

# “We can’t stop them” (Мы их не можем остановить): Russian media representations of the flow of asylum seekers at the Finnish-Russian border in 2015–2016

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the winter of 2015–2016, refugees arrived at the arctic border crossing points of the Barents region between Finland and Russia. This paper examines how the Russian media portrayed the event and the policy context the coverage occurred in. The first sample of research examines the intensity of the media discussion and the general theme that is derivable from asylum seeker discourse in relation to Finland. The second sample focuses on subtle themes that dominated the discourse around two border crossing points between Finland and Russia. Data were collected from the news and articles published in the Russian Integrum database between June 2015 and June 2016. A content analysis examines the issues of framing, representation, and security to understand how the refugee migration was represented in the media. The analysis shows that there was an overall neutral representation of the refugee flow and that the media did not label the flow as a security issue in Russia. The findings highlight that the Russian media did not securitize the migration wave and the subsequent anomaly at the Finnish-Russian border. The discussion drew a bilateral problem-solving mechanism to the fore and portrayed Finland as an initiative-taker in depicting the phenomenon as a problem. Russian leaders contextualized the refugee flow with a failure of the European Union’s immigration policies.

**Keywords:** *Arctic, migration, trafficking, security, conflict*

## INTRODUCTION

The European migrant crisis (Balkan 2016), or the European refugee crisis (Albahari 2015), as it has also been defined, began in 2015 when a rising number of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East made the journey to the European Union (EU) to seek asylum (Eurostat 2016; UNHCR 2016, 40). The migrants travelled across the Mediterranean Sea or through Southeast Europe via the so-called Balkan route. Only a small proportion of them entered the EU and Norway, a Schengen-associated country, via the so-called northern route (Arctic route) through Russia (Frontex 2016a). In Finland, the year 2015 was exceptional in terms of the number of asylum seekers. Over 32,000 persons applied for asylum in Finland, a ten-fold increase from 2014. The largest group of asylum seekers were citizens of Iraq, followed by asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria (Finnish Immigration Service 2015a).

As of August 2015, thousands of asylum seekers entered Finland via its border with Sweden in Lapland, the northernmost region of Finland. From then on, Finland faced its most difficult year in relation to both the EU Schengen border and the EU external border in eastern Lapland, with migrant detention expanding at the Swedish-Finnish land border and the Finnish-Russian border crossing points in Lapland. This traffic slowed down at Lapland's western border in late December of the same year after Sweden and Denmark tightened their border controls. Soon after, the number of asylum seekers at the Lapland stations on the Russian border – Salla and Raja-Jooseppi – picked up.

The Arctic route through Russia over the land borders with Norway and Finland caught the Norwegians, Finns, and the EU by surprise. At first, the migrant flow targeted the land border between Russia and Norway in October and December 2015. Storskog, the only legal land border crossing between Norway and Russia, saw 5500 applications for asylum in 2015, compared with less than 10 the previous year (UDI 2016). The situation eased up in Norway in December 2015 as the migrants were deterred by worsening weather conditions and a shortage of transportation means. At the end of 2015 the Russian authorities began refusing travellers permission to transit their country without a Schengen visa. Despite this refusal, migrants started to appear at the border between Finland and Russia. Asylum seekers had started to arrive at Finland's two northernmost border crossing points, Raja-Jooseppi and Salla, already in October 2015, obviously as a spillover effect from those aiming for Norway. By mid-January 2016 the total number of asylum seekers at the Finnish border crossing points in Raja-Jooseppi and Salla was 1756 persons. Most of them were originally from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, but there were also migrants of other nationalities (Finnish Immigration Service 2015b).

The Arctic route is part of the eastern borders’ migration dynamic (Frontex 2016b). According to the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex), the overall scale of irregular migration at all the eastern borders of the European Union is much smaller than on any other migratory route into the EU. More modest migration pressure at the eastern border together with geographical conditions and border control systems discourage irregular migration. The migration crisis at the southern borders of the European Union is a more commonly known challenge to the European Union’s member states, and the flow of asylum seekers was expected to remain merely a southern phenomenon that would not affect the northernmost region of the European Union.

Russia’s border with its Nordic neighbours Norway and Finland is commonly regarded as the most peaceful, orderly, and relatively closed leg of Russia’s border areas. Therefore, the migration that surged at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 was exceptional, leading to a short-term but intensive anomaly in the Barents Region. The Arctic route of asylum seekers quieted down swiftly during the spring of 2016. The last crossing of asylum seekers at the Salla and Raja-Jooseppi stations was recorded on 10 April 2016, as Finland and Russia negotiated an agreement to stop border crossings from all third countries for 180 days.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This paper attempts to determine how Russian media representations of migration were contextualized and what kind of spatial practices emerged on the arctic border with the European Union. Migration discourse at the Finnish-Russian border in the winter of 2015–2016 is expected to reveal the core themes present in the media. The analysis particularly addresses portrayal of disorder and lack of control at a border traditionally regarded as stable and strictly controlled.

