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Interethnic Interactions and Group Boundaries: Ukrainians and the Local Russian-Speaking Community in Estonia

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Abstract

This article explores relations between Ukrainians and the local Russian-speaking community in Estonia in the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Ukrainian community has significantly expanded in Estonia since 2022 due to the reception of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. This has led to new dynamics in interethnic relations with the local Russian-speaking community in Estonia, as the two groups share social spaces where they interact daily. Interactions are often marked by ideological tensions related to different perspectives on the war and related political factors. As well as discrimination and symbolic acts of violence, the process has been characterised by so-called conflict transportation, when homeland conflicts influence interethnic relations in the country of settlement. Negative interethnic attitudes, ideological differences, and mistrust intertwined with negative local interethnic experiences contribute to ethnic boundary building on the part of Ukrainians in Estonia. At the same time, some still prefer to blend in with the local Russian-speaking community, particularly those with limited opportunities to navigate in Estonian social contexts due to limited language skills. By focusing on relations between Ukrainians and the local Russian-speaking community in Estonia, this article shifts the focus from titular group-minority studies. It offers perspectives on in-minority relations in the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has significant effects on Estonia's local socio-political dynamics.

Keywords: Estonia; Ukrainian-Russian relations; interethnic relations; full-scale invasion of Ukraine

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Introduction

Conflicts often spread beyond territorial boundaries and manifest in many forms and societies. Alongside diaspora groups, refugees are considered actors who play a role in so-called conflict transportation processes through their conflict-related experiences, attitudes, and narratives. These are not only brought from the homeland to the countries of settlement during the migration process, but also “downloaded”, transformed, and adapted from generation to generation (Baser, 2012) in response to group interests and realities in the settlement context (Féron & Voytiv, 2022, p. 1089). Such groups can experience the conflict in their homeland across the distance and incorporate it into their daily lives (Demmers, 2002, p. 94). These experiences, attitudes, and narratives can shape relations with other groups in the settlement country, especially those perceived as rivals.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has made thousands of Ukrainians refugees in Estonia, which has significantly expanded the existing Ukrainian community in the country (UNHCR Estonia, 2024, p. 2). Surveys conducted among Ukrainian refugees show that they come from different backgrounds as well as from various regions of Ukraine, both Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking (IOM, 2023a, p. 5). In this context, it is essential to note that Estonia is a country with a significant population of Russian speakers, constituting the largest ethnic minority group. Estonia has a history of troubled experiences in integrating this group since regaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The local Russian-speaking community in Estonia is neither a homogeneous group ethnically (in addition to ethnic Russians, it also includes those with ethnic origins from Ukraine, Belarus, and other countries) nor when it comes to political attitudes. Since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine, attitudes both about the war and the reception of Ukrainian refugees have differed within the community and there has been no dominant perspective on whether to support or oppose the war and the reception of Ukrainian refugees (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2023).

Given Estonia's complex interethnic context, scholarly attention has long focused on the relations between Estonians and the local Russian-speaking communities. The issue has been explored through various lenses, from party politics to communal tensions (Park, 1994; Steen, 2000; Aklaev, 2001; Nakai, 2014). However, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and the arrival of tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees (joining the existing Ukrainian diaspora) have introduced a new and largely understudied dimension to interethnic relations in Estonia. Ukrainians now interact daily with other communities in schools, workplaces, and public life, giving rise to new social dynamics. Reports by international organisations have highlighted challenges in interethnic dynamics. Based on International Organisation for Migration (IOM) surveys that aimed to identify integration challenges for Ukrainians in Estonia, in 2023 up to 24% of respondents reported discrimination since arriving in Estonia, much of it from those of ethnic Russian origin (IOM, 2023a, p. 18). However, the reports do not cover identity or conflict transportation-related issues or explore the reasons behind this discrimination. Pre-existing interethnic relations in Estonia, different societal attitudes to the Russo-Ukrainian war and Ukrainian refugees, as well as the broader geopolitical context, underscore the need

to investigate interactions between Ukrainians and the local Russian-speaking community within Estonia. This is especially relevant considering the potential influence of the war and the emergence of ethnic boundaries on a societal level between the groups, driven by unwelcoming attitudes and ideological divisions.

Stimulated by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, new interethnic dynamics in Estonia are bringing new dimensions of interethnic relations into scientific focus. This paper analyses the interactions and boundary-making processes of Ukrainians living in Estonia – both older diaspora members and recent refugees – with the local Russian-speaking community. The Russian-speaking community in Estonia is the second biggest group that Ukrainians interact with after the titular group, the Estonians. While Ukrainians are already a significant ethnic group in Estonia with their own linguistic, cultural, and ideological background, it is essential to ask: what are their interactions like with the local Russian-speaking community, and how are group boundaries developing under the influence of the war?

This research employed semi-structured interviews as a primary source of data collection. Interviews were held with Ukrainians living in Estonia who were active members of their respective community through involvement in different ethnic and cultural organisations, as well as with representatives and experts from organisations and research institutions working on integration, minority, and migration-related issues.

