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Horizontal citizenship in Estonia: Russian speakers in the borderland city of Narva

This paper critically interrogates the notion of ‘citizenship’ from the politically-charged perspective of Russian speakers in Estonia. Drawing on a broad range of critical citizenship literatures, and ethnographic examples from the borderland city of Narva, we propose re- and de-centring citizenship away from universalising conceptions, towards a historically and culturally grounded horizontal perspective on citizenship. While cognisant of dominant, state-centric approaches in Estonia, we present citizenship as a process unfolding through individual, everyday practices of belonging. We demonstrate how Russian speakers, excluded from membership in the Estonian community, can still become members in many less-formal ways, through vibrant interaction with local space.

Keywords: Estonia; horizontal citizenship; Russian-speakers, post-Soviet; borderland

Introduction

In many parts of the world universal state- and nation-centric perspectives continue to dominate academic and policy-based debates on citizenship. This is certainly the case for many post-Soviet and post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, but is also evident across, and beyond, the continent. Within this context, Estonia (see figure 1) represents an illuminating case for contemporary citizenship studies. Estonia is particularly important for those seeking to interrogate critically the notion of ‘citizenship’ and the forms it can take among minority groups who may suffer from political and socio-cultural exclusion.

In Estonia, the citizenship status and general (geo)political loyalties of Russian speakers have been subject to intense domestic and international attention (for example,

Trimback & O’Lear 2015). This has been exacerbated by Russia’s continued criticism of Estonian minority policies and the transnational offer of its own citizenship to ‘Russian compatriots’. Indeed, Russia’s annexation of the Crimea in 2014, justified on the grounds that the Kremlin was protecting the rights of Russian speakers, has only intensified these geopolitical concerns (Grigas 2016). Russian speakers have been therefore heavily securitised, with a range of policies being used to exclude them from full political participation within the country. Following Estonia’s independence from the USSR, the vast majority of Soviet-era settlers (overwhelmingly Russian speakers) were denied full citizenship rights, despite initially comprising 39% of the total population. The denial of Estonian citizenship to these individuals understandably led to intense academic and political scrutiny. Because of these heavily-politicised domestic and external factors, it is perhaps not surprising that scholarly attention has been attuned to formal and legal dimensions of citizenship without adequate attention to the actual practices of the peripheral groups themselves.

Figure 1: Map of Estonia (author’s own drawing)



In this article, however, we use Estonia as an example of ‘horizontal’ perspectives on citizenship which are culturally relevant, context specific as well as empirically

grounded. As such, our aim is to scrutinise how the notion of ‘citizenship’ has been applied to the case of Russian speakers, and to interrogate its conceptual promises and shortcomings. We do so by drawing on empirical evidence gathered through ethnographic research. We acknowledge multiplicity and heterogeneity of conceptual meanings that citizenship can evoke. However, given the specificities of the Estonian case, we propose shifting focus away from formal and conventional practices and/or speech acts of Russian speakers that relate solely to legal categories of ‘citizenship’. Instead, we broaden the scope of existing research by examining the daily local struggles over belonging and membership claims encountered in and by this community. This shift in perspective is necessary because, even for those who hold Estonian citizenship, Russian speakers continue to be perceived by many as potentially disloyal and lacking genuine belonging to the Estonian state and nation (see below).

In this endeavour we join a growing body of scholarship that ‘re-centres’ and ‘de-centres’ citizenship, that is ‘loosen[s] hold of universalising conceptions of citizenship that seek to establish its general, proper or correct meaning (Clarke et al. 2014: 7). Furthermore, we build on research that, in the words of Bronwyn Wood (2014, 217), attempts to ‘give voice to marginalised groups and pay attention to spaces previously rendered invisible by normative conceptions of citizenship’ (see also Erdal et al. 2018; Kallio et al. 2015; Lister 2007; Miller-Idriss 2006; Parisi 2017). Drawing on empirical evidence from Russian speakers in the borderland city of Narva, our paper contributes to the meanings of ‘lived citizenship’ (Lister 2007) as understood and practiced by ‘ordinary people’. Studying citizenship at the localised level demonstrates how different vocabulary and frames can prove useful in scholarly debates on ‘citizenship’ from and for the ‘margins’.

To advance the argument, the paper proceeds as follows. First, we critically survey relevant debates on citizenship, noting the value of horizontal perspectives on citizenship that are intrinsically linked with dynamics of belonging. We then set out our methodological approach. This is designed to ‘capture’ everyday conceptions and negotiations of belonging and social membership on the ground, while revealing important nuances of practices embedded in the context of Narva. Such an agent-oriented approach subsequently invites us to scrutinise Russian speakers’ (both citizens and non-

citizens) desires and experiences in light of their ostensible exclusion from membership of the state or nation.

