Narva as Method

Urban Inventories and the Mutation of the Postsocialist City

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ABSTRACT

This article asks how a post-Soviet city went global and became something else, mutating, in the sense of generating a new set of features that go beyond a narrow understanding of postsocialism. The research provides a synthetic conceptualisation of Narva and the organisation of its ordinary life, by combining methods of urban observation and classification with geographical and ethnographic descriptions of this city. Using visual imagery of urban objects, along with field annotations and interview quotes as the materials analysed, the article carries out a *Narvaology* that consists in deploying this city 'as method'. It points out that cities such as Narva require a more relational and multi-scalar language, one with broader theoretical and methodological implications, able to account for fragmentary socio-political issues.

KEYWORDS

Conceptual methods, Europeanisation, local/global, trans-socialism, urban studies

Locating the Prefix

This article builds up the portrait of a city being transformed and transforming itself in the context of broader geopolitical and economic shifts. It presents examples of how complex divergent experiences of postsocialism take shape and are located, advancing an understanding of Soviet material afterlives and cities in Eastern Europe, framed here as trans-socialist. Additionally, it makes an interdisciplinary contribution to methodological literature in the form of a conceptual inventory of urban relations and streetscapes. The research treats the city as method, exploring an inventory of relations through objects in order to gauge Narva's trans-socialist materialisation and detect traces of this process of mutation.¹

Narva is the third largest city in Estonia, with an actual population of fifty-eight thousand inhabitants. History tells us that this city has

experienced intensive periods of reconstruction under both capitalist and socialist regimes. A capitalist regime emerged with the founding of a textile factory in 1857, which soon after employed 5,400 people. Little more than half a century later the city was entirely reconstructed based on Soviet, modernist principles and repopulated with workers from all the corners of the USSR. Narva then became a socialist prototype, with central control over the form and meaning of the built environment and with development based on the expansion of infrastructures and heavy industries. The production of the socialist city had its simplification and modernisation as a goal, as well as a full-steam-ahead approach, with the ‘Socialism plus electrification’ motto embodied in concrete infrastructures and materialities (Crowley and Reid 2002).

In the 1970s, the Kreenholm factory employed more than ten thousand workers and exported many of its goods. In the 1990s, however, the company was privatised after falling on hard times when trying to compete in global markets not only because of the existing skills and infrastructure, but mostly because of decisions made by the new, foreign administrators (Vissak 2014). Kreenholm manufacturing ultimately faced bankruptcy in 2010, despite receiving financial support from the World Bank. This was the corollary of the de-industrialisation of Narva, affecting its sense of urbanity and causing the city to lose its function for people, since there were no jobs and the city was not well integrated with the rest of the country, partly because of the nation-based construction of the new Estonian state.

After the regained independence of Estonia in 1991, the reality of Narva had to do with de-industrialisation, a transnational border and energy infrastructures, and also ethnicity, since Narvians became the Other of the country. This list shows that the enormity of postsocialist change was bigger in some localities than in others. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Narva was consigned to the national and cultural fringes of Estonia, being highly affected by neglect and disinvestment. For decades, this city was made invisible to national designs, located ‘at the centre of the unsolvable’ (Simone 2019: 23). However, Narva has not been irrelevant, neither in the global realm nor in the national political order. Quite the opposite, this town became a ground where political categories were re-worked, un-made and in some cases reinforced, and multi-scalar orders of knowledge were at play (Corsín Jiménez 2005).

As a border city (between the European Union and Russia), Narva stands at the intersection of various global flows and networks, and

shows a particular type of connectivity, specifically trans-systemic and transnational. Paying closer attention to this city, we see that Narva's ongoing transformation is directly related to global capitalism and Europeanisation too. Based on this, I argue that in Narva we face the explanatory limits of a narrow understanding of postsocialism (strictly constrained to a single historical period and area), while simultaneously foregrounding its conceptual potential to travel to other regions and take part in global theory production. Hence the need for a conceptual boundary re-work.

As a plastic concept, postsocialism has been travelling from East to South and back to East, suggesting a 'global postsocialist condition' (Gille 2010) that challenges the boundary-work done to limit its application to a single historical period and geographical area. Indeed, cities such as post-crisis Lisbon, Buenos Aires or even New York can also be, to a great extent, considered postsocialist—directly shaped by the ideological postulates that became hegemonic after the collapse of the USSR, resonating with the structural adjustment programmes of austerity policies, the neoliberal reconfiguration of the relation between the welfare state and individual choices and responsibilities, as well as in the scale of socio-economic risks (Gotham and Greenberg 2014). Hence, Narva can be seen not just as an importer of models and policies, but also as a frontier of planning experiments and as an exporter of urban practices too, generating new anthropological objects of study.