The article first discusses the Estonian interethnic context and the effects of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a contextual background. Even though the homeland conflict (the Russian-Ukrainian War) might influence the interethnic interactions of the respective groups in Estonia, the settlement country context also plays a significant role in shaping the interaction dynamics and group strategies. Thus, understanding the Estonian context as a background is crucial. Next, the theoretical frameworks of conflict transportation and group boundary making are explained, which are used to analyse the characteristics of interactions between Ukrainians and the local Russian-speaking community in Estonia, followed by a note on the methods. In the empirical part, the article discusses the integration characteristics of Ukrainians in Estonia, later moving to interactions with the local Russian-speaking community, us-them divisions, and analyses of the political and ideological reasons behind it.

The Estonian interethnic context and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

Estonia has long been an interesting case for scholars of interethnic relations. The country has a significant number – almost a quarter of the population (Statistics Estonia, n.d.) – of Russian-speakers whose integration persists as a challenge. Soviet rule and the later continuous threat from Russia strongly influenced Estonia's national project and perceptions about how to ensure state and societal security. As Russia has continuously attempted to meddle in the country's internal affairs through its compatriot related foreign policy, as well as aiming to influence Estonia's foreign policy and relations with the West (Herd & Löfgren, 2001, p. 282), Estonia's principal goal has become to ensure not only its military and economic security, but also its societal security, including securing cultural, demographic and linguistic

guarantees for the Estonian nation (Kuus, 2002, p. 95). This is also embodied in its citizenship and naturalisation policies. In the first years of independence, the citizenship policy allowed some non-Estonian residents to become citizens; However, under the policy almost one-third of the population was unable to acquire citizenship. Those Russian speakers who were unable to become Estonian citizens either held Russian citizenship or were stateless individuals who gained the right to permanent residence in Estonia, which does not equal citizenship (Järve, 2009, p. 46). Residents could become Estonian citizens through naturalisation under determined circumstances; after international suggestions and policy changes, the number of naturalised people increased. By 2024, there were 62,212 individuals in Estonia with unspecified citizenship (Statistics Estonia, n.d.). However, it is often discussed socially that integration of the local Russian-speaking community remains a challenge.

One of the most significant issues straining relations between the local Russian-speaking community and Estonians has been language. Some Russian speakers continue to have difficulties obtaining sufficient Estonian language skills, which are necessary both for the naturalisation process as well as for active involvement in social spheres and political life. The Estonian government has prioritised this issue in integration politics, meaning that linguistic integration and the formation of a population loyal to the state had a core meaning. Starting in the early 2000s, the focal points of Estonian integration programs were language, education, civil society, and mass media (Aklaev, 2001, pp. 24–25). According to Statistics Estonia, based on the 2021 census, 40% of those identifying as Russians living in Estonia still do not speak any other language apart from their mother tongue (Statistics Estonia, 2022). For many years, Estonia has offered school education in two languages, Estonian and Russian, mainly to avoid further deterioration of relations. However, in 2022, the government initiated the transition into a fully Estonian-language education from kindergarten to all stages of education. This also aims to support strengthening Estonian national identity and promote social integration (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.).

One of the significant challenges that Estonian society has been experiencing is the informational influence from Russia, exacerbating interethnic differences. Surveys targeting this topic show that Estonian speakers are less likely to use or trust Russian information sources. In contrast, the local Russian-speaking community is more exposed to them. However, when it comes to trust towards news about important topics like Ukrainian issues, the local Russian-speaking community as a group is divided, with a significant part still believing that Russian state media can objectively cover it, while others doubt its objectivity (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2023, p. 9). The fact that Russian media is the source of information for the significant part of the local Russian-speaking population, not only in Estonia but also in other Baltic states, has been regarded as a challenge for national interests and security, as Russian propaganda messages can influence the identity construction process of Russian speakers in Baltic states, with a potential to detach them from their states of residence and consolidate their loyalties to Russia. To answer these challenges, the Baltic states have been

trying to limit the number of available propaganda channels from Russia, yet the influence is not easy to break in the short-term.

Since 2014, Russia's actions towards its neighbouring countries, and especially Ukraine, have strained Estonian-Russian relations and significantly affected Estonian public opinion: that the crisis in Ukraine goes beyond Ukraine itself, posing threats to the Baltic region and European security as a whole (Maigre, 2015, p. 17). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 further aggravated Estonia's security threat perceptions. Estonia declared unconditional support to Ukraine, manifested in political, military, economic and humanitarian assistance, alongside the continuous diplomatic support (Jakobson & Kasekamp, 2023, p. 118). Estonia has received thousands of Ukrainian refugees, making it one of the biggest hosts among European countries considering its small population (Eurostat, n.d.). Public support towards Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees is generally high among the Estonian public. However, in-group differences can be more noticeable in the local Russian-speaking community. Based on the study by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2023, p. 11) if 80% of the Estonian speakers describe themselves as on the supportive side to Ukraine in the war, then the Russian-speaking population is divided – the majority refuses to take a side, about 28% support Ukraine, while 17% openly support Russia. Estonians are also overwhelmingly in favour of receiving Ukrainian refugees, while Russian-speakers are more divided about this topic, too – the majority are still positive, while 23% oppose.

