

**‘I Used to Think That I Am Finnish’ – Examining the Relationship between Ethnic Identity  
and Perceived Discrimination among Russian-speakers Living in Finland**

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## Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between perceived discrimination and ethnic self-identification in the context of Finland's Russian-speaking minority. Drawing on original qualitative data collected during fieldwork in Finland between 2016-2019, it explores how experiences and expectations of discrimination relate to the ethnic and national self-identifications of Russian-speakers, as well as to their well-being and sense of belonging to the Finnish society. Building on previous research on the connection between identity and discrimination, the in-depth interviews with and participant observation among Russian-speakers living in Finland show that essentialist views of ethnicity and attitudes of the majority can affect the ways in which members of minority choose and feel allowed to identify. They also shed light on the various and sometimes conflicting ways in which Russian-speakers discuss and make sense of their experiences of discrimination. Importantly, the findings suggest that minority members can consciously resist harmful narratives by, among other strategies, producing positive counter-narratives or opting for more inclusive identifications. The paper further highlights the role of researcher and the importance of intersectional approach in discussing the consequences of prejudice and discrimination for minority populations.

*Keywords:* identity, discrimination, acculturation, Russian-speaking minorities, Finland

## **‘I Used to Think That I Am Finnish’ – Examining the Relationship between Ethnic Identity and Perceived Discrimination among Russian-speakers Living in Finland**

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the relationship between perceived discrimination and ethnic self-identification in the context of Finland's Russian-speaking minority. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Finland between 2016 and 2019, it examines how experiences and expectations of discrimination are expressed and negotiated by Russian-speakers and how these narratives of discrimination relate to expressions of ethnic, national and supranational belongings.

As the biggest immigrant group in Finland and one of the largest diasporas in the world<sup>1</sup>, Russian-speakers have been the subject of a large number of both Finnish and international studies. The discrimination faced by Russian(speaking) minorities, too, has been documented in previous academic papers, official reports, and testimonies from the members of the community (cf. European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, 2013; Jaakkola, 2009; Puuronen, 2011). Consequently, this paper does not attempt to establish whether the phenomenon exists (this has already been done) or even how widespread it is. Instead, I am interested in exploring

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<sup>1</sup> According to United Nations (2016), Russia had the world's third largest diaspora in 2015, after India and Mexico. It should be noted that the number cited by UN, 11 million, does not include Russian-speaking migrants from countries other than Russia.

the ways in which Russian-speakers talk about and make sense of discrimination. Furthermore, my goal is to examine the ethnic and national self-understandings within these narratives as well as to highlight the ‘narratives of resistance’ and other strategies of coping being formed in response to discrimination and prejudice.

In doing so, I part from a constructivist approach which sees that the meaning and significance of identity, discrimination, and other concepts central to this work have been and continue to be constructed in various social domains. These domains include but are not restricted to media articles, political speeches, art, pop culture, as well as fieldwork notes and research interviews such as the ones that this paper draws on. I also recognize that I myself take part in this construction, through, for instance, the writing of this very text.

Understanding the effects that racism and discrimination can have on the wellbeing and adaptation of minorities is becoming more and more important in our increasingly globalizing world. It is more topical than ever also in relation to Russian-speakers - particularly so in the light of the recent deterioration of relations between Russia and ‘the West’ that has led to some sensationalist and stigmatizing representations of Russian-speakers in political speeches and mass media, including the idea of Russian-speaking minorities as a potential security threat for Europe (cf. Borger & Harding, 2014; Krutaine, 2015; Mansikka, 2016; Perttu, 2015).

Theoretically, this paper draws on the now-widespread understanding of identities as malleable, hybrid, and liquid creations that are always uncertain and rarely permanent (cf. Bauman, 1996;

Hall, 2009). It also builds on a wealth of preceding sociological, anthropological and psychological studies on the relationship between ethnic identity and perceived discrimination. In adopting this interdisciplinary viewpoint, my goal is to create richer data (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007) and reach a holistic understanding of the complex issues at hand. To do so, I will begin with an overview of the theoretical background of the study and a presentation of Finland's Russian-speaking community. While an in-depth discussion of the history of Russian-speakers in Finland falls outside the scope of this work, I will attempt to provide the empirical context necessary for understanding both the diversity of this minority group and the history between Finland and Russia - particularly important as historical reasons are often used to explain or even justify discrimination faced by Russian-speakers.