Post Post-Soviet Futures

Traditional studies of postsocialist cities have paid little attention to the present, insisting on an 'ill-defined blanket term' that 'obfuscates the range and variations of issues involved' (Bridger and Pine 1998: 3). This approach also presents cities in Eastern Europe as anomalous and subject to gradual correction (Ferenčuhová and Gentile 2016), and reflects a regrettable lack of forward-looking vision (Hirt et al. 2016).² In this vein, Martin Frederiksen and Ida Knudsen suggest in their ethnography of Eastern European grey zones that we study the afterlives of postsocialism in particular empirical contexts, looking at how 'the Eastern Europe of today reveals new vocabularies' (2015: 11).

This article takes on the concept of 'trans-socialism' to account for new relational topologies enabling the understanding of how elements of global and local government are lodged within this city. This

concept was originally proposed by Michał Murawski, who, in his study of the Stalinist skyscraper in Warsaw, shows how the actual capitalist ambition of the Polish capital is transfixed by still-socialist remains. In this way, Murawski highlights the plasticity of postsocialism as a concept, observing that it ‘refers to a regime that, on some substantive level, is still communist’ (2019: 265), despite the multiple site-specific reconfigurations and mutations.³

The prefix ‘trans-’ means going beyond and denotes a sense of conveyance, transfer and transplanting as well as going across, in the sense of mutation and transformation. It thus suggests intersections, transport and transmission, marking the through of the process. This prefix also signals an opening, while ‘post’ tends to point to a closure, an ending, an afterlife. Likewise, ‘post’ entails a gesture of rejection or rupture, while ‘trans’ refers to a shift and involves connectivity and wider spatial imaginaries, destabilising binary assumptions and focusing on what things become, instead of what things are.

Before being postsocialist, Narva was already transnational and filled with objects anchoring different scales and kinds of relation. Indeed, in less than a century, this city has been directly ruled by St Petersburg, by Tallinn, by Moscow and then by Tallinn again (nowadays with a clear input from Brussels in the form of funding and regulatory frameworks). Hence, the ‘trans-’ is not merely an analytical category, but also an empirical one, referring to inter-scalar networks that are recalibrated in relation to each other (Brenner 2001).⁴

Participating in the discussion of transnationalism, Caroline Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja chose to focus on cities that were once cosmopolitan. They observe that in this case, the ‘post’ prefix refers to ‘a sense that something precious has been lost, or side-lined, and that other less generous relations have taken their place’ (2012: 1). Postness thus implies incompleteness and ‘a special quality of relating to the past’ (ibid.: 6). This backward-looking approach ignores, however, how new political and economic forces, new forms of capitalism, and even emerging global operations and networks are tied back to a lost past and embedded into existing patterns and materialities in a rather fragmented way.

Stephen Collier has studied this in two small industrial cities of Russia, examining how heating pipes, ‘a key figure of the Soviet project of social modernity’ (2011: 2), originally designed with the objective of materialising socialism, were reprogrammed to introduce neoliberal reforms after the break-up of the USSR. His findings challenge the assumption of both neoliberalism and the political paradigm of

postsocialism as a static package of programmes, and show how some aspects of Soviet urbanism and the social state were preserved and cared for in the 1990s, often against the grain, and generating novel practices of city building and maintenance. When infrastructures fail or become obsolete, their meaning comes into question. However, they do not have to be destroyed or neglected; that would be just one (political) option among many, including repair, reform, repurposing and reinvention (Angelo and Hentschel 2015). That is indeed the position of Ivan Sergejev (chief architect of Narva between 2016 and 2020), who explains that urban plans for the city are not directed against the legacy of the socialist past, but rather try to make use of it in a different context and throughout different scales. In one of our conversations in the city, he insisted that we should look at the outcomes of post-socialist transformations in their fragmentary character, suggesting that postsocialism has been a process unable to complete itself. In the case of Sergejev, we are talking about a new generation that has received a foreign education and has experience of living abroad, thereby adopting a more pragmatic approach to Soviet legacies.

