

## **Valga and Valka - Divided by a "Berlin Wall"**

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High iron bars block the way; streets end in the middle of nowhere. Even in the year 2004, the Latvian-Estonian border that runs between Valka and Valga would appear to be impenetrable. The fence is known in the vernacular as the "Berlin Wall".

For more than 600 years, Valka and Valga were one united city known as Valk. Only after Estonia and Latvia gained independence in 1918 was the city divided into an Estonian and a Latvian part. During the Soviet era, both parts de facto became one city again. In 1991, after Estonia had regained its independence, the country began to re-establish its border - as a symbol of a new national awareness and as a practical step towards EU accession. Since Estonia was, for a long time, the only candidate from the Baltic region in the first round of EU enlargement, Valga would have been located at the outermost border of the EU.

Today, there are three highly frequented checkpoints in the downtown area. Since the border dissects people's every-day path between home and work, school, and the cemetery or market, and relatives or friends live on the other side, many inhabitants have become regular cross-border commuters. For many people, applying for and extending a visa, residence or working permit has become a costly necessity.

The group that has been mostly affected by the demarcation are the Russian-speaking inhabitants that comprise about one-third of the population. They had only moved here during the Soviet era and had always been able to move freely between Valga and Valka. For them, the creation of the border in 1991 came as a complete surprise. Since Estonia's and Latvia's independence, many of them have become stateless citizens or foreigners and consequently find themselves in a peculiar situation as it is: As a result of the demarcation of Valga and Valka, their freedom of movement has now been curtailed.

Estonians and Latvians face the same problem to a much lesser degree. One exception to this, however, are the seven Estonian families residing in the Latvian Street Savieniba. Former Estonian president Lennart Meri even suggested simply buying the street from the Latvian government. His Latvian counterpart rejected this proposal stating that "this is not Alaska". The problem has not been solved yet. However, most Estonians and Latvians have accepted the border since it reflects the historical pre-war order.

In the first years after demarcation, the market in Valga was an attractive meeting point for Estonians, Latvians and Russians. In contrast, the administrative co-operation did not run quite so smoothly. It was not until an EU programme on co-operation was introduced in the border region that not only Valga and Valka were brought closer together but also the partnership to the Swedish-Finnish border towns of Haparanda and Tornio improved. Since then, many contacts have been established between the two regions and advice has been forthcoming from the northern neighbours.

In contrast, the level of exchange that has taken place between Valga and Valka in the areas of culture and sports has a long-standing tradition. This includes sports competitions and the joint use of sports facilities as well as exhibitions, theatre projects, concerts or celebrations.

The two music schools maintain contact and schools have been offering classes in Estonian and Latvian as part of a foreign-language learning programme since 1996. Both towns are especially proud of the foundation of the Estonian-Latvian Institute in Valga and the Latvian-Estonian Institute in Valka that offer language courses and various further education classes.

Given these developments and Estonia's and Latvia's accession to the EU, demarcation might seem paradox, but will remain for the time being. Border policy will continue to be made in the capitals and only in 2006 - when the countries will become members of the Schengen Agreement - will the "Berlin Wall" fall in Valga/Valka.

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