Through our horizontal perspective, we demonstrate the potential for the emergence of alternative meanings and practices of citizenship. This, we argue, is founded on constructions of belonging and the contestation of hierarchies established through exclusionary ‘politics of belonging’ (Parisi 2017, 97). Previous research has often uncoupled formal citizenship as a tool of governance from lived experiences of belonging (Erdal et al. 2018), seeing the latter merely as a ‘corrective for the limitations of dominant discourses of membership’ (Gonzales and Sigona 2017, 5). In contrast, we consider issues of belonging both on the macro scale (in relation to the nation-state) and the micro scale (in terms of local and regional identifications) to constitute essential aspects of ‘citizenship’. This allows us to conceptualise ‘citizenship’ as a ‘cultural process’ (Craith 2004), or as a ‘set of practices [...] that define a person as a component member of society’ (Turner 1993, 2). Being as they are emergent and embodied, such practices are intrinsically linked with disputes on social membership and resistance against oppressive modalities of citizenship.

Re-centering and de-centering citizenship

The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of multidisciplinary literatures on citizenship seeking to understand and critically dissect the essence of the concept of citizenship. Historically, citizenship referred to entitlements to social, political and economic rights afforded by a given state, and the obligations of membership within this polity. This modern understanding is closely associated with the legacy of English sociologist Thomas Marshall, who conceptualised citizenship through the lens of both the rights and the duties bestowed upon full members of a community as a part of state membership (1950, 28).

Recently, however, a burgeoning stream of scholarship has extensively critiqued the Marshallian model by emphasising the flexibility of social membership (Isin & Turner 2008, 5). Trends in globalisation along with considerable transformations in an age of migration, have led to further scrutiny of the primacy of the nation-state in determining membership and granting rights. It has been pointed out, for example, that citizenship

does not have a stable form contingent on state and territory: rather it remains perpetually incomplete with less consequential borders (Soysal 1994). Proliferation of other focal points of citizenship struggles (sexual citizenship, intimate citizenship, environmental citizenship, to name just a few) have all strengthened the definition of citizenship as ‘imperfect’, revealing the multiplicity of sites, people, places and relationships that are at stake in citizenship (Clarke et al. 2014, 11; Dagnino 2005; Kabeer 2005). As a result, more democratic articulations of citizenship have been established, drawing important distinctions between formal citizenship as a tool of governance, on the one hand, and participatory citizenship associated with experiences and practices of belonging, on the other (Isin 2008, 17).

These developments have stimulated scholars to expand the conceptual parameters of citizenship. In her article on everyday citizenship in Germany, Cynthia Miller-Idriss usefully problematises our understanding of citizenship as a ‘fairly unified and static concept’ (2006, 542). Instead, she argues, ‘the meaning can shift for individuals and vary across populations’. Taking this a step further, Mairead Nic Craith (2004) criticises not only our assumption of a uniform understanding of citizenship within a single nation but also prevailing culture-blindness in the theoretical constructions of citizenship that continue to dominate most political science literature. According to her, a liberal political perspective, stemming from a very particular cultural, political and social European context has ‘asserted the primacy of citizenship over culture and of universalism over specificity’ (Craith 2004, 290). In other words, these universal and institutionalised meanings seem now to represent the only possible path to social membership, whereby other cultural practices are often relegated to a subordinate position. In a similar vein, Nyamnjoh (2007, 79) notes the scholarly tendency to identify and theorise manifestations of citizenship without making inquiries into ‘the contexts, meanings and practices that make citizenship possible for some and a far-fetched dream for most’.

The pre-supposed universality of citizenship fails, furthermore, to address significant variations in meanings and practices that may arise across Europe. Katherine Verdery (1997), for example, stresses how, in many post-Soviet countries, the terms ‘people’ and ‘nation’ have acquired highly ethnic connotations, producing ‘unanticipated effects’ of citizenship that nationalise the very concept. Nowadays then, in countries like

Estonia the conception of belonging to the ethno-nation represents a primary criterion for social membership .

Despite these important considerations, research into Estonia's post-Soviet citizenship typically continues to adopt conventional approaches rooted in formal conceptions. . In effect, this helps to ingrain the centrality of the state to citizenship, and the primary importance of ethno-nationality to the state; existing research has sought to historicise and contextualise the citizenship issue (Hogan-Brun & Wright, 2013), scrutinise different ways citizenship affects social exclusion (Aasland 2002), measure the impact of Estonian Russians' legal status on their socio-economic and socio-cultural position in Estonia (Vetik 2011), and to examine citizenship as a practice of choice (Fein & Straughn, 2014). Despite the broad range of foci, the meaning of citizenship has never been thoroughly deconstructed, decolonised or viewed beyond the vertical, state-people relationship, even though there have been limited attempts to examine localised patterns of identification (Trell & van Hoven 2015; Trimbach & O'Lear 2015).