This article openly challenges the defensive epistemology and boundary-work that has constrained the concept of postsocialism to a geographical region and to a specific historical period, instead of making use of this concept to reflect on global issues (Ferenčuhová 2012; Gentile 2018; Kojanić, this issue; Murawski 2018; Tuvikene 2016). The ‘post-’ is thus spatial, material, epistemic and political too, raising questions about how the methodologies and concepts that we use make sense here and now. Hence, it is worth exploring whether there is anything progressive or hopeful about trans-socialism (speculating about post-postsocialist futures), in what way it might contribute to repairing urban injuries as well as to understanding what is still socialist in Narva.

One attempt to upgrade the existing infrastructures and propel the city towards the future was the (unsuccessful) application to host the European Capital of Culture in 2024. The preparation of this project of cultural diplomacy and commodity-led transnational branding was in itself the outcome of ongoing epistemic changes in the city and also a driver of new scale-making practices. For instance, the material power of European imaginations was manifested in local attempts to revitalise the Kreenholm area through cultural activities and to increase the touristic imagery of Narva abroad.

Another example are the increasing efforts by the municipality to access EU funding programmes to repair the existing Soviet

infrastructures. The results of this are already visible in the restoration of administration buildings, parks and various tourist attractions in Narva, which convey a sense of belonging to the European zone. Further on, the renovation designs, regulations and standards brought to Narva by the EU work in two ways: as a political translation of this city into Europe and Estonia, making it readable and measurable; and also as an agent of Europeanisation, seeing local materialities as not only consequential but necessary for a particular version of Europeanisation to succeed (Gille 2016). In other words, the social and material confrontation with European regulations, funds and designs is meant to generate broader social changes in the locality and enhance the sense of belonging to the EU.

Figure 1. Cornered Lenin and working EU.
Author, 2019.

Currently marking the border between the Russian Federation, NATO and the EU, Narva is a node wherein Europeanisation is expedited, turning the beginning and ending of the EU into a performative experience. Borders such as the Narvian one had to reorient their function from protecting the nation to controlling the whole European territory (Follis 2012), also changing the key referential, policy-making point from Tallinn to Brussels. We can see this in the repaired promenade and city bastion, funded by the EU. On the pavement along the promenade are written the names of all the EU members and their years of accession. Also, the renovation of Soviet panel houses through the Kredex programme (partially funded by the EU, and requiring the application of specific environmental standards) has been turning Khrushchev-era flats (built in the 1960s) into a political space in which new relationships to the

state and to supranational institutions are being formed. Nevertheless, the influence of the EU at the everyday level has been visible in a much slower and more fragmented form than officially expected, showing certain limits in processes of preference formation mobilised by the EU. However, the anthropology of postsocialism has paid too little attention to transnational normalising strategies and the relationship between the different scales (Barry 2006; Martínez and Beilmann 2020).

Narvaology

In order to understand the intersections of people, scales and temporalities, and how they take material forms, this article proposes an inventory of relations as a thinking tool exploring how cities can be theoretical and methodological models in themselves. Likewise, it reconsiders what counts as urban knowledge through a collection of public objects, selected by this researcher to work as visualisations of the city—in an inventory that resembles a conceptual toolkit and depicts spatially differentiated trans-socialisms within Narva.

Cities are infused with memory, geometry, a plurality of temporalities and scales, as well as embodied affects, circulating narratives, localised imaginations and a symbolic storage that frames our perceptions and mirrors the existing relations (and institutions), while reproducing them forward. They all depend upon material associations and also play out contradictions and unresolved complexes (de Certeau 1984; Hansen and Verkaaik 2009; Murawski 2019). Aware of this, Italo Calvino excavated the shared dreams of urbanity in his novel *Invisible Cities* (1974), to show that each city entails a state of mind. And George Perec (1989) argued that cities as a whole can be perceived through their fragments by correlating elements of representation, in a form of essayistic research.

In the classic *Exploring the City*, Ulf Hannerz aimed at doing a ‘total urban ethnography’ (1980: 303) by composing a portraiture not merely in the city, but also of the city. As he noted, the methodological composition of this portrait should be more akin to art forms than to ‘exhaustive likeness’ (ibid.: 304). Drawing on this aspiration of epistemological completeness, Murawski suggested in his ethnography of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw (2013, 2019) that methods could also emerge from the urban object of study, producing knowledge of the city as a whole to gain an understanding of social, spatial and temporal complexity, in his case in a sort of *Palaceology* or *Warsawology*.⁵

This article navigates the complexity of the city, while trying to construct some sense of order (through a conceptual inventory and the juxtaposition of urban objects). The research accounts for the abundance of temporal, geographical, cultural, political and infra-structural connections that form the actual trans-socialist spaces. It proposes a conceptual synthesis of the ever-transforming cityscape to understand the dynamic interrelationship of its material, social and symbolic aspects. By integrating various visual, material and discursive registers in an inventory, this research enacts a method that puts a focus on the emerging materialisation of multiple scales and durations, based on the idea that localities are ‘no longer isolated but tied to the outside world in complex and rather consequential ways’ (Gille 2001: 334).