Next, I will briefly discuss attitudes towards Russian-speakers in Finland and present my fieldwork before moving on to the empirical part of the paper. Here, it is important to note that while many studies focus on discrimination faced by one or more minority group(s) in the context of one nation-state, such an approach is not necessarily the most suitable one with regards to Russian-speakers, some of whom have faced discrimination (also) in their previous countries of residence. In the analysis that follows, I will thus highlight not just the narratives of discrimination that relate to Finland and Russian(-speaking) identities, but also those connected to other places and self-understandings. Finally, the paper will conclude with discussion and recommendations for further research.

Throughout this paper, and in accordance with a majority of other academic writings on the topic, I have made a conscious decision to speak of ‘Russian-speakers’ instead of ‘Russians’. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, Finland does not collect information on the ethnicity of its residents, and precise information on the size of different ethnic groups is thus not available. Secondly, the ‘ethnic Russians’ form only one part of the country’s culturally diverse Russian-speaking community. In contemporary Finland, Russian language connects people from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds and is often of great practical and symbolic importance even for those native speakers who do not identify as Russians (Protasova & Tuhkanen, 2003).

But who counts as a Russian-speaker? It is perhaps not surprising that, as a researcher working with identities, I feel that the answer should be based on the self-identification of potential respondents. Recognising that being a Russian-speaker in contemporary Finland can be just as much about identity and a sense of belonging as it is about language, I did not set any linguistic requirements for potential interviewees - the only prerequisite was identifying as a Russian-speaker.

### **Identity and Discrimination: Theoretical Background of the Study**

Attitudes of majority populations can have a noteworthy influence on the lives of minorities. Various studies have shown that discrimination, in particular, poses a threat to the mental and

physical wellbeing of migrant and minority groups and is one of the central factors affecting their processes of acculturation. Anxiety, constant worrying, self-hatred, passivity and increased levels of stress are just some examples of the many potential adverse effects of having to deal with prejudice and racism (cf. Allport, 1958; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Jaakkola, 2009).

In this work, I understand discrimination in a broad sense, encompassing not just discriminatory actions but also related phenomena such as racialisation and othering (cf. Puuronen, 2011).

During the fieldwork and the subsequent analysis, I did not judge what constitutes or does not constitute discrimination, focusing instead on the narratives emerging from the data. This approach also allowed me to keep an open mind with regard to the variety of different ways in which different forms of discrimination may affect identities: on one hand, research suggests that strong ethnic identities may mediate these risks; on the other, experiences of discrimination may affect the ways in which people choose to - or feel allowed to - identify (cf. Varjonen, Arnold, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2013).

With regards to identity, I adopted a constructivist outlook in viewing them as liquid, dynamic, versatile and constantly evolving social structures that are expressed, negotiated and built through public discourse and in the everyday life (cf. Edensor, 2002; Hall, 1996). Approached from this position, identity 'is a symbolic construction, an image of ourselves, which we build in a process of interaction with others' (Mach, 2007, p. 54).

This understanding of identity is particularly useful for the study of migrants and other ethnocultural minorities, whose status is explicitly based on the ‘otherness’ that separates them from the majority population<sup>2</sup> and who lack the possibility, often available to others, of taking their (ethnic and national) identities for granted. According to some views, immigration ‘causes a serious shake-up of individual’s identity’ (Akhtar, 1999 p. 76) and, consequently, leads to a lifelong project of identity reconstruction and renegotiation.

At the same time, many members of minorities ‘live amongst other minorities and move seamlessly in and out of relationships, languages and cultural settings with a fine attunement to them all’ (Sreberny, 2005 p. 453). Difficulties, if they arise, are not necessarily produced by incompatibility of two or more ‘ethnicities’, ‘nations’ or ‘cultures’ per se, but rather by the ambient pressure for clear, simple and unambiguous identification. As Eriksen (2002, p. 63) puts it, in ‘a social environment where one is expected to have a well-defined ethnic identity, it may be psychologically and socially difficult to “bet on two horses”’.