Based on the ideological differences between the ethnic groups and the new interethnic dynamics that now include Ukrainians as well (with their war-related experiences and ethnic perceptions), social cohesion might experience challenges. Thus, it becomes increasingly important to uncover new interethnic dynamics, especially between Ukrainians and the local-Russian-speaking community in Estonia. Ukrainian-Russian ethnic relations beyond the conflict zone have been largely understudied, and Estonia offers interesting ground for this research. While previous scholarly attention has been concentrated on Estonian-Russian community relations in a tradition of titular-minority group studies, this study shifts the focus to in-minority relations. It offers an understanding of the new interethnic dynamics in Estonia, stimulated by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Theoretical framework

Several studies have addressed the effect of homeland conflicts on interethnic relations in the settlement countries among groups emotionally connected to those conflicts (Baser, 2013; Romashov, 2022; Féron & Baser, 2023; Özgür & Deniz, 2024; Voytiv, 2024). The theoretical perspective of conflict transportation, which is strongly associated with the works of Élise Féron (who has significantly contributed to its development and application) is relatively new in peace and conflict research. The studies conducted in this dimension show that the retention of ethnic, religious, linguistic, or political identities, even generations after migration, can lead to a process of conflict transportation, where conflicts from ethnic groups' countries of origin are reproduced in the countries they settle in (Féron, 2017,

p. 360). Incidents between opposing ethnic groups in the settlement country are often perceived as an extension or reproduction of the primary conflict from their countries of origin. When opposing groups settle together in the same place, the primary conflict between their countries of origin continues to define the relations framework. However, there is also a parallel distancing from the primary conflict in the new environment, as groups might have new political and organisational goals. Based on this theoretical perspective, homeland conflicts can be transported by the ethnic groups in settlement settings in multiple ways, from everyday life to political and institutional levels. They can result in physical and social distancing between the ethnic groups, perceiving each other as rivals. The most common forms of conflict transportation are political, discursive, and symbolic, emphasising the division of symbols between groups. Such symbolic and discursive expressions play a significant role in causing tensions between the ethnic groups and, in some cases, lead to violence (Féron, 2017, p. 364). The theoretical perspective of conflict transportation helps to understand the influences of the Russo-Ukrainian war on Ukrainian-Russian-speaking community ethnic relations in Estonia, as well as how war-related attitudes and ideological differences continue to shape interethnic interactions locally.

Group boundary building processes associated with war-related interethnic perceptions are common during the conflict transportation process. A generalised, yet simple example of group boundary is the “us and them” division that scholars often analyse on individual, group, national or international levels. As Charles Tilly puts it:

People everywhere organize a significant part of their social interaction around the formation, transformation, activation, and suppression of social boundaries. It happens at the small scale of interpersonal dialogue, at the medium scale of rivalry within organizations, and at the large scale of genocide. Us-them boundaries matter (Tilly, 2004, p. 213).

The exact phrase cited here shows that the group boundaries are not fixed and do change. They can be formed, transformed, or shifted; activated or suppressed. Boundary changes are often incentive-based and constitute a response to changes in the environment. According to Andreas Wimmer’s theoretical approach about ethnic boundary making, ethnic boundaries react to exogenous factors like political events that incentivise the actors to adopt new strategies of boundary making, transforming old ones, inventing new ones, or borrowing them from the outside (Wimmer, 2008, pp. 1005–1007).

As noted, external factors play a significant role in group interaction strategies. Quite often, real or perceived danger outside the group strengthens the group’s cohesion and solidarity while decreasing it towards “them” on the other side. The process is often accompanied by strong ideological and organisational support for the sense of group identity (Malešević, 2011, p. 143).

Both conflict transportation and ethnic boundary-making theoretical approaches offer an effective departure point in understanding how interactions are organised between Ukrainians and local Russian-speakers in Estonia, as well as identifying influential factors, be it internal or external, such as a homeland conflict.