Urban forms and give-and-take dynamics of change are increasingly influenced by transnational investments and strategies of homogenisation and standardisation (Barry 2006). Any discussion of trans-socialism has therefore to pay attention to how multi-scalar ups and downs are materialised and the way scales contribute to put ideas into practice and are fed upon the still Soviet urbanity of Narva, influencing further changes and producing epistemic transformations among locals. This approach enables us to think about the heterogeneity of place-making practices (Laszczkowski 2016), as well as the multiple spatial imaginaries, connections and durations through which cities are continuously assembled (Edensor and Jayne 2012; Roy 2009).

This explorative research also draws on new ethnographies such as the one by Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Adolfo Estalella, who studied how neighbourhood assemblies in Madrid are reimagining the city as a methodology and as ‘a very messy kind of archive’ (2014: 150). These authors pay attention to how the city provides the hardware and also the method, arguing that research questions and techniques stand inherent within the city, and the researcher has merely to take inventory of them. In a more recent article, Corsín Jiménez goes further by presenting ethnography as a method of auto-construction, open for experimental redescriptions of how locals cope with the world around them. In a study of guerrilla architectural collectives in Madrid, he claims that the method can be found within the existing infrastructures and urbanity of the city, to be perceived as a ‘material system for sharing resources, knowledge, and experiences’ (Corsín Jiménez 2017: 451).

The idea here, thus, is not to write the biography of Narva; rather, we reflect on how our methodology is something that might be given by the city. This kind of approach addresses a specific setting while reflecting on how the process of capture is reshaped by this specificity, showing constitutive self-organising effects that might challenge traditional notions of epistemic authority (Estalella and Criado 2018; Lury and Wakeford 2012).

A Conceptualist Taxonomy

In the attempt to describe how the organic interplay between different scales, tempos, designs and legacies participates in urban dwellers' daily routines, I have composed an explorative taxonomy of relations as both a thinking tool and a conceptual form of intervention in the city. It is an inventory of socio-semiotic relations in Narva, accounting for outliers, linkages, affectual intensities, and points of condensation and meaning-making through material arrangements. The inventory is composed of a series of tangible marks where multiple temporalities and scales intersect. The methodology takes the form of epistemic recomposing, combining physical signs encountered in this city with geographical and ethnographic descriptions.

In my regular visits to Narva since 2014, I have gathered different urban fragments that, once entangled in a conceptual collage, help me create a different kind of knowledge about the city. A series of pictures are included here as a multi-modal index of urban materiality (Ferreira and Martínez 2020; Latham and McCormack 2009). The visual representation of my encounters facilitates the possibility of creating an inventory of the relations taking place in this city, as if they were topographical diary entries, yet also as 'a praxis that elicits new forms of relationships' (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2014: 165).

Inspired by these discussions, I have chosen a series of objects, here taken as a prototype of urban knowledge and trans-socialism. Over the last seven years, I have been gathering traces of the ongoing mutation of Narva, not in an attempt to grasp the city as a whole, as a synthetic totality, but rather aiming to explore existing ontologies and relations through found objects. They are here taken as anthropological ready-mades, functioning as analytical devices provided by the city and creating new knowledge speculatively (Savransky et al. 2017). Also, by looking at cities in terms of public objects and thinking with

Figure 2. Cyrillic café. Author, 2019.

Figure 3. Window installation combining references to the Tsars, Putin, Gagarin, the Orthodox church and the Soviet Army. Author, 2019.

cities through objects, we can reflect further about what this implies ontologically and how this gesture might change the way urban spaces are represented and planned (Carter et al. 2011; Star and Griesemer 1989).

- *The St George Ribbon*: a Russian military symbol consisting of a black and orange ribbon, reinstated by the Kremlin in 2005 as a memorial to the Second World War. Nowadays, it is used in everyday terms as a citational display of belonging, effective in performing an act of social linking (Oushakine 2018).

Figure 4. St George Ribbon, on a car. Author, 2017.