Considering the central role that identity has played in the social sciences, it is only natural that the term has not been immune to criticism. Perhaps the most famous critique of the concept has been presented by Brubaker and Cooper (2000) who claim that it has become too ambiguous to serve social sciences well. According to them, the majority of academic writings use identity in a sense which is either too ‘hard’ or too ‘soft’. The former, much in line with the everyday use of the word, puts emphasis on homogeneity of social groups and fails to question its primordial

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, being a member of a minority group can be an identity in itself (cf. Wing 2002, p. 164).



premises. In contrast, the latter – and, these days, much more common – understanding of identity explicitly distances itself from essentialism. However, in doing so – often through clichéd automatism rather than careful reflections –, it risks becoming too weak for analytical work.

Brubaker and Cooper were not the first ones to point out this problem. In his historical overview of the use of identity, Philip Gleason (1983) documented how the rapid spread of the word since the 1950's had led it to the brink of meaninglessness. Handler (1994 p. 29), too, has highlighted the tension between the essentialist and constructivist analysis of identities, and encouraged scientists to be careful in not reproducing ideologies of identity (p. 39).

The concern is warranted, and, despite the widely shared understanding within academia of identities as non-essentialist and non-stable constructs, the tendency for groupism, the treatment of ethnicity and other social groups as bounded entities and fundamental social facts, still persists (Brubaker, 2004). As a consequence of this, identities are often simultaneously presented as indispensable and unnecessary, fundamental and impermanent, liberating and oppressing. Even those emphasizing the constructed nature of identity sometimes fail to distinguish categories of practice from categories of analysis. Consequently, the scholarly use of the word often reflects the 'commonsense', primordial understanding of the phenomenon. In combination with constructivist approach, this essentializing, hard use of identity leads to metaphysical inconsistency. (Bendle, 2002; Handler, 1994.)

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) go as far as suggesting that this intrinsic conceptual ambiguity means that identity is unsuited for analytical work and needs to be replaced. One of the terms they suggest as a substitute is identification, a commonly used concept that is inseparably linked with identity (Gleason, 1983). However, while the latter is a label, the former 'refers to the classifying act itself. [--] Identity is thus best conceived of as being both relational and contextual, whereas the act of identification is best viewed as inherently processual' (Rummens, 2003, no pagination).

In fact, identifications main advantage over identity is that it highlights the action, the process, and the constantly changing nature of the phenomenon. However, I tend to agree with Jenkins (2008), who points out that it 'isn't much of an improvement, because it is stylistically so cumbersome' and chooses to 'unapologetically, use both terms'. I, too, understand the concepts as synonyms and will be using them as such for the rest of this work. Overall, I still regard identity as capable of addressing complex theoretical and practical issues and prefer to continue its use. Handler (1994, p. 38) has warned that, in deconstructing identity, scholars can unwillingly play into the hands of those who 'seek to reassert the validity of homogenous "mainstream" collective identities against the proponents of "multicultural" diversity'. Moreover, rather than abandoning 'tarnished' words, we should perhaps seek to renegotiate them (Tilly, 2002 p. Xii). Indeed, as Shaw and Stewart (1994, p. 2) point out, 'embracing a term which has acquired – in some quarters – pejorative meanings can lead to a more challenging critique of the assumptions on which those meanings are based than can its mere avoidance'.

## Empirical context of the study

### Russian-speakers in Finland

There have been Russians and Russian-speakers living in Finland for centuries (cf. Karemaa, 1998; Kurkinen, 1984; Raittila, 2004), but their numbers have rapidly grown since the fall of the Soviet Union. According to official statistics, there were 72 436 Russian-speakers living in Finland at the end of 2015, amounting to 1.3 percent of the total population (Tilastokeskus, 2016). As the Finnish census only recognizes monolingualism, and Russian thus goes underreported in many bi- and multilingual families, the real number is likely to be even higher. In any case, Russian-speakers form the biggest immigrant group in Finland, and Russian is the largest unofficial minority language in the country<sup>3</sup>.

