

# “Maybe we’ve gotten a little better against them”. Russian speakers’ positionings in racializing “migration crisis” speech

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## **ABSTRACT**

The article ponders boundary formation within a multiethnic society, more precisely in the community of border dwellers on the Finnish side of the Finnish-Russian border. Russian-speaking immigrants are considered as an already established part of this community. They assess their position not only in relation to the local Finns, but also related to the newcomers, that is, asylum seekers who appeared in rural Finnish border areas in 2015. The article is based on interview material collected in the summer of 2016 among Russian-speaking immigrants living in Eastern Finland (21 interviews). Aside questions on images of Russia, respondents were asked about their views on the arrival of asylum seekers. Most respondents expressed a negative stance on the “migration crisis”. In the analysis, these views are set in the “national” framework of the formation of racialized hierarchies in an immigration society. Additionally, the view on Russian speakers as transnational media users is applied to understand the harsh character of the speech. It seems that the interviewees’ opinions are shaped by Finnish “immigration-critical” discourse that has gained a strong position in Finland. The opinions also reflect the geopolitical views created by the Russian mainstream media, which many Russian speakers in Finland use as their primary source of information and entertainment. In the interview speech, asylum seekers are racialized and presented as not belonging in Finland. Transnationally mediated discourse on the “unsuitability” of asylum seekers in Europe and Finland leans on populist anti-immigration speech and is used instrumentally to discursively improve one’s own position in the Finnish racialized ethnic hierarchy.

**Keywords:** Russian speakers, Finland, bordering, racial hierarchies, “immigration crisis”

## INTRODUCTION

Over a million asylum seekers from Syria and other Middle Eastern and African countries made their way to Europe in 2015. About 30 000 of them ended up in Finland, with an impact both on the majority population and other immigrant groups. This phenomenon tends to be viewed primarily on a “national” scale: how it has been responded to in a particular nation not only by authorities, political parties, and civil society, but also in a particular national media space, and what discourses, movements, and actors it has strengthened or weakened. In this way, “the nation” can be presented as internally monoethnic, facing the “influx” of internally similar “migrants” (see Kotilainen and Laine 2021).

However, today’s European societies are in many ways diverse and multicultural, and it is worth looking both at the majority–new minority relationship and the (older) minority–(newer) minority relationship. It is also relevant to ask what dynamics the appearance of new immigrants has created or reinforced in a multiethnic context. Societies and populations should be seen as spaces of (ethnic) bordering and power struggle both among the national majority and among a wide range of minorities, including those with an immigrant background. This is not to claim that these groups are somehow clearly defined, but rather that their boundaries and identities are also changing and constantly constructed in different (discursive) practices.

In this article, I will analyse perceptions of the “refugee crisis” (as the dominant discourses framed it) among Russian-speaking immigrants who live in sparsely populated Finnish border municipalities. The analysis is based on studies of racism in multiethnic globalized societies. Immigrant minorities living in Europe are part of the societies of the countries of destination and the countries of departure, and are therefore included in the racial orders of both the “host countries” and the “countries of origin”. At the same time, through their own media involvement, groups with an immigrant background connect in different ways to national and transnational mediascapes. I will examine how Russian-speaking people who have moved to Finland position themselves in interview speech towards the newcomers who arrived in Finland in 2015, and will consider the factors influencing this positioning.

## INTERVIEW SPEECH

The data of the article consists of interviews conducted in the spring and summer of 2016 with 21 Russian-speaking residents of the province of North Karelia. The interviews focused on images of Russia in Finland, and the fieldwork was carried out in small

North Karelian border municipalities. Russian-speaking immigrants were recruited by snowballing. They were mainly middle-aged, employed, or unemployed people who had lived in Finland from two to more than twenty years. Only one interviewee was under the age of 30, the others were between (approximately) 40 and 70 years of age. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the members of the research team primarily in Russian and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer and the interviewees did not know each other before.