The central focus of the analysis was on the following key questions:

- How was the migration crisis at the Finnish-Russian border represented in the Russian media?
- Did any noticeable themes emerge as typical of the representation of the migration crisis at the two northernmost border crossing stations of the European Union?
- Did the Russian media treat the anomaly at the border as a national security issue for Russia or merely as a humanitarian crisis?

## METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study has been developed to best operationalize the research questions, which probe the depiction of the refugee crisis at the Finnish-Russian border in Russian news. Hence, the sources are Russian newspapers and news agencies, and the sampling unit is the newspaper and the agency itself, while the recording units are the relevant articles found within. The representation of the migration crisis in Russian media was analysed through content analysis of the output of news agencies over a 13-month period.

The first sample focuses on a theme that is derivable from the asylum seeker discourse in relation to Finland. Samples from national and regional newspapers (Центральные и Региональные газеты) and news agencies (Информагенство) helped to delve more deeply into the discourse on asylum seekers in the context of Finland. The sources for the sample were two national newspapers *Независимая газета* and *Новая газета*, one state-operated domestic Russian-language news agency РИА Новости (МИА Россия сегодня) and one regional newspaper, the Murmansk branch of *Комсомольская правда*. The latter source represents the very region where the migration crisis peaked. *Независимая газета* is depicted as representing independent media with nationwide cover, while *Новая газета* is known to be a critical and investigative newspaper under the auspices of *Россия Сегодня* that has controlled РИА Новости since 2014. *Комсомольская правда*, the *Murmansk Pravda* is a daily newspaper and one of the most influential media in the region (Karitskaya 2013).

In this sample, the sources were sought for all articles that contained the word combination “Sanctuary and Finland” (Убежища и Финляндия) in the period from 1 June 2015 to 30 June 2016. The combination reflects the correct definition of the status of the people entering Finland – that they are asylum seekers, not refugees. The first sample unfolds the dominating themes that emerged in the 13-month review period. In all, 112 documents fulfilled the criteria, and these documents were selected for further analysis.

The second sample comprises a case study of 13 months’ reporting on the asylum seeker flow at the border crossing points in Raja-Jooseppi and Salla, located in the Barents Region. The sample was created by using Raja-Jooseppi and Salla (Рая-Йоосеппи и Салла) as search words in news released by all newspapers and agencies in the Integrum database from the beginning of June 2015 to the end of June 2016. The border crossing points were chosen because they have been key entry points to the EU

for refugees and migrants from Northwest Russia. The purpose of this sample was to focus more precisely on the border crossing theme reflected by the two northernmost international border crossing points of the European Union. This sample generates themes as representations of the anomaly caused by the surge of asylum seekers at the border. It was expected that the word combination Raja-Jooseppi and Salla (Рая-Йоосеппи и Салла) would confine the sample to the core discussion pertinent to those particular border crossing points. All documents which had the selected combination in the national and regional sources of the Integrum database were analysed.

The material was collected online from the Russian Integrum Profi database, which, as it maintains on the website (Integrum 2016), is the world’s largest archive of mass media of Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Most of the Integrum documents are in Russian, but some of the material is also available in English. To get maximum benefit from Integrum and to extend the scope of the documentation, it is recommendable to use the database in the Russian language. In this research, the searches were conducted in Russian. In all, there are 6403 sources in the Integrum Artefact search in the category of national (Федеральная) and regional (Региональная) media. Advanced search features in Integrum Artefact are relatively simple and clear. Documents can be found without major effort despite the massive amount of material. However, fluency in Russian is a prerequisite for achieving a reliable outcome from any document search.

The information in the Integrum database was queried with the Artefact search engine by entering key words that condition the search in Cyrillic form into the query window. Key words that should be found in the original documents can be typed in their singular basic form, or truncated. The time scope of documents is indicated in the search window, and, if needed, the search can be confined to a desired list of databases. In this study, a default list of databases determined by Integrum was used to achieve a maximum search result.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Migration and security have tight discursive links that serve political, bureaucratic, and media games in reinforcing organizational and state interests (Bigo 2001, 122; Balabanova and Balch 2010). The media have an influential position as an institution. Information provided by the media influence media consumers in their attempt to make sense of the world and their place within it (Sjöberg and Rydin 2014). The media,

social media included, can also influence public attitudes and policies positively. They have a pervasive presence in modern society and the capacity to interpret and construct reality (Hall et al. 1978). The media do not simply reflect and mirror “reality”, they create or re-present a new reality. They are therefore pivotal in the public perception of contemporary phenomena at international borders. For many, the media are the only source of information on topics that fall outside their personal experience (Graber 1994; Hall et al. 1978) and the source of public fear of crime (O’Connell 1999). Agenda setting is a key role of the media (Branston and Stafford 2005; Critcher 2003; McCombs and Reynolds 2002; Hall et al. 1978). According to Pollak and Kubrin (2007), reality is socially constructed, and the media can therefore affect perception and construct social problems.