- *Bat houses*: the abundance of bastions and caves makes Narva rich in bats, to the point that the Municipality installed a series of ‘hotels’ for these nocturnal mammals around the promenade. They are made of wood and filled with narrow chambers where bats can rest and stay warm during the day.

Figure 5. Bat houses of Narva. Author, 2019.

- *Plastic bags*: Russian citizens cross the border to buy products such as milk, cheese or salami, since the items are of better quality on this side of the Narva River.

Figure 6. Plastic bags, cross-border shopping. Author.

- *A bust of A. S. Pushkin*: erected in 1999 on a street dedicated to one of the key figures of Russian culture.

Figure 7. A.S. Pushkin. Author, 2016.

- *Urban garages*: these were a key element within Soviet car culture—a place for intensive storing, repairing and socialising (Tuvikene 2010). What characterises Narva, however, is that we can find there two kinds of urban garages: one is continental, inland based, and can be made of bricks, panel and/or metal, while the other appears in an area locally called ‘Narva Venice’, standing alongside canal-stripe structures (Martínez and Pikner 2019).

Figure 8. Canal view of ‘Narva Venice’.
Author, 2019.

- *Fences*: we can also find two kinds of fences: weak ones, such as those surrounding the gardening plots next to ‘Narva Venice’, and hard ones, such as those marking the EU boundary.
- *Tanks*: next to the border gate, there is a building with a water tank on the roof. Many visitors believe, however, that the tank is part of a communications or defensive infrastructure. Also, one can see many water tanks in the allotment garden area next to ‘Narva Venice’, as the water infrastructure in the area is fragile (especially during the winter season). One can find a different kind of tank in the city too; on the way to Narva-Jõesuu, a Soviet T-34 is exhibited as a monument. At this location in July 1944, troops coming from the Leningrad Front crossed the Narva River in their advance on Berlin.

Figure 9. Water tank on the roof. Author, 2014.

- *Military shelters*: Narva was completely reconstructed after the Second World War following modernist principles of urbanism, but also the military principles of the Cold War scenario. Since Estonia regained its independence in 1991, most of these urban underground shelters have been abandoned and actually stand in a state of disrepair. For the Estonian government, warfare has changed since then. However, Finland is still preserving existing bomb shelters and even building new ones.

Figure 10. Urban bunker. Author, 2019.

- *Urban cottages/dachas*: during the Soviet era, these were considered a zone of disconnection from formal public life, which, in Estonia, might be dated back to the Russian Old Believers who settled around Lake Peipsi in the seventeenth century.

Connecting Devices

To a large extent, we could consider the whole city of Narva as a connector of different languages, legal regimes, political standards, economic practices, religious beliefs and even cosmologies, bringing Russian language to the EU. Hence, this conceptual taxonomy includes objects that work as interfaces, facilitating communication, accommodating different interpretations by various professionals, bridging multiple scales or taking part in wider networks (Star and Griesemer 1989).

Based on its historical experience, this city is characterised by a resilient effort to keep multiple relations open. Here we can find six distinctive scale effects—Soviet, Estonian, European, Russian, city-identity, and also domestic—partially connected and showing complex, overlapping

ontologies. As noted by Robert Kaiser and Elena Nikiforova (2008), all these scales are sedimented through everyday citational practices, establishing in turn a contested scalar hierarchy. The city itself is a juncture that both separates and unites, challenging monolithic understandings of what it means to be Estonian and European.

The movement through of global flows is complex and geographically distributed; here we try to show this by selecting a series of connectors present in the cityscape. A connector is an infrastructure that links different parts in a more or less rigid and durable way, structuring experiences, affecting the parts that they come into contact with and, in some cases, co-evolving with the city, and in others having a life of their own. Connectors come to operate between different worlds, producing new configurations and combinations, and establishing possibilities for crossing, sharing, interacting, seeing and communicating (Serres 2006; Tsing 2000; Viveiros de Castro 2003).

Connecting devices are not simply scaling connections up and down; they also foster new modalities of power and forms of relatedness, not simply of transit and communication, being entangled with different social practices, meanings, values and also landscapes. As an example, the EU is often represented through architectural apertures, such as gates, windows and bridges (Gille 2016). In the case of Narva, we can find both global penetration and circulation, as well as processes of transmission, ramification and interaction.

- *Bridges*: these are built to be crossed, connecting people, places, history and markets. In Narva, we can list a highway bridge (named ‘Friendship’, under the castles), a railway bridge, and a pedestrian bridge (onto Kreenholm island). There is also an in-city bridge, used to cross over the transit lines. Borders are spaces of crossing, which simultaneously unite and separate, putting into contact diverse historical narratives and political scales.