In this research, however, we answer the calls of Isin (2009, 368) to frame a vocabulary of citizenship that is both 'historically grounded and geographically responsive'. Re-centering citizenship, that is moving beyond universalising conceptions, is not seen here merely as an attempt to devalue the concept of citizenship by exposing it to incomprehensible diversity. Instead, following Clarke et. al (2014, 7), it is viewed as a necessary 'move in theorising citizenship' as anchored in animating forces of contexts. De-centering citizenship, and disentangling ourselves from the conventional understanding of citizens as connected primarily to the state, represents then another essential step. Instead of perpetuating the vertical meaning of citizenship linked to a state membership, we propose focusing more on the aspects of 'lived citizenship' (Lister 2007) that expose the everyday relationships between citizens, their experiences and practices on the ground, rooted alongside (or even independent of) the state. De-centering our focus facilitates careful consideration of differentiated ways in which people can articulate their own positionality and membership in a society . It also has a potential to uncover new vocabularies of citizenship that emerge from ethnographic accounts (Wood 2014, 217). According to Tylor and Wilson (2004, 157), it is important to engage with social relationships and the practices in the social arena, even if at a first glance they seem to

have little to do with citizenship (for example, funeral dances, marching competitions, schoolyards). As they note:

‘in politicised context these activities have a great deal to do with the nitty-gritty negotiations of power, reckoning up of political deals, exercise of political agency, declaration of “belonging” and, therefore, [make up] the very fabric of citizenship.’

These crucial insights help frame our multi-tiered horizontal perspective on citizenship’, which entails complex dynamics and struggles of belonging among citizens and stateless people in the Estonian borderland. In the following sections, we consequentially turn to the contextually grounded, re- and de-centered, bottom-up analysis of the embodied, everyday informal practices of the marginalised groups. These are groups who fall outside the boundaries of ‘Estonian’ membership on a macro scale (that is belonging to ethno-nation). We examine, in particular, how Russian speakers experience exclusionary forms of state citizenship, and assess how they are able to contest, and resist, these exclusionary terms by constructing belonging along a range of alternative axes..

It is important to note that we do not reject in toto the salience of the vertical dimension of formal citizenship. As discussed below, formalised practices of citizenship and exclusion related to the state are difficult for Russian speakers to ignore. Instead, our de-centered perspective highlights the need for more concerted engagement with bottom-up practices. Key to our understanding of citizenship is the construction of belonging. This, inevitably, can be derived at various levels of local, national and supranational contestation. Our central argument is that, by opening up these spaces, we bring into view many important and vibrant practices of belonging that are otherwise ignored. In a highly politicised environment, conventional understandings of citizenship can obscure these practices, thereby creating impressions of disloyalty and disunity that may not be, when viewed horizontally, so pronounced.

Citizenship debates in Estonia

Heated debates about Estonian citizenship started in the late Soviet period, following the seismic effects of Gorbachev's ill-fated reform programme (*perestroika*). It was then that the leaders of the Estonian Popular Front movement (*Rahvarinne*), started to grapple with the possibility of an independent Estonian state and the need to outline a clear, future citizenry. Despite some internal debate and the anti-Soviet activism of a significant number of 'non-Estonians',¹ the more radical voices prevailed over the relatively moderate Popular Front, eventually promoting a citizenship agenda that sought to consolidate the dominant position of ethnic Estonians in society (Kask 1994). Consequently, following the acquisition of independence, official citizenship, similarly to Latvia, was explicitly tied to the *de jure* principal of the legal continuity of the Estonian republic of 1918-1940.²

The 1992 citizenship law granted citizenship only to the historical inhabitants of the country and people able to trace their direct ancestry to individuals who were Estonian citizens in 1940, directly before the Soviet occupation. In turn, official citizenship was denied to almost all Soviet-era settlers and their descendants who could not prove ancestral links to the pre-war republic. Individuals who were unable to prove such ancestral links were forced either to apply for citizenship of another country, or to accept their legal status as resident 'aliens'.³ These 'non-citizens' were given grey passports and were officially recognised as 'stateless' (Fein & Straughn 2014). It has been estimated that almost 30% of Estonia's Russian speakers (i.e. people whose native language is considered as Russian) have opted for Russian citizenship: something possible as a result of Russia's outward-looking 'compatriot policies' (Cheskin 2015, 84).

A number of important studies have been conducted on Estonia's citizenship laws, highlighting the politicised and heavily-ethnicised logics that have underpinned them (Kask 1994; Feldman 2005). Magdelana Solska (2011) refers to Estonian citizenship policies of the early-to-mid 1990s as 'Caesarean': that is, focused on the principle of compliance. In this period, non-citizens were expected to comply with the rules of the game formulated by the new political elites. These elites presented a clear vision of an 'Estonian' ethnic and cultural core and citizenship was consequently conceptualised as a one-way street towards 'integration'.