Geographically, nearly half of Finland's Russian-speakers are based in the southern Uusimaa region, which includes the capital, Helsinki, and where majority of the fieldwork that informs this paper took place. There are also notable concentrations of Russian-speakers around other big cities, as well as in the Kymenlaakso and Southern Carelia regions of Eastern Finland.

[\(Tilastokeskus, 2015.\)](#)

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<sup>3</sup> Finnish and Swedish, the country's two official languages, are spoken by some 89 and 5 percent of the population, respectively.

Russian-speakers in Finland differ from Russian-speaking minorities in many other European countries due to their internal diversity and to Finland's history: while Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire from 1809 until 1917, it was never a part of the Soviet Union. Consequently, Russian-speakers in the country are often divided into the so-called 'old Russians', whose ancestors moved to Finland mainly during and immediately after the Grand Duchy era, and the more recent immigrants.

It is hard if not impossible to assess the current size of the 'old Russian' minority in Finland, but it is estimated to consist of no more than 5000 people (cf. Nousiainen, 2016). During the czarist rule, the permanent Russian-speaking residents of Finland were mainly merchants, tradesmen, manufacturers, civil servants, clergymen and teachers. In addition to the permanent residents, the number of Russian army personnel stationed in Finland usually varied between 12 000 and 50 000 men, peaking at 125 000 in 1917. Discharged soldiers were only granted the right to remain in Finland after their service in 1858. Out of those who did, many belonged to the Jewish and Tatar communities. Finland was also a popular tourist destination for many Russians, including the family of Tsar Nicholas II. It is estimated that the number of Russian summer residents on the Karelian Isthmus was at one point as high as 100 000. Some of those who owned property on the Isthmus remained in Finland after it gained independence in 1917. In the aftermath of the revolution, the country also received thousands of new refugees, their numbers reaching 33 500 in 1922. For many, however, Finland was just a short stop on their way to Western Europe. (Haimila, 1998; Leisiö, 2001.)

After the independence, the general attitude towards Russia and Russians, having already tensed up during the short but severely opposed period of Russification during the last years of the Romanov rule, turned sharply negative. The (fear of) discrimination led to many Russian-speakers hiding their Russian heritage and changing their names. In some families, Russian roots became a source of shame, sometimes kept a secret even from the children and the grandchildren. Despite the strong pressure for assimilation, some families have managed to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage to this day. (cf. Martikainen & Laitila, 2016; Shenshin, 2008.)

Within the ‘new’ Russian-speakers, the single largest sub-group consists of Ingrian Finns, descendants of the 17th-18th century Finnish settlers to Ingria, situated in what is now known as the Leningrad Oblast of Russia. After several border conflicts between Sweden and the Russian Empire, Ingria and its residents became part of the latter, followed in 1809 by (the rest of) Finland.

Under the Russian Empire, Ingrian Finns enjoyed a relatively long period of prosperity and undisturbed Finnishness, with active Finnish language schools, newspapers, and congregations. The situation rapidly changed for the worse under the Communist rule with Stalin’s mass deportations and, later, the Nazi occupation of Ingria. During the war Finland, in desperate need of workforce, invited Ingrian Finns to ‘return to the homeland’, appealing to their Finnishness and to the needs of their fatherland. Some 63 000 Ingrian Finns accepted the invitation. However, after the peace treaty of 1944, the Soviet Union demanded the repatriation of its

citizens. In what is now known as a betrayal leading to *kunniavelka*, a debt of honour, Finland deported 55 000 Ingrian Finns - including children and war veterans - to USSR, where many were condemned to capital punishment, imprisoned and/or sent to labour camps for collaborating with the 'enemy'. Those who survived were prevented from moving back to their homeland. Many settled in Estonia or other areas relatively close to the border with Finland. (Matley, 1979; Shenshin, 2008; Sihvo, 2000.)

In April 1990, Finnish president Mauno Koivisto officially recognized the debt of honour resulting from Finland's actions after the war. This recognition was highly significant, as it was followed by Finland granting Ingrian Finns the possibility to apply for repatriate status, enabling them and their descendants to return to their 'historical homeland'. It is estimated that some 35 000 Ingrian Finns and their family members made use of the opportunity before the scheme officially closed in July 2016 (Maahanmuuttovirasto, 2016).

