

## Narva, a post-colonial, post-soviet, post-industrial border town in flux

*How the Estonian city once proclaimed to be the “next Crimea” is navigating a myriad of transformations and tensions while hoping to revitalize urban life*



*Narva Town Hall from different perspectives. Source: Author*

It is noon when I arrive in Tallinn, the capital of the digital republic of Estonia. I get to my hostel and take an immediate five-hour nap. I had barely slept before I caught the 6 am Ryanair flight from London despite my vows never to fly with said airline again. But this was the only one of two direct flights per day leaving England. Half asleep I keep wondering: This is London after all, the city with the second most airports in the world. How is it possible that merely two direct flights depart the city per day bound for the capital of another EU member state? In that moment I feel like Estonia is really the NATO borderland at the end of the world it is sometimes portrayed as.

Back among the living, I make my way to a nearby coffee shop in the late afternoon. I talk to some people sitting next to me. The typical small-talk: ‘How long are you staying here?’; ‘Where are you going next?’. “I’m only here for the night, catching the early train east towards Narva tomorrow”, I answer. Narva is the third biggest city in Estonia and a mere two and a half-hour train ride away from Tallinn. Yet, none of the other travellers has heard of it. The barista serving my coffee admits she has never been to Narva either. “It’s a bit like going abroad to a foreign country”, she answers. Indeed, this seems to be the prevalent response of many ethnic Estonians when being asked about the city. I take note and mentally prepare myself for this trip into unknown foreign territory at the Russian border.

I am taking part in a weeklong interdisciplinary research program for people interested in urban questions. The program aims to produce knowledge about interdependent social, political, geographical, and technological processes in the context of the city of Narva. Boldly titled ‘(Re)configuring territories’, the workshop asks us to discover the invisible layers of the city and reimagine a new synthetic landscape through technological and artistic means. So far, so (un)clear.

Arriving at the train station, I briefly forget why I came here. Recreating synthetic urban landscapes with the help of artificial intelligence suddenly seems somewhat out of touch with reality when gazing

at the array of run-down Soviet blockhouses that line the streets. But, after all, I suppose that's the point of artistic research: being misaligned with what is visible to our bare eyes.

During our first stroll through the former old town, I can't help but think: this place is not nearly as depressing as the prevailing narrative about the post-industrial, post-Soviet city would suggest. Maybe it's the warm, nearly hot afternoon sun, but I am almost euphoric as we explore Narva Castle and hear about its fascinating history and that of the region from a woman in metallic blue hair.

And this history, indeed, seems like a rollercoaster in and by itself. The earliest reference to the town was made around the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the region was under Danish rule. Over time it was occupied by the German Livonian order, the Russians, the Swedes, again by the Russians, the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and then again by the Soviets, until in 1991 Estonia restored independence. Overall, Narva has been independent for a mere fifty years of its more than 800-year long existence. So much for complex colonial history.

The enduring contestation over the territory has left its visible and invisible marks on the city. Perhaps the only stable presence has, after all, been the castle itself, albeit flaunting a changing series of flags. Apart from that, the place has been forced to reinvent itself again and again, physically and mentally.

Take for instance the physical shape of the city. Throughout its history, it has been completely destroyed twice: First, during a fire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and then again in 1944, when it was so heavily bombed by the Soviet forces that by the end of July, only 2% of the city was left standing. Even though, after the war, some of the buildings could have been restored and saved, Soviet authorities decided to tear down the remains and build an entirely new city from scratch. Unlike with most historical European towns, it is impossible to visit "Old Narva". In its place, one can only find a different city with the same name.

In the aftermath of the bombing and rebuilding of the city, even the street net itself got substantially altered. And not only did the streets change, but also the locations of centrality evolved with them. As the two maps below show, in 1943, the most central part of the town was situated in the old town. In today's city, a real centre is missing. Activity is more dispersed and spread-out.



*Maps of activity centres in Narva, 1943 and 2019. Source: Author*

In the city lined with blockhouse after blockhouse after blockhouse, the familiar concepts of public space and centrality become warped. People do not necessarily converge in one primary location. As a student from Narva tells me, until a few years ago, they didn't even have a cinema. "What did you do with your friends when you were a teenager?", I ask. The answer: Hanging out in one shopping mall or another, sometimes alternating between both within the same day. What does this lack of or, in fact, rethinking of viable public space imply for social activity? One can only speculate.