Solska also notes, however, that international pressures, especially those associated with EU conditionality, helped liberalise Estonian citizenship. Following international monitoring by the OSCE and the EU, citizenship policies started to focus more on the provision of basic rights and the prevention of discriminatory practices against non-citizens (Solska 2011, 1094). International pressures were widely credited with the speeding up of procedures for ‘naturalisation’, allowing non-citizens to acquire Estonian citizenship if they could meet basic language, residency and general-knowledge requirements (Lottmann 2008).⁴ While the withholding of official citizenship restricted voting rights in national elections, non-citizens were legally entitled to the same socio-economic rights extended to full citizens. They were also, unlike their Latvian counterparts, able to participate in local elections.

Within the existing literature, almost all discussion of Estonian citizenship is underpinned by elaboration of the concept of integration: the desire to facilitate the successful cultural-political incorporation of individuals into Estonia’s political community. Estonia’s official state-level integration programmes (starting in earnest in 2000) have focused heavily on the participatory and judicial dimensions of integration (Kus-Harbord & Ward 2015, 68), reflecting an inherent bias towards traditional ‘republican’ and ‘liberal’ models of citizenship (Cohen 1999). This involved goals to increase the numbers of Estonian passport holders (and, consequently, their ‘loyalty’ towards the Estonian state), raise general proficiency in the Estonian language, and reduce socioeconomic inequalities.

For one thing, this state-centric model of integration, and, by extension, citizenship, revolves around essentialised discourses of a core, ethnically-Estonian nation (Kruusvall et al. 2009, 15), despite limited allusions to multiculturalism in official documents (Malloy 2009, 235). This implies vertical integration of ‘non-Estonians’ into the state-defined, hegemonic core. As such, many Russian speakers in Estonia view integration in terms of assimilation and feel a sense of alienation from the Estonian state (Vetik 2011; Nimmerfeldt 2011). However, even when ‘structural integration’ is achieved (defined as ‘the acquisition of rights and equal access to the major institutions of society’), Nimmerfeldt notes how it does not correlate positively with increases in ‘social integration’ and ‘identificational integration’ (defined, respectively, as ‘the degree

to which members of different groups are segregated and the degree to which they interact' and 'ethnic and national self-identifications' (2011, 78–79).

These observations highlight serious limitations in current universalistic and institutionalised approaches to integration and citizenship: despite some successes in securing social, economic and even political rights to 'non-Estonians', there still appears to be a widespread lack of national acceptance as fully-fledged members of the Estonian, national community. That is to say, many Russian-speaking Estonians continue to feel a sense of exclusion from the 'Estonian' core nation as it is currently articulated within Estonia's citizenship and integration policies.

Fieldwork in Narva

Expanding the conventional definitions of citizenship into the domain of lived experiences and practices of the everyday raises several methodological challenges: how can we investigate such an 'intangible' idea as 'belonging'; how is it possible to analyse the elusive context of people's everyday life; and which methodologies should we employ to elicit reflective and rich, bottom-up insights? To avoid the abstract nature of much theorising on citizenship, we root our analysis in a concrete space where citizenship is lived. Empirically, this work is grounded on the experiences of citizens and stateless Russian speakers in Narva, a city which represents a particularly interesting site for analysing citizenship practices.

The city's Russian-speaking inhabitants (comprising over 90% of the local population) were particularly affected by Estonia's attempts to consolidate the dominant position of ethnic Estonians in society. To date, 15.3% of Narva's population still hold undefined (non-)citizenship, 36.3% have taken up Russian citizenship, whereas only 46.7% have Estonian citizenship. Most of the inhabitants arrived in Narva during the reconstruction years following the end of the WWII, as the city was almost completely destroyed by ground warfare and Soviet bombardments in 1944. The large flow of newcomers from Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union considerably shifted the ethnic composition of its population, turning ethnic Estonians into the minority group. This demographic situation has stimulated much discussion concerning the status of Narva – whether, for example, Narva should be considered a 'Russian enclave'. There

have been numerous attempts to ‘Estonianise’ the city after the collapse of the Soviet Union through the erection of monuments and organisation of new commemorative activities. These, however, have only been partly successful and in the eyes of many Estonians, Narva remains not quite ‘Estonian’.

As part of our commitment to explore complex citizenship practices among Russian speakers, we situated ourselves in Narva from February to April 2017. We met most of the informants through a technique of a snowballing (with a maximum of one subsequent referral per respondent): through personal contacts, with people we met on the streets, or with help of the Narva College. In addition, we attended *Keelekohvik*, or language café – the informal meetings organised by the Integration and Migration Foundation (MISA) for people seeking to improve their Estonian language skills. All in all, the analysis of this article builds on extensive ethnographic observations and 27 semi-structured interviews with city-dwellers between 18 and 66 years old. These individuals represented a range of professional backgrounds with different level of education, or engagement in civic activities: some were university students, others – teachers, engineers, lawyers, general workers, housewives, unemployed or pensioners.

