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Bordering and de-bordering: The Russian speaking community in Estonia

MA thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

The Purpose of this MA thesis is to explain the nuances between those communities that live along the borders of Estonia & Russia and Estonia & Latvia. The connecting thread between these communities is that they are divided by the international borders and yet share family and/or cultural ties across the border. Moreover, they are different in the ways in which they are integrated into the Estonian socio-cultural milieu. Therefore, this research aims to explain the difference between these communities and how nuances in bordering and de-bordering practices of these communities influence the security narratives of Estonia. Methodology of this work is grounded on an ethnographic study of these communities using photographs and text as research material. I use visual autoethnographic studies, which is entrenched in the positionality of the researcher (Bleiker, 2019) as a participant and a witness and thus explain things that are unseen. Photographs from the fieldwork are used in conjunction with the words of the members of the community. Therefore, from a methodological perspective, in this study, I aim to explore the possibilities of using photographs in political science research. From a conceptual standpoint, in this thesis I utilize three different pillars: social constructivism, hegemony, and cultural semiotics to analyze the empirical data - interviews and photographs - obtained from the fieldwork to explain the nuances in social-cultural practices of these communities situated on the borderlands of Estonia.

Keywords: bordering practices, security, identity, visual politics, visual autoethnography

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1. Introduction

Estonia has been confronting the construction of its nation-state identity since regaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The process of moving from "Old Europe" to "New Europe" has been met with a number of political upheavals, including the integration of the country's Russian speaking minority population (Morozov, 2015; 2004, p. 324; Solska, 2011); a political phenomenon that is common in the neighboring Latvia and Lithuania. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, each of the Baltic States implemented different policies to integrate its ethnic minorities from the Soviet past into their mainstream social milieu. Besides, in Estonia the political debates on territorial boundaries between Estonia and Russia still remain unresolved. The geographical border between Estonia and Soviet Russia were determined after the signing of the Tartu Peace Treaty in 1920 and is yet to be ratified due to domestic political divisions (Pettai, 2007). The treaty was signed at the end of Estonia's war of independence with Soviet Russia in 1919 to mutually agree on the territorial borders between the two countries (see Appendix 1), which encompassed areas east of the Narva River, in the North of the Lake Peipsi, and the Pechory district region, in the South East of the Lake (Pettai, 2007). These internal socio-political dimensions are often used as leverage in national political discourses. For example, in recent times, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) brought such ethnopolitical debate to the mainstream (Petsinis, 2019). During the 2021 local elections, EKRE contested for the first time in Ida-Virumaa region, Northeastern part of Estonia that has the majority of Russian speakers where oil shale industry is the main source of income for the locals. On the one hand, the right-wing Eurosceptic party used the European Union's climate-neutral regulations, which put a strain on the shale industry due to environmental concerns, as a leverage to promote anti EU sentiments in Ida-Virumaa region but on the other hand, in Setomaa, the border region in Southern Eastern Estonia, the EKRE party used the status quo of 1920 border treaty to their political gain.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 by "revanchist Russia" (Browning, 2018) posited an unprecedented security crisis to which the West, including the EU, struggled to respond. Since then the Russian speaking community in Narva became the center of

interest for many international media outlets and policy analysts by posing such questions as whether Narva could be the next Crimea (Kallas, 2016). Putin's action in 2014 was primarily based on the fact that Ukraine had a weaker economy and poor military infrastructure. As Andres Kasekamp noted, though there were increased Russian military activities in the region closer to the Estonian border, for the Kremlin it would have been a risky military maneuver to send their "little green men" to Narva (Kasekamp, 2016). This observation is made on the assumption that invading a NATO member state would result in a serious political consequence for Russia. Furthermore, the socio-economic conditions of the Russian speaking population in Narva is far better than their relatives, with whom many have strong family ties, across the river in Ivangorod in Russia. Despite the ethnocultural divide, the Russian community in Narva arguably prefers to live within the territorial borders of the EU.

However, the members of the community still live in the Russian information sphere due to the lack of Russian language TV programs available on local TV. Most locals in Narva depend on the Russian language programs available via satellite and the free-to-air channels from Russia. In the wake of the annexation of Crimea in 2015, to address this issue, the Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR), launched a dedicated Russian language channel ETV+ aimed at their Russian speaking audience in the country. This separation in the information sphere is a fault line between the Russian speaking population in Narva and the rest of Estonia and acts as a conduit for Russia to promote its compatriot policies among the Russophone community. Protection of Russian minorities in Post Soviet countries became a part of Russia's foreign policy agenda in 2008 when it claimed to protect its compatriots and justified its armed aggression against Georgia. The idea of state sovereignty was stretched beyond Russia's borders and the Russian world, "*Ruski Mir*", became a focal point of discussions in the EU- Russia relations (Morozov, 2004; Pieper, 2020; Suslov, 2018). Furthermore, the unprecedented Russian aggression in Ukraine that started on the 24th of February 2022, under the pretext of "saving Russian population in Donbas" (Trevelyan & Winning, 2022) and the misinformation spread by Russia (both online and on TV) about the war in Ukraine emphasizes the importance of addressing issues around those communities that live in a specific information bubble not only in Estonia but also in the countries that share borders with Russia. Kalev Stoicescu, former ambassador to US and Canada and a research fellow at ICDS, a Tallinn based

think tank wrote, "Estonia is clearly an attractive target, even if not strategically important, for hybrid attacks as it is home to a community of Russian speakers, most of whom settled there during the Soviet years" (Stoicescu, 2020). Such political maneuvers by both local and foreign actors using "border" and "identity" as a premise to advance their agenda pose a security and foreign policy risk (Raik, 2015). These observations from both scholars and political analysts necessitate a further understanding of the socio-cultural makeup of minorities in Estonia especially living along the borders. Therefore, my objective in this study is to understand and explain the nuances of the Russian speaking communities living in Estonia, especially on the borderlands.

The current war in Ukraine introduced unconventional and precarious ways in which International Relations are conducted. President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine to push Russia's interest in protecting its citizens and eventually sabotage the world order is unprecedented. The effect of the war in Ukraine is felt through the EU member states sharing borders with or closer to Russia and Ukraine. In Estonia, since the war started both political leadership and the public have been more supportive of the Ukrainian cause. However, the war had a polarizing effect among the local Russian speaking population; for example, in Kohtla-Järve some school children had cut the "Z" sign, a symbol associated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, on their heads (ERR News, 2022a). The pro-war symbol "Z" is considered to be analogous to 'Swastika' and it is reported that this propaganda has been spread in schools elsewhere in Russian federation (RFE/RL, 2022). Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, Estonia's Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority (TTJA) banned four Russian language TV channels as they seemingly harm the country's internal and national security (ERR News, 2022b). However, the locals in Narva obtained antenna to pick the Russian TV channels broadcast from the other side of the border (Maruf, 2022), which spreads the Kremlin propaganda among the locals and makes them vulnerable to misinformation. Fighting misinformation spread by Kremlin about the war in Ukraine has been one of the main concerns during this conflict (Clark, 2022). Except for Narva and Ida-Virumaa, the areas next to the border are not of concern due to the lower number of Russian speakers and a higher level of integration with the rest of the country.

In this context, a comparative study of Russian speaking communities in Estonia to address the differences among them helps us to unpack and understand the temporal and spatial aspects of these communities. I refer to *temporal and spatial* (italicized for emphasis) aspects because, I believe the time when Estonia was populated with Russian speakers and the location where they were situated are salient in further understanding of these communities. The historical connection to political events in Estonia, especially during the Soviet occupation, and the geographical division along the borders of these communities play a role in their everyday practices. Subsequently, such a nuanced approach to studying the ethnic minority issues could be applied to other scenarios elsewhere in the European Union and beyond; for example, any communities that are denied their voice/agency in process of securitization. I believe such a study is important to the EU-Russia relations because, especially in the context of the Eastern Partnership, it is a space in which these two worlds overlap, but at the same time, it's an area that is treated as a border by both entities and not the center of these relations.

The structure of my thesis is comprised of seven chapters. I introduced the background of my study in the first chapter. In my second chapter, I outline the research puzzle and the supporting questions to elucidate the research puzzle. Then, in the third chapter, I expand the existing academic literature on bordering practices and ontological security to establish a correlation between these two ideas. Furthermore, I also identify the gap in the existing literature that applies to my study. In the fourth chapter, I outline the overarching approach of my research design, which falls under the constructivist paradigm. The conceptual rubrics I chose are explained in detail in this section. In the fifth chapter, I expand the ethnographic research method I have used to conduct my study. In addition, I explain the visual autoethnography as research method to introduce the possibilities of using photographs in political science research. In the analysis section, the sixth chapter, I combine the information obtained from the interviews with my photographs to explain the underpinning concepts of this study. In the final and the seventh chapter, I present my conclusions.

2. Research Puzzle

Against this background, using bordering practices and ontological security as underpinning ideas, in this thesis I explore the constitutive relationship between Russian speaking communities living along the borders and the security narratives in Estonia. To achieve this, I explain various socio-political factors of Russophone communities living along the border regions of Estonia (i.e. Narva, Setomaa, and Valga) to analyze how they correlate to the security and foreign policy dimension of Estonia and thus framing the research puzzle: *How do bordering and de-bordering practices influence the security narratives in Estonia?*

To elucidate the main research puzzle, it is pertinent to address the following additional questions, which may provide plausible explanations. These questions are formulated in such a way that they form the basis for the fieldwork interviews.

1. What are the differences in cultural and historical aspects of these communities living along the borders of Estonia?
2. How well are these communities feel and/ or believe they are integrated into the Estonian society?
3. How do these communities view their own world within the context of Estonian social structure?

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Border and identity are two concepts that are constantly being (re) defined by the "self" and the "state". Bordering practices stretch beyond territorial borders that are rigidly controlled and secured; while explaining the practices of demarcating the self from the other Jennifer Mitzen notes, "way of thinking about political authority renders invisible the bordering practices that reproduce territorial logics but do not necessarily take place at the geographical border" (Mitzen, 2018). In her work, Mitzen emphasizes the idea of home as the centrality of ontological security by using the example of how migration creates strained relations among the EU member states in securing their borders. Similarly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, we witnessed how member states established their own rules in safeguarding their borders by introducing country specific travel restrictions, which in principle is against one of the founding pillars of the EU, i.e. free movement of people across its borders (Wille, 2020).

Existing social science literature illustrates that the notion of borders extends beyond politics and geo-strategy. The process of bordering and de-bordering is a bottom-up conception that takes place through social, cultural, and economic practices (Bürkner, 2014; Mitzen, 2018; Sassen, 2018); for example, Etienne Balibar deconstructs the idea of borders in Europe by examining the relationships between political and historical landscape as well as the idea of citizenship and cosmopolitanism. Following the logic of Schmittian's "friend versus enemy" distinction, Etienne Balibar goes on to say, "the main stake of politics becomes the drawing, defense, challenging, and redrawing of 'civilizational borders'" (Balibar, 2009). By 'civilizational borders', Balibar means that in multicultural societies conflicts arise because of the fault-lines created between the power center and the rivalling civilizations. In his work on "Europe as borderland" he highlights that in order to address the issues that arise in the relationship with others – non-Europeans/ foreigners - it is important to "understand, acknowledge, and transform their own 'domestic' multiplicity" (Balibar, 2009). In Nevzat Soguk words, "borders acquire their meanings always contingently, through the activities and practices undertaken around and through them" (Soguk, 2007,p.284). For Soguk, practices of bordering are political as it is the premise for "tensions, conflicts, and contradictions as well as unexpected convergences of

intentionalities" (Soguk, 2007,p.286). Chris Rumford emphasizes that, "theorizing borders and the dynamics of bordering and rebordering have become key components of understanding contemporary social and political change" (Rumford, 2006).