Our research group was particularly interested in how the everyday experience of Russia which unites the Finnish- and Russian-speaking border residents might affect how Russia is perceived. Additionally, interviewees were asked about their attitudes towards the border, including the visa-free regime and the entry of asylum seekers which was still in fresh memory. At the time of the interviews, there were three reception centres for asylum seekers in North Karelia, and the asylum seekers were a prominent phenomenon in small remote areas as well as a hotly debated topic in the local and national media and among local residents. As a sideline, the interviews also enquired about the interviewees' media use to find out where people get information about Russia. The interviews were analysed thematically: the texts were coded, and the themes that emerged were analysed in relation to each other, and in relation to the context of Finnish and Russian dominant discourses (Ruusuvuori et al. 2010). However, the material used in this article is not strictly limited to the interview data, as my research approach is ethnographic: broadly, I am interested in the everyday life of Russian speakers in Finland and the themes that arise from it, and I also view myself as part of my research field because of a similar background and lifestyle with the research participants. Together with my colleague Pirjo Pöllänen, we have discussed this everyday ethnographic approach in numerous articles (see, e.g. Pöllänen and Davydova-Minguet 2017; 2022), emphasizing that our views on the phenomenon under study are being formed and shaped by overlapping and simultaneous processes of long-term stay and being in the field, analysis, and writing.

By including media use and mediascapes in the analysis of interview speech, I seek to highlight the transnational factor influencing the views of Russian speakers. Today, participation in the different mediascapes created by electronic media must be kept in mind as an intrinsic circumstance of our everyday lives. (Hedge 2016.) My methodological approach is thus transnational: in addition to the multi-local and multi-temporal nature of research, it means that social processes are seen as fundamentally borderless and at the same time border-creating (see Khagram & Levitt 2008).

The article explores what hierarchies are built in the speech of Russian-speaking immigrants on the “migration crisis”, what linguistic means are used to build them, and what positions are created for “oneself”, “us”. I also depict the themes and images that connect the interview speech with the language and discourse of Russian media. In conclusion, I place my analysis in the context of a multiethnic Finland and consider the commonalities between this small-scale study and the wider political developments in Finland, Russia, and the EU.

In the next section, I present the Russian-speaking minority in Finland from the perspective of the experiences of inequality. For different people, these experiences are not the same, but may be related to family history, ethnic background, income level, gender, or age. During the 2000s, experiences of inequality and “non-fitting” have been exacerbated by the aggressive foreign politics of Russia, the conflict between Russia and the “West”, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in eastern Ukraine.

### **RUSSIAN SPEAKERS AND AFFECTS OF INEQUALITIES**

“Russian speakers” is a rather loose definition that can be used broadly or narrowly. Strictly speaking, it refers to people whose mother tongue is registered in the Finnish population register as Russian. In Finland, it is still possible to register only one language as the native tongue. At the end of 2020, there were 84 190 persons registered as Russian speakers (Statistics Finland 2021). When used in a broader sense – to refer to people for whom Russian may be a second language or who for some reason have not wanted to register themselves or their children as Russian speakers – there are considerably more people who speak Russian in Finland.

It is customary to distinguish between the migration to Finland that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the so-called Old Russians, who are mainly descendants of citizens of the Russian Empire who moved to Finland in the 19th or early 20th century in the turmoil of the Russian revolution and the collapse of the Russian empire. “Old Russians” are people of Russian background born in Finland, their strongest language is usually Swedish or Finnish, and their connections with modern Russia are weak and mostly historical. However, they may have a common experience of some degree of racism and discrimination or such experiences may have been narrated as family memory, namely racist naming, difficulties in daily life, and attempts to hide the Russian background and change names. (See Jerman 2004; Baschmakoff and Leinonen 2001; Immonen 1987.)

The majority of today's Russian-speakers in Finland have arrived in the country since 1990 in different ways from different countries of the former Soviet Union. Expanding the so-called remigration procedure to cover persons of Finnish ethnic background and their family members in 1990 resulted in immigration of approximately 30 000 persons. This migration channel was closed in 2016. It was based on the presumed biological, cultural, and linguistic "Finnishness" of the returnees, and their perceived "Russianness" was conceptualized as a sort of unwanted outcome. Societal discussion and administrative practices aimed at a more precise definition of proper Finnishness that would qualify for "returning" to Finland, and its separation from Russianness. These discursive and material practices influenced the hierarchization of different kinds of constructions of "Finnishness" and re-enhanced the image of "Russianness" as something that does not belong in Finland. (Laari 1997; Davydova and Heikkinen 2004; Davydova 2009.)