Note on methods and positionality

The primary data sources of this study, which was designed as qualitative research, are semi-structured interviews held with 11 respondents from March to May 2025. The participants of the semi-structured interviews were active members of Ukrainian organisations in Estonia, actively involved in community support activities and able to offer perspectives on group levels. As well as organisational experts working on refugee integration-related matters and minority issues in Estonia, with professional knowledge about the dynamics throughout the country, many of them ethnically Ukrainian or Russian, and able to offer perspectives about integration and interethnic issues not only from personal but also professional experiences when interacting with the communities in question. Based on interviewee preferences, interviews were held online as well as face-to-face in Estonia. The interview format and language were always pre-agreed with the interviewees. The vast majority were comfortable with giving the interviews in English, which served as a neutral language, considering that some participants were originally Russian-speaking Ukrainians who prioritised English in non-day-to-day interactions, considering their experiences and ideological factors. All participants have been informed about the topic and purpose of the study, as well as the method of analysis that was used, thematic analysis. The data from the interviews is complemented with quantitative data from the reports by IOM based on surveys with Ukrainian refugees throughout 2023. If the reports cover mainly quantitative aspects of Ukrainian refugee life in Estonian society (including mentioning challenges like discrimination by members of the local Russian-speaking community), they do not cover the reasons behind it or how Ukrainians perceive it; semi-structured interviews enabled the identification of key aspects shaping the interactions of the two groups. With the full recognition that the topic I as a researcher was interested in could be sensitive for some participants, the interviews were designed to address group level experiences. This approach kept the process emotionally less charged, helped participants to feel more comfortable, and allowed them to share personal experiences and examples if they wished.

Additionally, since the research was qualitative, as a researcher I performed the dual role of both gathering and interpreting the data. Therefore, it is important to discuss the researcher's role in this process. Given my own cultural background and perspectives regarding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in my sociopolitical environment, efforts were made to minimize any influence on the opinions expressed during the interviews. I formulated the questions in a neutral manner and refrained from revealing any personal stance on the political processes or dynamics being discussed. It is important to note that my experiences in conflict-affected settings provided a unique understanding of interethnic interactions beyond the conflict zone. These experiences often mirrored those of the interviewees. To make my research intentions clear to the participants, I informed them about my own life experiences in Estonia and how the research idea was born when the country was receiving a large number of Ukrainian refugees. Sharing my background and clearly communicating research objectives with participants helped to build mutual trust and positive interactions that made interviews easier.

To ensure respondents could freely express themselves, without fear of pressure of being able to match socially acceptable opinions, the interviews were anonymous. The quotes used below do not include any names or organisational affiliations of the interviewees.

Ukrainians in Estonia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

As previously noted, since 2022 Estonia has become one of the biggest hosts of Ukrainian refugees in Europe. As of the end of June 2025, more than 34,000 Ukrainians have been under temporary protection in Estonia; however, the officially-reported numbers may still be lower than the actual number of Ukrainian citizens in Estonia (ICDS, 2025). As an ethnic group, Ukrainians were also present in Estonia before 2022; there have been numerous Ukrainian organisations in Estonia, mostly of a cultural character. Thus, the presence of Ukrainians in Estonian society was not a new phenomenon. But the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the reception of tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees expanded the community quickly and caused changes both for the existing diaspora and newcomers.

After the outbreak of the full-scale war, there were several key developments regarding the Ukrainian community in Estonia that significantly contributed to the community's mobilisation. The existing diaspora started responding to the new situation very quickly. Ukrainian organisations in Estonia started accepting new members, and they opened their doors to the refugees. Most importantly, they shifted the focus from mainly cultural activities to charity activities, raising money for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees and organising activities supporting the integration of Ukrainian newcomers.

As Ukrainian refugees noted during the interviews, the existing diaspora and organisations helped them to feel welcome and continue to play a role in their integration process through organising different cultural activities, festivals, and events that contribute both to strengthening Ukrainian identity in Estonia and getting close to the local community too.

Another significant factor was the welcoming approach of the Estonian state and society. As was mentioned during almost every interview when speaking about integration process for Ukrainian refugees, Estonia's integration approach has been to treat them in the same way as other residents of Estonia, without special regulations, laws, or practices. During interviews, it was noted several times that Estonia provided shelter and support to the refugees during the first period after their arrival. However, they later had to find jobs and accommodation for themselves just like every other resident. A representative of one of the organisations working on integration-related issues noted:

One of the biggest advantages of Estonia is that we did not establish any new law specific for the Ukrainians, which has been done in different countries in Europe...in Czech Republic... I know this has been done in Latvia, Lithuania, etc. ...The one of the types of that is, we are talking about the temporary protection. Ukrainians have the same rights and obligations as all the residents in Estonia... They could go for work. The kids could go to kindergarten, schools and so on. So everything is being like the same as for myself.

Estonia's specific integration approach was noted by almost every respondent, with emphasis that there is no different treatment or 'independent money' for Ukrainians, and even social benefits are given based on the same criteria and procedures as for every other resident.

According to the data from the IOM, the majority of Ukrainians already work in Estonia and most do not have the desire or plan to move from Estonia in the short term (IOM, 2024). This also suggests the results of the integration approach: mainly, that refugees can already sustain themselves and are not dependent on the state.