Furthermore, in cross border regionalism studies the flexible nature of borders is considered a "state of mind" rather than a fixed territorial boundary between states (Sparke, 2002). As Mathew Sparke argues, in some cases cross border regional concepts such as the Cascadia region in North America - a region encompassing British Columbia, Washington state, and Oregon – is based on geoeconomic reasons that transcend beyond traditional geopolitics (Sparke, 2002). Similarly in the European Union, INTEREG A program is designed specifically to "tackle common challenges identified jointly in the border regions and to exploit the untapped growth potential in borders areas" (European Commission, n.d). The program covers various regions along the internal borders, around thirty-eight, within the EU to improve and strengthen the socio-economic situation resulting from the linguistic and geographic divisions. Constitution of a cross border region is defined by the Council of Europe as: "trans-frontier region is a potential region, inherent in geography, history, ecology, ethnic groups, economic possibilities and so on, but disrupted by the sovereignty of the governments ruling on each side of the frontier" (Council of Europe, 1995 quoted by Perkmann, 2003). In essence cross border region shares similarities in the geographical area, social practices, and cultural aspects but they are managed by the local authorities (Perkmann, 2003). Thus cross border region studies, in sum, give us an understanding of the organizational/institutional nature of places that share similarities and yet belong to different nation-states.

Territorial borders are tangible in defining the power of a nation-state, however everyday practices at the local level exercised by the state and the non-state actors play a role in securing borders (Côté-Boucher et al, 2014). Essentially, bordering practices are performed to ensure the ontological security of the state or the self (see Mitzen, 2018). In her work on EU Bordering practices during the Covid-19 pandemic and migration crisis Jennifer Mitzen claims, "Home is central to processes of self-stabilization. It is a locale associated with internal, psychological and emotional feelings of personal continuity or being" (Mitzen, 2018). She then turns this idea of home as the centrality for ontologically security to inquire the ways in which EU

member states secure their borders. As Christopher S. Browning points out, "ontological security requires that the actor is able to establish and maintain a sense of order and stability with regard to their salient environment". In this context, "self identity" anchored on spatial and temporal relation to the "salient others" plays a significant role (Browning, 2018). Furthermore, Wilson and Donnan note, "Borders are spatial and temporal records of relationships between local communities and between states"(Wilson & Donnan, 1998, p.5). In addition, they observe, that by using ethnographic studies one could not only understand the cultural practices but also the role of border cultures in policymaking (Wilson & Donnan, 1998). Thus from these scholars observations, it can be inferred bordering practices and ontological security are reciprocal.

In recent history, time and space played a role in the migration of Russian speaking population to Estonia. However, the country's language policy has been one of the key pillars of nation building since the collapse of the Soviet Union and also a wedge in perceiving the Russian speaking community "as a legacy of the Soviet past" (Berg & van Meurs, 2002). From existing academic literature, it is evident that after regaining its independence in 1991, Estonia's third constitution (1992-present) established Estonian as the official language of the government at both state and local levels and a compulsory requirement for acquiring Estonian citizenship (Smith, 2002). Employment in the public sector and the right to run for office, both local and national levels, are restricted to Estonian citizens; a move that triggered resistance and anxiety in regions such as Narva where Russian speakers constituted the majority of the local demographic (Smith, 2002). Estonia's language policy toward its Russian speakers has been under scrutiny and often criticized for swaying away from the values of the European Union (Morozov, 2015; Solska, 2011). Moreover, Russia's foreign policy maneuver in the Baltic region, especially towards Estonia, is hinged on the countries' language policy toward their Russian speaking population (Pieper, 2020).

In contemporary Estonia political discourses continue to center around the Tartu Peace Treaty signed in 1920. According to the treaty, Ivangord region in the north and Pechory region in the south belonged to then independent Estonia; however, in 1944 these regions became part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), following the reoccupation of Estonia (Pettai, 2007; Smith, 2002). After

regaining its independence in 1991 Estonia dropped the border claims, at least symbolically. However, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) uses the status quo of the Tartu Treaty in its political discourses. For example, Henn Polluaas the party's candidate in the 2021 presidential race suggested Russia should return the territories east of Narva River and south of lake Peipsi (ERR News, 2019).

While the existing political science literature mainly highlight the socio-political issues related to the Russian speaking communities in Narva and Ida-Virumaa (Kallas 2016; Pieper, 2020), such communities as old believers, who live along the shores of Peipsi lake or the Setos from the southeastern part of the country, whose families are divided between the territorial borders of Estonia and Russia, are given less attention. In addition, the Russian speaking community in Valga-Valka, a city divided between Estonia and Latvia is considered different from the aforementioned cases. Such division among people beyond territorial borders and invisible bordering practices such as language, culture and history lay the ground for demarcating the "self" from the "other" (Mitzen, 2018). As Kinnvall and Mitzen note, "feeling the precariousness of their own condition might lead publics to be vulnerable to scapegoating and othering, which can have domestic and/or international effects"(Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). Along these lines, I argue that despite their divisions the sense of belonging and securing their identity is a subjective idea that is specific to the communities studied in this project. Thus, the distinct nature of these cases presents an opportunity for providing a plausible explanation to understand the similarities and the differences between each of these Russian-speaking communities living along the borders of Estonia and how it influences the country's security narratives. In this vein, it is also essential to utilize the existing literature on Russia's compatriot policies towards Estonia as a backdrop. Therefore in this study, I analyze the differences in social, cultural, and political aspects of Estonia's Russian speaking communities to provide an understanding of how bordering and de-bordering practices that extend beyond the territorial borders set them apart. This analysis, in turn, may provide some explanations to address issues pertaining to the Russian speakers living elsewhere in the European Union and in the Eastern Partnership countries. In summary, as noted above traditionally academic literature point out identity is created through the practices of bordering and securitization. However, in this thesis, I aim to apply a

bottom-up approach to examine how bordering and de-bordering practices and the corresponding securitization narratives construct identity within a society.

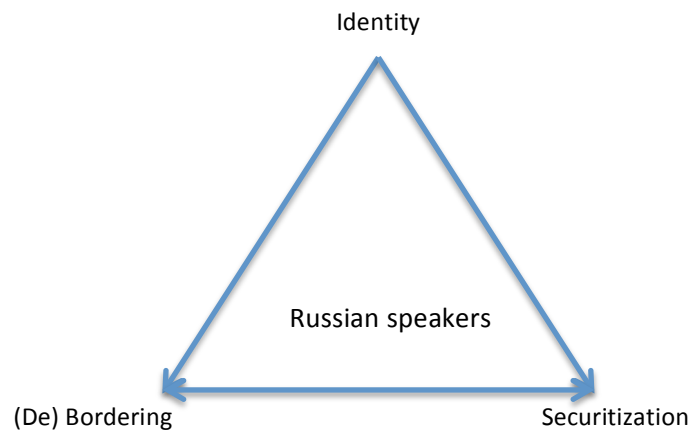


Figure 1: Traditional conceptual understanding of borders based on the existing academic literature

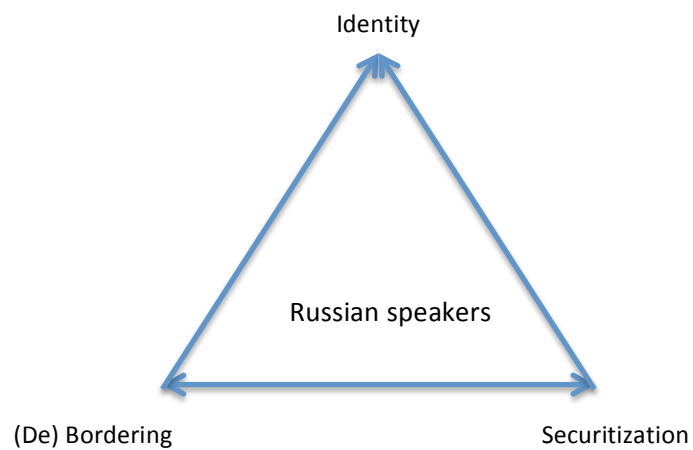


Figure 2: Conceptual approach I use in this thesis to study how identity discursively formed through bordering and de-bordering practices and the securitization narratives.

4. Research Design

The explanatory nature of this research puzzle is to unpack a nuanced understanding of the notion of ‘bordering’ among the Russian speaking communities in Estonia. In fact, the concepts of borders and identity are vastly studied in both constructivist and post structuralist academic literature to construct a meaningful understanding of nation-state identities. In constructivism, meanings are inter-subjectively constructed with some fixity; however, the post structuralism approach denies that fixity. Because each one of the communities constructs their identity based on their own socio-cultural conditions and they are identified with a fixed narrative, I believe, constructivism would be a suitable approach in this study. Therefore I choose such conceptual rubrics as social constructivism, hegemony, and cultural semiotics to analyze the empirical data obtained during the fieldwork. In the following sections, I outline the reasons for each of these choices and how they are applied in my research.

First, as constructivist social science literature emphasizes, “people make society and society make people” and diverse materials and discourses used systematically aid in the finding links to explain this two way process (Onuf, 1998, pp. 58-59). In other words, societal reality relies upon individuals. Paul Jackson mentions in his work, “Social constructivism tells us we build knowledge as ways of understanding the world, and that these ways of understanding are a subset of how the world could be understood” (Jackson, 2010). The social construction is rooted in the specificities of cultural practices and historical contexts (Burr, 2015, p.4). Furthermore, Christine Agius argues that social constructivism (in fact, she considers both constructivism and social constructivism are analogous), allows us to understand the world through social practices rather than through material aspects, and “security can be socially constructed” (Agius, 2018, p.71). According to Adler (1997), “knowledge persists beyond the lives of individual social actors, embedded in social routines and practices as they are reproduced by interpreters who participate in their production and workings”. Therefore the “intersubjective meanings” produced by the actors essentially form the social reality (Adler, 1997, p.327). Thus, in the context of my research puzzle, the way in which the societal practices are different among these communities is better studied through the lens of social constructivism.

Second, from the existing academic literature, it is understood that political identity is shaped by hegemony. For Antonio Gramsci, social and historical conditions - “historical bloc” - is essential for the creation of hegemony in society. The agents and the institutions that promote hegemonic views are vital in creating socio-political hegemony (and counter hegemony) as they are organized based on the activities specific to the social groups (Woolcock, 1985). These three different social groups compared in this study are different in their socio-cultural practices that set them apart from the national identity. While expanding Gramsci’s view and explaining the concept of hegemony, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe note that “the open and incomplete character of every social identity permits its articulation to different historico-discursive formations” (Laclau & Mouffe, 200, p.114). Further, they add, “the two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001,p.136). And they add, “that certain discursive forms, through equivalence, annul all positivity of the object and give a real existence to negativity as such “. In other words, antagonism is essentially mediated through discursive practices (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp.128-129). I use the above mentioned two different approaches to conceptualize hegemony in explaining the uniqueness on which identities of these communities are constructed and in turn influence their bordering and de-bordering practices.

Third, the temporal difference among these communities necessitates a need for analysis of cultural memories, which is fundamental to the creation of social identity. As Juri Lotman noted ideas and social relations are formed based on memories (text and cultures which connect the past to the present); and it is a continual process of “self-definition” and “self-remembering” (Steedman, 2004; Tamm, 2019). Collective memories construct communities through identification and these “lessons of the past” can influence foreign policy discourses (Guzzni, 2017; Lebow, 2016). As Jan Assmann noted, “Memory enables us to live in groups and communities, and living in groups and communities enables us to build a memory” (Assmann, 2008). Memories and cultural representations are often expressed through discourses, which is very much in line with Michel Foucault’s idea that knowledge is socially constructed and produced through discourses (Hall, 1997, p.51). I use the reference to Michel Foucault’s idea here because his thoughts on discourses are concerned with the

production of knowledge. According to Stuart Hall, for Michel Foucault's knowledge about society, individuals and groups are created and produced from different periods; and most importantly, as he puts it, Foucault's work is grounded on "historical specificities" (Hall, 1997). These communities chosen in the study have gone through different temporal and spatial experiences that differentiate them from one another and subsequently play in role in how they have been perceived and governed.