Another significant immigration channel, marriage migration, has been an important route to Finland especially for Russian-speaking women. Migration through marriage has reinforced the image of the dominant masculine "West" and the dependent and caring feminine "East" (Sirkkilä 2006). Women from the "East" have to balance on the racialized notion of "gender equality" as an inherent part of Finnishness and whiteness (Krivonos and Diatlova 2020). The dissolution of the economic and social security system following the collapse of Soviet socialism, the liberalization of the post-Soviet gender order, and the opening of national borders have all made more visible the "shadow of a whore" associated with Russian-speaking women in Finland (see Uimonen 2010; Davydova and Kozoulia 2009). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Russian-speaking women found themselves in the position of an ethno-sexual other, which was consolidated in different everyday practices, such as border crossing, especially in the Finnish-Russian border areas (Davydova and Pöllänen 2010).

In the early 1990s, when Russian immigration was new in Finland, it was often discussed as an "unexpected" and seemingly accidental phenomenon. Surveys of attitudes in the 1990s and 2000s showed that stereotyped "Russians" remained at the bottom of ethnic hierarchies together with the Somali. (See Jaakkola 2009, 52–60; Puuronen 2011). However, gradually by the 2010s, Russian-speakers have become a fairly common part of everyday neighbourhoods, especially in eastern Finland. Still, studies on their socio-economic situation show that the Russian speakers are often overqualified, have difficulties finding employment, and have a lower-than-average income level. (Varjonen et al. 2017.) Studies of the 2010s have highlighted the high level of discrimination and racism experienced by

Russian-speakers, for example in recruitment situations or as everyday racism (Ahmad 2020; Puuronen 2011; Krivonos 2019).

The favourable economic development in Russia at the beginning of the 2000s resulted in growing trade and tourism between Finland and Russia. In particular, Finnish border municipalities viewed local Russian-speakers as a valuable asset for the economy. However, this positive trend grew increasingly fragile under the sequence of international conflicts with Russian involvement, such as the dispute in 2007 over the monument to the Soviet soldiers in Tallinn, war in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea, and the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. These mediated conflicts highlighted the transnational character of media involvement among Russian-speakers and made it clear that they were being targeted by Russian diaspora politics (Davydova-Minguet 2014; Davydova-Minguet et al. 2016, 2019).

Since the annexation of Crimea, the everyday transnationalism of Russian-speakers has been politicized by both Russia and Finland. Amid the political debate on dual citizenship in Finland and the legislative changes which restricted such citizens' access to security-related jobs and training, Russian-speakers felt that these were primarily directed at them. (Oivo 2021.) Everyday ties with Russia, such as transnational family relations or residential property ownership, became securitized in Finland. Russian-speakers found themselves "between a rock and a hard place" (Oivo et al. 2021). Russia, on the other hand, through its mediated diaspora and politics of memory, has sought to tie them ever more tightly to their country of origin, while securitizing international ties within the country. (Davydova-Minguet 2014, 2021; Davydova-Minguet 2019.)

In its immigration and integration politics and actions, Finland, the immigrants' new home country, promotes their integration, inclusion, and employment as well as multiculturalism. Yet, maintaining people's spontaneous ties to Russia is securitized at some level. Finland and Russia also have notably different official positions on many issues of international politics and democracy, and portray them in a notably different manner in national media. This raises suspicions, mistrust, and feelings of insecurity among Russian-speakers. Many issues have become difficult to discuss, the agenda and discussion in the Finnish-language media are perceived by many as exclusionary, and Russian-language social media often provides space where emotions and doubts can be verbalized. Simultaneously, social media has become extremely conflictual (Oivo and Davydova-Minguet 2019; Oivo et al. 2021).

The affects of inequalities and insecurities of the contemporary multiethnic society should be seen as part of wider global developments and the historical, economic, cultural, and social dimensions therein. In the following, I present the theoretical discussions applied in the processing of the material.

### **BORDERING THROUGH RACIAL ORDER IN A TRANSNATIONALLY CONNECTED AREA**

Current migrations take place in complex networks of relationships at different levels and involving national and international contexts and histories. I approach the migration of Russian-speakers to Finland as a transnational process and examine their position in the increasingly multiethnic Finnish society as multi-level, flexible positionings that in different ways entangle and intersect Finnish and transnationally operating (Russian) discourses and orders.