Media representations of refugees and asylum seekers have been scrutinized by Gale (2004), Kaye (1998), and Bradimore and Bauder (2011). Scholarly analyses of media representations and impacts have been conducted by Mai (2006), Kaye (2001), and Georgiou (2012). Nicola Mai (2006) stresses that the media have been the main source of information for Italians about migrant Albanians living and working in Italy. According to her, the media have a role in the migrants’ social exclusion and marginalization. Ron Kaye (2001) scrutinizes the political role of the media in the public perception of refugees, while Georgiou brings gender into the debate on migration issues and media representations. The central finding of studies of media representation in the context of refugees and migrants is that the role of the media in forming the public perception of refugees is considerable (Brosius and Eps 1995; Coleman 1995; Tomasi 1993). Migration, refugees, and asylum narratives are usually problematized; the public perception of migration is typically negative (Beutin et al. 2006, 2; Gerard and Pickering 2014). Coverage of refugees and migrants tends to be negatively categorized as a problem rather than as a benefit to the receiving society. This observation is supported in many studies which highlight widespread feelings of insecurity associated with immigration (Newton 2008; Leonard 2011; Bleiker et al. 2013; Dykstra 2016).

A security-oriented view of migration intensified as a result of the escalating Syrian crisis and the entailing wave of refugees to Europe. The theme of migration and refugees inherently encompasses the question of borders, be they physio-empirical or socio-linguistically and psychologically delineated entities between cultures. Migration is recurrently depicted as a threat to borders, order, and the identity of western societies. This observation is made in papers on the refugee crisis in Lampedusa, southern Italy (Dines et al. 2015; Orsini 2016), Greece (Papadopoulou 2004), the United States

(Ackleson 2005), and Australia (McKay et al. 2011). State leaders and other prominent politicians are thus apt to securitize border issues and migration (Buzan et al. 1998; Faist 2005; Huysmans 2006).

In the 1990s the open Schengen border suddenly became a security deficit, challenging the EU’s principles of freedom of movement of persons (Bigo 2001; Boswell, 2003). However, borders are not fixed symbols of statecraft, but are in a constant state of flux (Paasi 1999), at least on the psychological level. Harle (1993, 11) asserts that increased cross-border traffic and cross-cultural interaction may actually strengthen cultural boundaries, rather than lower them. Supportive of Harle’s reasoning, Jukarainen (2002) claims that internationalization and global challenges give rise to border activities that may lead to xenophobia, protectionism, and deterioration of a perception of borders as stabilizers and reproducers of security.

Migration as a phenomenon lies at the nexus of reterritorialization and geopolitical rivalry; their manifestation complicates relations between Russia and the West. The border between Finland and Russia serves as a paradoxical tool for reproducing power relations, exerting asymmetry, and entrenching psychological boundaries between the two countries. In practical terms, the border was an embodiment of governance between states in their curtailing of an unexpected group of people coming to the North.

One consequence is a reinforcement and reconstitution of the message of power, dependencies, and delineation between the “we” and the “other”, alternatively “us” versus “them”. Representations of the other reflect the operations of power. The ethos of the other in relation to migrants can be derived from Said’s denotations of Orientalism as representations of the Orient from a European and Russian perspective. According to Said, the Orient is seen as backward, mysterious, and deviant. Orientalism conveys an understanding of European superiority over the people from the East, thus creating the Other for both Finland and Russia (Cloud 2004; Said 1977, 1985).

“The Other” brought two states which usually regard each other as the Other together to solve a common problem as “We”. The perceived disorder at the border seems to have surprised both sides. Yet, the initiator of the problem solving was Finland. Here the Other was not the state and the society on the other side of the border, as it is commonly reflected. The Other came to the joint border as asylum seekers, which has not been experienced before at the Russian arctic borders. A completely new setting invoked media attention in the winter of 2015–2016.

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According to Hall et al. (1978), stories are contextualized through “maps of meaning”, which work because of the assumed consensus of the public. An example would be the assumed consensus that borders represent order and security, and efforts should be made to reduce the occurrence of undesired border events. Another contextualization would be consensus on the understanding that politicians do their best to solve the problem caused by others. A refugee crisis at a border always transgresses the news threshold, and, as Cohen (2002) asserts, atypical events receive more coverage. The media contextualize stories about a refugee crisis. Reinforcing the media’s power over perception is its interpretive capacity (Cohen 2002).

