

Bridge over the Narva River

A BALTIC
WORLDS
feature

“Estonian politicians want to learn from their own mistakes, not from others’.”



PHOTO: ARNE HENNINGSSON

Silent individuals slowly wander across the bridge. Some have finished a good day's work in Narva's twin city Ivangorod. Some have visited relatives and others have just purchased cheap vodka or cigarettes which they carry in plastic bags over the Narva River through the grey dusk. The road from Russia to the European Union is short, just over one hundred meters.

Narva, located in the north-eastern corner of Estonia, is EU's gateway to the huge Russian market, a couple of hours' drive from newly-rich St. Petersburg.

Narva is a very Russian city. History has made it somewhat German and Swedish, as well, but not very Estonian. In Narva, only one in twenty people has Estonian as his or her mother tongue, but the city's official signs are written in that language.

“It is crazy to support just one language”, says Sergei Stepanov, who resides in the editorial office of the local newspaper *Narvskaja Gazeta*, from which he has a view over Peter's Square, named after the Russian tsar Peter the Great.

During the Soviet era, a Lenin statue stood on Peter's Square. But it is now a long time ago since Vladimir Ilyich was deported to a remote corner of the courtyard of the – originally Swedish – Narva Castle.

The bust of Pushkin, on the other hand, is still to be found in the middle of Pushkin Street. The Narva area is at the periphery of Russian civilization. A borderland of the culture that nurtured Aleksander Pushkin and Fyodor Dostoevsky, it is like a weak whiff of *Doctor Zhivago*, a stray tone in a minor key, a stanza from the melancholy tune of Russian history.

But Narva has been taken over by Estonia, a republic that is too young (18 years), too inexperienced, and too anxious to let the Russian culture bloom freely.

The Soviet-Russian era has left its stamp on Estonia.

A few years ago, when asked during an interview why he did not speak Russian, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves answered: “Speaking Russian would mean accepting fifty years of Soviet brutalization.”

Official Estonian language inspectors pay regular visits to schools, public administration offices and private service facilities in order to make sure that the employees have sufficient knowledge of the official Estonian language. Those who do not pass the tests must take courses or risk dismissal.

“It is terrible”, says a Russian public employee in Narva about the language inspection that is planned for his own work place.

At present, many Narva residents need not worry about the language inspection. They no longer have a job to go to. After a few intense years of labor shortage, unemployment started rising again in 2008 and is now estimated to be no less than twelve percent in Ida-Virumaa county.

There have been lay-offs, shifts to four-day work weeks and six-hour work days, as well as cuts in salaries. The construction workers are unemployed, small stores go out of business and real estate prices have declined by 30–40 percent since the middle of last year.

“It will get worse in the summer”, says Sergei Stepanov, who, from his small editor’s office, monitors the trends in Narva’s business life.

Last year, the Swedish-owned textile factory Kreenholm laid off around 1,500 people. For a long time, the textile industry was the backbone of the industrial town of Narva. Now around 1,000 people are left in a company that had 6,000 employees when Borås Wäveri took over in 1995, and which had had almost 12,000 employees during the Soviet era.

“The textile industry has been in big trouble all over Europe. There are not many companies left in this region. There has been a shift to Asia, where the raw material [cotton] grows and where labor costs are low”, says Mikhel Önnis, who is the new finance director at the crisis-struck Kreenholm textile factory.

The old brick buildings on the Kreenholm island, lying in the middle of a dried-out river bed, tell a dramatic political and economic story about this German-Swedish-Russian-Estonian corner of the Baltic region.

Kreenholm was founded by a German industrialist in an area, which, in 1857, was still part of the Russian empire. At this time the Russian emperor ruled from nearby St. Petersburg. In 1872, a militant strike broke out in Narva, at what was, at the time, the largest textile factory in Europe. The old and distinguished Berkeley professor Reginald E. Zelnick described the strike at Kreenholm as a decisive moment in the history of the Russian workers’ movement. In his last major work, *Law and Disorder on the Narova River: The Kreenholm*

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Strike of 1872 (Berkeley 1995), Zelnick claims that the authorities’ inability to meet the Kreenholm workers’ demands became the starting point for a series of conflicts that gradually led to the monumental upheavals which took place in Russia in the early 1900s.