The border region is a place that allows relatively easy and mundane maintenance of cross-border relations but also emphasizes the national nature of many phenomena. National identities are heightened in border areas due to often conflictual border history and guarding practices. Individualizing and identifying border-crossing practices inevitably remind people of their “true” and single national belonging. The border region, functioning as a contact zone with the territories on the other side, simultaneously carries the function of bordering – de-territorialized re-creation of the border between people, institutions, imaginaries, identities. Where cities (megapolises) can “naturally” create an image of diversity and openness, the symbolism and practices of border areas work primarily dichotomously, producing separation from the neighbour, even if the border area dwellers’ actual everyday lives are rather transnational. (Davydova and Pöllänen 2010; Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2018; Zhurzhenko 2011.)

The border has an ambivalent character: it both enables (controlled) inter-border contact and is perceived as an essential element of defining and preserving the “national self”, the national identity of the territory and the people living there. Studies in ontological security unfold the entanglement of senses of endangered ontological security that are fertile breeding grounds for different crises, and well as for populist and nationalist calls to reinforce different borders, to secure the “national self”. Groups that experience their position as somehow weak can find their ontological security – the feeling of the stability of the social system and the continuity of their “place in the world” – somehow threatened, and turn to “clear” and “traditional” identities that are

promoted and exploited by populist political forces worldwide, including Russia and Finland (see Kinnvall 2017, 2019; Davydova-Minguet 2020; Kuposov 2021).

The “migration crisis” of 2015 was largely perceived in Finland and other European countries as a threat posed to national borders, states, communities, and identities by non-European asylum seekers. (Kotilainen and Laine 2021.) This reaction endangered the adherence to basic principles of the post-WWII European system, such as the primacy of human rights, including freedom of movement. According to James Scott (2019), a widespread European reaction to the “migration crisis” of 2015, which increased not only cultural nationalism and populism but also a revanchist securitization of national selves and borders, had securitized mobility overall, creating a perception of mobility as rootlessness and a potential threat. The “migration crisis” strengthened illiberal, racialized understandings of culture, belonging, citizenship, and nationality. In border areas, this was reinforced by the very presence of border and border crossings in people’s everyday lives.

My view on Russian-speaking immigrants’ speech on “migration crisis” is based on the idea of a racial order that permeates Western, including Russian, societies and determines their internal (interethnic) relations (see Puuronen 2011; Rastas 2004, 2018; Krivonos 2019). Although Finland and Nordic countries more generally have long sought to eradicate the concepts of race and racism from public debate, they are key terms for conceptualizing and analysing diverse and intersectionally formed inequalities and hierarchies. Traces of colonialism are present in societies perceived as “white” and “non-colonial” in the guise of normative “whiteness” and belittling racism. (Rastas 2018; Keskinen et al. 2016; Tlostanova 2018.) As a concept, “racial order” compares to “gender order”: whiteness (like masculinity) is implicitly seen as the norm, privileged and valuable, thus placing other racialized bodies as “second” and inferior. Like the gender order, the racial order appears self-evident and is therefore invisible for majorities. “Racial order” is tied to social power: while white Finnishness is the norm, other racialized subjects struggle to gain access. (Puuronen 2011.) Whiteness must be seen as a racial dominance, or at least as a privileged position. Whiteness, then, is not the neutral background against which the coloured “race” becomes visible but is an essential part of the racial system. (Lundström 2014; Krivonos 2019.)

In her dissertation on young Russian-speaking immigrants (2019), sociologist Daria Krivonos analyses the internal hierarchies of whiteness in Finland. In the context of



immigration, even white immigrant bodies become racialized depending on where they come from. Krivonos (2019) paints a picture of post-colonial and post-socialist Europe as a region permeated by racial hierarchies, in which the white subjects of the former “second world” of collapsed state socialism are still seen as “deficient” and inferior to those of the “first world” of “old” European states. When they move to the “West,” they feel, on the one hand, that they have been placed in a lower position than the “local” whites, and, on the other hand, that they have been forced to struggle and compete for “suitability” with other racialized immigrants. In this struggle, they become racialized themselves and simultaneously they racialize others. The internal hierarchies of, and struggles for, whiteness are often overshadowed by the “clear” confrontations of whiteness and non-whiteness, West and East, global North and South. Their conceptualization in a postcolonial context seems to “fade” the “second modernity” of collapsed state socialism, making visible only the “first” and the “third” worlds. (Krivonos 2019; Tlostanova 2018.)