Figure 3: Conceptual rubric to explain bordering and de-bordering practices

Despite different conceptual approaches employed in this research, my goal in this study is to adopt a multi-faceted approach to arrive at an explanation that may shed a new understanding of these communities. I believe the concepts that I apply - social constructivism, hegemony, and cultural semiotics are intertwined and therefore help in explaining how bordering and de-bordering practices of these communities are constructed. Moreover, this pluralist approach adds richness to the study and subsequently opens up the possibilities for further discussion. From a methodological standpoint, the constructivist method is suitable for this study as it enables to elucidate the process of identity formation, which is centered on the borderland areas. And these aforementioned conceptual rubrics are used throughout the analysis of empirical data collected through fieldwork, which is explained in the following sections.

4.1. Case Selection

The crux of the research puzzle relies on the nature of understanding the nuances of bordering practices among the Russian speaking communities in Estonia that live along the borders with Russia and Latvia. In order to achieve this, I chose, in total three communities; Narva and Setomaa on the eastern borders of Estonia that share borders with Russia and Valga on the southern side on the border with Latvia, a EU member state. All these communities have Russian speaking population and families are divided along territorial borders but they differ in socio-cultural aspects. For example, the Russian speaking community in Narva continues to live in a “grey zone” because of the language (Stepanov, 2022). And in Setomaa, despite the community are being divided along the territorial boundary, the Setos live on the Estonian side of the border is integrated into the Estonian socio-cultural milieu. Often Russian language is spoken and is a common bridge that connects the divided community. In Valga, a city divided between Estonia and Latvia, Russian language is part of their daily vernacular.

Narva:

Narva is the largest and most populous town in Ida-Virumaa County and the third largest city in Estonia after Tallinn and Tartu. Today, about 95% of the city’s population is Russian speaking. During the Second World War almost all of the historical architecture of Narva was destroyed and in the 1950s due to industrialization workers from other parts of the Soviet Union settled in the city (Kattago, 2008). Over the last decades, the closure of the historic Kreenholm cotton mills factory and the job losses resulted in the decline in the city’s population.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, many locals opted for the “Grey Passport” to avoid taking the mandatory language exams to qualify for the Estonian citizenship, which granted them resident status in Estonia and yet they were able to travel to Russia easily. In 1993, the introduction of the Law of Aliens created anxiety among the local population. Stemming from the disapproval of the alien law, the same year a referendum was held to determine the territorial autonomy for Narva within the Republic of Estonia, which eventually failed to meet its mandate (Smith, 2002). To

date, some residents of Narva continue to visit Ivangorod in Russia (and vice versa) because of family connections and commercial interests. As Sergei Stepanov, a senior journalist at the Russian news channel ETV+ in Narva, put it, “sometimes the people in Narva think and believe that they live in a different country. It’s not Russia; it’s not Estonia; it’s a buffer zone” (Stepanov, 2021). For better education and opportunities, youth moved out to cities like Tallinn, and Tartu. The Integration Foundation of Estonia has far more outreach programs in Narva compared to the other Russian speaking communities in Estonia.

Setomaa:

The Seto community, split between the territorial borders between Estonia and Russia in the southeastern part, presents a different scenario in this study. Since the signing of the Tartu Peace Treaty in 1920, the community’s socio-political fate is very much centered on their religious and cultural practices (Jääts, 2000). The community is spread across the region extending from the south of lake Peipsi to Petseri district in current Russia. Between 1920 and 1940, the assimilation of Setos into mainstream Estonia happened through assistance from the country’s political elites by improving local economic standards and by providing compulsory education in Estonian. During this period, the Orthodox churches in Setomaa adapted Estonian as language for conducting religious services.

Despite being seen as an “outdated and backward” community, through religious practices, costumes and folklore singing Setos make a significant contribution to the Estonian cultural milieu (Jääts, 2000, Kalkun, 2014). Based on the population of Russian speakers, the borders between the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic were redrawn after the Second World War in 1945, which eventually split the Seto community between the territorial borders (Jääts, 2000). Regardless of the community’s orientation towards their respective governments and the separation of religious practices in the Orthodox Churches in different languages (Estonian and Russian), the Seto’s kept their cultural identity intact because of the seamless border crossings between the two republics. Families from either side of the border were able to take part in religious ceremonies at Churches and visit their ancestor’s graves. After the fall of the Soviet Union, these practices continued as the local authorities from either side of the border kept a list of

local residents who were allowed to cross borders freely (Dobbs, 2020). This simplified border crossing process came to an end in September 2000, when Estonia initiated the process of becoming a part of the European Union and essentially erecting a "Setu Wall" (Berg, 2002).

Valga:

Valga – one city, two states – is situated on the Southern border of Estonia and the Northern border of Latvia, a place where the territorial boundary lines literally run across the center of the town. Valga traces its historical roots back to the 13th century and was part of the Old Livonia. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the train station in Valga became an important junction with trains from Tallinn, Riga, Peskov and Stukmani crossing the city. This rail connection boosted the local trade and commercial activities. When Estonia and Latvia gained their independence in 1920, because of the demographic divide between Estonians and Latvians, the city was divided in two. During the Soviet occupation, following the mass deportation of both Estonians and Latvians, Valga was turned into an industrial town and a military base. In 1991, when both countries regained their independence, the territorial border was re-established and continued to divide the town into two. Because of the Soviet past, the Russian speaking community remained in the town. Since joining the EU and becoming part of the Schengen area, the border restrictions were lifted. However, Russian language remains a lingua franca between both sides (Lazdina, 2019).

Old Believers:

Old Believers are Orthodox Christians who escaped Russia for the fear of prosecution after the Church reforms in the mid 1600s and settled in then Swedish Estonia along the shores of Lake Peipsi, essentially predating the Russian empire. Though they continue to practice their religious traditions they are very much assimilated with the mainstream Estonian culture. The Estonian government views them as a protected cultural group and unique to the country's cultural representation. At this juncture, it is important to note that, the Russian speaking community of Old Believers community who live along the shores of Peipsi lake is omitted from this study as they do not share similar characteristics of the territorial borders, as mentioned in the other cases with Russia or any other EU member states.

This study is a small-n case study with Most Similar System Design. The following table illustrates the similarities and differences in the bordering practices of these communities. All these three communities share their social ties across the border and they have Russian speaking population (Note: although in Setomaa the locals speak mainly in Seto language and Estonian most are able to converse in Russian). However, I hypothesize that due to the difference in social integration and cultural identity, the bordering practices and the security narratives pertaining to these communities are different. In summary, I examine how bordering and de-bordering practices take place through social and cultural practices in these three communities.

	Divided Borders	Russian language spoken	Social Integration	Socio-cultural Identity	Security Narratives
Narva	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Setomaa	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Valga	Y	Y	Y	N	N

Table 1: Summary of comparison of three communities live along the territorial borders of Estonia.

5. Research Method

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, academic reports and policy papers have extensively studied the case of Russian speaking communities in Ida-Virumaa, specifically in Narva. However, academic study about the Seto community or Russian speaking population in Valga is limited. Often social conditions are not truly expressed in the popular and social media. The information sphere, especially with the current modern technologies, is targeted to reach specific audiences in social media. And eventually the true understanding of social issues is very much distorted based on the medium and the carriers of the message. For example, those who live in the Russian mediascape (TV channels from Russia) and those who consume mainly through social media often have different views on socio-political issues. Hence, it is essential to speak to the representatives of the community in order to understand the nuances of the local social and cultural practices. To achieve this, I conducted ethnographic field research work in these three communities. In my research, I give equal importance to both interviews and photographs obtained during my field trips. The images collected during the fieldwork in these communities are used in advancing the contribution of visual analysis in political science research. As Roland Bleiker put it, “photography, also has the potential to provide us with a more inclusive view of the world. It may allow us to ‘see’ the spirit of an age and move beyond a merely external depiction of the world” (Bleiker, 2001).

In the case of my research puzzle, the comparative analysis of these communities is little studied in the academic literature and therefore it makes sense to use the constructivist method to examine the subtle differences. In this work, I use both “experience-distant” (academic literature and think tank reports) and “experience-near” (media reports and interviews by sampled participants) approach to obtain the requisite empirical evidence (Schaffer, 2016). As Michael Quinn Patton observed, “Qualitative inquiry is personal. The researcher is the instrument of inquiry” (Patton, 2015, p.40). In this sense, the positionality of the researcher (i.e. a foreigner currently living in Estonia) plays a crucial role in looking at such issues with a fresh view. For this thesis, empirical data comes from visual materials – photographs taken by myself - and from the interviews conducted during the fieldwork. In addition,

academic literature, policy papers and media reports are used in this study as supporting materials to inform the research puzzle.

Traditionally, sociologists and anthropologists have conducted ethnographic research in their work. However, ethnographic work can also contribute to logically meaningful explanations in political science research (Wedeen, 2010). Furthermore, “ordinary language interviewing” is an accepted form of ethnographic investigation (Schaffer, 2016, p.43). In this ethnographic research work, empirical data (interviews and photographs) is obtained from the fieldwork and they act as first-hand source material. Information obtained from the interviews is then used in elucidating the research puzzle using an interpretivist approach.

5.1. Fieldwork Interviews

Throughout my field research, I conducted in-depth interviews to collect original and on the ground information from different communities. As Stephanie Taylor suggests, one of the most popular ways to obtain data for discourse analysis is through interviews (Taylor, 2013). Furthermore, she points out, that culture is a social knowledge specific to a society or groups within, and therefore they form the source of identity and are expressed through discourses (Taylor, 2013, p.20). Collecting information through ethnographic interviews is further asserted by Iver Neumann: “Ethnography and discourse analysis are similar in that they pay, or should pay, a lot of attention to how the analyst is situated in relation to the data” and that interviews can be a data collection method in discourse analysis (Neumann, 2008, p.73). According to Lene Hansen, discourse analysis of primary text provides the epistemological starting point (Hansen, 2006, p.74). Therefore, interviews are better suited in understanding the outlook of the participants in order to explain the underpinning concepts, in this case, “bordering and de-bordering practices”, in social science research (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In my fieldwork, I used a semi-structured interview approach as they allow flexibility in designing the interview questions and drive the interview towards a direction in which meaning making of the research question is possible. To select the participants for the interview, I used the “snowball sampling” method as a strategy to negotiate additional access to interviewees and provide inroads to an interesting set of people who otherwise are not invisible to outsiders (Van Puyvelde, 2018). The participants are chosen from a pool of people

who have a wide range of socio-political awareness and diverse experiences. For example, my interviewees include those who are in public offices, journalists, non-governmental organizations and civil society workers, artists and business leaders. Interviews for this thesis project are designed with multiple “open-ended questions” to achieve a nuanced response from the participants and to facilitate probing into additional responses to establish a better understanding of the topic. During the interview, different techniques such as “prompt questions”, “probe questions”, “specifying questions”, and “direct questions” are used to obtain clarity on the topic (Kvale, 1996). Sample interview questions used in my field research are as follows:

1. Do you see a difference in the treatment of Russian speaking communities living in different border regions of Estonia?
2. How policies are devised differently for each of these regions? For example, is Narva more of a concern related to security issues, vis-à-vis the Kremlin’s attempt to influence the local population, compared to Setomaa?
3. How does the media portray different Russophone communities in Estonia?
4. How do politicians view their electorates in these communities?
5. How do you see the divisions in cultural, emotional, and political aspects in these communities?
6. Is the integration policies different based on the Russian speaking population in these communities?