While the physical urban setup changed, so did the social makeup. The most profound transformation happened when Soviet forces took control after 1944. Pre-war residents, some of whose families had been residing in this location for hundreds of years, were not allowed to return to their former hometown. In their place, the area was repopulated with immigrants from other parts of the Soviet Union, mainly from Russia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Narva became an ever more central locus where ethnic tensions and contestations over identity took centre stage. Estonia, at last gaining independence from foreign rulers, turned the post-Soviet narrative into a strongly nationalistic one, emphasizing the importance of ancestry, traditions, and language in the construction of national identity. In Narva, however, Estonians make up only 4% of the population while nearly 90% of residents are Russian. In a country where the vast majority of political discourse is conducted in Estonian, where even the street signs in Narva itself are exclusively written in Estonian, the majority of the Russian-speaking citizens of Narva has been essentially excluded from public life.

And while these processes might appear to some extent implicit or indirect, exclusion has also found its manifestation in the more explicit. It may, perhaps, come as quite a surprise to some fellow Europeans (myself included!) to learn that there is a group of people residing within EU borders whose passport answers the question about nationality with a damningly capitalized XXX. On the cover of the same document trumps the deceptively futuristic phrase 'Alien's passport'.

After independence, these were the passports that were given to Russians and other foreigners who were born before 1993 and were unable to prove that their ancestors had resided within the borders of Estonia before the war. These people, whose families may have been living in the same location for the second or third generation already, were offered the opportunity to acquire Estonian citizenship, provided they would pass a language and history examination. However, a large number of people either did not pass or refused to take the test as a form of protest.

Hence, today, there are still about 76,000 people in the possession of an Alien's passport, some of them still in their twenties. For a country with 1.3 million inhabitants, this share is substantial. The 'only' major administrative disadvantage of the passport is that it prevents residents from voting in national elections. For what it's worth, they can participate in local elections and are able to move freely throughout both Europe and Russia. It seems somewhat less clear, however, how this form of 'othering' shapes the sense of belonging of those affected. While some admit that it makes them feel alien and unwanted, others concede that the passport does not affect their day-to-day life in any sense. Again, identity is complicated.

In fact, when talking to Russian-speaking Narvians about their identity, many have difficulty pinning it down: it is neither Russian nor Estonian. Many feel culturally Russian but they don't identify with the Russian state. 'Narva is neither Europe, nor Russia; Narva is the border', I read in a book. This makes me think, again, about airports and duty-free zones and embassies and Guantanamo and other places that are in some ways extra-national territory, exempt from aspects of national law. Narva is post-national. Narva seems like a testament to the notion that our binary understanding of the nation-state, of who belongs and who doesn't, might, after all, be outdated.

Adding to the jumble of complexity created by post-ness, the economic history of the city has been no less rocky than its socio-political legacy. Already throughout the Middle Ages and well after that, Narva remained an important location where different trade routes converged. During the Industrial Revolution, it evolved into a major industrial town. Its success was in large parts due to the 1857 founding of the Kreenholm manufacturing company, soon to become the most important cotton mill in the Russian Empire. At its peak, it employed close to 12,000 workers, one-fifth of the entire city population.

Kreenholm is itself a monolith, subject to changing symbolical meaning. Its very foundation was rooted in the Capitalist processes that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. After all, it was built by German businessman Ludwig Knoop who hoped to accumulate large amounts of wealth by pioneering large-scale cotton manufacturing in Russia. Not long after its foundation the factory was the site of a strike, the first of its kind ever to have occurred in the Russian Empire. The Kreenholm strike together with a series of ensuing strikes across the country laid some of the initial groundwork for the Russian Revolution of 1905 to follow.

When the Soviet Union occupied the territory after the war, it rebuilt the factory and turned it into an industrial enterprise incorporated into Stalin's economic. After independence, it was forced to transition from the planned economy to a free market system. The turnaround was successful only temporarily until, in 2010, the company had to eventually declare bankruptcy.



*Kreenholm factory from different perspectives. Source: Author*

In a city in which, at one point, a single factory employed one in five residents, industrial deterioration has strong effects. Not only was Kreenholm factory closed down, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, most other factories disappeared as well. Little is left to remind of the breadth of industrial enterprises that once had their home in the city, performing activities as diverse as pottery, distillery, or fish processing. Couple deindustrialization with an abrupt transition of the economy from planned to free market, and the current economic struggles come as no surprise at all. Indeed, throughout Estonia, Narva and its surrounding areas report both the lowest per capita income and the highest unemployment rate.

In an attempt to understand how economic activity has shifted after the transition to the free market, I make it my goal for one day to document all signs of commercial activity found in parts of the city. Walking through the streets of Kerese district, I see one residential blockhouse after another. This definitely isn't an area one would call central or commercial. Upon taking a closer look at the houses, however, I realize that advertisements are everywhere, hidden from the unsuspecting view by the very fact that the distinctions between residential and commercial have become blurred here.