Also, Hall et al. (1978) claim that the media contextualize news and apply labels which are presented to us as a simplified product. Research literature shows that the media use the terms migrant/immigrant and refugee/asylum seeker interchangeably (Berry et al. 2015). In Finland, the migration phenomenon has received scholarly attention for example in the context of hybrid war (Martikainen et al. 2016; Moe and Rowe 2016), everyday humanitarianism (Naguib 2017), and as a case for organizational learning (Kosmo 2017).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has noticed that there are major differences in the terminology and language used by journalists in the media in different countries and in their attitude towards refugees and migrants (Berry et al. 2015). The UNHCR reports that the majority of those making the sea crossing to Europe would qualify as refugees because they are “fleeing from war, conflict or persecution at home, as well as deteriorating conditions in many refugee-hosting countries” (UNHCR 2016, 2). The same definition cannot be applied to all people using the land route via Russia: some people arrive from countries and regions not belonging to war zones or conflict areas, while others fall into the definition of refugee.

The media can set agendas and frame debates. According to Boomgaarden and Vliegthart (2009), the political and policy context of the “real world” conditions how news accounts are received and read. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Krippendorff 1980, 21). News are written not solely to inform the reader of facts, and sources do not have any natural springboard but are a product of their origins and moulded by the expected audience (Finnegan 1998).



## RESULTS

To highlight the topicality of the issue, I carried out a quantitative analysis on article intensity by calculating the monthly number of articles containing a combination of desired search words. The intensity curve gives an idea of the topicality of an issue that is or has been in the media during a defined period. If there are visible curves and peaks in the intensity, the topic is discussed in the media more (or less) often than usually. This observation suggests that the issue is (has been) topical, thus justifying delving more deeply into the reasons why the issue has appeared in the media more intensively. The point(s) of time of the intensity peak(s) and the fluctuation of the intensity curves are particularly interesting because they allow the researcher to focus on causes behind the fluctuations.

A search with the names of the international border crossing points Raja-Jooseppi and Salla (Рая-Йоосеппи и Салла) gives detailed information about border representations. These remote places at the external border of the European Union seldom stir news interest in the Russian media, but as of October 2015, Salla and Raja-Jooseppi started to appear in the media at an accelerating pace. All articles that contained the combination “Raja-Jooseppi and Salla” were analysed. There are altogether 320 documents with this search word combination in the Integrum database in the period from 1 June 2015 to 30 June 2016. A majority of the documents can be found in national news agencies (Table 1). National internet publications are the second biggest data source. The media of the Russian regions published about 22% of all articles with the word combination. The media intensity peak was reached in December 2015 when the Russian media published over 160 articles containing the names of both border crossing points. The intensity went down rapidly and reached long-term normalcy in June 2016 (Figure 1).

Anomalies, represented by peaks and curves, suggest that there is obvious relevance in scrutinizing the research questions more closely. It was expected that the search words and their combinations were sufficient to unfold the anomaly. Other search words, such as “illegal immigration”, would not add any benefit to the quantitative results already achieved with the selected combinations.

## ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST SAMPLE

The results of the first sample analysis gave rise to “dominant discourses” that the Russian media discussion maintained on refugees relative to Finland: a European Union

NEWSPAPER / NEWS AGENCY	NUMBER OF HITS IN 1.6.2015 - 30.6.2016
Nezavizimaya Gazeta	18
Novaya Gazeta	5
RIA Novosti	83
Komsomolskaya Pravda in Murmansk	6

Figure 1. Number of analysed documents

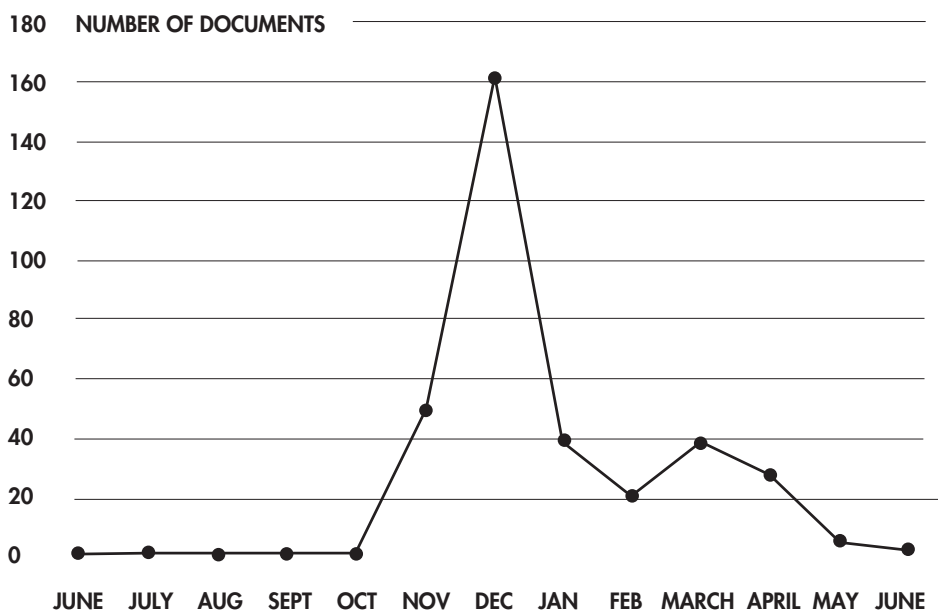


Figure 1. Intensity curve of the search combination "Raja-Jooseppi" and "Salla".