In today’s Narva, a 29-year-old financial manager is in charge of this company, with its disquieting legacy of historic upheavals. Kreenholm was founded in the Tsarist era. It survived the Russian revolution, the oppression of the Stalin era, and Estonia’s independence from the Soviet Union. But in the era of market economy and globalization, the company is shaken to its foundations. Industries that have existed for one and a half centuries have recently closed down.

“We closed the spinning and weaving [departments] last year. Instead of buying raw cotton we now buy grey fabrics from Pakistan and other low-cost countries. The wages here have doubled over the last ten years and we cannot compete in labor-intensive fields”, says Mikhel Önnis.

But this young, energetic, Russian-Estonian (his father is Russian and his mother Estonian) and his Russian-speaking workers are faced not only with problems caused by the economy.

“Many business people are disappointed with the Estonian politicians and their way of relating to Russia. The bronze soldier did a lot of damage to business with Russia”, says Mikhel Önnis, referring to the Estonian government’s 2007 decision to move a Soviet-era statue in Tallinn, a decision that ignited violent youth riots and led to frosty relations with Russia.

But in the deepening economic crisis, Russian businessmen have once again begun to trade with Estonia. Financial misery knows nothing of politics.

“You can no longer see the signs in Russian towns: *We do not sell Estonian fish products*. At Kreenholm, we anticipate greater opportunities a hundred meters away from us [the textile mill is separated from Russia only by a dry river bed]. We speak the same language, why should we not do business?”

Mikhel Önnis’s new superior, Igor Poleschuk, is the first Russian-born CEO that Kreenholm has had since the Soviet era. He agreed to meet me in Narva, but had to go abroad on a business trip. Poleschuk is on the move. And he has good contacts in Russia, which nurtures the hope of the doors towards the East once again being open to Kreenholm.

“The business elite in Estonia ignores Russia and is oriented towards the West. People thought that turn-

ing the economy westward would yield fast returns. But we need to start taking advantage of the resource we, in Estonia, have in our geographical location”, says Mikhel Önnis.

But in order to make it home from Narva, I must travel west, past the former vacation resort Sillamäe at the Gulf of Finland. During the Soviet era, the resort was turned into a center of military industry. Here the enriched uranium for close to 70,000 Soviet nuclear arms was produced.

Beyond Sillamäe lies Jõhvi. This is the most Estonian town in Ida-Virumaa, the reason why it was made county capital, though it is tiny compared to Narva. Is it the fear of all that is Russian, or of history, that makes itself felt here?

Jõhvi has a pretty little brick church, which, in spite of its beauty, has dark associations. The Moscow Patriarch Alexei II, who passed away recently, was accused of having betrayed his brothers in faith to the KGB during his tenure as bishop in Estonia. And it was here, in the pretty little church in Jõhvi, that Alexei once started his career as a priest. The church is nowadays beset by the Soviet system’s worst enemy, the forces of the market. This little place of worship is currently jammed in between two hideously ugly, newly-built department stores. This sight is esthetically repulsive, an ultimate desecration.

In Kukruse, just past Jõhvi, one’s gloomy thoughts take flight. Here lies the White Horse Inn, which pleasantly reminds one of the Swedish bard and troubadour Evert Taube. The White Horse is rustic, being established in an old granary. This building, which has survived the time of the *kolchos*, reminds one of Evert Taube’s Baltic-German noble ancestor Jakob Tuve, who in the 1500s resided here in the Kukruse manor.

Right after Kukruse, one comes to Kohtla-Järve with its enormous slag heap created by the oil shale industry. During the Soviet era, people of forty different nationalities were drawn to the rapidly growing town, and most of these are still there today. Russians are in a majority in this long-suffering town, which now fights great social problems.