To capture banal practices of citizenship among diverse groups of Russian speakers we followed a comprehensive methodology of ‘spatial ethnography’ (Sen and Silverman, 2014), combining several methodologies together. First, we turned to interviews to generate oral narratives. We sought, however, to avoid framing the discussions around the value-laden and a normative concept of citizenship, focusing instead on the experiences of life in Narva or in Estonia, and seeking to bring into light local vocabulary. This was important as it allowed us to interrogate lived practices of belonging separately from the politicised context of ‘citizenship’ discussed above. For every interview our respondents were also asked to bring along photographs that to them represented places of significance. Second, we turned to the ethnographic practices of ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998; Ingold 2004), that is sharing with our participants the experiences of various places by strolling through the city, visiting their homes, and having numerous conversations about life outside the formal interview structures.

Our definition of citizenship, as a lived ‘cultural process’ (Craith 2004), might seem challenging for ethnographic endeavours. This research, however, followed John Law (2004) and his ‘method assemblage’ as a useful and a necessary way for interpreting our fieldwork data from the slippery and often indistinct spatial reality that we observed. By focusing, on the one hand, on the ‘told’ experiences and manifestations of citizenship among our participants by means of thematic narrative analysis and, on the other hand, incorporating observed, at times divergent, performances in place, we were able to uncover diverse, complex and contested practices of social membership that Russian speakers were forming in the context of day-to-day social and spatial interactions. The particular examples we utilise below are therefore used to illustrate how people can be citizens in many less-formal ways through re-negotiating membership in everyday situations and settings, or while locally contesting state-enacted practices of exclusion. Contrary to popular and political beliefs, we argue that many Russian-speaking residents are much better ‘integrated’ within Estonian society than traditional approaches suggest.

Experiencing and practicing citizenship in the borderland

In late January 2018, Estonia’s main TV channel ETV organised a discussion between political representatives on the question of citizenship, statelessness and integration in the country. High on the agenda was the question of whether relaxing citizenship policy would help reduce tensions and strengthen security or, on the contrary, whether it would open the door to new challenges. The discussion revolved mostly around the notion of ‘loyalty’ and potential ways to embed it among the citizenry, whereby citizenship itself was predominantly presented as a privilege to the people who earned it. As the programme continued, one of the politicians pointed out that while the Estonian state provides ample opportunities for people to integrate, further progress is simply unattainable due to a lack of incentive among stateless Russian speakers on the ground.

This discussion represents an ‘ideal type’ understanding of citizenship based on the ‘liberal’ discursive claims for universality. Consequently, this approach is largely blind to local complexities and to the many illiberal practices that have helped to disenfranchise large groups of the population. While reinforcing notions of citizenship as a status, which individuals might have the honour of accessing, this model seems to ignore

the fact that subscribing to official ideas of ‘Estonianness’ guarantees neither cultural membership nor citizenship, understood in terms of belonging to the ethno-nation. Such representations of state belonging lead to significant consequences for Russian speakers and continue to define their daily experiences. For example, our respondents, particularly those with undefined citizenship status, often discussed the role of the state: an entity that can legitimate and validate a person’s worthiness to be a citizen, or, in many cases, deny and contest this status. Many respondents interpreted the state’s exclusive citizenship policies as a mechanism to reject their legitimate membership of Estonian society. Nataliya,⁵ a museum worker in her 50s, explained:

We are nobody. We pay taxes, live here, go about our business, carry out our obligations before the state. But we are nobody. It’s unpleasant, for example, when I cross the border to Russia and have to write down my citizenship. It’s very weird that I’m stateless. I live in this country, I do everything necessary here. It’s like carrying the Star of David for Jews [...] A lot of people here are oppressed by this attitude towards them and so they develop a similarly careless attitude to the country that treats them this way.

The alienation of many Russian speakers, a recurrent theme from the extant literature, cannot therefore be ignored. For many of our respondents, this alienation was most keenly experienced through their interactions with Estonia’s official citizenship and integration policies. Dmitrii, a salesman in his 40s, summed up the prevalent mood of people with non-citizenship status: ‘I remember when I just got my grey [non-citizens’] passport. I was standing at the German border and felt ashamed for being ‘alien’. [...] The grey passport is just a grey passport. These are the broken lives of people, and if I had [Estonian] citizenship, I could have fulfilled myself differently’. While non-citizens like Dima or Nataliya face a particular set of legal practices that impact their daily lives, a sense of alienation was also evident among many Russian speakers who have become naturalised citizens. Despite having obtained official citizenship, many of these individuals expressed dissatisfaction concerning their status within Estonia: ‘I grew up, passed the [naturalisation] exams and got my Estonian citizenship. I am being told though, that we, the people who have been naturalised, are considered second-rate people.