contextualization, politicization and securitization by Finland, and Russian intervention. The Russian media, when releasing news on asylum seekers at the Finnish-Russian border, generated dominant discourses that followed each other chronologically. These discourses systematize the phenomenon spatially and chronologically, and highlight the focus points of the media. The first and earliest discourse emerged as the migration crisis peaked in early summer 2015. The second discourse started to take shape in autumn 2015 as the migration (asylum seeker) flow turned from South Europe towards the North and Finland. The appearance of asylum seekers at the Russian-Norwegian border and the Finnish-Russian border in Lapland were essential elements for the emergence of the second dominant discourse. The third dominant discourse in turn implies the desire to find a solution to the commonly understood problem. Finally, the media discussion fades after a solution to the asylum seeker flow was found and the acute problem was solved.

### **A EUROPEAN UNION CONTEXTUALIZATION**

The news in Russia in late summer 2015 revolved around the escalating migration crisis in southern Europe. At first, Finland was only a marginal issue without any major importance for Russia. Finland popped up in Russian news in the context of a discussion by the European Union leaders on a refugee quota and agreeing upon a refugee policy, its remuneration, and other assistance by member states in the summer of 2015. However, Finland distinguished itself as not being hostile or against the jointly agreed refugee quotas. The country's hospitality towards asylum seekers culminated in an announcement by the Prime Minister of Finland Juha Sipilä, who said he would offer his home to refugees. In September 2015, four of the 28 EU countries voted against the quota system, with Finland abstaining from the EU decision to impose refugee quotas on member states. The news were written in a neutral way in Russia because the original source of the reports was the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle. The Russian media carefully followed the escalation of the refugee crisis in Europe and, gradually, also in Finland. One indicator of the crisis was a subsequent filling up of refugee reception centres in Finland in September 2015.

Crisis discourse started to gain ground in Finland in September 2015 as the Finnish immigration authorities launched reviewed guidelines on asylum seekers from Iraq and Somalia. It was later decided that refugees from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq would not automatically be granted a residence permit.

## POLITICIZATION AND SECURITIZATION BY FINLAND

The involvement of top politicians in decision-making and crisis management was a sign of Finland's rapid politicization of the migration issue with Russia. News about the opening of a registration centre for asylum seekers in Tornio, the western border of Lapland, and Finnish plans to harden her immigration policies and enhance control at the Finnish-Swedish border circulated in the Russian media in September 2015. From November on, news about the problematization by Finland of migrants crossing the Finnish-Russian border started to appear in the Russian media. The Russian media's attention was also caught by the Finnish suggestion of not allowing bicycle crossings at its eastern border stations of Salla and Raja-Jooseppi. The media also reported deportations of asylum seekers back to Russia. By this time the flow of asylum seekers through the border crossing points had heated up, which was depicted by quotations of Finnish leaders in the Russian media. An example of the political involvement is the statement of Foreign Minister of Finland Timo Soini that traffic at the border should be limited if Finland does not reach an agreement with Russia:

If we are not able to move forward in finding an agreed solution, restrictions on the work of the border have to be implemented. (*Nezavisimaya gazeta* 22 January 2016)

In January 2016, Mr Soini maintained a strong message:

It seems that severe measures are required. We have to put an end to this illegal immigration and migration. (*Ria Novosti* 22 January 2016)

Minister Soini urged launching bilateral negotiations with Russia to solve the problem that he already labelled as a threat.

This is a very delicate question. I cannot make any assumptions before meeting with our Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister of Russia. However, I hope that problems will be solved... If this problem is not solved, it can become a threat to the whole Schengen idea. There are enough discussions; measures that work have to be taken. (*Ria Novosti* 25 January 2016)

Moscow swiftly responded, indicating its readiness to discuss with Helsinki the migration crisis. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MID) added that

... the Russian legislation and the international obligations of the Russian Federation do not provide prohibition to departure from the Russian Federation of persons not having the Schengen visa. (Ria Novosti 27 January 2016)

Very soon after that, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev had a meeting with Prime Minister of Finland Juha Sipilä in St. Petersburg in January. Their talks dealt with migration at the northern border crossing stations. The Finnish Prime Minister kept the curbing of “illegal immigration” on the discussion agenda. During the talks, a common problem was identified but opinions on means to solve it differed. Sipilä said,

We were unanimous in the opinion that it is necessary to find a sustainable solution to this problem, and traditionally good collaboration between competent organs of Finland and the Russian Federation continues... (Ria Novosti 29 January 2016)

The Prime Minister of Finland pressed the urgency of decision-making. There was no time to waste in finding a satisfactory solution to the problem of, as he called it, illegal immigration.