The sample size of the interviewees was determined based on the data saturation point. In other words, as many interviews were conducted until there was sufficient information collected from the field in order to provide a plausible explanation of the research puzzle. The interviews I conducted were not elite interviews. However the interviewees I chose live their everyday life and they convey their “own perspectives in their own words” (Kvale, 2007, p.11). For example, some of the interviewees are community leaders who have complete understanding of their community’s aspirations and needs. And in some cases, the interviewees are officials / NGO workers who are authoritative in their field of work. Furthermore, as Steinar Kvale

rightfully points out, the way in which interviews conducted and analyzed are can be of two different approaches: “miner” or “traveller” and each of them produces a different kind of knowledge (Kvale, 2007,p.20). In my fieldwork, I took the “traveller” approach, in which the knowledge is constructed socially, to record and retell the information that may have never been uncovered. As Kvale notes this approach of obtaining social knowledge is similar to that of the anthropological approach (Kvale, 2007). Moreover, as noted by Malterud et al. (2016), the “information power” is fundamental in obtaining the highest quality of information during the dialogue with the interviewees. It is a process where knowledge is “co-constructed” by the interviewee and the researcher (Malterud et al., 2016). In addition, the interviews were conducted over a period of time and some cases in multiple iterations. Therefore, I assert that the quality of the information in the study is rich even though the sample size is smaller compared to a traditional anthropological fieldwork.

5.2. Visual Analysis

In addition, I use Visual Analysis approach by using photography as a data collection method to provide supporting evidence and expand my ethnographic research. As Susan Sontag wrote in her monumental work *On Photography*, “Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, free standing particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and fait divers” (Sontag, 1979). Since its invention, photography has been used to record all walks of life, from intimate personal moments to events that are of public interest. It serves as a tool to communicate news stories about the war and crime, society and trends, and family heritage by offering direct access to the real situations. Photographs don’t narrate themselves but rather preserve appearances and memories (Berger, 2013). These temporal instances then aid in constructing meanings. It is a process in which the photographer is a participant and a witness.

Photography has been in the “toolkit” in conducting ethnographic research for generations. These photographs serve as “aide-memoire” in creating visual documentation of what is observed and witnessed. For example, Edward Curtis used photography to conduct an ethnographic study of Native Americans in the turn of the

20th century¹. Furthermore, the increasing trends in visual communication through non-traditional media – online blogs and social media platforms – create a need for taking research photographs (Tinkler, 2014). Photographs can be supportive and supplemental in social science research. While such methods as photo-documentation and photo-elicitation serve as supportive materials in a research study, they also act as empirical data in the “visual research methods” (Tinkler, 2013; Rose, 2016). While explaining social or political situations, in addition to the aesthetics, photographs represent the positionality of the photographer (Bleiker, 2019). This method is compared to the “grounded theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Rose, 2016) in which the social research is constructed through iterative evidence obtained from the field. Also, the images photographed through the “photo documentation” can be presented using discursive text (Penn, 2000, p.13). Thus in this thesis images are used as discursive text to analyze the socio-cultural phenomenon of the communities that are studied.

As Gillian Rose noted in her work on *Visual Methodologies*, “discourse analysis can also be used to explore how images construct specific views of the social world” (Rose, 2016, p.192). Since discourse is socially produced, photographs obtained during the research work can act as a regime of truth to represent the social condition. Gillian Rose, emphasizes this by using an example how historians and scholars studied the social conditions of the East End of London in the 1880s using photographs as one of the discursive texts (Rose, 2016). Furthermore, in explaining the importance of images in political science research, Roland Bleiker notes, “photographs shape not only an individual’s perception but also larger, collective forms of consciousness” (Bleiker, 2018, p.13). Another example to validate this method is Bleiker’s visual autoethnographic work in North Korean DMZ (See Bleiker, 2019). I adapt a similar method to analyze the photographs captured during my fieldwork. Therefore, because of the richness of the images, using visual analysis can add nuances to political science research studies. And by combining different forms of empirical data collection methods, I aim to provide a better understanding of the theoretical and social dimension of the research puzzle: *How do bordering and de-bordering practices influence the security narratives in Estonia?*

¹Edward Curtis’ Epic Project to Photograph Native Americans:
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/edward-curtis-epic-project-to-photograph-native-americans-162523282/>

5.3. Operationalization

In order to operationalize the empirical data collected from fieldwork, I use a combination of discourse analysis, photo documentation and visual discourse analysis (Tinkler, 2014; Pink, 2008; Rose, 2016). Information obtained from the interviews and photographs, which serve as the empirical data, are combined and analyzed in clusters to match the conceptual pillars (social constructivism, hegemony, and cultural memories) as described in the research design. In discourse analysis there is no one defined way as each researcher/scholar conducts discourse analysis using different techniques (Dunn & Neumann, 2016,p.104). To analyze the data collected through interviews, I use the discourse analysis technique of looking for continuity in the interview materials and juxtaposing them with the photographs. In this case photographs serve as intertextual materials by connecting the information obtained from the interviews to that of the visual representations. To expand this idea of using intertextuality in research the further, I turn to the example of how Lene Hansen studied the Bosnian war to methodologically illustrate the process of othering. In which, she notes that meanings are created through different signs (Hansen, 2006). According to Hansen, in her work on Bosnia, “meanings and identity are constructed through series of signs that are linked to each other to constitute relations of sameness as well as through a differentiation to another series of juxtaposed signs” (Hansen, 2006 quoted by Dunn & Neumann, 2016). Therefore, in my research text and photographs mutually contribute to each other in elucidating the research puzzle. Gillian Rose explains, that photo documentation is a “precise record of material reality” and it can provide a link with the research topic (Rose, 2016, pp. 310-311). Thus, the photographs used in the analysis also act as a representation of reality. Discourse analysis of photographs has been used as a research methodology in many different ways. Photographs have been studied through sign systems, representations, and icons (See Rose, 2016). Thus by using photographs as evidence / documentation of the reality and as a discursive text meanings can be made.

In addition, I rely on the methodological disposition of the analysis derived from the works of Roland Bleiker on visual ethnographic study of the North Korean DMZ, in which the author himself was a witness (as a photographer) and participant (as a

military attaché) to illustrate the notion of securitization of borders. In his work, Bleiker explains the how ethnographic study through photography can be applied in political science research:

“In this sense, my photographs are not representative of something, but against something and, in doing so, expose how common visual and political discourses have been framed and naturalised to the point that they have the power to construct common sense” (Bleiker, 2019).

Bleiker employed a research method that he calls “visual autoethnographic” to conduct his study. Being a passionate photographer and a Swiss Army military attaché in North Korea, he used his camera to record everyday military activities. As he put it, by taking photographs he was interested in recoding the “epistemological lessons of the every day” (Bleiker, 2019). In other words, his interest stems from “being as mode of knowing” as observed by Linda Åhäll (Åhäll quoted by Bleiker, 2019, p.277). In addition, Bleiker notes, “I use my photographs as tools to re-view, re-evaluate and re-imagine the world. If they are representative, then only of my positionality and of how self-reflective ruminations about this positionality can reveal existing political discourses and the power relationships they embody” (Bleiker, 2019). The situatedness of the photographs therefore lies in the complementing text that goes with them. In his analysis, he uses his images to illustrate reality (in line with photo documentation) to explain a political phenomenon. For example, to illustrate the idea that a border is an interface rather than a physically constructed wall or a fence he uses an image of a soldier looking at an area of border separation that is just a minefield with no physical signs of any physical structure and a rusted pillar that marks the demarcation between North and South Korea. In another example, to show the masculine nature of the North Korean army he shows images of official military meetings in which there is almost no presence of women, except one in which a female soldier attends a Military Armistice Commission meeting. In the above mentioned examples, he uses his own words to explain the context of the photographs. The emphasis here is that the photographer’s positionality matters and as Bleiker claims, “the significance of visual autoethnography, has to do with my own experience and my changing relationship to the photographs I took over three decades ago” (Bleiker, 2019). In addition, the positionality of the photographer as a researcher

conducting the study can add an additional layer of explanations to an issue or a situation that is political. For example, previously, I have employed visual analysis as method to analyze my work on *India's Third Gender* to illustrate how photographs can provide additional information to a social phenomenon that is unseen or invisible in the written text. In this work, I used my own photographs taken during the *Koovagam* festival, the largest transgender festival that takes place every year in Tamil Nadu, India, to examine socio-cultural nuances of transgender community and the society's illiberal attitudes towards the transgender women (see Siva, 2021). In this vein, I use my photographs taken during my fieldwork to illustrate the bordering and de-bordering practices that take place in these three different communities – Narva, Setomaa and Valga. However, the information that surrounds the photographs, I used in this thesis is from the interviews of locals which add the context to the photographs. This is method of combining the views / opinions expressed by the locals with my own observations produced through images is a novel method. And, I believe, this approach strengthens the visual autoethnographic study. Thus, in my thesis, I employ these aforementioned techniques to operationalize the research material obtained from my fieldwork.

5.4. Validity and Reliability

Information obtained from this fieldwork research is from those who play a key role in their respective communities. In essence, the voice of these communities is heard through those who live through the experiences of those who reshape their space. In other words, interviews conducted during the fieldwork provide the researcher “a true insider perspective on a topic or situation” (Mosley, 2013, p.210). The information obtained in this research is from first-hand sources and therefore the authenticity of the information is reliable. General concerns about the positionality, as an outsider attempting to understand the local cultures, and the validity is addressed through repetitive visits, personal observations and corroborating the information with other members of the community and external sources such as academic literature and news media reports. Moreover, in visual ethnographic research, as Sarah Pink puts it, “the ethnographer’s own visual practices can lead us to a way of understanding the multilayered nature of how a place is constituted and the conflicting but entangled perspectives from which places might be understood and experienced” (Pink, 2008). In addition, photographs are from the author and therefore they are an authentic

representation of what is observed and witnessed during the research work. Although on the one hand Michael Quinn (2015) argues, “Seeing is not necessarily believing” as photographs can be altered, he does agree that they are “credible and useful” when they are used alongside the interviews (Patton, 2015, p.709). Therefore, using my own photographs without any distortion or modification ensures the validity of the images and acts as supporting evidence in conjunction with the information obtained during the interviews.

5.5. Research Timeline

Although the border agreements between Estonia and Russia were originally drawn up during the 1920 Tartu Treaty, after the Second World War and during the Soviet times, they were renegotiated and new territorial boundaries were established between these countries. Since Estonia regained its independence in 1991, the technicalities surrounding the borders became relevant because of the necessity for easier border crossings to continue family ties and socio-cultural practices. In Narva, the Narva River became a new territorial boundary between the two cities - Narva and Ivangorod, creating a new separation between the two cities that had shared services and infrastructure. And in Setomaa, after 1991, Pechory region became part of Russia and thus cutting ties between families and distancing religious sites that are important to the community. In the case of Estonia and Latvia border in Valga-Valka, they were agreed by a British led arbitration in 1920. During Soviet times, the town was integrated into one. However after both Estonia and Latvia regained independence in 1991 newer regulations in civic functions and town infrastructure were separated until both countries joined the EU and became part of the Schengen Area (Lundén, 2009). Essentially, the border practices have changed in Estonia and Latvia since the fall of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the timeline for my analysis starts from 1991 to understand and explain how the bordering practices impact everyday practices in these communities.

6. Analysis

As explained in the research design, I use discourse analysis techniques to analyze the data collected through interviews and photographs. In my analysis, I use both interviews and photographs to illustrate these three communities and how they share similarities and yet they are different. My goal is to explain the logic of inquiry of the research puzzle: bordering, de-bordering and security discourses. Therefore, to elucidate the research puzzle, in the following sub-sections I use the three conceptual pillars: social constructivism, hegemony, and cultural memory and explain how bordering and de-bordering practices take place. As explained in the research design, social constructivism allows us to understand the process of meaning makings in a society, hegemony explains the power relations between agents and institutions, and cultural memory provides insight into the collective identity of the community. Using these conceptual pillars as a point of departure, I analyze the interviews and photographs obtained from fieldwork.