In addition to the 'old Russians' and the Ingrian Finns, the majority of Finland's Russian-speakers are so-called first-generation immigrants who have moved to the country mainly for reasons related to work, study or family. This includes both 'ethnic Russians' and people - often former citizens of the Soviet Union - who do not think of themselves as Russians but speak Russian as their native language. Out of the 2 772 new residency permits granted to people with Russian citizenship in 2015, 993 were based on study, 948 on family ties, 586 on work and just 226 on remigration (Davydova-Minguet, Sotkasiira, Oivo, & Riiheläinen, 2016 p.

23-24). The share of the first three groups is likely to grow rapidly since the discontinuation of the Ingrian Finnish remigration programme.

In any case, it has to be underlined that the boundaries between the above-mentioned 'categories of analysis' are blurred and overlapping. One of the people I interviewed during the fieldwork noted that her father is an Ingrian Finn, her mother an ethnic Russian, and the family's move to Finland was influenced by reasons related to employment. This highlights the importance of intersectional approach in studying the identities of Finland's Russian-speakers.

### **'The Others' - Attitude towards Russian-speakers in Finland**

According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2015), people living in Finland have some of the most positive attitudes towards immigration in Europe. Research has shown, however, that these attitudes vary significantly between different minority group (Jaakkola, 2009). In general, Russian(-speaker)s are low in the Finnish migrant hierarchies, making them more susceptible to discrimination and its negative consequences. In fact, along with Somalis, Turks and Iraqis, Russian-speakers are among the most common victims of racist crimes in Finland (ECRI, 2013), and Russianness could be described as a 'stigmatized nationality' (Clarke, 2014 p. 65) within the Finnish context.

In 2013, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI, recommended that the Finnish authorities strengthen their effort to combat discrimination and prejudice faced by the

country's Russian-speaking minority. According to the ECRI report, discrimination is particularly problematic in the field of employment. Despite their generally high level of education and a good command of the Finnish language, a disproportionately large number of Russian-speakers remain unemployed. One study showed that job seekers with a Russian name had to send in twice as many job applications as someone with a Finnish name just to get invited for an interview. (ECRI, 2013).

Another major problem is the use of the slur 'ryssä', a racialized, derogatory insult aimed at Russians. In testament to the prevalence of the phenomenon, the verb 'ryssitellä' is derived from the same word stem and means to call someone 'ryssä', while the noun, 'ryssittely', refers to the act of insulting someone in this way. According to Keskiälo (2000), 'ryssä' is a part of the construction of Finnishness. The epithet continues to be widely used despite the fact that using it may constitute a criminal offense (cf. Shenshin, 2008, p. 26); in August 2013 it was even revealed that the judges of the Helsinki Court of Appeal had used 'ryssä', along with offensive words for other minority groups, during their deliberations and breaks (Tarvonen, 2013).

The discrimination of Russian-speakers in Finland is widely understood to be based on historical reasons (ECRI, 2013). Leaning on Bauman (2013), who has pointed out that racism is a modern weapon which utilizes anti-modern emotions, I would argue that it actually stems from a conscious process of nation-building. Russia has for long played the part of the Other, 'the archetypal enemy' in contrast to which the Finnish ethnic, cultural, national and religious identities have been constructed. As a consequence, 'Russianness' and 'Finnishness' are often seen as two polar entities. Illustratively, one of the most famous catchphrases of the 19th century



Finnish national awakening was the still widely-used 'we are no longer Swedish, we do not wish to become Russian – let us thus be Finnish!'. (Iskanius, 2006; Karemaa, 1998; Raittila, 2004.)

While the stereotypes and instances of discrimination outlined above are often based on Russiannes and aimed towards ethnic Russians, they can affect all Russian-speakers regardless of their cultural background or identity. In fact, many of the Russian-speakers I interviewed for my Master's dissertation (Tuhkanen, 2013) emphasized that Finns tend to treat all Russian-speakers as Russians, regardless of their 'actual' national or ethnic background. Unsurprisingly, they were disappointed in the prevalence of the discourse questioning their Finnishness and frustrated about being denied the right to name themselves as Finns.