A solution to the border issue has to be found in a short perspective... (Ria Novosti 29 January 2016)

Medvedev made it known that from a Russian perspective the immigration policy of the European Union had collapsed and was a fiasco: the EU was to blame for the crisis. Medvedev uttered his opinion nearly two weeks after the meeting with the Finnish Prime Minister. What is also interesting is that the Prime Minister of Russia leans on human rights when explaining why Russia cannot stop the migration wave.

They are very concerned about this because some of these people also cross our border, but we are not able to stop them. There is a European agreement on human rights, which we have joined. We do not want any harm to anybody and do not want to dilute our neighbour Finland with these migrants. But what to do, we simply cannot do anything in another way. (Ria Novosti 11 February 2016).

Russia continued to calm down Finnish anxiety. The ambassador of Russia to Helsinki, Aleksandr Rumyantsev, commented that the Finns had exaggerated the problem. He

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said that over 30,000 asylum seekers had crossed the border between Finland and Sweden, while the corresponding number at the Finnish-Russian border was a little over 1000 persons (Ria Novosti 10 February 2016).

## **RUSSIAN INTERVENTION**

The situation changed dramatically after Vladimir Putin's meeting with the Federal Security Service (FSB) in February 2016. The Border Service of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation started to curb the flow of migration towards the Finnish-Russian border. In the February meeting the President of Russia ordered the FSB to tighten monitoring of the refugee flows coming into Russia or transiting onwards to European countries. This decision substantially decreased the number of asylum seekers at the border. The Norwegian-Russian border had quieted already in December 2015, after which asylum seekers had not come to Norway via that section of the borderline. After the FSB had restored control in the Murmansk region, the Russian media started to write stories about migrants getting jammed in the arctic city of Kandalaksha and waiting for transportation to the Finnish-Russian border. Soon they began to move back south. As of March 2016, asylum seekers disappeared completely from the Finnish-Russian border.

The absolute highlight of the process was the bilateral agreement between Finland and Russia on imposing temporary restrictions at the Salla and Raja-Jooseppi border crossing points. Only Finnish, Russian, and Belarusian citizens and their family members were allowed to cross the border during the 180-day restriction period. President Putin stressed Russia's understanding of Finland's concern over the flow of asylum seekers. It was important for president Putin to emphasize partnership with Finland and that the measures were carried out by the request of Helsinki:

I can tell you one thing, we understand the concern of our Finnish friends and we are going to work together in a regime of absolute partnership.... In this, I fully agree with Mr President of Finland. (Ria Novosti 22 March 2016)

## **ANALYSIS OF THE SECOND SAMPLE**

In the second sample, I investigated media discussion in the context of the two northernmost border crossing points, Raja-Jooseppi and Salla. The search resulted in 334 documents, which were selected for further analysis (Table 2). The analysis offers

a more profound overview of the actual hotspots through which the asylum seekers entered the Schengen area. As the first sample constructed the context and background for the phenomenon, the second sample served as a subtle analysis of what happened at the very border. As part of the analysis, themes that appeared in the coverage were coded. All the articles contained at least one theme, and most had multiple themes. The media covered such themes as migration statistics, policy prescriptions, discussion of Finnish reactions, and the reception or rejection of refugees.

The central finding is that many of the news articles overlap with those of the first sample: the names of these two border crossing points also appear in many of the news articles in the first sample. Again, Finland is solely responsible for securitizing the phenomenon. Russia did not consider the flow of migrants (asylum seekers) a security threat in her border zone. This can be verified by conducting a search using all declination variants of the word “security” (безопас\*). The search result refers completely to utterances in Finland. The names “Salla” and “Raja-Jooseppi” often had a marginal role in the articles due to their role as concluding remarks or news footnotes.

All the news and articles were analysed and their contents were clustered into groupings. As was expected, the result of the content analysis gives a more subtle stratification of topics that were discussed in the Russian media in the context of the two border crossing points (Figure 2).

The jointly agreed ban on using bicycles for crossing was the most extensively spread news item in Russia in the context of these two border crossing points. Many news agencies and media houses in Russian regions referred to the new border regime, established at the end of December 2015. The prohibition to use bicycles for border crossing was labelled by the media as a decision taken by Finland, although it was preceded by negotiations with the Russian border authorities. The media attention on this issue indicates its attractiveness and exceptionality in the Finnish-Russian border regime. Of course, there was a real need to disseminate the information for a large audience to prevent surprises that this regime might cause for travellers, and to contain the flow of migration to Arctic Russia.