However, whiteness and racialization in the context of the country of immigration are not, in my view, sufficient as perspectives for the analysis of Russian-speakers’ opinions on the “migration crisis”. The Russian post-Soviet way of constructing ethnicized and racialized hierarchies must also be taken into account as a factor that is always present in transnational everyday lives of Russian-speakers in Finland. Especially for people living near the border, making the journey back to what used to be home and maintaining family relations and friendships across the border are self-evident everyday activities. The ease of maintaining relationships is guaranteed also by the use of internet-based media. Interpersonal and mediatized transnational contacts between Russian-speakers who live on both sides of the border make images and ideas produced on the Russian side feel “natural” among the Russian-speakers on the Finnish side. The character of border areas and their emphasis on clear-cut national belongings accentuates racial orders of both bordering entities.

Our previous research (Davydova-Minguet et al. 2016, 2019; Davydova-Minguet 2017; Sotkasiira 2017) has revealed that the Russian-speakers’ media use in Finland is both intensive and rather polarized. It follows a trend initiated by the revolution in media technology: young people increasingly follow social and internet-based media, while the older generations often continue to use media, mainly television, in a ritualistic and entertainment-seeking way. For them, Russian television channels constitute the main source of information and entertainment. In particular, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2013–2014, the annexation of Crimea by Russia,

and the following war in eastern Ukraine, as well as news coverage of these events in Russian state-aligned media (including most TV channels and ever-expanding domination on the internet) and Finnish media (primarily television and internet-based outlets) have led to Russian speakers' affective division into those who consider Russia's official and popular interpretation of events correct and those who do not. Media use to some extent reveals positionings in this conflict, and largely in the conflict between Russia and the "West", which in Russian mainstream discourse is also presented as a conflict between Russian "traditional values" and Western "liberalism".

Throughout the 2000s, the governing circles in Russia have created a multidimensional system of control over the main medium, television broadcasting. The discourse on migration and migrants produced by the most popular Russian TV channels before the "migration crisis" of 2015 was twofold, one concerning immigration from non-European countries to the EU, and the other pertaining to labour migration from post-Soviet Central Asian states to Russia, especially to Moscow. Migration has remained an ever-present theme on Russian TV channels due to coverage of different "western" or Russian negative events. Already in the 2010s, the discourse on migration oscillated between obedience to (more restrained) Kremlin wordings and attempts to provoke opinions on the issue on television talk shows and news programmes. Overall, migration has been presented as happening from radically different (compared to Russian or European) cultures, which makes it incompatible with the societies of arrival. Immigrants themselves have been portrayed through discourses of "Islamization", "ethnic criminality", "parasitism", and through different threats that the immigrants pose to Russian/European cultures, societies, public health, and so on. While European governments have been criticized and mocked for their alleged inability to cope with "completely uncontrollable" immigration, Russia is being presented as inherently multiethnic and able to govern immigration, sometimes with force. The discourse on migration on Russian TV has remained blatantly racializing, creating opposition between "us" and "them" ("Russians" and "migrants", and "Russia" and "Europe"), often not only biased in presenting events, but also staging them to produce certain images of "us" and "them". (See Hutchings and Tolz 2015, 221–246; Mitrohin 2017.)

In the following, I will analyse what the Russian-speaking interviewees living in the Finnish border area said about the "migration crisis" of 2015. I have kept in mind both perceived racialization and inequalities, and the possible influence of world views and images produced by Russian state-controlled media. In such a way, I hope to be able to illustrate and interpret the bordering process among Russian-speakers in Finnish border areas.

## PRODUCING RACIALIZED HIERARCHIES IN INTERVIEW SPEECH

In the interviews, we primarily discussed what Russia meant to Russian-speaking individuals living in the border regions of Finland. However, at the end of each interview, we asked whether the recent arrival of asylum seekers had had any effect on the position of Russian-speakers in Finland. The responses ranged from very brief to very broad. In the analysis of the interview speech concerning views on the arrival of asylum seekers in 2015, I have identified the following themes: construction of the image of newcomers as incompatible with the status of refugee; claiming that the newcomers' culture is incompatible with Finnish culture; construction of "immigrants" as detrimental for Finnish economy; and construction of the own position as knowledgeable about the migrants and the international situation. These themes impacted in positioning "us" as fitting and "naturally" belonging in Finland, whereas "immigrants" were constructed as inferior and problematic.