Another strongly manifested factor highlighted during the interviews was Estonian societal support towards refugees. This aspect is demonstrated in existing quantitative studies as well. Numbers regarding levels of support have also been noted earlier in this paper. Another important aspect is how Ukrainians in Estonia perceive this support. Interviewees with refugee backgrounds – as well as professionals who have worked with this group – noted during the interviews that Ukrainians in Estonia not only feel and appreciate the support received, but also understand where it is derived from and that the reasons for the support are strongly associated with Estonia's own historical experiences of oppression from Russia, negative public opinion towards Russia's aggressive neighbourhood policy, and ongoing security threats which have been aggravated after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As one of the Ukrainians living in Estonia and actively engaging with Ukrainian refugees stated:

Of course, the political side, politicians still support Ukraine and main population of Estonia, Estonians of course support, because they understand that potential – we here in Estonia are the next victim of this invasion.

Ukrainians and the local Russian-speaking community: Spaces of interaction

As noted, attitudes towards Ukraine and Ukrainians are not homogenous within the local Russian-speaking community. IOM surveys with Ukrainian refugees that were regularly conducted in 2023 all indicate that discrimination within Estonia is an issue for 20–24% of the surveyed Ukrainians (See: IOM, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d). Discrimination is often connected to experiences of humiliation and bullying from those of ethnic Russian origin in Estonia, the surveys say. However, the surveys do not examine the reasons behind the cases of discrimination, the context or the environment in which they occur, nor how Ukrainians perceive these cases. Instead, they generally frame it as a challenge for integration and inclusion.

In this regard, studies regarding relations between different ethnic groups in different countries that have been examined in the context of the conflict transportation perspective suggest the trend that, even though the conflict continues to affect interethnic relations in settlement contexts, the situation is still not identical to that in the homeland as conflict-related factors (feelings, perceptions, memories, ideological factors) become intertwined with new realities and contexts (Toivanen & Baser, 2019, p. 24; Jensen & Féron, 2021, p. 38). Based on the cases and situations that have been mentioned during the interviews, this logic is present in the case of interactions between Ukrainians and the local Russian-speaking

community too. There are many spaces where the two groups meet each other, creating new social dynamics. The local Russian-speaking community has had many challenges in terms of integration in Estonia. One of the most significant issues for part of this community, as mentioned before, is having low (or no) skills in the Estonian language, which has put this group behind in receiving higher education (Schulze, 2014, p. 27), accessing highly-paid jobs, and so on. So-called blue-collar jobs have often been dominated by local Russian-speakers due to fewer requirements in the Estonian language in the sector. Since the number of Ukrainians in Estonia has risen significantly, and due to the fact that many Ukrainians tried to get a job quickly and went for lower-level jobs, this environment has become a meeting point of the two groups. Ukrainian refugees in Estonia come from various regions of Ukraine; however, a significant number originate from the eastern parts of the country, which are traditionally Russian-speaking and have been heavily affected by the occupation. For many of these refugees, Russian is their first language. Some Ukrainians decided to put children in Russian-speaking schools to make the adaptation process easier, which also meant creating spaces of interaction between Ukrainian and local Russian-speaking children and parents. The same spaces became a source for challenges in relations, considering the interethnic perceptions and ideological differences. In these spaces, different ideologies meet: this increases the likelihood of conflicts and discrimination. Interviewees mentioned challenges even at schools where children with different ethnic backgrounds study together, as the information they hear at home and the perceptions and attitudes their families have affected how they interact with other children. As one of the Ukrainian refugees working at a school remembers:

One teacher came to me, Estonian teacher, and told about the discrimination during her lesson, when Russian Estonian boy did not want to sit near Ukrainian boy. Yes, because his father did not allow him to do it... And she was very impressed. Not impressed, but she was shocked.

These dynamics in Estonia became a new dimension in interethnic relations which had not necessarily been noticeably present before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but which became increasingly relevant during the war. Ukrainian refugees working at schools also noted that the challenges are greater at Russian-language schools and lesser at Estonian schools. This has been new for the schools too; thus, they are gradually learning how to manage such cases.

Ideological factors, such as how the groups perceive the situation between Ukraine and Russia, significantly affect the characteristics of interactions. Even though there is no violent open conflict between the two groups, grounded negative perceptions towards each other often strain everyday interactions. As one Ukrainian interviewee says:

When they (Ukrainians and the local Russian-speakers) have fun together, or just going to play table games, this is again a sample from the real life... and when people communicate – Ukrainian refugees and local Russian-speaking people, they are smiling to each other, but when they take like one, two, three shots of the beer, alcohol, they start to communicate about these political issues and the Russian-speakers blaming them (Ukrainians) – this is

your fault, you started the fight and use all those Russian-speaking propaganda which they consume from the TV shows from Russian channels because they 100% believe in that.