6.1. Social constructivism

As Emanuel Adler notes constructivist scholars “believe that the identities, interests and behavior of political agents are socially constructed by collective meanings, interpretations and assumptions about the world” (Adler, 1997). Further, he adds that social reality is produced by practices and routines that are inherent part of a society (Adler, 1997). With this in mind, this section explains different practices in relation to bordering practices, which are distinctive to these communities.

Redefinition of national borders took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union in post Soviet space splitting communities across the borderlines (see Wastl-Walter, 2011). As noted in the previous sections notions of bordering and de-bordering are not just based on territorial bordering. William Callahan states that, “borders are not static, and can take on meaning through movement and flows: borders here are no longer just at the edge of the nation-state, but are complex sites of flows, often throughout society” (Callahan, 2018). Callahan’s uses the idea of walls – both the Great Wall of China and US-Mexico border wall - to critically explore the concepts of identity, border politics and foreign policy. For Callahan, the idea of walls extends beyond from physical construction to ideological separations. For example, the Berlin

wall separated between “morally superior socialist experiment” and “morally corrupt capitalist tumour” (Callahan, 2018). Following Callahan’s thought this section of the analysis explores the idea of bordering through the prism of physical border, cultural and linguist differences to explain the chosen cases.

In the case of Narva the borders on both sides are unequivocally protected, controlled by boarder guards with a strict visa regime. The fortified nature of borders is clearly visible and illustrates the significance of a well-protected border (see figure 4). Both vehicles (commercial and private) and pedestrians use the tightly secured bridge between Narva and Ivangorod to cross from one side to the other. Border between Narva and Ivangorod was formalized in December 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, a political event that created a new reality and challenges for both cities. The newly implemented border not only cut off the cities’ infrastructure between both sides but also created a divide in public discourses. And thus creating a difference in perceptions that Ivangorod is “Russian-like, unstable and chaotic “ (Berg, 2000). The promenade built by the assistance of the EU funding through its Cross Border Cooperation program (EstoniaRussia, 2020) is one of the examples showcasing the difference in the urban development between Estonian and Russian side of the borders. Nevertheless, compared to rest of Estonia, Narva still suffers from lack of urban infrastructure. According to Mihhail Komasko, a journalist at ETV+ Russian language channel operated by the Estonian Public Broadcasting, since the Soviet times, when Narva was prosperous due to industrialization during the Soviet times it became a cultural center and therefore had its own culture. However, since Estonia regained its independence, the change in economy and degradation of population eventually led Narva to become a “border town” (Komasko, 2022). Besides being a border town, Narva has been facing challenges in integrating with the rest of the country due to its linguistic and cultural practices. As Thomas Lundén on his work on divided borders in Estonia noted: ”Through communication in the form of language and symbols, those common values that determine behavior and attitudes, culture, are mediated and reproduced” (Lundén, 2009).



Figure 4. The bridge between Narva and Ivangorod serves as an international border between Estonia and Russia. Source: Author

While speaking about her work in Irene Kaosaar, head of the Integration Foundation, she mentioned:

“In Narva, we have a very special challenge. This is not only the language challenge, this is a cultural challenge, this is a challenge to support this people to feel themselves part of the Estonia society. They don't trust the Estonian society, trust Estonian government or, or other official organizations” (Kaosaar, 2022).

Mihhail Komasko echoed a similar sentiment; the reason for mistrust is due to the Soviet past is still being carried over in the psyche of Estonians. He noted:

“Because they (Estonians) are sure that people who live in Valga will never ask for freedom or asked to be part of Latvia. I think that in Setomaa they have their own ways of life. They don't have such big troubles and they don't feel that big external Setomaa government with nuclear power and the nuclear missiles will conquer Estonian settlement” (Komasko, 2022).



Figure 5: A local woman from Narva looking over to Ivangorod on the Russian side during a cross border music concert in the summer of 2021. Source: Author.

The above photograph (Figure 5) visually shows that a local resident looking over to Ivangorod in Russia on the other side of the Narva river. To a viewer with no information about the context of this image, this could appear as a woman overlooking the river with perhaps a sense of longing or nostalgia. However, for those who are familiar with the city of Narva and its local community, this photograph easily read as that the woman is on the Estonian side and the fort is on the Russian side of the border. Therefore the situatedness of this photograph relies on the cultural and historical awareness of the viewer. Thus photographs can construct meanings that are not explicit and unseen; meaning of an image depends on who reads it and how its read (Hall, 1997, p.59). As Gillian Rose notes, “invisibility can just as powerful effects as visibility” (Rose, 2016, p.213). Photographs, therefore, can add layers of meanings to situation that is captured.

However, in Setomaa the borders were redrawn in 1991, which split the Seto families between the territorial borders of Estonia and Russia. Through family connections and cultural ties, the border remained fluid on the both sides allowing the Seto people to continue their religious practices and take part in community events. For Setos the

border doesn't exist as they consider the whole of Setomaa (including the parts in Pechory district in Russia) as unified land of their own. During the Seto Kingdom day the community members from the both sides of the borders come together and elect their chief herald – ülembsootska (Berg, 2002). Since 1994, the Setos have been organizing Seto Kingdom day every year in August to choose their king or the representative of *Peko*, their folk legend. During the Seto Kingdom day the notion of bordering practices changes as the kingdom has its *borders* and the visitors to the event are required to have “visas on arrival” (Setomaa.ee, n.d.).

During the Soviet Union, the territorial border between Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) and Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was less controlled. Because of the free movement of people, the Setos considered their land situated in the area that was formally agreed during the 1920 Tartu Peace Treaty as undivided. As Helen Külvik, the head of the Seto Institute, noted in 1945 during the Soviet Union the borders were redrawn between ESSR and RSFSR, similar to the current territorial border between Estonia and Russia. However for the Seto community it didn't mean anything. The farmers traded their produce and meat at the market in Pechory, Peskov and as far as Saint Petersburg by travelling along the shores of lake Peskov (Külvik, 2022).

As Harry Sundell, a photographer from Finland who spent years living in Setomaa and regularly documents the daily life of the community, summed up:

“the Setos still call the border between Estonia and Russia a control line. We (others) don't understand the history and the mind of Setos. We tend to think that it's a border. And of course, in today's world, it's a fact, it's a border. But still, for Setos, it's only a control line” (Harry, 2022).

Until the recent Covid 19 pandemic the Setos were given Russian visa (free of charge) and were able to visit their relatives and family graves easily (Harry, 2022). In addition, since the migration crisis instigated by Belarus the Estonian government has been erecting barbed wire fences (see figure 7) along the border with Russia (Spirlet, 2021).



Figure 6: House next to the Estonian and Russian border in Setomaa with Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic Flag and Seto Flag. Source: Author

In 1999, Mariam (who only went by her first name) and her family, the owners of the farm in Vinski located on the border (see figure 6), relocated to Estonian side from Pechory in Russia when the Estonian government facilitated movement of Setos through a financial assistance program. For Mariam, the borderline is just a protection of their land. She said, “It is just a control line as the border is not rectified due to political reasons”. She believes Pechory is part of Seto district (region) and it is a central part of the community, a family sentiment is vividly displayed by hoisting the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) flag along with the Seto flag (see figure 6), an example of how visual representation of a social practice can be associated with political meaning. According to Mariam, the Seto culture is flourishing in the Estonian side compared to Russian side of the community. Border crossings through easier visa process allowed them to keep their family connections alive. However during the Covid-19 pandemic family visits were complicated due to the travel restrictions and therefore the border crossings were made difficult. Until recently, in Vinsky surveillance of the borders was done through cameras and however recently barbed wire fences are being erected (Mariam, 2021). In summer of

2021, I visited Vinsky village during the Seto café day event. When I visited Vinsky, the border between Estonia and Russia, was marked by just yellow colored poles and currently as the recent photograph (see figure 7) shows the barbed wire fence is constructed based on a decision made by the Estonian government after the 2021 Belarusian migration crisis (Euractiv, 2021).



Figure 7: Newly erected border fence in Vinski village in Southern Estonia. Source: Author

In the case of Valga-Valka border it was drawn in the 1920s when both Estonia and Latvia gained independence. For Lea Vutt, the head of international projects at Valga municipality, border between these two cities are irrelevant as she often wonders “Am I in Valga? Or am I in Valka” (Vutt, 2022). Historically in Valga-Valka, different nationalities such as the Estonians, Latvians and Livonians co existed. As Lea Vutt (2022), succinctly explained:

“There are some Latvians still live in the Estonian side because the border was set between us and it's not a natural border. And some of Estonians live in the Latvian side. Some of Estonians have graves of the relatives on Latvian side. So we visit Latvian side cemeteries and of course vice versa”.

In 2021, when I visited the twin cities, people from either side of the countries used the newly established pedestrian crossing to do their shopping or conduct daily activities (see figure 8). The photograph of a local crossing the border by foot over a pedestrian bridge, with no border guards present and yet two sides of the borders are clearly marked with the colors of the national flags and city names in their respective national languages, demonstrate the loosely constructed phenomena of the bordering practices. In Valga-Valka, the border between Estonia and Latvia is more of an administrative construct than a secured international border between two nation-states. The locals, workers, and youth who take part in sports activities cross the border everyday without any restrictions. And both municipalities conduct meetings with their counter parts every first Monday of every month to coordinate on the common civic activities (Vutt, 2022).



Figure 8: A local crossing the Estonian and Latvian border using the pedestrian bridge. Source: Author

However, during the recent Covid-19 pandemic restrictions while cross state borders were loosely imposed in the Valga-Valka border (Kriis.ee, 2020). In light of war in Ukraine and due to the inflow of refugees in Estonia, the Estonian government established border checks in Valga (Politsei.ee, 2022). Such examples reveal that

open borders in cases like Valga-Valka is (re) negotiated based on the socio-political situations. As Chris Rumford points out, “Borders are no longer solely the preserve of the state, and societal actors can redefine borders or appropriate them for purposes other than those originally intended” (Rumford, 2006).



Figure 9: Members of Conservative People’s Party of Estonia – EKRE demonstrate in front of the town hall in Tartu.

In the summer of 2021, the members of Conservative People’s Party of Estonia – EKRE (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond*) held a protest in Tartu (see figure 9). The central theme of the small but active demonstration was about borders. The party members held placards showing homophobic and anti Semitic sentiments against the political elites of the country. However, the display of the border posts and flags of Ingria and Saaremaa (Eastern and Western most parts of historic Estonia) and the sign stating, “*me ei taha teie oma. tagastage meie oma*” – We don’t want yours. Return ours – with reference to 1920 Tartu Peace Treaty is an example of how visual objects can be used in the political discourse and photographs can reveal political sentiments. David Shim, in his book on North Korea - *seeing is believing*, notes:

“Relying on what will be called ‘a logic of inclusion and exclusion’, imagery relates to questions of power and implies ethical and political dimensions because it helps to create boundaries and differences which, in turn, affect particular binary relations – including ‘self/other’, ‘inside/outside’ and ‘us/them’ “. (Shim, 2014, p.3)

This observation reiterates the role of photographs and visual materials, though in many cases it is subtle, in defining social constructs between groups. All these aforementioned examples illustrate that the idea of border is indeed a fluctuating one. When I asked Maria Sakarias, a program manager for an Estonian NGO lived and worked in Tallinn in 2021, what border meant to her she noted:

“Because human beings, we need to make sense of things we need to categorize, we need to be able to say, okay, this is where one thing starts and ends. So state borders, certainly one aspect, but border to myself, who am I? Where is my identity? How do I define it? Where do I stop with identifying it?” (Sakarias, 2021).