Asylum seekers were relatively commonly referred to as lacking the "right" image of a refugee in need of asylum (see Malkki 1995). This way of speaking was quite common among the interviewees and in Finland in general.

I consider refugees to be people who have really suffered. For example, children whose parents have lost their lives, old people whose children have died may suffer. <...> But when an adult, a broad-shouldered young man, dressed in brand new clothes, [is] seeking asylum. And not political. But because there is a war in his country. This looks idiotic. I think this is wrong. <...> Go defend your own country. Why are you leaving your own country? Go defend it. I think so. (Woman, in her fifties.)

The image of a proper refugee is highly gendered. In the example above, views on asylum seekers are based on the nationalist heteronormative concept of nationality and citizenship, where the citizen, especially the young man, has a duty to defend the homeland and "women and children" against the enemy, and where the war otherwise frames proper masculinity and citizenship. The "right" man and citizen is a warrior and defender, and cannot therefore seek asylum. (Tickner 2004; Nagel 2000; Jokinen 2019, 17–32.) The politics of remembrance, referring to World War II in Finland and in Russia, reinforces this conservative notion of male citizenship rooted in the heroic war narrative. (Davydova-Minguet 2018, 2019.)

The "right" need for asylum and assistance could also be questioned by arguing that asylum seekers are "really" motivated by the possibility to benefit from Western countries.

They want money. Where are they heading, the majority? To Germany, where they are still given money. I'm telling you, these who come here are not poor. They are rich and come to benefit even more. (Woman, in her forties.)

The influence of the discourse of Russian television is particularly obvious in this quotation. Russian reports on the 2015 “migration crisis” concentrated mostly on Europe and Germany, which were cast as incapable of dealing with the “migration crisis” and forced to accept immigrants by external forces. They neglected the needs of their own citizens, who therefore had to compete with the immigrants for social welfare. The way of portraying asylum seekers through the discourse of misuse of social welfare systems of European countries resonates with the classified position of Russian-speaking immigrants in the “west”: they are commonly unemployed or precariously employed people and are often entitled to social benefits.

The view on asylum seekers as misusers of the refugee status was also questioned by some interviewees – who nevertheless argued against the common view. A distortion in this view was created by questioning the duty to “defend the fatherland” or young men’s “wealth”. Such views emphasized the similarities between them and the speaker. However, this position was presented with hesitation and was not common.

When I hear people talk that they have expensive smartphones, they have everything, and they come to us, and we have to maintain them. I just think, whether I've got my own personal jet or a palace, I was the richest woman in the world, but if there was a war, of course I would flee it. (Woman, in her fifties.)

The “incompatibility” of asylum seekers in Finland and the Finnish labour market was conceptualized mostly in cultural and gendered terms. The common image of a Muslim woman, “incapable to work”, is a telling example. The view that new immigrants are unsuitable to the Finnish society precisely because of cultural differences, is common. These views could be grounded in the “knowledge” about “Eastern” cultures, which interviewees situated in their Soviet or post-Soviet experience.

The migrants, Syria is a country where women will never come to work, never in their lives. So, these migrant women are simply a heavy burden. Can a small Finland, which already has a lot of its own unemployed, still support immigrants at the required level? I doubt it. First, cultures are very different. Culture is closer to Uzbekistan, it is said. I know what Muslims are. They are completely different

people, completely. They never adapt to Finnish life the way Finns expect, no matter how they are taught, in any courses or schools. (Woman, in her fifties.)

When white immigrants from Russia move to Finland, they become part of a neoliberal postfordist economy and welfare society, where, depending on their economic, cultural and social capital, or class position, they struggle for status and livelihood (Krivonos 2019). In the analysed interview speech, asylum seekers were presented, at least in part, as competitors of “Russians” in the labour market. In Finland, the *immigration consensus* of the 2000s (Könönen 2015) was achieved around the idea of labour migration: ideal “useful immigrants” do not need the society’s resources to adapt. Quite the opposite, they pay taxes, which benefits the society. Simultaneously, immigrants’ labour is exploited in low-paid and irregular jobs. Regardless the exploitation, many asylum seekers or undocumented migrants view these jobs as attractive channels of earning a living and (un)achieving legal status in Finland. Immigrants from Russia who arrive in Finland mostly through family ties, ethnic background, study, or work, often see newer immigrants as competitors in these lower labour-market positions (Krivonos 2019). The anti-immigration discourse typically builds on common disillusion in the precarious labour market and life. It is closely linked with anti-EU and anti-globalization discourses. These help speakers present themselves as “local” and thus “deserving” members of Finnish society.