### **Fieldwork in Finland**

The analysis in the following section draws on the qualitative data I collected in Finland between April 2016 and February 2019 as part of my fieldwork investigating the relationship between identity, acculturation, and religion. The main part of the data is formed by interviews with 27 Russian-speakers, reached through purposeful sampling with the help of social media, mailing lists, existing contacts and Russian-speaking organisations and churches. Broadly in line with the gender composition of Finland's Russian-speakers, 11 of the interviewees identified as men and 16 as women. Their ages ranged from 19 to 68 years, although younger interviewees were

overrepresented in the sample. Most lived in Southern and Eastern Finland, although one had recently moved to Western Finland and one studied abroad at the time of the interview.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, the data consists of fieldwork notes and numerous informal conversations. Some people were interviewed more than once. Furthermore, as I continued meeting some interviewees in the course of my fieldwork, I sometimes had a chance to continue the discussions started during the interviews in a more informal manner. Often, these conversations proved just as fruitful as the original interviews.

While none of these informal conversations were captured on tape, all but two of the official interviews were recorded. In the two cases where interviewees felt more comfortable speaking without the recorder, extensive written notes were taken and served as the basis for the following analysis. The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English.

Language-wise, I always started the interviews by asking which language my interviewees would prefer to use<sup>4</sup>, unless this was clear from previous conversations. Majority of the interviews were conducted mostly in Russian, five mostly in Finnish and one in an almost equal mix of Finnish and Russian. It should be noted, however, that most interviews included at least some mixing of the languages.

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<sup>4</sup> Out of the languages most often spoken by Finland's Russian-speakers, I could offer a choice between Finnish, Russian, English and Estonian.

## Analysis

### **‘You get this feeling that you’re dirty’ - accounts of discrimination**

Discrimination can have profound, long-lasting and even life-changing consequences for the lives of minorities. I received a striking reminder of this during my fieldwork when Zhanna, a successful professional in her 50s, told me that not teaching her children Russian was the biggest regret in her life. Why hadn’t she? I asked. She sighed. At the time, she had thought that it would be safer: a man had physically attacked her on public transport for speaking Russian, and she did not want the same to happen to her kids.

This was not the only account of racially motivated physical violence in the fieldwork material. Most instances of discrimination shared by my interviewees were, however, more subtle. In fact, many spoke of how discrimination can often be nearly invisible: people may feel that they are treated differently from others, but cannot quite ‘put a finger on it’ (9, 2017). Several interviewees described this feeling:

“I’m a very intuitive person, so of course I feel that not all have a good attitude towards me. But I behave with them as I would with anyone else. And sometimes they afterwards start greeting me, shouting ‘oh, hello [name]’.” (13, 2018)

“I’ve never felt open hostility from Finns because I’m Russian. But I’ve had the impression that the person I’m speaking to doesn’t like Russians.” (20, 2018)

Elvira also touched on this subject, describing how having evidence of discrimination helped her fight back against it:

“Discrimination is difficult because it’s often, very often invisible. You get this feeling that you’re dirty, that something is not right with you. [--] But this time I heard it [being referred to with a racist slur], and I could go home and tell mum what had happened. And she immediately called the parents, and the parents, of course, were furious, because in the family it’s not... well, it seems that he got it from the society. And they talked to him, and it didn’t happen again... from him.” (9, 2017).

Despite being able to confront racism in this instance, Elvira made it clear during the interview that the discrimination she endured affected the way she felt able - and willing - to identify - so much so that she eventually started identifying as a European, feeling that this was a more inclusive identity than either Finnishness or Russianness alone. Previous studies (cf. Iskanius, 2006), too, have indicated that at least part of Finland's Russian-speakers reject the nationalist call for ‘choosing sides’, instead using their ability to re-negotiate identities and belongings on many different levels to their benefit.

In some cases, experiences of racism and discrimination had a direct effect on how interviewees thought of themselves in ethnic and national terms, as demonstrated by the following passage from an interview with Mikael - a young student who, like Elvira, had gone to school in Finland:

“It probably happened when I was around ten, until that I used to think that I am Finnish, after that it’s been like I’m Russian, or other-Finnish, you could say in quotation marks [--].