The second largest group of media content consisted of social issues related to asylum seekers, their subsidies, living conditions in Finland, or their relations with local inhabitants. Article footnotes and margins recurrently mentioned the border crossing points Raja-Jooseppi and Salla, which therefore played an indirect role in the message conveyed by the media.

MEDIA SOURCE	NUMBER OF DOCUMENTS
Federation Press	3
Federation Information Agencies	153
Federation Internet Publications	76
Federation TV and radio	12
Federation Media Archives	12
Regional Press	9
Regional Information Agencies	23
Regional Internet Publications	45
Regional TV and radio	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>334</b>

*Table 2. Share of the second sample material.*

The new border regime, the third column, includes media content that focuses on the bilateral agreement between Finland and Russia on imposing temporary restrictions at the Salla and Raja-Jooseppi border crossing points. The agreement reached in March 2016 imposed a border crossing ban on all other but Finnish, Russian, and Belarusian citizens and their family members during the 180-day restriction period.

The bicycle ban proposal, preceding the ban itself, ranks fourth in the table. This was also an issue in which Finland was depicted as the initiator. The Russian media typically titled the ban proposal as: “Finland proposes that Russia should ban border crossings by bicycle.” Finland was clearly made both responsible for the decision and dependent on Russia.



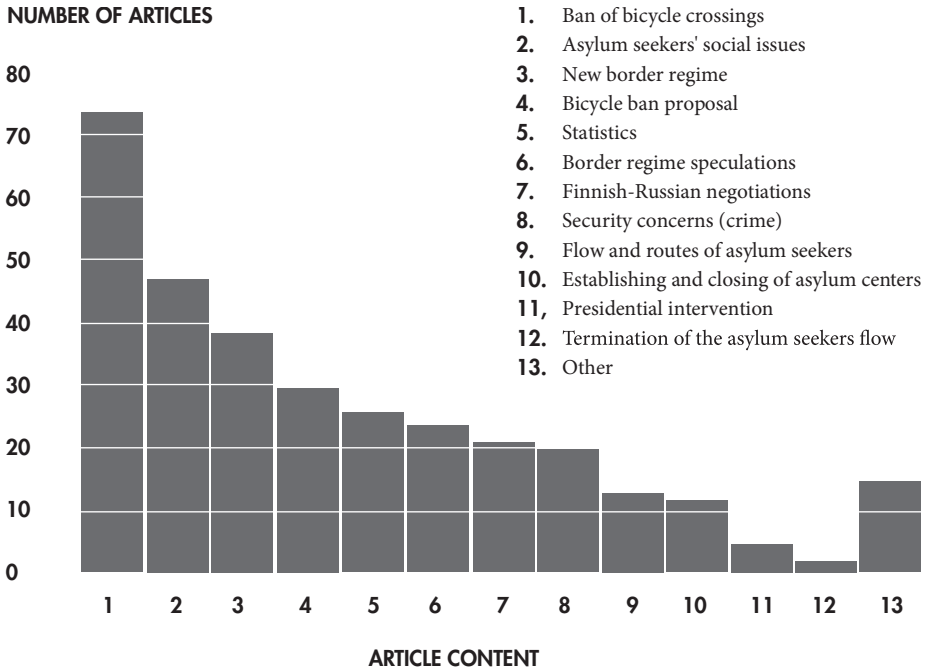


Figure 2. Ranked order of articles and news grouped by content.

The fifth group is a miscellaneous collection of statistical information on asylum seekers in Finland and Europe or the amount of tourists coming through the border crossing points. Common to all the news and articles in this group is their numerical content.

Speculations of possible alterations of the border regime, such as opening and closing times, circulated in the media, particularly during the beginning of December 2015. Another theme that fell into this category were the European Union’s plans to strengthen control at the external borders of the European Union. According to the articles, this would directly affect the Finnish-Russian border regime.

The Finnish-Russian negotiation schemes and contents formed the seventh largest

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group of news. These negotiations were conducted between ministers of the interior and prime ministers. The negotiations, held in January 2016, dealt particularly with the regimes of the border crossing points in Raja-Jooseppi and Salla, and the topical flow of asylum seekers in Europe and between Finland and Russia.

Much of the security issues related to refugees and asylum seekers came eighth in the news ranking list, followed by a large spectrum of discussions about the flow of asylum seekers immigration routes, as well as the closing and opening of asylum centres. The presidential intervention into the problem took place at the end of February 2016, resulting in a termination of the flow of asylum seekers.

## CONCLUSIONS

The northwest border of Russia with Finland and Norway is historically associated with control, security, and order. The flow of asylum seekers in the winter of 2015–2016 shattered the tranquillity that had prevailed throughout the Cold War era and post-Soviet transformations. The appearance of asylum seekers in the Finnish-Russian border zone came as a surprise to Finland, where the phenomenon prompted a crisis discourse.