As Ágnes Németh mentions, “Borders are continually performed and created” and they can be “produced by variety of cognitive and psychological stances” (Németh, 2017). Following this, I assert, in these cases cognitive aspects stem from the social and cultural differences in these communities. She further goes on to say, “bordering is not a given condition but an action; in itself an (inter) active process involving actorship” (Németh, 2017). In constructivist language the “agents” of these communities make the rules and these rules determine “social arrangements” (Onuf, 1998) as it is established by the members of these communities. In addition by establishing such bordering, and de-bordering, practices through social and cultural practices these communities preserve their sense of being, i.e. the ontological security (see Browning, 2018).

6.2.Hegemony

In this section, I explore aspects that are related to the definition of identity of these three communities. In order to achieve this, I take different social and cultural aspects that ultimately formulate their identity. Scholars point out that the world is understood through social practices and actions (Agius, 2018; Burr, 2015; Jackson, 2010). As

noted earlier, history, social practices, and discourses form hegemony. Indeed, ‘hegemony’ is a term that encapsulates many interpretations; but, my main goal for using hegemony as a conceptual prism in this section is to explain how these three groups form their identity vis-à-vis socio-cultural and linguistic practices, in other words, social constructs and discourses. To achieve this, first I rely on Gramsci’s ideas of “separation of powers” between social classes (see Gramsci, 2012) and then follow Laclau’s idea of discourses as the foundation of hegemony (See Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The reason behind choosing these two specific schools of thoughts is to juxtapose them in the analyses of the cases used in this study.

In Narva, the idea of *Narvinian* is centered on the fact that the Russian Speaking people feel they neither belong to neither Estonia nor Russia (Komasko, 2022; Stepanov, 2021). In this case, the language (Russian) and the way of life (Estonian) thus separates the population apart from both countries. Therefore, they carve out a distinct identity for themselves that defines their sense of home. The Alien Law and language policies were crucial for the Russian speaking population in Narva to decide on whether or not to return to Russia. Those who opted for “Grey Passport” continued their daily lives communicating only in Russian.

As Denis Poluboyarov, an independent political artist, noted:

“Officially Russian language became the language of minority population. For most of people it was quite painful. Because they recognize themselves that basically you are part of occupation system. A lot of old people emotionally they've separated themselves from the model Estonia valued. Because they just decided that they done all their best, they don't need to make any movements or any new decisions in their lives “ (Poluboyarov, 2022).

In essence, the idea of *Narvinian* is a discursive practice that, as Laclau and Mouffe (2001:96) put it, “is an articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations”, between the Russian speaking Estonians in Narva and Estonians. By using the term *Narvinian* they assert the idea that they belong nowhere but in Narva. Alina Vorontšihhina a project coordinator at Vita Tim (local youth NGO) highlighted that in Narva she gets support from the locals and to run her projects aimed the local youth. She noted:

“I do a lot for Narva. I don't know how much do I do for Estonia in general. ... And I'm super attached to this place. Otherwise I wouldn't organize anything. I love people in here. I love that identity in here. And we understand each other. I feel myself comfortable in both for Estonian and Russian communities, because, I can speak both languages, too. But sometimes I'm getting nervous because I don't get some cultural layers, you know, both in Estonian and Russian culture. But here we are, more or less are on the same level, you know, like, people talk about the same things, the same stuff is relevant. We listen to similar music” (Vorontšihhina, 2021).

For Sergei Stepanov, the idea of *Narvinians* is a mindset. Despite many in Narva consume Russian TV channels, because of their awareness of the social conditions through their personal visits or through their families across the border in Ivangorod, they set themselves apart from both Russia and Estonia. Therefore specificity of Narva's identity lies at the core of the locals' way of life.

In Setomaa, construction of Seto identity is anchored in cultural and linguistic roots. Though they share similar Finno-Ugric identity with Estonians, they consider themselves separate. The language policy introduced after the restoration of Estonian independence limited Seto language to be used in homes and in their own community (Siiner, 2006). However, in 2010 community leaders and activists started the Seto Institute² to preserve the language and folklore tradition.

As Helen Külvik claimed:

“During the Soviet time it was a shame to be Seto. Because they were seen as stupid and low level. So no one wanted to be a Seto. Even now when the young people went to study in Voru or Tartu or Tallinn then they made this pact with the others that lets not speak in Seto or Voru language”

The current Estonian censuses do not include Seto as unique category, but it is included as part of Voru dialect and this issue is still contested by the Seto community leaders. Since administrative practices, education and religious events are conducted

² Seto Instituut: <https://www.setoinstituut.ee/en/home/>

in Estonian, various initiatives to preserve Seto language are mostly spearheaded by the community (Järvelill, 2021).

For former Chief Herald Rein Järvelill the Seto Kingdom days is an important event to build self-confidence among the community members and bring them together. The Seto Kingdom day, which takes place in August of every year, is one of the most significant events for the Seto community. Election of the Seto King, the representative of Peko - the Seto folk legend, brings Setos from either sides, Estonian and Russian, border together. During the event, not only the culture and traditions are kept alive, but to an outside visitor it gives a glimpse into their cultural practices. The Setos who attend the kingdom day are even required to wear their traditional attire to showcase their Seto identity (see figure 10). To explain more, Rein Järvelill added:

“For me first point is making identity stronger and give people self confidence is the my aim of this festival. Fake arms and fake kingdoms, and fake money and fake kings are main reason. Of course we're happy people outside of the community taking this all like to just big fun and big festival, let them take this way. But for our community in the first place this is to unite us” (Järvelill, 2021).

This idea of carving out a niche local identity (Seto) within the national identity (Estonian) is in line with the Gramsci view on hegemony as “dialectical unity of the structure and super structure” and they are coupled organically (Woolcock, 1985). As pointed out in the above example, the idea of Seto Kingdom allows the Setos to create a unified identity with in the realm of Estonian national identity and thus give them a sense of belonging. The photograph taken during the 2021 Seto Kingdom day shows (see figure 10), the ceremonial aspects are performed during the event. In this case bordering practices are performed through socially constructed cultural events as the Seto Kingdom day. In addition, such events are simply put a “performative nature of identity formation and bordering (Németh, 2017).



Figure 10: The newly elected Chief Herald (2021) of the Seto community greets various official delegation. Source: Author

In Valga-Valka the identity is constructed based on the idea “1 city 2 states”³. According to Lea Vutt, when the Polish King Stefan Batory granted the city privileges the city had population who spoke Estonian, Latvian and Livonian living side by side. During the Soviet occupation, deportation of locals to Siberia and migration of Russians took place. Since then Russian has also become a commonly spoken language in the city. Today, the city’s commercial and cultural activities take place in Estonian, Latvian, Russian and English and all three communities living side by side. For Jiri Tentera, who is the town’s architect at Valga city municipality, the urban space project is what brings people together. By removing the deteriorating buildings from the soviet times and connecting the both sides of the places with the pedestrian area dotted with benches and play areas the city created a common space which bring people from both sides together. As Jiri Tentera noted, during the recent demonstrations against the war in Ukraine, people from Estonian side and the Latvian side gathered together in this shared common area that runs long the border (see figure 11) to show their support (Tintera, 2022) and thus establishing a borderless society in such times when there is a common objective. Furthermore, As Jiri Tintera

³ Valga-Valka: <https://visitvalgavalka.com>

explained in the 1940s despite the mass deportation the city was never completely emptied of the local population, as it happened in the case of Narva. And the Russian speaking community arrived at different stages in 1940s and therefore they have different ways of integrating with the locals (in both Estonian and Latvian cases). However, in Narva after the Second World War, the city was completely repopulated with the workers from different parts of the Soviet Union and thus resulting in 95% of the city's population (Tintera, 2022). A bar tender from a local pub resonated similar idea that Valga-Valka is one city with three different languages and the people co-exist. Julia Mihhalkina, tourism information specialist at the Valga visitor's center asserted that still Russian is more commonly used (compared to English) among the locals on the both side of the border (Mihhalkina, 2022).



Figure 11: The church towers from both sides of the border in Valga-Valka can be seen as they are in the same line of sight. Source: Author

In the above photograph (figure 11), it can be understood visually the border is seamless except for the markers indicating the separation between Estonia and Latvia. However, for the locals in their every practice it is nothing but a formal agreement between the two countries. As mentioned above in the theoretical outline, these borders indeed act as fluid construct rather than territorial boundaries between two

countries (See Callahan, 2018). Though Callahan work is not necessarily about territorial borders, it is the spirit in which he approaches idea of borders – a site of flow rather than a physical construct – is relevant to study the case Valga-Valka border. Nastja Pertšjonok, Director of International House Tartu, described her experience of crossing borders in places that are geographically similar is some thing that occurs in the mindset rather physical. As Pertšjonok noted:

“there's absolutely nothing to mark it but it (border) is there. So yes, it is a physical line in some cases, then more interesting is that, for me is that it will make it into a mental line, or mental border or mental box. If you are crossing the border to like another side, then there's nothing that really changes, but it feels like there's a huge change”(Pertšjonok, 2021).

As Bleiker puts it borders “demarcate shapes and collective consciousness (Bleiker, 2019, pp. 282-283). Therefore, I would argue that the notion of hegemony in the case of Valga-Valka is based on Gramscian idea that “the dialectical relations between instances of the superstructure” can exist (Woolcock, 1985); and the twin city (Valga-Valka) which belong two EU members states (Estonia and Latvia) can create an hegemony (economic alliance) with in a “superstructure” of the European Union). As it is demonstrated at the local level, the identity of Valga-Valka is underpinned by its cohesive social existence. Though the history and political developments in the 1920s have resulted in the creation of a territorial border and splitting the city into two, the community continues to co-exist in terms of administrative cooperation and every day social practices.

6.3. Cultural Semiotics

In this section, without dwelling deep into semiotic studies, I explore how cultural practices help in keeping the collective memory of a community alive. The purpose of using references to Juri Lotman and Michel Foucault are to illustrate how culture and memory produce social identity and the corresponding discourses. For example, Singing Revolution in Estonia at the Tartu Pop festival in 1988 played a role in creating national identity. The patriotic songs composed by Alo Mattisen kept the movement lasting for four year during which Estonians came together holding ‘human chain’ rallies, which eventually saw the end of USSR in 1991. The director of

Schuman Center for European studies called it a “spiritual revolution” (Fountain, 2019), which resonates Juri Lotman’s idea of culture as religious experience. Above all, such collective cultural experiences play a role of a “dominant signifier” in establishing a “hegemonic formation” of identity (Selg & Ventsel, 2010). Memory is part of the functioning of social life and it is kept alive through communication and social interactions (Assmann, 2008). Moreover, in Lotman’s terms, memory forms the basic function of all thoughts (Steedman, 2004). Using these observations as a point of departure, in this section, I aim to address how cultural practices give a veneer of identity to these communities, especially in the cases of Narva and Setomaa.

In Narva the monuments and buildings still remind us the bygone era of Soviet Union (Lundén, 2009). In that sense, the Victory Day celebrations on May 9th remain one of the most talked about events in Narva. Commemorating Victory day on the 9th of May (See figures 12 & 13) is an important event for the Russian speaking community in Estonia. Remembering Soviet Army’s victory over Nazi Germany is still debated by the political parties in Estonia; especially in light of recent Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (ERR news, 2022c).



