to upset Russia, because after all, we are those who are right on the frontline'*.

With the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, it is not clear anymore what actions might be taken from the Russian side, regardless of the E.U. and NATO. Interviewees also mentioned the paradox, that while Estonian and NATO military presence might be increasing in the area and close to the Russian border, this did not necessarily make them feel more secure. Interestingly, interviewees mentioned that while they do trust in NATO's military and defence capabilities, they were less convinced that this would effectively help them in case of an actual Russian attack. The sentiments expressed where that while NATO states might protect the European continent more generally, this would not make a significant difference for

[2] Personal Interview 1, Narva, April 2023.

those residents who are most likely to be right at the forefront of actual attack at the border. One interviewee commented that:

'War is war, and even if Estonia is protected through NATO, fighting and bombing and deaths are scary for us, and they are always bad, no matter the context'.[3]

Hence, while interviewees largely expressed a sense that Narva feels safe in their day-to-day lives, their accounts were often shaped by an underlying sense of uncertainty. This tension stems not from immediate threats, but from an acute awareness of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the broader geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Regardless of whether military protection in Narva is increased or not, the simple fact that Russia lies *just across the river* shapes the atmosphere of the city in subtle yet powerful ways. In this context, proximity becomes symbolic. Narva is not merely geographically at the edge of Estonia, but at the fault line of two competing worlds. The border, then, is experienced not only as a line of separation, but as a site of latent unease, where security is as much about perception and emotion than about physical protection.

Culture

The concept of culture emerged in the interviews as a fluid and subjective notion, open to interpretation and contested in meaning. Responses reflected a spectrum of perspectives. Some interviewees noted a cultural affinity with Russia, highlighting shared language, media consumption, or family ties. Others pointed to the influence of Estonian culture in Narva, particularly among younger generations or in education and public institutions. Several participants also referred to common customs, traditions, cuisine, and religion as cultural elements that unite both sides of the border rather than divide them. This ambivalence shows that culture in Narva is not a fixed identity marker, but a dynamic and negotiated space where multiple affiliations coexist. In this sense, culture operates not as a neat dividing line, but as part of the everyday

[3] Personal Interview 4, Narva, April 2023.

'borderwork' through which residents navigate belonging, differences, and identity in a city shaped by both proximity and distance to Russia and the West.

Interviewees from the older generation still remember the Soviet Union, when there was no border at all. They mentioned memories of times when it was possible to simply take a bus across the border to watch a movie in a cinema or go to the theatre on the other side. Interviewees from the younger generation addressed exchanges between Estonian students and Russian students coming to study in Estonia, at least before the start of the war in Ukraine. Both generations mentioned cultural similarity and proximity.

However, in contrast to this similarity, interviewees also pointed out important socio-cultural differences. These pertained mostly to worldviews and values such as democracy, human rights, freedom of opinion, and similar factors. For instance, even something as foundational as the school curriculum between Estonia and Russia was seen as a key site of difference. The ways in which history, language, and national identity are taught can significantly shape one's sense of belonging and the way people relate to either side of the border.

In terms of identity, participants clearly considered Narva to be an Estonian city. Interviewees mentioned that the issue of identity is one that is often a fluid one, and that in principle, there might again be a generational division. The older generation still identifies more frequently with the times in which they were born and grew up, which was during the Soviet Union. Younger people, on the other hand, mostly consider themselves as Estonians. They commented that geographically, the border plays a role, and that when crossing the border, the transit between Estonia and Russia is felt and acknowledged, and the difference in identity is also present.

Interviewees also stressed that native language, ethnicity, and nationality (according to passport) are not useful categories to measure and gauge identity of people. Some Russian-speaking residents of Narva, who hold a Russian passport, do see themselves as Estonian and identify very strongly with Estonian/European/Western values; they might simply hold a Russian passport for practical reasons, which has little to say about how they identify in terms of patriotism and belonging. On the other hand, there could also be

citizens who speaks perfect Estonian and hold an Estonian passport, but their perception of identity is that they are Russian or even coming from other parts of the former Soviet Union, for example Ukraine or Belarus.

When it comes to culture and identity, the war in Ukraine was also mentioned as having altered perceptions. According to interviewees, many citizens of Narva, and in the province of Ida-Virumaa in general, took the position to identify even stronger with the Estonian state and their Estonian nationality, following the developments in Ukraine and shock of the Russian invasion. To some extent, the shock of the war, and the clear rupture it represented, prompted a re-evaluation of loyalties and belonging for some, deepening their attachment to Estonia, and distancing them from Russia's political trajectory.