It's true: I can't become president or a politician with my Russian surname' (Yuliya, 24 years old, student).

These examples demonstrate how the primacy of the ethnic criterion not only impedes a sense of belonging to the 'Estonian' nation-state, but also induces a hierarchy of citizenship, whereby Russian speakers are constituted and feel themselves, according to Yuliya, as 'second-rate people'. This notwithstanding, in what follows we depart from enduring notions of *marginality* to consider *engagement* and *social practices* of citizenship on the ground. Exclusive focus on conventional definitions of citizenship, we argue, obscures many of the complex ways that these individuals can, in fact, in less-formal everyday ways, become citizens. In particular, through our horizontal perspective we demonstrate how citizenship is constituted through local interaction in and with vibrant spaces, creating alternative links and opportunities for citizens and stateless alike to belong. Crucially, these interactions, which represent a defining aspect of lived citizenship, can enable Russian speakers to develop new forms of sociality and a sense of worthiness.

Citizenship through interaction with the built environment

Following our discussion, an important question arises: how can people, excluded by an encompassing national discourse, overcome the challenges of the historically and politically established 'ideal type' of citizenship? What emerged from the visual narratives around photographs our participants brought to the interviews was the importance of engagement with material elements of the 'built environment'. The built environment, understood here as physical alterations of the natural environment through human construction, represents an important possibility for people to overcome the challenges of seemingly entrenched boundaries by attaching new meanings to the places one inhabits (Lawrence & Low 1990). Despite efforts by the state to manipulate spatial meanings and construct totalising narratives of national identity, deeply anchored in the ideas of 'Estonianness', residents in post-Soviet cities like Narva, we argue, still find creative ways to inscribe their own meanings into the cityscape. As such, built environment and public spaces create room for interpretative freedom for individuals to work out their disagreements symbolically, politically or personally.

Although the sense of marginality and exclusion was present in numerous discussions (irrespective of citizenship status), our respondents demonstrated continual efforts to make Narva a habitable place and to present themselves as worthy members of Estonia. This corresponds with our de-centred definitions of citizenship. Representation of Narva as a ‘native place’ or ‘home’ was clearly strengthened by a sense of continuity in the city and country, imbued with memories of the past. Particularly important to our respondents were locations, which to them represented the historical continuity of Narva in Estonia (as opposed to top-down discourses of Narva being a ‘not quite Estonian’ ‘Russian enclave’). For example, the narratives and memories of daily engagement with local places like Hermann Tower/Narva Castle (see figure 2) were often used to strengthen a sense of rightful belonging and to express their desire to be recognised as legitimate members of the larger community:

I’ll tell you now one of my school memories. We were travelling a lot with my class, we went to Moscow, to St. Petersburg. I liked it everywhere. But there is this turn to Narva, when our castle becomes visible. When the bus would turn, and you would see the Hermann Tower. I would immediately get tears – this is my native place [*rodnoe*], this is my home. And I would say: I am finally home. (Marina, 45 years old, kindergarten teacher)

Figure 2: Photo of one of our respondents with the Narva Castle in the background. Summer 2016.



Stephanie Taylor (2010, 12) summarises such stories as ‘born and bred narratives’ that arguably help individuals to establish a connection to place associated with local identities, thereby representing an alternative strategy for coping with social boundaries imposed by the nation-building policies of the Estonian state. In this sense, growing up in this place, and recalling memories of it, helped develop emotional continuity among our respondents. This allowed them to claim rights and connection to the terrain locally, as their native place (*rodnoe mesto*). As another respondent from Narva put it: ‘You can’t say – Dima get out of here, this is not your home. How come it’s not my home? My parents live and will be buried here. My children live here. Where else should I go? To Russia?’ (Dima, 42 years old, salesman)

The widespread sentiment of feeling like ‘a stranger among your own’ (*chuzhoi sredi svoikh*) (Vera, 40 years old, social worker), ostensibly erects barriers between our respondents and the formal and symbolic structures of the Estonian state. However, people we interviewed often sought to overcome these barriers by engaging with places that, to them, directly represent alternative inclusive ‘Estonianness’ separated from its heavily-ethnicised meaning.