[Interviewer]: Why around ten, what happened then?

The first bigger cases of *ryssittely*, the bullying.” (1, 2017)

Mikael’s account underlines the context-dependant nature of identities. Jelena also reflected on this when talking about her Ingrian Finnish husband’s experience in Finland:

“He once said: In Russia - a Finn, here - a Russian. Because here, when he goes somewhere, it happens that he is perceived as a Russian. But when he was living there, he probably felt that he is a Finn.” (13, 2018)

The feeling expressed by Jelena’s husband is very similar to that described by the participants in Varjonen, Arnold, & Jasinskaja-Lahti’s longitudinal study (2013) on ethnic identity construction in (re)migrants with Finnish background. This accentuates the complicated and rather problematic status of Ingrian Finns in present-day Finland, where they are at the same time ‘an old national and a new immigrant minority’ (Martikainen, 2004, p. 20). During the Soviet years, Finnish language was disadvantaged both in relation to Russian and to other titular languages (cf.

Pavlenko 2006, p. 83), and Ingrian Finns ‘had only a theoretical chance of maintaining their own Finnish identity’, which is now, due to language loss and high levels of intermarriage, largely based on non-linguistic factors (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind, 1998, p. 210-211). The Finnish officials were aware of this ambiguity, and the remigration procedures took precautions to dissolve it, only allowing ‘immigration of persons who have adopted the Finnish identity and feel unity with Finland’ (FINLEX ® - Ajantasainen lainsäädäntö, 2011) (FINLEX, 2010). Potential remigrants had to prove their Finnish heritage by attending formal interviews and producing official Soviet documentations that categorized them, one of their parents or at least two of their grandparents as ethnic Finns. Despite this, they are often viewed as Russians by the majority population.

Notably, the role of discrimination in affecting people’s identification also emerged in narratives outside of the Finnish context and in relation to non-Finnish identities. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Galya:

“I’ve never felt Soviet, in relation probably with what happened with my family, with how much all of my family has suffered both on dad’s and on mum’s side... no. Even though no one ever told me at home don’t join the komsomol, don’t join the party. Again, my cousin who lives in Estonia, she’s Russian completely. They probably think of me as an outcast, my Estonian relatives. [--] They’re not interested in their past. Absolutely. I did archives, my other cousin also. These not, in no way.” (14, 2018)

Galya's account highlights how the identities of Finland's Russian-speakers are affected (among other factors) not just by prejudice and othering faced in Finland, but also that encountered in other countries. Moreover, in addition to discrimination experienced personally, family narratives of racism and repression can also play an important part. Again, the malleability of ethnicity is present in this account: Galya describes her cousin both as a 'Russian completely' and an 'Estonian', but, due to lack of interest in family history, never as an Ingrian Finn.

### **'Perhaps it's not always good to shout loudly in Russian' - similarities and differences**

Instead of trying to make generalisations, my goal in this work was to zoom in on individual narratives of discrimination. Nevertheless, common themes as well as differences soon started emerging from the data. One of the most interesting ones was the difference in narratives of discrimination among those interviewees who have been born in Finland and/or identify as Finns, and the more recent migrants who had moved to Finland as adults. By and large, the latter reported fewer encounters with racism and, more importantly and in contrast with the narratives of younger interviewees, often highlighted minorities' own role when encountering prejudice.

For example:

“There is this old saying - в чужой монастырь со своим уставом не ходят<sup>5</sup>. Have you heard it?

[Interviewer]: Yes.