Language

While most thematic issues are less clear cut, or at least show nuances in interviewee responses and views, a point of clear convergence is the issue of language. There is no *de facto* linguistic division between the Russian-speaking city of Narva and the other side of the border on the Russian side. One interviewee stated that:

'Narva is a Russian-speaking city. That is a simple reality that cannot be denied. And it might be the one uncontested, unifying factor between the two sides of the border – we all speak Russian language'.[4]

Another commented that hearing Estonian language in Narva is rare, so the language is the same on both sides of the border and specifically emphasised that their *'native language is Russian'.*[5]

Perhaps a very slight nuance can be added by the fact that some Estonian colloquial words might feature in the everyday speech of people on the Estonian side, but not on the Russian side. Interviewees explained that there is an influence of Estonian language on the Russian language spoken on the

[4] Personal Interview 4, Narva, April 2023.
[5] Personal Interview 1, Narva, April 2023.

Estonian side of the border as Estonian is the official administrative language and language of communication with official state institutions in Narva. There are also efforts to promote Estonian language in schools and adult education, for example Eesti Maja which is an institution for teaching Estonian language to grown adults through language courses and conversation clubs. However, the predominant language in Narva is still Russian, it is also the native language of approximately 97% of the local population (Gardner, 2022).

Economy

For interviewees in Narva, economic considerations featured in terms of division between currencies, as is often the case in border cities between states. How economy is perceived also depends on who can cross the border (because of Russian citizenship or visa), and how often the border is crossed. Mostly, interviewees mentioned the possibility for cheaper purchases on the Russian side. For some, this was in fact a type of trade business, meaning that people would cross the border to buy cheap goods, food products, and even second-hand clothes, and then resell them on the Estonian side. For people who did not use this as a business opportunity, the option to buy cheaper goods on the Russian side is still useful and pleasant for personal use and leisure. One interviewee stated that:

'My father [who has a Russian passport] goes to the Russian side often to buy sports magazines, on football, etc. He likes those'.[6]

Interviewees also highlighted the economic divide between the two sides of the border, particularly in terms of the availability and affordability of goods. Many noted that items such as food products, books, and even car fuel were significantly cheaper on the Russian side of the border. This disparity in prices reflects the broader economic and social dynamics of the border region, where the proximity to Russia creates both opportunities and challenges for local residents. The lower cost of goods on the Russian side has long influenced cross-border shopping habits, further complicating the sense of division and connection between the two countries. One interviewee shared:

[6] Personal Interview 1, Narva, April 2023.

'I bought big bags full of sweets and candy from Russia. I would come back with big packages, that was really great to have such a huge package of sweets and candy with you'.[7]

It was mentioned that not just magazines and sweets, but also medicine and pharmaceutical products are less expensive in Russia. This certainly has been dependent on the state of the Ruble and Euro. One interviewee commented that she lives very close to the border so she could see the exchange rates daily at the local exchange office and followed how the currency values changed with the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent E.U. sanctions.[8]

In addition to this, an economic aspect in the past was the purchase of apartments and houses in Narva by Russian citizens, at times raising property prices in Narva, which was sometimes regarded with dismay by the local population. One interviewee explained:

'Sometimes, rich Russians from St. Petersburg would come here to buy and apartment, only to spend two weeks in Estonia in the summer and leave it empty. It sometimes raised property prices to unreasonable levels for Narva'.[9]

Russian tourism in the city of Narva and the region of Ida-Virumaa more generally was one additional such aspect which influenced economic relations between the two sides of the border. Hence, the economic element is not only one of people crossing from Estonia into Russia, but also from Russia to Estonia. The Russian tourists visiting Estonia were mostly of wealthier backgrounds, meaning they constituted a lucrative type of visitors for the local population.

A final aspect in terms of economy is the reality of the worse economic situation on the Russian side of the border, which interviewees stated to be visible when in Ivangorod (the city on the other side of the river) and beyond. Interviewees stated that in their perception, it is visible that the city and the

[7] Personal Interview 4, Narva, April 2023.
[8] Personal Interview 4, Narva, April 2023.
[9] Personal Interview 4, Narva, April 2023.

country overall are less developed, less progressive, and less modernised. Economically, it is clear that there is a division and difference. Infrastructure in Ivangorod is in bad condition, as are other rural areas visited by interviewees. Perception was also that because of socio-economic reasons, crime rate on the Russian side might be higher and interviewees mentioned minor crimes such as stealing which happened more frequently when they were on the Russian side and in Russian cities. Participants also commented on less cleanliness which was evident on the Russian side as opposed to the Estonian side, where things are, in the perception of interviewees, kept more neat, clean, and safe.