In Kohtla-Järve, the newly-wed couple Valeria and Timofey Goloulin are faced with the task of building a future for their family during this deepening economic crisis.

“My husband cannot find a job”, Valeria tells me. She is – unlike the majority of Estonians – religious. According to a recent survey, the Estonians are the least religious people in the world (the Swedes came in as number two). The ethnic Russians are generally more religious than the Estonian majority.

“For us, times of crisis are not so bad. Such times encourage us to learn from God more and more, to study His Word.”

The young Russian couple has few Estonian friends. Neither of them is an Estonian citizen and they are not allowed to vote at the parliamentary elections.

“I can become a citizen of Estonia, as I have passed the exam well, but it was my decision to stay a Russian citizen. My husband does not want to be an Estonian citizen, and this is because of Estonian politics”, says Valeria.

“I believe it should be easier for Russians to become Estonian citizens.”

After Estonia’s independence in 1991, everyone who was a citizen of Estonia prior to the Soviet era, or whose ancestors had been citizens, became Estonian citizens automatically. But most of the Russians, or their ancestors, came to the country during the Soviet era and must therefore pass a test in the Estonian language as well as in the country’s constitution and history.

In Tallinn, the Social Democratic minister in charge of integration issues, Urve Palo, would like to do more to change the citizenship rules. But she is stymied by the fact that the government is dominated by two right-wing and relatively nationalistic parties.

“We have at least started a discussion and put the issue on the agenda in a new way”, says Palo’s advisor Eva-Maria Asari.

They are working on a plan that should eventually make everyone who finishes Estonia’s obligatory nine years of school eligible for citizenship. Those who have passed the exams in Estonian and in social science should only have to fill in the formal application.

“To go through school should be enough to become a citizen”, says Eva-Maria Asari.

The Russians in Narva agree that this is a step in the right direction. But they are not satisfied. They want citizenship and voting rights on the same terms as everyone else born in Estonia.

“There are a hundred thousand adults who carry grey passports [stateless]. What about them? They are also taxpayers!” says Sergei Stepanov who holds a grey passport himself, although he was born in Estonia.

“The priority should be changed, citizenship first and language learning second.”

There are also more than a hundred thousand Russian citizens in Estonia. Only half of the Russian-speakers – around 400,000 people – are Estonian citizens.

The government has decided that the Public Service TV in Estonia must broadcast two hours of Russian-language news and discussion nightly. This does not impress Sergei Stepanov.

“There should be 24 hours of Russian-language TV!”

He is worried about the message that comes from the TV channels in Russia, which most people in Narva watch. After the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, questions concerning citizenship and media influence have even gained geopolitical significance, according to the Narva editor.

“We need to be covered by Russian language news produced here, not the kind we get from Russia: *‘Ansiip* [Estonian Prime Minister] *is a killer*’. We should say to our partners in the world: If you want stability here, then provide us with the resources needed to accomplish this.”

One of Moscow’s motivations for going to war in Georgia was the need to protect Russian citizens. Some

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analysts warn that Russia could use this argument in a future conflict with Estonia. But this has not prompted any leading politician in Estonia to say: “Hey, finally it is time to deal with the citizenship question. We need a loyal Russian minority and a stable democracy.”

There is a serious, not to say worried, look in the eyes of Sociology Professor Raivo Vetik at Tallinn University when he points out that:

“Estonian politicians want to learn from their own mistakes, not from others’.”

Professor Vetik is considered a foremost expert on integration in Estonia. He believes that Minister Palo is moving in the right direction. There is a new government program that tries to create incentives for interaction between Estonians and Russians, as Estonia, of all EU countries, has the least interaction between different language groups.

“This is good, but not enough”, says Professor Vetik.

“The basic policy, the citizenship policy from the 1990s, was perhaps understandable and justifiable then – although I am not sure. But now that we are in EU and NATO, there is no justification for holding back on the zero-option [of giving every person born in Estonia citizenship on equal terms and conditions].”