The us-them division, distancing, and boundaries in making: Ukrainian perspectives

There have been many scholarly discussions on why and how ethnic identities are essential in determining interactions between the groups and in how their boundaries are formed. Wimmer, in her multilevel process theory about ethnic boundary making, highlights that this process should not be understood from a primordial perspective, giving importance to the ethnicity as a bounding factor itself, but in terms of a more constructivist perspective, giving importance to the social forces, exogenous factors that make ethnicity salient in certain situations and social environments (Wimmer, 2008, p. 977). In the case of Ukrainians and their interactions with the local Russian-speaking community in Estonia, the interviews highlighted political and ideological aspects that gain importance when deciding about strategies of boundary making.

The influence of the war on Ukrainians has been expressed in both their cultural identity expressions and their political behaviour within Estonia. In response to the war, many Ukrainians in Estonia stopped using the Russian language and are using only Ukrainian or, alternatively, another relevant language. Firstly, this is to express their cultural and linguistic distinction from Russia and the Russians and highlight the sufficiency of their own identity. Secondly, not using the Russian language, even though one might be able to understand and speak it, carries a political meaning too. It symbolises protest against Russian aggression and distancing from Russian political influences. When discussing the influences of the war on Ukrainians in Estonia during the interviews, representatives of the organisations working on migration and integration matters within the country and working with Ukrainian groups noted that there are several Ukrainian organisations in different cities of Estonia who refuse to use Russian and only use Ukrainian, or if relevant, English. As one of the Ukrainian interviewees explains:

It is a difficult question, as it all depends on people and there are very many different people in here. I can say that 99% of Ukrainians speak Ukrainian, and I think 99% know Russian. So it is more of a question do they use Russian language or not. And many of them associate the language to the aggressor that invaded their country. So ideology of some people is that they just do not speak any Russian, though they understand.

As noted above, Ukrainians in Estonia have been offered support both by the state and the majority of the population. However, they met the challenges with some members of the local Russian-speaking community. Interviewees mentioned that, because of the expected unfriendliness and ideological conflict, some Ukrainians started distancing themselves from the Russian-speaking community:

If Ukrainians are coming to Estonia, they are really, trying to go to that places to live where there are not a lot of Russian speakers. This could be really been said in a very, like, confirmed way. So if you talk about the eastern part of Estonia, where there are a lot of

Russian speakers, there are not Ukrainians there. Still they are, but they are not (many) – an expert from the organisation working on migration matters says.

However, as noted, there are spaces where the groups still have to interact considering the social environment, such as when many local Russian speakers and Ukrainians work or study together. In such specific environments or even in everyday life, there are cases of unwelcome interactions, which causes the desire to create distance within these spaces between the groups. Interviewees note that if the social environment makes avoidance impossible and it is expected that the pro-Kremlin narrative will dominate the discussion, then the strategy of Ukrainians is not to discuss sensitive topics, like politics, to avoid conflict.

It is important to note that not all Ukrainians coming to Estonia speak Ukrainian or are willing to learn Estonian. And there are some who prefer to find a job in Estonian cities where the Russian language is dominant, as it is an easier and faster way to sustain themselves. However, challenges with locals still occur. During the interviews, it was mentioned several times that in such cases Ukrainians try to blend in by not communicating their political loyalties. Choosing a neutral stance on sensitive issues such as the war and international politics can serve as a strategy to integrate into the local Russian-speaking community. This approach often yields benefits like job opportunities and personal safety, as displaying pro-Russian sentiments or maintaining a neutral position on the war and related political matters is seen as a criterion for acceptance by some local-Russian speakers.

Of course, because they cannot protect themselves and this bullying happening in schools too. And of course you will not get any kind of the working place in case you have this pro-Ukrainian views, so people are hiding this kind of the information usually and trying to be “neutral”, because this is primary question about their safety. – Ukrainian interviewee also working with refugees.

Using different strategies of inter-group interactions and boundary making highlights the role of differences in in-group motivations as well as the role of the environment, which suggests what kind of strategy can be more effective when interacting with the other group, which is considered as a “rival”. While some Ukrainians choose a firmer ethnic boundary with local Russian-speakers, trying to distance themselves physically, culturally, and politically, there are others who prefer to blend in, based on their personal intentions and social conditions in Estonia, and who aim to put themselves in a situation which will allow to sustain themselves easier.

Incidents between the groups

Transported conflicts in settlement countries can be manifested differently, from non-violent to violent ways. Even though there is no widespread organised group violence between Ukrainians and local Russian-speakers in Estonia (which requires a high level of mobilisation and coordinated action), discursive tensions, individual violent acts, aggression in social media, violence against national symbols, and symbolic acts of violence on the basis of ethnic

identity are present. Such acts significantly affect interethnic perceptions and incentivises building ethnic boundaries.

The interviews highlighted that Ukrainians perceive violent incidents and aggression online as demonstrated anti-Ukrainianism by a part of the local Russian-speaking community. The tensions are especially easy to notice on social media, where there is more space for expression. Hate speech, aggressive comments, and especially blaming Ukrainian refugees as a new group is common, and has been highlighted during almost every interview. Those interviewees who have monitored this issue note that even though conflict on social media has been quite tense, the 'word war' rarely goes beyond the digital space. A local Russian interviewee who has also been working with Ukrainian refugees and has been aware of the activities of the two groups in the digital space has noted that mostly those engaged in the 'word war' are less-integrated Russian-speakers who may have aggression against Ukrainians living in Estonia but lack the ability to organise anything beyond social media; thus, hate speech is the most effective instrument for this particular part of the community.