People-to-People Relations

Interviewees seemed to agree that the border does not have an influence on people-to-people relations. Those who have family and friends on the Russian side, would continue to communicate and meet with them, independently of the existence of a border.

Interviewees mentioned distant and near relatives living on the other side of the border in Russia. They explained that living on different sides of the border does not divide them in a real way. Interviewees detailed that citizens with an Estonian passport need a visa to cross over to visit relatives in Russia; however, as this situation was further complicated at the beginning of the Covid pandemic, which changed the accessibility to cross borders, not just between Estonia and Russia, but between states worldwide, interviewees did not seem to see this visa requirement as a real division.

From another perspective, in the past decades, the border has also lost relevance because of social media and the possibility to communicate. Telegram, Skype, and similar social media platforms make communication easier across borders. However, the accessibility of media also pertains to the threat of foreign information manipulation and interference, linked to Russian media, and attempts to spread news channels from the Russian side beyond the border. Interviewees mentioned that perceptions of Russia strongly depend on the sources of news and information. For example, people might have different views depending on the TV channels which they watch, the

radio stations which they listen too, the (online) newspapers and journals which they read, and the social media channels which they follow. One interviewee conveyed:

'Personally, I do not consume Russian media, because I do not identify with those values and the propaganda that is spread there. I try to watch Estonian news, both in Russian and Estonian language, and Western media, mostly in English. But I am aware that some people have access to Russian media, and their views might differ very much'.[10]

When people are influenced by Russian media, this might amend their perception also of the border itself, seeing it as less divisive. Interviewees again commented that this might be a generational issue, because the older generation is more prone to consume such Russian media, whereas the younger citizens have countering views based on the fact that they watch Western channels and media. This could even create division inside families, where different views are held on certain topics. While not necessarily leading to disruption of family ties, it could mean that certain issues were simply not being discussed, and the understanding that there is strong disagreement on those matters. A border 'inside families and houses' is thus created based on such realities.[11]

Division Overall and Further Aspects

When asked about division overall, interviewees mostly commented on the border as the river itself, that being the clear visible border. One interviewee explained:

'The river is quite beautiful, it is nice for walks. When I was a child, the window of our house looked right onto that river which is now the border we are discussing. Visually, not much has changed'.

Interviewees from the older generation described times when there was no border, when electricity and water were handled by the same company on both

[10] Personal Interview 4, Narva, April 2023.
[11] Personal Interview 4, Narva, April 2023.

sides of the river, and when there was no perception of division in any way. One interviewee mentioned people simply swimming across the river, something which is no longer possible. In the summer, one could observe this indeed very beautiful river, with a promenade where people walk their dog or sunbathe, and people on both sides of the river fishing, and presumably speaking the same language, maybe even being relatives. Who would think that at present, two worlds (Russia and the West) are divided here on paper in maps and in discourse on geopolitics, security, and defence?

None of the interviewees saw the city of Narva as closer to Russia than to Estonia, but instead, it was mentioned that it is, as very visible, a 'border city', meaning that it lies somewhere in between the two countries, forming an area of transit and connection as well as division. Some interviewees addressed this area as the 'beginning the E.U./NATO/West', where good work opportunities begin as opposed to the opposite side of the river when lives are of less high standard and fewer opportunities. Others stated that Narva is, to them, 'the end' and the 'periphery' of such concepts and constructs as Europe and the West, where opportunities end, where there are fewer possibilities. In both interpretations, Narva is deeply entangled in spatial and symbolic understandings of Europe and the West, not as a clearly defined part of it, but as a zone where definitions seem to blur.

Interviewees described what they consider to be the 'actual real border' as not just a physical line, but the flow of information and disinformation that shapes public discourse. According to these participants, the division between East and West is often internalised – it manifests in how individuals think and speak about the world, particularly when it comes to Russia. In this sense, the real divide lies not in geographical space but in the opinions and worldviews of individuals. This internal border, shaped by media narratives, personal experiences, and political ideologies, creates a deeper, more intangible form of division. It is in these differing perspectives that the true boundaries of identity and alignment are drawn, making the divide not only geographical, but cognitive and emotional as well.