Figure 11: Local residents in Narva prepare the Soviet monument for May 9th Victory Day celebrations in Narva. Source: Author

Insofar, figure 11 is an example of how visual analysis could be useful in understanding some things words cannot explain. In this image, one could see that the Soviet era monument is cleaned and made ready for the May 9th celebrations by the local residents rather than municipal workers. These residents volunteer their time on this day to ensure the terrain around the monument is prepared for the event. From observing this photograph it can be inferred that people of different generations – an elderly man on the foreground and women and their children seen on the background - are getting involved in this annual event. But for Estonians it's a day the war was ended and the first day of new occupation. So, “it's a day about not only the war, but about Soviet tanks” (Komasko, 2022). According to Mihhail Komasko, the collapse of Soviet Union is the turning point for Estonia to create a better life. But for Narva, a former industrial city with supply chain connections all over former Soviet Union and cultural ties were cut off. Therefore the collapse of Soviet Union was, as Mihhail Komasko explained, a tragedy for the local community because in the 80s and 90s Narva had a stable economy and cultural activities were on the rise; theatres, saunas and there was a thriving social life (Komasko, 2022).



Figure 12: A wreath with St. George Ribbon and Russian flag laid down at the Soviet Monument in Narva. Source: Author.

In the above photograph (figure 12), the colors of red blue and white clearly match with the color of Russian flag. The ribbons of Saint George and the Russian Federation flag next to each other can be analogous to current Russian elites idea of glorifying the past. Photographs thus can express the sentiments and can be seen and understood without any explanation texts. In other words, the intertextual aspect of commemorating the Soviet past is expressed thorough the usage of ribbon and wreath laid at the Second World War monument. Jan Assmann called this as mnemohistory, which allows to theorize how historic past is remembered and interpreted (Salerno, 2021). To use Jan Assmann's words:

“Mnemohistory is reception theory applied to history. But "reception" is not to be understood here merely in the narrow sense of transmitting and receiving. The past is not simply "received" by the present. The present is "haunted" by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present” (Assmann, 1997, p.9).

As Mihhail Komasko put it, “there's two points about victory day about 9th of May in Estonia. For local Russian speaking Estonians or local Russians, It's a Victory Day. I visited the Soviet monument on the 9th of May 2021 and found the locals were enthusiastic about commemorating the Victory Day, as it is part of their history. At the same time they gave out Saint George ribbons (brown and black) with a badge in Estonian, “Õnnelik Tulevik”, in English “Happy Future” (see figure 13). The juxtaposition of the Saint George ribbon with the Estonian text ‘Happy Future’ is on the one hand is optimistic but on the other hand in the social context of Narva it may have a different under current connotation. Members of the community from all ages take part in the celebration to keep their cultural heritage alive. However, it is a practice that is still not popular among the Estonians. In the wake of War in Ukraine, the Police and Border Guard Board prohibited the display of any symbols related to the Soviet times, including wearing of the Saint George ribbon, or Russia's current invasion in Ukraine, for example: Z symbol and white wrist band, during the 2022 Victory Day celebrations in Narva and elsewhere in Estonia (ERR News, 2022d).



Figure 13: Ribbon of Saint George with Estonian language batch “Happy Future”.

Source: Author

Besides the May 9th Victory Day celebrations, Sergei Stepanov added other socio-cultural sign could be the ‘*dachas*’, summerhouses in Russian tradition (Stepanov, 2022). As he explained that the *dachas* are somewhat idiosyncratic to *Narvinians* as they are unique to the community compared to the rest of the country. Such cultural signs were visually reproduced in popular culture through songs and movies; for example, *Privet, Gorod Narva!* and *Goodbye Soviet Union*. *Privet, Gorod Narva!* is a pop song produced by the Estonian artist Nublu highlighting the idiosyncrasies of Narva through visuals from the Soviet times⁴. And in *Goodbye Soviet Union - Hüvasti, NSVL*⁵, a nostalgic satirical film about the construction of identity Estonia

⁴ nublu x gameboy tetris - für Oksana: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgJqak4BuzQ>

⁵ Goodbye Soviet Union: <https://poff.ee/en/film/goodbye-soviet-union/>

vis-à-vis minorities, Lauri Randla recreates the life of Russian speaking minorities in Estonia during the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In Setomaa, the memories of the past are often reproduced through plays and songs. For example, in the local gallery in Obinitsa they perform satire dramas based on historically true events combined with fiction to entertain the community. For Harri Sundell, “Seto culture is not any more so good on the other side of the border. And so they want to keep it alive, the language, the culture, the music, whatever, the art” (Sundell, 2022). Former Chief Herald and community leader Aare Horn explained the drama he took part in which the main plot was in the late 1940s in the region there were not Soviet representatives and when the soldiers came to investigate the locals they were attacked and therefore they were using local Setos as shield to protect them (see figure 14). Since then the population of Seto decreased from approximately 64,000 to 20,000. Therefore it is important to keep the Seto consciousness alive.



Figure 14: Seto activists and community members perform satirical play written by a local artist about their life during the Soviet times at a local gallery in Obinitsa.

Source: Author.

The writer of the play, Ülle Kauksi explained that it is important to remember the history and recall the atrocities committed, for example mass deportation during the Soviet times, to let the new generation know about the past. Though this painful part of the history is recreated through satirical play, the main idea is to remind the audience about the evil past (Kauski, 2022). Folklore costume (see figure 15) and singing of Seto *Leelo*, a polyphonic song recognized by the UNESCO in 2009, are another ways of keeping the culture alive. For Jalmar Vabarna, 35 year old Seto musician who is part of the band *Trad.Attak!* and *Zetod*⁶ and the grand son of the renowned *Leelo* singer Anne Vabarna, it is important to keep their unique culture alive; therefore, he uses Seto traditional songs in his new music performances and albums (Vabarna, 2022).



Figure 15: Seto women seen in their traditional costume during the annual summer event, *Kostipaiv*, café day. Source: Author

The folk costumes and traditional jewellery are passed through generations (see figure 15) and these indeed keep their culture alive. The young woman in the above photograph (see figure 15) lives in Tartu and takes part in Seto cultural activities along with her grandmother. Mariam, owner of the farm where the photograph was

⁶ Zetod - Tšastuškad Ukraina toetuseks: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CkbaMREAcQ>

taken, explained the culture is important for them and that is why she is part of Leelo singing group and perform elsewhere. For her identity is something passed down from her grandmother and is deep rooted in their Seto culture. Thus visual images enable to convey the authenticity of such cultural representations. These images, “not only shape an individual’s perception but also larger, collective forms of consciousness” (Bleiker, 2018). As shown in the figure 15, the Setoness is kept alive through visual representation of their identity during such special cultural events as the café day.

Another significant part of Seto culture is orthodox religious faith as it part of their every day practices. Though they follow Orthodox Christianity, the Setos believe in their folklore traditions (Kalkun, 2014); as Ulle Kauski, put it “they don’t always read the Bible but remember what grand mother did” and “the had to know when to make a pie or when to fast, but it was not always clear why Jesus Christ died” (Kauski, 2022). For Setos, the orthodox religious practices and traditional customs go hand in hand. During the recent Easter celebrations, in 2022, at the church in Obinitsa, Father Viktor performed sermons in the Estonian (the church is part of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church which belongs to Constantinople Patriarch), Seto language and in Russian because of the Ukrainian family who arrived in Obinitsa from Mariupol; an exception that was made to accommodate those who fled the war in Ukraine.

In Valga, the city’s identity mainly revolves around its uniqueness of being part of two different countries. As Lea Vutt, explained for the locals it is a part of life and they celebrate it through community events, fairs, etc. But for the tourists including those who visit from other parts of Estonia, it is a unique phenomenon to experience the city in which national borders run across the town (Vutt, 2022). It’s the common history and three different cultures living side-by-side defines this place. Though they live in their own bubbles they come together, Latvians and Estonians more so compared to Russians, during local cultural or recreational events (Tintera, 2022). Thus the uniqueness of Valga-Valka is defined by its cultural diversity and every day practices.

While discussing Juri Lotman’s ideas of cultural memory, Marek Tamm notes that, “Previous cultural states are constantly tossing fragments of themselves—texts, fragments, individual names, and monuments—into the future of the culture. Each of

these elements possesses its own volume of 'memory', and each activates a certain degree of its depth based on the context into which it is introduced" (Tamm, 2019,p.148). Thus, communities such as these choose their own ways of preserving their cultural identity through memory, historical events and text. To further elaborate what text means, in Lotman's terms, Marek Tamm explains, text is a "function that allows a meaningful element to play a mnemonic role as symbolic, and hereinafter we will refer to as symbols all signs having the ability to concentrate within itself, preserve, and reconstruct the memory of its previous contexts" (Tamm, 2019,p.142). Therefore I argue, that the cultural semiotics not only preserves the unique identities of these communities but also separate them from the 'other'.

6.4. Summary of analysis

In this section, I summarize the analyses from the above sections and revisit the research puzzle in order to explain the difference in bordering and de-bordering practices and how they influence security discourses in Estonia. The three conceptual frameworks chosen in this study provide different ways to understand these communities through different lenses. In the following two subsections, I synthesize the findings from the fieldwork and correlate them to the theoretical concepts. In the first part of the summary, I emphasize how bordering and de-bordering practices in these communities influence in carving out a unique identity of these communities. And in the second part, I explain the difference in security narratives pertaining to these communities. Ultimately, the idea here is to illustrate the bordering practices adopted by the locals and how securitization plays a role in the construction of identity in these communities.

6.4.1. Bordering and De-Bordering

In the previous sections, I illustrated a few examples of how the processes of bordering and de-bordering take place along the territorial boundaries in relation to cultural practices and linguistic differences in the communities in Narva, Setomaa and Valga. To situate these examples in the context, I now turn to the conceptual inquiry raised by Chris Rumford:

“The new spatiality of politics; changing state–society relations; and the question of who borders?” (Rumford, 2006).

In the case of Narva, it is indeed the spatial constitution of the city – being on the border with Russia - that situates the place in the center of political debates. In Setomaa, it is the difference in the relationship between the Seto community and the Estonian nation that created the need for Seto-ness. Furthermore, in the case of both Narva and Setomaa, the country’s language policy alienated the locals from the Estonian nation, and in some ways forced them to carve out their own identity of these communities. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, in his work on *‘Linguistic Hegemony and Minority Resistance’* explains, “The great importance of language in ethnic and nationalist movement all over the world testifies to a close link between language, politics and ethnic identity”. In the case of integrating ethnic minorities states employ

different integration approaches to include them in the national milieu (Eriksen, 1992). According to Irene Kaosaar, the Integration Foundation of Estonia has different programs aimed at these communities. For example, in Narva they work more closely with the locals, in Setomaa there is very little activity as the Setos speak Estonian, and in Valga the organization conducts language courses mainly for the Roma population (Kaosaar, 2022). In Valga-Valka, precisely because of the fluid nature of the border between two nation-states it prompts the question who borders who. Roland Bleiker, in his visual autoethnographic work about the borders in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North Korea and South Korea notes “border delineates not only space but also how individuals and societies see, feel, think, and act. It is a boundary that demarcates and shapes collective consciousness” (Bleiker, 2019). In the same spirit, bordering practices of the communities studied in this thesis share similarities in their emotions and forming their collective identity. Furthermore, he adds this process of delineation is highly political (Bleiker, 2019). In all these three cases, eventually, it is the collective consciousness the underpinning idea that defines and redefines the borders and thus ensuring their ‘sense of being’. Therefore, I argue that the bordering and de-bordering practices form the base for establishing ontological security not only for a nation-state but also for a community. In critical border studies, as Nevzat Soguk emphasizes, borders “emerge in a shifting melange of political, administrative, sociocultural, aesthetic-poetic, and political-economic interventions. They constantly ‘unfold’ in time, and across place and space, in form and content” (Soguk, 2007).