In conversations with our respondents, Narva College was clearly identified as such a place, perceived as an inclusionary space for Russians, Estonians and international visitors to the city. This was underpinned by the peculiar design of the building, signifying modernity and Westernisation of the country (see figure 3); public events in the Estonian language held in the college; and the diverse community of people that use the facilities. The college hosts numerous events such as Jazz nights, book clubs or ‘memory games’ (*Mälumängud*). During these events citizens and stateless people, Estonians and Russians come together and socialise with each other. While ‘socialising’ would perhaps be rarely regarded as a citizenship action, in the words of Trelle and van Hoven (2015, 438), ‘mingling’, can encourage constructive social participation and by extension strengthen a sense of belonging to the community both on the micro and macro scales. Through mundane practices of playing games together or discussing books people are arguably able to transcend the externally-enacted boundaries of community membership and citizenship related to the state and ethno-nationality. Tellingly, Vera, who often experienced formal exclusion, told us that she immediately enrolled in the college after renovation works were completed:

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

Figure 3: Narva College. March 2017. Author's own photo.



Although many obstacles remain in overcoming a sense of alienation, our data demonstrate how engagement with the material spaces, especially through meaningful social participation or memories of one's own continuity in place, can foster new social links. In other words, 'much of what was special in these mundane sites had little to do with the site itself' (Wood 2014, 225). Rather our respondents, even without Estonian citizenship, used places repeatedly to claim legitimacy within Estonia and to negotiate their belonging both locally and nationally. Crucially, Narva was often portrayed as an inherently Estonian space; their belonging to Narva was therefore logically extended to signify a rightful place within Estonia. As Vladimir (formally a citizen of Russia), put it: 'home begins from your childhood, and my childhood was here in Estonia' (57 years old, pensioner).

Citizenship as local agency: ‘we live on this land and we enrich the culture too’

The voluminous literature on belonging in the Baltic states, and within the post-Soviet region, has started to reflect wider academic trends in exploring quotidian practices (Morris et al. 2017; Seliverstova & Pawłusz 2016). Within such process-based approaches, small and everyday actions and interactions are seen as vital components for shaping personal identifications and feelings of placeness. These everyday actions may revolve around seemingly banal practices such as consumption and home renovations (Polese et al. 2017) or they can be expressed in less material acts (Morris 2016, 239), including participation in sport or other cultural or leisure activities. Even though, at first glance, such practices might seem to have little to do with citizenship, these activities are linked to the exercise of agency and declarations of belonging, which, we argue, constitute the very fabric of citizenship.

Local practises were indeed highlighted by several of our respondents as acts that qualify them to be worthy members of the Estonian community and the deserving bearers of rights. Take, for example, the story of Zinaida, a woman in her fifties who is a choir singer and a music teacher in a Russian-speaking kindergarten. Zinaida was born in Soviet Estonia to Russian immigrants. Having Russian as her mother tongue and not necessarily being able to ‘understand’ (as she claimed) Estonian culture as ethnic Estonians do, she nevertheless declared a great deal of respect for it. Although uncomfortable with the political and media discourses that represent Russian speakers as occupants: ‘I am upset by this attitude. I was born here, no one needs me in Russia, and it seems Estonia doesn’t need me here either’, she proudly performs Estonian songs around the world with her fellow choir members and teaches them to kindergarten children:

I love Estonian dances, all those polkas... ‘Kaerajaan, Kaerajaan’ or ‘Kaks sammusissepoole, kaks sammuväljapoole’. I teach them to children. They are very accessible and communicative. When you see those dances at the festivals, they are amazing. [...] In the choir, each one of us has a skirt and we put them on when we do the Estonian programme. [...] Although some people say that we are occupants, we live on this land and we enrich the culture too. I cannot say about myself that I make Narva worse. On the contrary, we always perform with respect. We record and preserve these songs.

In the narratives of Zinaida, but also several other respondents, the idea of belonging was closely tied with the ability to contribute to Estonian society both in the past and present. This accords with Isin (2002, 275), who argues that it is precisely by developing symbolic, social and cultural practices, that people are able to ‘constitute themselves as political agents under new terms, taking different positions in the social space than those in which they were previously positioned’. Russian speakers display agency from below by establishing themselves not as ‘occupants’ or ‘undesired others’, but as valuable members of society who considerably contribute to the country’s national and cultural development.

In the above example, there is a clear link between Zinaida’s cultural activity and her claims for justice in the asymmetrical context created by the Estonian ethno-national citizenship regime. However, other ‘banal’ acts, with less obvious links with national culture, can also help people challenge the modes of being an outsider. For example, Dmitrii, told of his participation in several sports events, including the organisation of various events in Narva. According to him, such activities help people overcome the question of statelessness and nationality, defined narrowly in ethnic terms. This helped transform Narva and Estonia into a more unitary place, united through ethnically-neutral culture.

So, I went to these scout gatherings. Russians rarely go there. So, you walk alongside an Estonian person and both of you forget about your nationality. You are united by a common problem and this problem is a long path, and you sit down together and share a chocolate, and the Estonian doesn’t care anymore what language you speak. When you have common goals and common difficulties, these bring nations closer. [...] And here too, if we develop sports structure in the city, people will come out more and socialise with each other.