V Conclusion: The Border as a Social Construct with Various Facets

The present paper set out to explore what meanings the Estonian-Russian border holds for people of Narva, and how these meanings are constructed through lived experience in this unique and historically layered border city. By approaching the border from the ground up and through the perspectives of people living near it, rather than through official state narratives, this article emphasises the human dimension of international frontiers and argues that borders are not merely geopolitical or administrative boundaries, but also intimate and symbolic spaces embedded in everyday life.

The chosen method of a qualitative ethnographic case study, using an interpretivist design, and discourse analysis, allowed for an analytical unpacking of some of the socially constructed meanings of a strategically important border between Estonia, the E.U., and NATO on the one hand, and the Russian Federation on the other hand. The results from the qualitative semi-structured interviews with knowledgeable interviewees representing different age groups, backgrounds, professions, nationalities and ethnicities, and proximity to the border, allowed for an overview of opinions and perceptions of people confronted with this border on a daily basis. Analysing the data from the interviews, combined with ethnographic observations, the article aimed to gauge the social meanings assigned to those otherwise categorised as 'hard power' and security issue of the concept of borders.

Based on the analysis, the paper finds that security perception in and around Narva has been altered, particularly since the start of the war in Ukraine. While tensions were already observable prior to the start of the war and the Russian invasion, there is now increased concern and awareness for the securitised situation. This is furthered by discourse in media, social media, and the physical closure of the border crossing.

In terms of language and culture, the separation is less strict. Interviewees did emphasise the cultural and linguistic similarity between the two sides of the

border, particularly when they also mentioned having relatives on the Russian side. All interviews were conducted in Russian, the native language for the interview participants.

The divisive line comes from the perception of identity, where the understanding is that Estonia is a separate political entity, with a completely different conception of state functions and social and political values. Notions of identity are also tied to the understanding that the interviewees are lucky to live in a democratic free country, where human rights such as freedom of opinion and expression are respected.

Economically, the perception prior to the war in Ukraine was the advantage of cheap purchases on the Russian side of the border and opportunity for trade. This is now overshadowed by inflation in Estonia, causing many inhabitants of the city of Narva economic difficulties.

People-to-people relations have also been affected by the closure of the border since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This border has now become increasingly difficult to cross. The bridge between Narva and Ivangorod, once easily accessible, now represents a much more rigid division and limits everyday interactions that were previously common.

In conclusion, the border, as reflected in the discourse of local residents, emerges as a multifaceted and deeply layered phenomenon. From the perspective of international relations, it marks a critical dividing line between two geopolitical worlds: E.U. and NATO or 'the West' and Russia. In the context of the war in Ukraine and tensions between these two sides, the border in Narva carries immense strategic weight, serving as a frontline of European defence and security. And yet, on the ground in Narva, this same border is also just a river: quiet, scenic, and ordinary. It is a powerful symbol representing both the beginning and the end of what is perceived as 'the West'. More than a line on a map, the border is lived: crossed physically, but constructed socially, culturally, and emotionally. In Narva, residents carry within them the echoes of different historical periods: the Soviet past, the post-independence transformation, and today's renewed geopolitical

uncertainty in the context of ongoing tensions exacerbated by the war in Ukraine.

This article has sought to explore how the various layers of meaning are constructed and experienced in everyday life. Through interviews and local observations, it aimed to detail how the border is continuously shaped by personal histories, generational shifts, cultural references, and political realities; thus, arguing that borders are never only material or strategic, but also intimate, symbolic, and deeply human.

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Annex 1: Interview Questions

Topic 1: General

What do you know about the border?
What does this border mean to you (personally) or what is its relevance from your perspective?

Topic 2: Culture

How to you perceive cultural difference from both sides of the border?
How does it mark a division between identities?

Topic 3: Language

Does the border mark a division between language?
How is linguistic similarity/sameness between both sides perceived?

Topic 4: Economy

What is the relevance of the border from an economic point of view?
How is this relevant to you personally?

Topic 5: People-to-people relations

How often do/did you cross the border?
How is the border perceived in terms of relations between people on both sides?

Topic 6: Security

What does the border mean to you/How do you perceive the border from a security point of view?
What is your perception of security? What role does the border play?
Has this changed since the invasion of Ukraine?
The border marks the line between NATO/E.U. and Russia. How do you view this?

Topic 7: Division overall. Open question, additional comments

How do you see the division overall?
What additional comments and thoughts do you have on this topic?