Figure 11. Cross-border bridge for trains. Author, 2019.

- *River*: the Narva River is a zone of interference, producing complex and multi-scalar water infrastructures (see Jauhiainen and Pikner 2009), establishing a particular form of contact between fishermen of both sides, and also challenging locals' imagination in crossing the actual border.

Figure 12. The bridge, the castles, the river and the EU border. Author, 2014.

- *Energy transit infrastructures*: here, we are talking of rigid international inter-connectors that join grids as well as electricity markets, and also train transit lines transporting oil and gas. They run through the city, influencing the qualitative unfolding of Narva. The Balti and the Eesti power plants were built in the 1960s, accompanied by the creation of the water reservoir, which itself generated the distinct landscape of Narva Venice. In 2011, the Auvere power plant was added in a joint venture with the French Alstom. These stations produce 4.5 million tons of ash a year (highly alkaline) and have turned the local water into the most polluted in Estonia. Also, not far away (in Kohla-Järve) there is Viru Keemia, processing two million tons of oil shale rock fragments per year and producing 250,000 tons of synthetic oil and gas. Through information exchange and energy transmission, these infrastructural links reduce global distances and challenge geopolitical disruptions and cultural detachments, yet they also establish their own polarisations within the cityscape, often intensifying uneven development (Graham and Marvin 2001).

Figure 13. Cross-border grid. Author, 2019.

Figure 14. Energy trains. Author, 2019.

- *Domestic doors and curtains*: domestic decoration in Narva reflects its demographics—83% are ethnic Russians; 43% are over fifty years old.⁶ The decoration is often characterised by the means available during the Soviet era (i.e. metal doors, bulky furniture made of cheap wood, memorabilia of Soviet events) and notions of taste referred to as ‘Russian’ (i.e. landscape painting, colourful wooden bowls, ornamental curtains, old books on shelves and so on). Yet in the cottage houses one can find more vernacular and creative decorations, *bricoleur*-like.

Figure 15. Door in the *dacha* area with a silhouette of *Mishka* (Moscow Olympic games mascot). Photo by Tarmo Pikner, 2017.

A Phoenix City

In September 2018, I went to the international Station Narva music festival with some young Estonian friends who were not familiar with the city. For them, it was shocking to confirm how the only official language in their country (Estonian) had little use in the everyday life of this city (for taking a taxi, for shopping, for booking a hotel and so on), and also to discover that Narva required different ways of negotiating and getting things done than in the rest of Estonia. They felt intimidated by the setting, puzzled, uneasy and yet also excited.

Historically perceived as being under a state of reconstruction, Narva has become an example of a city going through radical ruptures, with identity crises and rebuilding being constitutive of its particular life history. In Narva's recent history, we can point out three particularities: its frontier location, its migrant processes, and its intensive industrial activity. As a result, an autonomous space-time

has been consolidated in Narva, a ‘zone’ that affects relations and representations within Estonian society overall. As explained by Ivan Sergejev:

We can call Narva ‘border city’, ‘postsocialist city’, ‘shrinking city’ or ‘post-industrial city’. In a way, all of them apply, yet none of them is enough. These categories are not necessarily capable of explaining the complexity of Narva. Here, there is nothing larger or more special than anywhere else, and many of our problems can still be found somewhere else. Probably, the best concept that describes this city does not come from urban studies, but from psychology: ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’. You can recognise it both in the behaviour of local people, in their search for meaning, their lack of trust, their indolence, but also as a general feeling about the city. . . . Also, on a meta level Narva can be considered a global city, as we stand on the border of the EU and NATO. The fact that we are geographically peripheral makes us politically central.

In Sergejev’s view, Narva suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and demonstrates a strong need for re-urbanisation, underlying a collective feeling of emotional exhaustion and a sense of powerlessness, as well as an urban injury around the Kreenholm area. After negative alterations such as the closing down of the factory or the re-materialisation of the geopolitical border, local people are afraid of changes and of the future, explains the former chief architect. This is manifested in a lack of trust, stress, negative emotional states and also indolence and an existential search for meaning.