After Finland’s accession to the EU, the economy began to collapse, independence has been lost, there are no jobs, no matter how many immigrants there are. I’m a professional car driver, I haven’t been able to find a job for two years, and simultaneously my Russian friends work in Finnish cars. <...> The more immigrants there are at work, the lower the economic growth. <...> I believe we must first offer (work) to those who want to work, who are able to work, and to those who just have to work. And only then provide places for migrants. (Man, in his fifties.)

The reason behind the arrival of asylum seekers, the Syrian war, was described as an abstract geopolitical conflict between the “West” and Russia, in which Russia was forced into the position of an underdog. Still, the entry of asylum seekers was also seen as a kind of deserved punishment for the actions taken by “Europe” or “America” against Russia. The talk of a conflict between “the West” and Russia also concerned Ukraine, which was seen as a field of confrontation and struggle between them. Russia was spoken of as misunderstood and mistreated, but still right. Especially

in these respects, the interview speech echoed the explanatory patterns of political entertainment on Russian television (see Davydova-Minguet et al. 2016; Gulenko 2021). This speech is contemptuous, aggressive, follows conspiracy theory models, and is often overtly racist.

Interviewees' speech on asylum seekers was driven by Russian-language clichés, which are transferred to discuss the situation in Finland and Europe from the Russian discourse on immigration concerning labour migration from Central Asian states to Russia. Finland is presented as a kind of resource which external powers try to misuse. This kind of speech is exemplified by expressions such as “not elastic” (*ne rezinovaya*, not made from rubber), which creates an impression of limited national physical and economic space, threatened by new immigrants, and belonging to those who have arrived “here” before and thus have more rights to this space. In such speech, Finland can even be spoken of as “our own” area and place.

Both Russia and America are contributing to this immigration crisis, unfortunately. But Europe is not elastic (made of rubber). There are not enough resources and there will be fewer and fewer of them in the future. And this only affects us, the taxpayers. (Woman, in her forties.)

The “migration crisis” was presented as part of an international geopolitical game, where the main players – “America”, Western presidents and elites – were blamed for using new migrants as a weapon against “the ordinary people” or weaker European countries, such as Finland. Once again, this kind of talk about the reasons for the arrival of asylum seekers resonates not only with Finnish anti-immigrant discourse but also with the discourse of state-controlled Russian media. In this space, an abundance of information is used to obscure the actual developments of events and to create in the media users' a position of well-informed viewers competent in international politics.

Let's imagine that I was the President of Finland. And an American would have told me: you have to take a million refugees, or three million. I would say to any American, be it President, Clinton, Churchill, whatever: if you need it, then take it, we don't need it. I'm not going, just because you scrambled there, you scattered everything, people are fleeing, and now the people of my state have to feed these refugees. ... You take these refugees, feed them, press those new dollars with your printing press. ... We did not do this, and if you have done it, be responsible for it. (Man, in his seventies.)

The talk of a “migration crisis” has thus been largely negative and bordering, with few exceptions. Those speaking empathetically about asylum seekers and questioning common ways of speaking also tended to be otherwise critical of Russia, its president, geopolitics, and the media. In general, asylum seekers were presented as a mass, unsuitable in and a burden to Finland, which set the Russian-speakers as local and well-integrated “people of the north” together with other Finnish locals. However, some interviewees saw that the status of “Russians” as a group had improved due to the influx of asylum seekers: Russian immigration was no longer seen as a “problem”, as new groups had taken this place.

To my recollection and understanding, the immigration of Russians to Finland has been considered negative. We visited Helsinki with my son, there was a lot of these immigrants. We visited now in the spring and a year ago too. There weren't really any dark people at the time. Now there are a lot of them. <...> Before them, we were already negative immigrants. Maybe we've gotten a little better against them. I don't know (laughs). (Woman, in her forties.)