Border crossing rules and practices are renegotiated during the state of exceptions. For example, during the Covid 19 pandemic, bordering practices in all these three places were different. In Narva and Setomaa strict border regimes were implemented, which severed family visits, cultural ties and cross-border commerce. In Valga, both Estonian and Latvian governments created an exception for the locals to cross the border and continue their everyday practices. The travel restrictions implemented by Estonia and Latvia during the pandemic were not fully applicable to the locals in Valga-Valka. As noted in my analysis, the 2021 immigration crisis along the border between Belarus and the EU, particularly in Poland and Lithuania, prompted Estonia to build a barbed-wire fence to strengthen the border security along its South Eastern borders with Russia. However, the refugee crisis did not impact the Valga border

and it remained functioning normally as it is situated inside the EU. Similarly in the light of the war in Ukraine and the movement of refugees arriving from Russia at the border crossing point in Narva were treated in a hospitable way. The Estonian border guards are more receptive in accepting the Ukrainian refugees who were transported to Russia from the eastern part of the country (Donbas and Mariupol). The processing of their documents is expedited and in some cases they are allowed in the country even without proper documentation (Postimees, 2022). In Valga the border police re-established controls to verify the documents of those who flee the war in Ukraine and enter into Estonia to ensure proper identification and provide right assistance (Baltic Times, 2022). These cases exemplify that the bordering practices are (re) negotiable based on social and political crises.

6.4.2. Security Narratives

In terms of security narratives the main driving factor is the information sphere of Russian speaking population, especially since the annexation of Crimea by the Russian federation in 2014. In the era of “the weaponization of information”, the information toolbox includes heavily biased news reporting, targeted political advertisements, social media commentaries and publication of materials gathered by intelligence (Hansen, 2017). Until 2015, Russian-speaking population in Estonia consumed Russian language TV from Russia available through Satellites. In order, to curtail the misinformation, Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) launched a 24/7 Russian language channel ETV+. During the Soviet times, Russian TV programs were used as one of the “Russification methods” in the republics. In Estonia, after the collapse of the USSR, due to budget constraints and lack of funding, Russian language TV channels stopped broadcasting and print media outlets bought out by private individuals went bankrupt. The EU integration funds in the 1990s and in the new millennium were directed towards programming of Estonian language based contents. However, the production of Russian language news continued to be funded by the original budget allocated by ERR (Joesaar, et.al., 2013). Sergei Stepanov emphasized the imbalance in the number of Russian language programs available for the residents of Narva and the rest of Ida-Virumaa County. He pointed out that, currently there are three free-to-air Russian language TV channels offered in Estonia; compared to twenty channels transmitted from the Russian city of Kingisepp, 35 KMs

away from the border, available in Narva and beyond (Stepanov, 2021). These free-to-air channels are instrumental in retaining the local Russian speaking population in Narva within the Russian information sphere.

Ljudmila Larina came to Narva 55 years ago with her husband who worked at the Krenholm textile factory. She worked as a sports teacher in the local gymnasium (high school). She is now 89 years old and regularly consumes Russian language TV programs received through satellite from Russia. From the information she gets from the television, Ljudmila is convinced that Putin would protect them (Russian speaking population) wherever they are and they have powerful weapons (Larina, 2021). During the recent war in Ukraine, Estonia banned Russian language TV channels broadcasting in the country.

In Setomaa, the demand for language autonomy is seen as a local issue. Similarly, the idea of Seto Kingdom and the Kingdom day celebration is an act to appease the community and entertain the visitors; and it is not a secessionist movement (Järvelill, 2021). Furthermore, the number of Russian speaking Setos is so low in Setomaa, that potential threat from Russia is less likely. In Valga, the Russian speaking community is integrated into their respective countries as well as they are closer to the European Union (Komasko, 2022). Therefore, these two communities do not pose any security concerns nor vulnerable to any external state / non-state actors as in Narva or the rest of Ida-Virumaa.

Nevertheless, the presence of one-third of Russian speaking minorities in Estonia is considered as a geopolitical threat, especially in the context of the current war in Ukraine. Russia's policy on its near abroad community has been undermining the EU's security since Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. As Pami Alto suggests, "security, ethnic identity and the state become very closely linked in this strongly securitizing and essentializing discourse" (Alto, 2003). In addition, the recent migration of refugees from Ukraine to Estonia adds additional challenges to the government, as it has to deal with its own Russian speaking community (Pommereau, 2022). The security policy of Estonia is based on the principles outlined in the National Security Concept of Estonia. The document highlights the importance of a cohesive society through "strong integration of different segments of society, and

uniform regional development”. Furthermore, the document emphasizes “cohesive society is less vulnerable and less open to the influences from outside. The better integration of society will reinforce unity and cohesion”⁷. As noted in the security concept outline, the more cohesive the society is the stronger it can defend itself from any form of security threats from the outside and the resilience of the state is built on the residents’ trust on the government. In this study I find, one of the reoccurring concerns among the Russian speaking population in Narva is that they do not trust the government and they are the least integrated with the rest of the Estonian society. As noted previously, integration funds are mostly allocated to Narva and Ida-Virumaa in order to create a more cohesive society (Kaosaar, 2022). Though there is not any obvious or direct threat posed by the community to national security, Narva has been at the centre of political debates due to its vulnerability to potential threats from Russia, especially during geo-political crises and diplomatic disputes between Estonia and Russia. For example, during the 2007 bronze soldier crisis the diplomatic dispute that ensued between Estonia and Russia resulted in the closure of Narva Bridge for commercial trucks (ICDS, 2020). Creation of *Russki Mir* foundation to serve the interest of Russia’s compatriots abroad is enshrined in Kremlin’s foreign policy agenda, which is of a concern for Estonia’s security as the country has thirty percent of Russian speaking population. Moreover, as noted in a report by the International Center for Defence and Security, Russia’s efforts to glorify its historic past and meddling in the affairs of other countries’ affairs under the pretext of protecting Russian citizens abroad is an ongoing political concern (ICDS, 2020), which has been proven by the Kremlin’s armed aggression in Ukraine. Therefore, I assert that the securitization of Russian speakers in Narva is rooted in their temporal and spatial identity compared to the rest of the country’s Russian speaking population.

⁷ National Security Concept 2017:
https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article_files/national_security_concept_2017_0.pdf

7. Conclusion

In this thesis, I set off to explain how bordering and de-bordering practices influence the security narratives in Estonia. To achieve this, I chose Narva, Setomaa and Valga, based on the premise that all these three communities are divided along territorial boundaries and are different in their socio-cultural configuration. My overall aim was to highlight the nuances that separate these communities and how they play role in the country's security narratives.

The theoretical framework of my thesis is based on the notions of bordering / de-bordering practices and ontological security. I chose these concepts to elucidate how identity formation takes place in all three cases that are studied. Information obtained during the interviews is applied in the analysis section and the results show that in general borders, both physically and conceptually, are constantly being defined and redefined based on the political and social incentives of the agents. In order to explain this idea, I used three different conceptual rubrics to compare the everyday dynamics of the bordering practices based on the territorial border, cultural, linguistic, and political aspects. I provided a few examples from each of the three communities to illustrate these phenomena. In the end, my analysis indicates that it is because people from Narva (and Ida-Virumaa) are looked upon as 'occupiers' from the Soviet times and they are closer to the Russian border, narratives related to securitization of their community are different. In the case of Setomaa, despite the community shares borders with Russia they are considered to be less of a threat because their social identity formation is rooted in cultural uniqueness and therefore they are less prone to political influences from external actors, especially Russia. On the other hand, the Russian speaking community in Valga constitutes just about one-third of the local population and they co-exist with the rest of the Estonians and Latvians in the city to an extent that the Russian language is used as a *lingua franca* in everyday practices. In addition, as the town is encompassed along the EU borders, they are less vulnerable to external threats. Thus the findings of my analysis show that the sense of home or in other words the ontological position of these communities influence their bordering and de-bordering practices. And these practices in turn influence the security narratives, because of the temporal and spatial characteristics of these communities. Thus overall the objective of my thesis is met.

Most importantly, the novelty of this thesis is entrenched in my attempt to use visual analysis as a part of political science research studies, specifically visual autoethnography as outlined by Roland Bleiker. By using visual autoethnography as a methodology, I explained the photographs that I have taken during my ethnographic research in the field and used them in conjunction with the texts derived from the interviews that I conducted. As Roland Bleiker aptly notes: “in self-reflective accounts of our own experiences, including how our own views change in relation to visual representations of these experiences” (Bleiker, 2019). The positionality of the researcher (or photographer) in such cases is what constitutes the base for visual autoethnography and in turn provides political insights (Bleiker, 2019). Thus my thesis attempted to illustrate the methodological possibilities of using photographs as a research tool in conducting political science research. In addition, in this study I adapted an interpretivist approach, which falls under the paradigm of constructivism, to illustrate how language, cultural practices and shared values/meanings are socially constructed.

From the onset of this study, I aimed to explain the nuances in the construction of identity in three different communities in Estonia that share territorial, social and cultural similarities but are different in the way in which the country’s security narratives are framed pertaining to these communities. In the context of the European Union, nation-state identities were formed since the end of the Second World War. The idea of Europe is underpinned by the plurality of multifaceted cultures and the domestic challenges that come with it. Since the collapse of Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, the new member states in the Baltics and Central / Eastern Europe have added multiple layers to the socio-cultural diversity of the European Union. Furthermore, the European migration crisis in 2015 and the war in Ukraine introduced another facet to the existing cultural, social and political composition of the EU. With this plurality and overlapping of cultures, the supranational structure of the EU has inherited additional challenges and creating a dichotomy between “old” and “new” Europe (see Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2018). In essence, as noted previously by studying the nuances it is plausible to explain bordering and de-bordering practices and the corresponding security narratives, which then can be applied to similar contexts elsewhere in the EU. The EU’s eagerness to promote

further cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries requires a better understanding of the local communities as they share the Soviet past that is similar to the cases studied in this thesis, especially under the current circumstances of strained relations between the EU and Russia.

In conclusion, this thesis informed different ways in which bordering and de-bordering practices construct the identity of Russian speaking communities living along the borderlands in Estonia and these practices are correlated to security narratives. In this study, I mainly focused on how a unique identity of these communities is constructed through their social and cultural practices. Consequently, this study shows potential for further research on areas such as education and economic development in such communities living in the borderlands to strengthen a nationwide inclusiveness and establish a cohesive society.

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Appendix 1

Map of Tartu Treaty



Source:

Estonian-Russian border dispute resurfaces after a Moscow diplomat denounces the 1920 Tartu Peace Treaty. Retrieved April 22, 2022, from <https://estonianworld.com/security/estonian-russian-border-dispute-resurfaces-after-a-moscow-diplomat-denounces-the-1920-tartu-peace-treaty/>

Appendix 2

List of interviewees

Narva:

1. Mihhail Komasko , Journalist at ETV+
2. Sergei Stepanov, Journalist at ETV+
3. Irene Kaosaar, Head of the Integration Foudation
4. Ludjmila Larina, a long term resident of Narva
5. Alina Vorontšihhina, youth worker at Vita Tim
6. Denis Poluboyarov, Political artist

Setomaa:

1. Aare Horn, community leader and former Chief Herald of the Seto Kingdom
2. Rein Järvelill, local politician and a former chief Herald of the Seto Kingdom
3. Harry Sundell, independent photographer working with the community for number of years
4. Helen Külvik, Head of Seto Institute
5. Ulle Kauski, Writer and community activist
6. Mariam, House owner at the border in Vinski
7. Jalmar Vabarna, Musician and member of the bands - *Trad.Attak!* and *Zetod*

Valga:

1. Lea Vutt, Head of international projects, Valga Municipality
2. Jiri Tintera, Town architect, Valga Municipality
3. Julia Mihhalkina, tourism specialist, Valga information center

Tallinn & Tartu:

1. Maria Sakarias, Program manager at a NGO, Tallinn
2. Nastja Pertšjonok, Director of International House Tartu

Note: Interview transcripts and recordings are available upon request

Appendix 3

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