Post-traumatic stress disorder can be both driven and expressed through the materiality of the city, in the form of negative material performance, empty apartments or crumbling façades—urban scars that can be approached as a testimony of power (Alexander et al. 2007; Weizman 2010). A rupture or de-structuration of social relations is thus recognisable in failed urban structures and decay. In this regard, Sergejev acknowledges that one of his main tasks, as chief-architect, is to change the way the town perceives itself, and also how Narva is perceived in the rest of the country. For decades, Narvians have been engaged in recalibrating what their position in and relation to Estonia might be. Likewise, this trauma narrative told by Narvians does not fit into the contemporary Estonian narrative of success and national re-awakening after the Soviet ‘occupation’.

Sergejev adds that there have been problems in communication with the rest of Estonia, ‘mostly due to using different languages, but also different interpretations of history and all that. In Narva, many people feel misunderstood. But the city is characterised by the effort to keep multiple relations open, even if not always active’. Interestingly,

Aet Kiisla (a lecturer at the Narva College) notes that living in Narva made her more cynical about the rest of Estonia because of continuous promises of rescue, often alien, delusional, and not applicable to the actual situation of the city. Traumatic experiences might become a key structuring principle precisely because of the difficulty in apprehending them, as they exceed human cognition (Oushakine 2006). Narvians were impelled to resituate themselves by forces that were larger than themselves. In this sense, we can argue that Narva shares some features with non-Eastern European cities, such as Detroit, for instance.

The materiality of a post-traumatic stress disorder often has to do with a sense of vanishing future. As explained by Felix Ringel in his ethnography of Hoyerswerda (in Eastern Germany), the shrinking present of this socialist model town is ‘an intense problematisation of the future’ (2018: 179). Narva also needs to come to terms with the future to open-up the present again, yet conceptualisations such as shrinking or post-industrial do not do justice to the multiscale connectivity of Narva and to locals’ sense of attachment to place.

In my previous ethnographic study of this city (Martínez 2018), I learnt how public life entails a strong performative character, challenging monolithic understandings of what it means to be Estonian, Russian, European, global, postsocialist or post-industrial. Also, it is argued that the density of spatial and historical relations in the city is broader than the history of its current inhabitants, pointing at the radical changes experienced in this city and also the richness of relations and connections. Narva is characterised by a super-abundance of character and connections (Pae 2011). This city appears as a centre out there, neither fully Russian nor Estonian, showing a distinct ‘Narvian’ city identity.

Otherwise, it is interesting to see how this city is rendered differently by the state, by international institutions, by neighbours and by political leaders, not in the form of hierarchical scale politics, but showing the interrelation between scales as nested (Brenner 2001; Pfoser 2017). Asked about this, Sergejev replied:

Still, the relation with St Petersburg is very active and important for Narva . . . Gravitation towards Tallinn is becoming more intense. Tallinn is the place where our laws come from . . . About the relation with Brussels, and besides the most obvious aspect of being located on the border, Narva is the third most successful receiver of EU funds in Estonia, after Tallinn and Tartu . . . To come here means to enter into a different space, an action of transitioning that generates a particular state of mind. Our intention is to make Narva into a place to stay, not

simply a city next to a river to pass through, as if it were a roadside gas station.

Figure 16. Interview with Ivan Sergejev. Photo by Ilja Smirnov, 2018.

The second kind of objects that require further elaboration are the architectural ones. During the Second World War, Narva was occupied by both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and it became part of the front, with artillery (mostly Soviet) devastating 98% of the buildings (Weiss-Wendt 1997). After the war, the Soviet government did not allow the former inhabitants of Narva to return home, and it decided not to reconstruct the baroque old town of Narva, but to rebuild it as a Soviet, modern city (Brüggemann 2004). As pointed out above, in 1991 Narva suffered a geographical shift, suddenly reappearing on the edge of Europe. The city also went through a period of decay, deconstruction and de-industrialisation. The process has been visible in collapsing façades and disappearing parts of the streetscape. In 1659, this city was completely destroyed by fire, and then rebuilt in a Nordic Baroque style, which was again destroyed in the Second World War, and rebuilt in a Soviet modernist style.

Three memory objects:

- *Façade of the Narva College*: the final design of the façade tells us about the local multi-layered pasts and the effects of the negative. The design of the façade dialogues with the previous building at the site (designed in the seventeenth century as the stock exchange), a Baroque construction destroyed in 1944. It reflects on the absence of the old town by appearing as a void, referring to the building that stood there before yet in reverse.