Following McCargo (2011: 835), these small informal social practices are important components of citizenship. Often, they even supplement the ‘legal-rational criteria’ for being considered a full citizen. Through local acts, people come to think of themselves as legitimate, rights-bearing members of Estonian society. Despite the negative developments Narvans faced after the fall of the socialist project, and despite

the exclusionary policies of the state that left numerous Russian speakers outside the Estonian national community, people were still able to construct ‘citizenship’ horizontally through valued social ties of commitment and numerous cultural practices.

This observation aligns with research on Russian-speaking miners in Ida-Viru County by Eeva Kesküla (2015). Through the narratives of her respondents she demonstrates how people often turned to the ‘discourse of hard work’ and their role as active citizens to strengthen their claim for membership in society. Similarly, Alena Pfoser (2017) stresses how the acts of resilience, anchored in memories and personal relations, also helped Russian speakers to re-work their place in Estonia, thereby taking an active role in interpreting, contesting and transforming ideas of citizenship projected by the state.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Since for much of the world’s populations, the status, rights, and identity of citizens remain intensely contested, there is an urgent need engage critically with conventional meanings of citizenship (Isin 2009, 369). The dimensions of citizenship presented in this paper do not fit many of the indicators and categories of mainstream frameworks for understanding citizenship. They do, however, largely reflect the transformations afoot today that challenge universalising conceptions, moving us towards richer heterogeneity of meanings that citizenship can invoke in particular historic and cultural contexts. In line with these developments, while anchoring our research in the Estonian case, we have sought to re-emphasise citizenship as necessarily a cultural process ‘unfolding and constantly changing’ (Wood 2014, 225) through individual everyday practices.

In this paper we demonstrate the importance of studying ‘citizenship’ from a horizontal perspective, intrinsically linked with locally embedded dynamics of belonging both on the micro and macro scales. The merits of this shift, as we demonstrate above, are manifold. First, it helps bring agency to the fore: agency of people who, based on their ethnicity, are often regarded as marginal within their national community. As such, it reveals the core features of citizenship in a bottom-up movement, highlighting different vocabulary and frames that people use to make claims for justice, for rights, or to challenge the exclusionary modes produced by official political practices. Second, by

focusing on Russian speakers, we argue for the need to take into account localised perspectives and practices of citizenship beyond those offered at the official, state level. This helps us move closer towards intellectual decolonisation of the concept, allowing us to illuminate alternative articulations of being and becoming a citizen. Through the narratives of our respondents we demonstrate how Russian speakers, by turning to meaningful social participation, local agency and memories of their own continuity in place, were able to contest and transform exclusionary ideas of citizenship and social membership projected by the state.

Finally, the current analysis presents useful insights for research on nation-building and social integration in Estonia and has resonance for a number of post-Soviet and post-socialist states where citizenship has been largely used as a tool of cultural exclusion. The examples here provide evidence that horizontal citizenship practices can lead to desirable outcomes for integration of minority groups. When spaces are provided for mutual interaction (be it through sports, cultural activities, festivals or through common consumption of spaces, goods and services), our Russian-speaking respondents were able to challenge hierarchies of power and the asymmetrical context created by Estonia's ethno-national citizenship regime. At the same time, perhaps counterintuitively from the perspective of Estonia's state bodies, identification and interaction with local spaces was often accompanied by increased identification with the national, Estonian space. The mechanisms by which Russian speakers claim recognition and negotiate own terms of belonging therefore represent, for us, clear examples of lived and vibrant citizenship, even when viewed through a narrow and politicised state-centric lens, but especially when one adopts a horizontal perspective.

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1. Without wishing to embellish the essentialising nature of these terms, we reluctantly use labels that have embedded social meaning in the Estonian context. Drawing on Soviet nationalities practices, 'Estonian' (used in inverted commas) is used as an ethnic categorisation, widely used in social discourse. 'Non-Estonian' (again, in inverted commas), conversely, refers to groups of people outside of this categorisation.

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2. The idea of legal continuity of the Estonian Republic of 1918-1940 rests on the basis that the Soviet Union illegally occupied and Sovietised Estonia in 1940. When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, policymakers argued that the country was returning to the legal position it held in 1940.
 - ³ A number of individuals (24,102 in total) were able to receive Estonian citizenship if they had a certificate attesting their support for the Congress of Estonian Citizens, obtained before independence. The Congress was an unofficial body that sought to create a list of 'Estonian' citizens (based on the principle of legal continuity) as part of the independence struggle. (Poleshchuk 2004, 18)
 4. The number of stateless people has dropped from over 30% in 1992 to approximately 6.1% in 2016. This is primarily because stateless people have decided to undertake 'naturalisation' or have, instead, acquired Russian citizenship.
 5. In all cases, pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of our respondents.

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