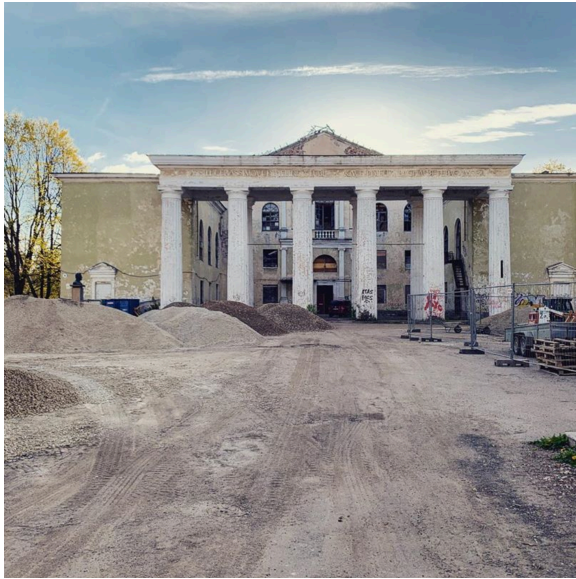
What I find aren't big bright billboards displaying the new iPhone X (though they do exist). Instead, many advertisements either line the facades or are incorporated into the windows of the same houses people live in. And so it happens that you may stare at a washed-out picture of a smiley curly-haired Bradley Cooper next to a pair of scissors where you would otherwise expect a less famous face gazing at the street from their kitchen window.

It dawns on me that this is what the transition to Capitalism meant to this city - not the revival of large-scale profit-driven production, but the ability of the ordinary citizen to operate and promote his or her own small enterprise, be it a barbershop or a second-hand store in someone's living room. Looking at the proliferation of advertisements in every corner, it seems like these little businesses sprang up like mushrooms once people felt free to try out entrepreneurship themselves. The fact that, now, many of these commercial displays seem to be paling in colour begs the question: Has the initial excitement about economic freedom waned? Have people been disappointed by broken promises?

In a way, Narva seems like a city of broken promises and forgotten dreams. The older generations, many of them widows of war, mostly avoid talking about the past and lament their problems on park benches. The young, on the other hand, often leave the city to get educated in Tallinn or elsewhere in the world. Most of them visit once in a while during holidays; some return, hoping to contribute to the revitalization of their hometown. But the reality is undeniable: Since the 90s, the urban population has



declined by nearly one third. The physical landscape of the city is a testament to this, filled with abandoned buildings wherever you look.



*Abandoned Palace of Culture and fire station in Narva. Source: Author*

And yet, somehow there is also a new smell of transformation in the air, at least faintly. We visit Ivan Sergejev, chief city planner of Narva who had formerly left to study and work in the United States before he decided to return and help transform his hometown. He tells us that turning Narva into more vibrant city isn't easy. Unlike the rest of Estonia where e-voting is becoming the norm and 'civic tech' bears the promise of propelling more participatory approaches towards public decision making, in Narva, residents seem somewhat less interested in having their say publicly and politically. Maybe because they were being ignored for so long. "You need to start small here", Ivan says.

Starting small isn't about building great new buildings or building anything new at all. It is about using what is there, because so much of what is there, is not being used. It is about creating little things that are meaningful, like constructing a small skateboard ramp for young people or organizing a music festival or applying to become the 2024 European Capital of Culture. 'Urban acupuncture', he calls it. Starting small is first of all about bringing people together so that they feel like they can participate and have a stake in what is happening in the city. It is about making people excited again about their hometown and the opportunities of what can be done with it that linger on the horizon.

Indeed, it is impossible not to sense a certain freedom when moving through the city. I glance at the vast areas of green and the myriad of abandoned houses, their romantic architecture still captivating. We visit the deserted buildings of Kreenholm factory and watch in awe. In a city like London, the complex would have long been turned into a series of hip co-working spaces, exhibition halls, and expensive industrial lofts. In Narva, it is left exposed to the forces of nature apart from one or another techno party or art installation making their way there.

The landscape of the city seems full of potential to be harnessed and reimagined into something new. The old villa turned art residency we inhabit throughout the week is a perfect example. Once the mansion of the technical director of Kreenholm, it has now been turned into a space that brings together people from the city, the country, and the rest of the world to jointly investigate topics relevant to the city and beyond. Its latest project: hosting the second instalment of the Narva Urban Lab.

But not only that. It seems like Narva is still a place where there is near unlimited room to explore ideas and do stuff. Because it is not saturated yet. Again, I find myself thinking 'This would never happen in London' when, on our last evening, the woman with metallic blue hair decides to take a few people on a nightly excursion throughout the city to spray graffiti on the walls of abandoned buildings. 'I am Alien', she writes on one of them. And I wonder: How long will it take until either the phrase will lose its meaning or the building itself will be turned into something exciting, new and better. Or will it at all? In the end, this is a city in which anything seems possible.