- *Alexander's Cathedral*: built in 1884 and named in honour of the then Russian emperor, the bell tower was destroyed in the Second World War and reconstructed only in 2008. Over €2.5 million of public funds (40% coming from the EU) were spent to help restore the now Lutheran church, which in the meantime acquired the status of cathedral. Part of the renovation cost was financed with a loan, which was unpaid by the congregation. In 2015, therefore, the cathedral went bankrupt and the repair work was left unfinished. A year later, the Estonian state and the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church bought it together for €375,000.⁷
- *A maquette of pre-1940s Narva*: for almost thirty years, Fjodor Šantsõn has been creating a 1:100 scale model of Narva's old town before the Second World War. 'It is sad to work with something that it is lost', acknowledged Fjodor in one of our multiple encounters in the City Hall. In this case, relations to an imaginary past are materialised through the miniature of a non-existent Narva.

Narva is not simply a palimpsest of past forms, but also a compositional and intersectional construction characterised by an intensive interplay of capacities, opportunities and constraints. After decades of decomposition, Narva stands as an incomplete body lacking a referential head. The university building does not manage to play a core role; the former Kreenholm factory no longer plays such a role either, and nor were the several shopping malls meant to play a role in identity construction. All of them coexist with the arrival of multinational capital, property developers and also artists, which bring with them global spatialisations and new urban functions and occupations, for instance pop-up forms such as the Vaba-Laba Theatre, the Station Narva festival or the *Bazar* opinion days. They all contribute to the already complex overlapping of temporalities, relations and rhythm regimes, which might come into conflict with one another, producing arrhythmia (Lefebvre [1992] 2004).

Narva strategically builds new capacities through translocal and inter-scalar ties, partaking in the global flows of ideas, people, funding and policies. This complicates narratives of urban transition as determined by postsocialist processes in a uniformed, monolithic way. Indeed, this city is positioned within supralocal circuits of capital and ideas, having important investments in real estate from Sweden and Russia and in the energy sector from France (paradoxically relying on the Soviet infrastructures). So, in Narva, we find an unfinished, mutated postsocialist city, whose understanding demands genre-transgressing and complex considerations of proximity, belonging, detachment and connection. Narva also shows how a place can form several identities simultaneously,

destabilising any easy distinction between ‘local’ and ‘global’, as well as showing that localities might have effects in other scales too.

Conclusion

Was postsocialism a process of de-modernisation or re-modernisation, of de-politicisation or re-politicisation, of past erasing or future making, of nation reawakening or a change of political scales? This article has investigated whether postsocialism has been able to complete itself as a process, stressing that this term does not work as a linear, well-bordered absolute. It has discussed the increasing distance between postsocialism and the reality referred to by this concept; in other words, between representation and what it represents. After accounting for an actual set of urban features that go beyond a strict, bordered understanding of postsocialism, it shows this has not been a homogeneous, coherent and definitive phenomenon, but rather happened in a fragmented, incomplete and partial way, as the existing Soviet urbanism mutated into something else.

By taking on the concept of ‘trans-socialism’, this article has explored urban space as complex, multi-scalar and epistemologically progressive, engaging with wider debates around the world. Likewise, it has argued for more focus on the relations at stake, instead of reducing the validity of postsocialism to delimited territories through conceptual boundary-work. In this sense, the article’s boundary re-work contributes to debates about the usefulness of ‘postsocialism’ as a heuristic concept to think about changing orders of knowledge and the taking place of globalisation and Europeanisation.

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Notes

1. I talk of *mutation* since this concept refers to stochastic changes, rather accidental or deleterious, hence not necessarily adaptive. *Transformation* would refer to a process that follows a purposeful, better-fit design. Also, the described change of appearance has not been a *transfiguration* into something more beautiful and elevated.
2. Tuvikene (2016) distinguishes between different competing uses of the term ‘postsocialism’—as a spatiotemporal container, a condition, and a deterritorialised concept.

3. Murawski's ethnography foregrounds the strong influence of the legacies of state socialism and its multiple afterlives in the global capitalist context, producing, in turn, an intersectional mode of urbanism.
4. We can find it for instance in the city's main football team, founded as 'Narva Avtomobilist' in 1979 by the workers of the motor depot 19, and renamed 'Narva Trans' in 1991.
5. This methodological exploration with the suffix '-ology' has also been applied to his new project (Murawski 2018b).
6. Narva in Figures, 2017, http://www.narva.ee/en/left_block/narva_in_figures/page:3543 (accessed September 2020)
7. See 'Culture Minister Presents Plan for Narva Church Interior Restoration', *ERR*, 19 January 2020, <https://news.err.ee/1025557/culture-minister-presents-plan-for-narva-church-interior-restoration> (accessed July 2020).

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