Interviewees note that Ukrainians perceive this kind of social media behaviour as aggressive, and that makes them think that part of the group of local Russian speakers wants only to hear and see negative content about Ukrainians and Ukraine, as it fits their ideological agenda and ethnic attitudes. Ukrainian interviewees could offer specific examples that strengthen this perception:

Maybe like two weeks ago. Maybe you know, Valery Meladze, Russian singer. He came to Tallinn... after the concert there was a huge scandal. Why? Because Ukrainian refugee singer, a young lady came to the scene and started to sing with Meladze and Russian-speaking ladies were afterwards in comments in Tiktok in YouTube, in local mass media so aggressive and started to blame them (Ukrainians): This is not a karaoke, why people came from Ukraine, Estonia was much calm before... So they found the reason to blame because they were not happy that somebody from Ukraine came to this concert – Ukrainian interviewee.

However, social media is not the only place where Ukrainians experience aggression. One of the important aspects identified during the interviews was the conflict around resources. Considering that many of the local Russian-speakers now have to work with Ukrainians, some perceive it as an attempt by the Ukrainians to take away their job opportunities. The competition for resources, multiplied by ideological differences, create conflictual situations between the two groups in the workplaces.

Another aspect that has been noticeable during the interviews is associating violent incidents against national symbols or places related to Ukraine or Ukrainians with political differences and tensions between the groups. When speaking about tensions between the groups, some Ukrainian interviewees remembered violent incidents against national symbols including cases against Ukrainian flags (which can be found both in the streets and on people's houses) as well as against places which have symbolic meaning for Ukrainians, like the area in Tallinn in front of the Russian embassy, where people leave banners, flowers, and different items to express support towards Ukraine. Interviewees named cases where

stones have been thrown at the windows of houses with Ukrainian flags, or when little stamps which people carry on their clothes or bags have been damaged during conflictual situations on public transport. Some of the interviewees said that, in such situations, they had had to call the police themselves. In relation to acts against Ukrainian symbols or places related to identity which have taken place in Estonia, one of the interviewees recalled that there have been attempts to destroy property associated with Ukrainians or related to Ukraine. For example, an explosive device was thrown at a restaurant called *Slava Ukraini* in downtown Tallinn. In some cases, interviewees have witnessed or heard that local-Russian speakers have been involved in such incidents. However, even when it is not a proven fact, associating such incidents with interethnic tensions and ethnic, political, and ideological conflict was common during the interviews.

Usually, Ukrainians speak more openly regarding their relations with the local Russian-speaking community, while many local Russian-speakers avoid discussing this topic. This has been noticeable during interviews too. When asked to participate in the interviews, local Russian-speakers were more avoidant than Ukrainians. This can be explained by hesitance to freely and openly express opinions regarding societally-sensitive issues. This can be related to fear or pressure from a society that is increasingly supportive towards one side in the war, as it might signal the group to restrain themselves from openly communicating their attitudes. This has also been visible in quantitative studies cited above, where the majority of local Russian speakers restrain themselves from taking a side and quite often position themselves as neutral regarding Ukraine or Ukrainian issues. As highlighted during the interviews, this is often negatively perceived by Ukrainians, causing uncertainty and mistrust. As one of the Ukrainian experts working on Ukrainian issues in academic contexts in Estonia says, “undecided Russians” – those who are asked about their views about the war and they say they have no opinion – are a problem. As the interviewee said, “I don’t know” is problematic, as no one knows what it signifies; thus, this uncertainty decreases trust towards the group among Ukrainians.

Based on highlights made during the interview process, these issues between two minority groups can be sometimes overlooked by Estonians due to two main reasons: firstly, that there are no major violent clashes, so the issue does not attract attention; and secondly, for some Estonians it is hard to differentiate between local Russian speakers and Ukrainians due to similarities in the two languages and the fact that some Ukrainians also use the Russian language. As one of the representatives of an organisation working on refugee issues says:

For an average Estonian, it’s very hard to make a distinction between Russian speaking and Ukrainian speaking. For him, it’s like a Slavic person. So again, if a person says that I’m Ukrainian, okay, ice is shifting, because Estonia is really being good friends with Ukraine, a lot of Ukrainians really got very easily (in Estonia).

This aspect can be potentially challenging, as this topic related to minority groups lacks representation both in research circles and at the policy level, which can potentially further add to issues of social cohesion in the long run.