### **DISCUSSION: HOW TO POSITION THIS SPEECH?**

The opinions of Russian-speaking interviewees about asylum seekers and the “migration crisis” that began in 2015 were not surprising – if anything, it was surprising that people expressed them to the interviewer in face-to-face conversation. In the Russian-language social media produced in Finland, this type of speech is rather widespread. Images of “us” “Russians” are produced by comparing, valuing, and racializing the “others”. This type of banalized speech easily erupts when one's “own” status is perceived as somehow trampled or threatened (Davydova 2021; Oivo 2021).

The study of the hierarchization of immigrants in the Finnish context has a long tradition (e.g., Jaakkola 2009; Avonius and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2018; Brylka et al. 2017; Könönen 2015; Krivonos 2019; Davydova 2009). Critical whiteness studies provide a valuable perspective for this, taking into account the different histories and the new constellations of whiteness and racism. Transnationalism as a methodological approach broadens the context under study and brings together the migrants' actual connections to their countries of origin – and to the discourses and power relations that pass through them. These contexts need to be factored into considerations of what types of policy and practical measures could mitigate these sharp attitudes. In the research, the rise and mainstreaming of racist and anti-immigrant attitudes is linked to neoliberal capitalism and its connection to a state that produces an

image of itself as the sole guarantor of security (Lorey 2015). Additional factors that promote populist, exclusivist, and racist opinions and movements are the general climate of insecurity, precarization, the crumbling of the working class (Mäkinen 2017), and hollowing out of the welfare state, combined with the ever-evolving possibilities of information and communication technologies (Horsti 2014) and the deep-rooted image of Finns as an ethnic-cultural community and nation (Tervonen 2014, Laari 1997).

Experiences and perceptions of, and influences from, Russia must also be taken into the account among factors adding to the insecurity and dissatisfaction among Russian-speaking immigrants in Finland. In Russia, the collapse of state socialism and the experiences of entering neoliberal capitalism have remained largely unaddressed in societal discussion and popular culture. State-controlled media has channelled the sense of resentment to mocking democracy and the “West” and to glorifying Soviet times. Contemporary Russia simultaneously evokes feelings of bitterness and disappointment as well as pride and love (see Davydova-Minguet & Pöllänen in this volume). The Russian discourse concerning the “West”, and the entangled discourses that blame and securitize asylum seekers offer Russian speakers outside Russia strong discursive means to “strengthen” their own position in the neoliberal post-socialist Russian and Finnish contexts.

In addition to their already racializing ways of presenting migration, the main Russian media channels staged the “migration crisis” of 2015 by exploiting events and themes that constructed asylum seekers as a threat not only to “Europe” but especially to Russian speakers in Europe. The “case of Lisa”, a 13-year-old daughter of Russian-speaking immigrants in Berlin revealed links that connect Russian-speakers in Germany with German populist parties and anti-migrant movements, Russian media, and Russian diaspora politics. The story of kidnapping and raping the girl by “immigrants” was fabricated by one of the central Russian TV channels after Lisa had disappeared from her home for a night which she spent at her boyfriend’s place. This was presented on Russian television as a ruthless kidnapping and rape by recently arrived asylum seekers. As a result, many Russian-speakers in Germany joined anti-migration protests organized by the populist AfD party. Asylum-seeking immigrants were constructed as sexually violent, while Russian-speaking immigrants were cast as vulnerable and in need of protection in European countries. The case also showed the manipulative power of Russian television and its connections with anti-EU political movements in immigration countries. (See Mitrohin 2017.)



Paradoxically, Russian-speakers seem to be simultaneously “present” and “absent” in the Finnish media landscape (see Davydova-Minguet 2017; Sotkasiira 2017; Davydova-Minguet et al. 2016). Transnational media use is their lived reality, and the integration of transnational media landscapes into the national media is difficult. To increase the resilience of Finnish society requires paying more attention to multilingualism and multiculturalism in national media strategies. Russian-speakers and other people from immigrant backgrounds should be equally involved in working life, education, and in symbolically prominent positions in society. Enabling an open and broad reflection of the relationship between Finland and Russia – of Finnishness and Russianness – as well as questioning and dismantling the discourses produced in Russian state-controlled media would contribute to the inclusion of Russian-language discussion in Finnish societal debate. This should be acknowledged as part of an anti-racist agenda in contemporary Finnish society.

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