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<sup>5</sup> Literally: you don't go to someone else's monastery with your own statute, meaning: when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

It's very suitable. Before we came here, we knew that we were coming here, we weren't brought here against our will. You have to study the mentality, to understand how people live here and how the society works. [--] Of course, we will come across actual bad things here. Like the nationalism. But well, we can't change the society completely, right? I think you shouldn't make the situation worse, you have to find common ground. If you come here, you must also understand and give in in something." (23, 2018)

This idea was expressed even more directly by Galya:

"I'm talking about the idea that Russian-speakers are oppressed... I don't know anyone from Lithuania, but I do from Latvia and many from Estonia of course, and I feel like those of us who lived in Estonia, we were used to... we lived in the midst of Estonians, and somehow inside we understood that perhaps it's not always good to shout loudly in Russian. Or that sometimes you can close your mouth when you're passing a big [group] and you don't have to speak loudly in Russian when there are a lot of Finns around you. But I have many friends who came from Russia. It's a big republic, and - this is my opinion - they think of themselves as a great nation, OK, I agree with that. And for that reason they don't speak quieter, let's put it like that. In any situation, you can hear them." (14, 2018)

Here, Galya's narrative builds difference not just and perhaps not as much between Russian-speakers and Finns as between different categories of Russian-speakers: those from the Baltic States, particularly Estonia, and those from Russia, who are presented as a different (albeit



a great) nation. This could also reflect Galya's family's experiences in the Soviet Union, discussed above. As suggested by the following passage, any discrimination encountered in Finland loses significance when contrasted to what the family had to undergo in the Soviet Union:

“I think we live such a good life compared to our ancestors, they suffered so much, that it's a sin for us to complain.” (14, 2018).

### **The role of the researcher**

Large-scale quantitative studies would be needed to investigate whether the differences outlined above exist outside of this dataset. In any case, there are several potential explanations for the differences I observed during the fieldwork. For instance, it might be that strong Finnish identity makes the processes of othering particularly difficult to encounter, or that racism is more pronounced in school than in the environments frequented by grown-up migrants. Language skills may also play a part.

Another potential explanation that I have to consider has to do with my own positionality as a researcher: It might be that some respondents simply wanted to be polite to an interviewer with a Finnish name and thus downplayed negative encounters with Finns, whereas those interviewees who had themselves grown up in Finland might have thought of me as their peer and thus found it easier to share their experiences.

In fact, the importance of the experiences that the researcher not only has, but also shares with her interviewees became clear to me during one of my first fieldwork interviews with Misha, a young man in his thirties who had moved to Finland for work. Early on in our interview, I asked Misha whether he had faced any prejudice in Finland. He said he had not, and I moved on to talk about something else. After the interview, when we were getting ready to leave the cafe, he asked me how come I spoke Russian and, after hearing that I too have Russian-speaking roots, whether I had experienced any discrimination myself, growing up in Finland. I said I had, but that I had been very glad to hear that he hadn't. Misha paused for a second and then said: *Well, actually...* It turned out that he had, in fact, experienced prejudice and even outright racism, but had not felt comfortable sharing it before - probably as I had brushed past the question so quickly. While discussing discrimination can be difficult and uncomfortable both for the interviewer and the interviewees, as researchers we have to try our best not to avoid difficult topics when our respondents are willing to share them.

### **Conclusion**

Practices of naming are used to fixate, claim or deny certain belongings. The present paper supports previous studies which show that migrants are not always free to choose their own identities. It also highlights that the attitudes towards Russia and Russians can affect any Russian-speaker, even those who identify as 'ethnic Finns'.

In fact, the findings suggest a difference in narratives of discrimination between those Russian-speakers who have lived in Finland since childhood and those who have moved to the country at a later age, as well as between those who identify as Finnish and those who do not: While nearly all interviewees disclosed at least some experiences of discrimination, interviewees who identified strongly as Finns were more explicit in their condemnation of it. They also often engaged in narratives of resistance, used not only to counter negative images of Russian(speaker)s, but also to express more inclusive, supranational and global identifications.

Most of the interviewees lived in the capital region, the most multicultural area of Finland. The few interviews with people from smaller and more homogenous areas suggest that the lived reality of Russian-speakers in a small village in Eastern Finland can be very different than that of their peers living in central Helsinki. Further studies with larger and geographically more evenly distributed samples are needed for a more rounded understanding on the different forms of prejudice and discrimination and the various effects that they can have not just on ethnic and national identities, but also on other areas of Russian-speakers' lives and self-understandings. Larger-scale quantitative studies would also allow for examination of potential connections between discrimination, ethnic identity and acculturation.

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