For Finns and Russians, the media have been the main source of information about the recent migration dynamics at the Finnish-Russian border. Therefore, media representations play an active part in constructing perceptions on the phenomenon itself, and on the essence of the border. The border between Finland and Russia is the focal point of media coverage in this paper and looms large in the migration crisis discourse between Finland and Russia. However, the paper shows that Russia did not treat the asylum seeker flow as a crisis or a security threat, and security seemed not to be a relevant theme for Russia at all. Notions of illegal immigrants, insecurity, and disorder were not present in the Russian media discourse during the migration crisis. Restoring the status quo to the border by asymmetric negotiations was depicted as merely serving the interests of Finland, which took the initiative in solving the anomaly. The outcome of the research highlights the flexibility in what is securitized by a state. It was interesting to find out that a state, in this case Russia, can perceive and treat an anomaly in a different way than its neighbour, in this case Finland.

What Finland conceives as a security problem, Russia treats as a humanitarian issue. The Russian authorities uttered the word “security” (Безопасность) in their press releases only once when the Prime Minister of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, commented on the seriousness of the migration flow in the context of the meeting with the Prime Minister

of Finland. Instead, the word “humanitarian” (Гуманитарий) appeared frequently. This is a notable finding, because one could have expected a dominant security theme in the border discourse. Apparently, the immigration flow towards the North was not a concern for Russia because it felt the phenomenon was under the control of the authorities from the beginning to the end.

The border *intermezzo* is an example of an asymmetric relationship between two countries. While Russia abided by its international obligations and agreements, it unilaterally changed the code of border practices with Finland, established already during the Soviet era. Suddenly the border was open to citizens from third countries, who could cross it without a Schengen visa. The Russian border service of the Federal Security Service FSB must have been responsible for the change of practice. However, as has been verified later, organized crime was involved in assisting the asylum seekers to the border crossing points. The flow of asylum seekers took place at only the two northernmost border crossing points of Finland, whereas the southern border crossing points proximate to St. Petersburg avoided the phenomenon.

This underlines the sense of confusion if not trauma in Finland over what happened at the border. The asymmetric relationship is an explanation for the finding that Finland strongly securitized the asylum seeker flow while Russia politicized the phenomenon by projecting the roots and causes to the European Union. For Russia, migration served as an instrument of foreign and security policy, but only Finland was active in highlighting the security implications of the asylum seeker flow. Thus, the politicization and securitization of the anomaly at the border zone were initially carried out by Finland.

At first there were differing views on the urgency and acuteness of solving the problem. The flow of asylum seekers towards the Finnish border was not seen by Russia as a concern in the first place, but as a natural outcome of the long-term immigration policies of the European Union. Contextualization of the migration with the failure of “the West” to curb wars and crises in the Middle East (see also Brekke and Brochmann 2015), and to practise sound migration policy, reflects a long-term spatial attitude in Russia. A reserved attitude towards the West, including the European Union, has been a feature of the political culture of Russia since the end of the 1990s (Iivari 2007). The frequency of threat themes was lower than expected in the samples.

There have been considerable disagreements among western scholars over the reasons behind letting asylum seekers travel freely to the Schengen border zone in Russia, and the aim of this paper has not been to answer the question of why this happened

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in the first place. It is left to subsequent studies to find out how it was possible that such disorder emerged at the border and why the Russian FSB and other state security authorities allowed the disorder to go on for months before action was taken to stop it.

The problematization by Russia and the securitization by Finland of the flow of asylum seekers at the Finnish-Russian border seem merely to reflect the pervasive cultural, identity, and linguistic demarcations attached to third-party aliens (such as asylum seekers) at the border rather than the traditional connotation of Otherness vis-à-vis the nation living on the other side of the border. Prejudiced and reserved attitudes towards the Russians were overshadowed by the imminent, strange, and confusing appearance of total strangers in Finland. This offers an interesting vision for developing theories on the border as a symbol of order and security when controlled by the Russians and Finns together instead of letting refugees as an alien group disturb the status quo.

Different media sources reported on asylum and immigration in broadly similar ways. This may reflect a homogenous press system in Russia. Newspapers and agencies tend to use the same language, report on the same themes, and feature the same explanations and responses. Furthermore, what variation there was can be attributed to different editorial guidelines and target audiences. The migration crisis was consistently represented in terms of its political contexts; the themes that emerged were broadly compatible with the various aspects of east–west relations as they are politically contextualized and understood. The representatives of the Russian government, Prime Minister Medvedev and Foreign Minister Lavrov, were particularly apt to contextualize the “migration crisis” with failed migration and foreign policies of the European Union. This way the Russian leaders attributed the anomaly in the Russian arctic to global politics.

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