The segregation in Estonia goes back to the policies of the Soviet Union.

Raivo Vetik:

“In Soviet times there were two parallel societies in schooling, working and living. In 1989, only 14 percent of the Russians here knew the Estonian language. They did not need to learn it. Today the percentage is around 50. But 80 percent of the Russians do not live in an Estonian language environment. It is difficult for them to learn the language, although most of them say it is important.”

But things are changing, slowly. Today, Russian kids in Narva know more Estonian than their parents did 25 years ago. Around 40 percent of Russian parents in Estonia send their children to Estonian language schools. In the 1980s practically no one did.

And little by little the Estonians realize that it is good to know Russian.

“But their views on the Russians have been complicated by the occupation, the deportations, and the former language policy”, says Raivo Vetik.

According to Professor Vetik, fear of Russia as a neighbor is one of the greatest obstacles to Estonians making contact with Russians. Russia must accept some blame here, but Vetik also blames the Estonian government’s policies and the Estonian media, who portray Russia as an enemy.

“My research shows that the integration is negatively affected”, says Vetik.

According to his analysis, party politics is another

serious obstacle.

“The politicians play the Russian card and try to mobilize Russians against Estonians.”

Andrus Ansip’s decision to take down the statue won him a lot more votes. But Vetik stresses that Russian politicians in Estonia must take their share of the blame in this case.

Just a few minutes’ walk from Raivo Vetik’s office, in the new university building in Tallinn, I meet Maria Lurje. She is a Russian-Estonian secretary who has been an Estonian citizen since she, twelve years ago, managed to pass the language test, though with difficulty. Maria Lurje has lived in Tallinn since 1964. She came here as a small child together with her parents, after her father, a Marine Officer in the Soviet Navy, had been transferred from the most eastern part of Russia to the Baltic Sea Fleet in Tallinn.

Hundreds of thousands of Russians came to Estonia in that same manner: as soldiers, administrators, teachers and, most commonly, as industrial workers. For them, and for Maria Lurje, it was all the same Soviet Union. They were not conscious of, nor did they care about, the fact that an independent Estonia had once been occupied forcefully, against the will of the nation. Even the Estonian culture was unknown to them. They lived in Russian enclaves.

“I was around twenty years old when I had my first real encounter with Estonians, at my workplace”, says Maria Lurje.

Then came the dramatic changes of the late 1980s, with the growing Estonian independence movement.

“It was scary, and I felt somewhat threatened. It was unpleasant to be here, to hear that you were an occupant and an enemy. I could not accept that”, Maria Lurje recalls.

Now that she has learned more about the history of the Estonians, she realizes that “life has been difficult for them”.

But after 45 years, she is still not integrated into Estonian society.

“I have tried, but practically all my friends are Russians. It is not normal, but that is life.”

Maria Lurje found that in 2007, after the conflict over the bronze soldier, it was harder to meet Estonians. Now it has become somewhat easier, she says.

“In the economic crisis, everyone has the same worries.”

Professor Vetik confirms Maria Lurje’s experience, and places it in a broader context. Research on attitudes before and after the statue conflict shows that Russians and Estonians, after the conflict, were more conscious of the need for mutual relations.

“On the grass-roots level, everyday matters count, people feel fear or hope, and they strive for economic prosperity”, says Vetik.

But an escalating economic crisis may increase the risk of social instability, and thus of ethnic conflict.

“We have seen that happen in other places.”

arne bengtsson

Foreign correspondent at the Swedish news agency TT and author of two books about the Baltic region which are reviewed in this issue of BW.

Newly married couple Valeria and Timofey Goloulin in Kohtla-Järve start building their family future during a deep economic crisis. The Kreenholm textile mill dominated the Narva area for generations. The cityscape of today’s downtown Narva features a typical Finnish brand.



The mitigating effect of the recession. In such times, even Russians eat food that doesn’t come from their own country.

Modern paradoxes: it is easier for Estonians and Russians to become Europeans than for Russians to become Estonian citizens.