Informational and ideological influences and preconditions for further social distancing for Ukrainians

Almost every interviewee who highlighted the incidents between the groups under ethnic and ideological motives also notes that the difficulty to find common ground with local Russian speakers in Estonia is strongly associated with the Russian informational influences that some local Russian speakers in Estonia consume. Anti-Ukrainian propaganda continues to affect the perceptions of part of the local Russian-speakers regarding Ukrainian issues. A representative of the organisation working with refugees and migration matters in Estonia said during the interview that a significant part of community members still continue to live in a “bubble of Kremlin narratives”, because of the dependence on Russian media sources and YouTube and Facebook channels that Russia uses to spread its desired narratives. Because of Estonian restrictions on Russian media, many use VPNs to access this information which later reaches their workplaces too, according to the interviewee.

Russian media is often loaded with anti-Ukrainian propaganda (Kravchenko, 2023, pp. 99–101). Thus, Russian informational influences have substantial effect on interactions and supports raising the boundaries between the two groups.

I've heard, and some Ukrainians were telling me that there are being discriminated because if you are coming to the factory, there are a lot of Russians there and of course they use the same narratives during the working day – Why did you come here? You are a fascist, go back to Ukraine and so on. So if we talk about the working places there, where there are a lot of like Russian-speaking population together with Ukrainians, of course there are tensions – organizational representative working with refugees.

As noted above, it was identified during the interviews that some Ukrainians in Estonia generally try to avoid active interactions with local Russian speakers, unless driven by individual needs like the preference to find a job in an increasingly Russian-speaking environment. This avoidance is based on perceptions regarding the political and ideological differences between the groups, strengthening the need for Ukrainians to build an ethnic boundary. However, cases of discrimination and negative interactions can further stimulate social distancing, not only because of the desire to avoid discussions about specific sensitive topics, but also because of safety reasons. This is especially noteworthy, considering that some interviewees mentioned that some Ukrainians do not even report cases that require attention from the police. This is because some of them think they are at a lower level in the ethnic and social hierarchy in Estonia. As one of the Ukrainian community leaders noted during the interview:

Estonian state protects the refugees strongly and operational level, I can 100% confirm that police takes it very seriously. But in order to get involved, it needs to be reported. And in many cases, unfortunately, Ukrainians feel like they are those who came here, they do not have much rights even though it is not like that, they have same rights and obligations as local people here.

Even though not all cases get reported, they can still signal the group to take safety precautions. These measures can be stronger ethnic boundaries and increased social distancing, fuelled by homeland conflict-related negative ethnic attitudes and mistrust, intertwined with some negative local experiences, resulting in more challenges in social cohesion.

Discussion and conclusion

After the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many Ukrainian refugees found themselves shelter in Estonia, which significantly expanded the Ukrainian community in the country. Considering Estonia's ethnic composition and history of interethnic relations, the new interethnic dimension – relations between Ukrainians and the local Russian-speaking community – became relevant yet overlooked and understudied. This intra-minority interethnic relationship between Ukrainians and local Russian speakers in Estonia carries significant characteristics of a transported conflict. The Ukrainian diaspora living in Estonia before 2022 was indirectly affected by the war; they, along with Ukrainian refugees, now interact with the local Russian-speaking community, a part of whom, due to ideological factors, also carries sentiments towards the Russian-Ukrainian war. These interactions continue to be shaped by the war, as political and ideological differences fuel mistrust and reinforce negative perceptions, thereby influencing the construction of ethnic boundaries.

The interviews within this study showed that discursive tensions and aggression against Ukrainian symbols that are emotionally important to the group have been present in Estonia and are often associated with inter-group tensions by Ukrainians. The interviewed Ukrainians perceive this as aggression and a demonstration of anti-Ukrainianism. As this study also showed, some Ukrainians have been distancing themselves from local Russian speakers, avoiding living in the Russian-speaking areas. However, considering that the two groups still interact at workplaces, schools, or other social environments, cases of aggression occur and negative ethnic and ideological attitudes and mistrust manifest themselves.

During the interviews, it became evident that, for the interviewed Ukrainians, aggression against their ethnic group is believed to be strongly connected to ideological influences from Russia, distributed by Russian informational sources among part of the Russian speakers in Estonia. The conflicting narratives reach the places of interaction and easily become a source of conflict. To ensure their safety, these incidents can further create incentives among Ukrainians for ethnic boundaries and social distancing.

The case contributes to the conflict transportation theoretical perspective, showing how the war in Ukraine and related ethnic perceptions play out in the local context in Estonia, shaping new dimensions of interethnic relations locally. The interactions between Ukrainians and local Russian-speaking community, as well as the processes of boundary making, reflect specific characteristics that are relevant to the Estonian societal context. These dynamics show that, in addition to the conflict in their homeland and the associated ethnic grievances, the local context also plays an important role in shaping these interactions. Further, narrower studies in relation to this particular aspect of this interethnic case will provide the full picture

of the process and further contribute to academic knowledge about interethnic relations in settlement settings. This will be done through highlighting the role of specific factors like state position or responses regarding the war in question as well as its influences on local interethnic dynamics.

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