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What Are Karelians Made of, RuNet?

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Abstract

The social construction of the concepts of Karelian people, culture, and land develops in temporal flux. In the 2010s, the expansion of internet usage empowered previously unheard voices engaging these concepts in Russia. In this article, Russian-language internet discussions are used to find out how the state of Karelianness was negotiated in Russian-language internet (RuNet) discussions in the 2010s. My research distinguishes how manifestations of (sub)national identifications were dialectically approved and disapproved in accordance with nationalism discourses that I codify as civic, regionalist, and ethnic. The discussions show how the territory of the Republic of Karelia defines the boundaries within which manifestations of Karelianness are considered. Moreover, they depict the critique and rejection of issues such as Karelian culture, language, and descent due to their perceived juxtaposition against Russianness.

Keywords: Karelia; Karelians; Russians; Russia; nationalism; regional identity; RuNet; social media;

Introduction

Regarding the constantly developing social construction of discourses of Karelianness, contemporary factors in the 2010s emphasised the significance of second-hand knowledge. First, due to long-term demographic developments, a decreasing number of people are self-identifying as Karelian in the Republic of Karelia, where the greatest share of Karelians reside (Humphries et al., 1993; Kareliastat, 2013). This decrease leads to a reduction in the voices of Karelian self-representation. Secondly, due to the popularity of social media, the audiences of lay and marginalised people who make claims about Karelianness have expanded (see Möller, 2013).

In this article, I examine discourses of Karelianness as they manifested in some of the discussion forums of the Russian-language internet (RuNet) in the context of nationalism from 2010 to 2014. In doing so, I seek to show how nationalist discourses have defined socially acceptable manifestations and perceptions of Karelianness in the RuNet of the early 2010s. In my empirical materials, 'nationalism' is mentioned in the same discussions alongside Karelianness, providing perspectives on how Russian-speaking internet users express their perceptions of national and sub-national identities. In this article, I analyse how *Karelianness* signified meanings of people, spaces, and abstract ideas of being Karelian, and how this was reflected vis-à-vis *Russianness*. I similarly examine *nationalism* as it is represented in RuNet discussions.

My analytical point of view is based on the Foucauldian school's discursive research, as presented in Neumann (1999) and in the work of Kendall and Wickham (1999). Accordingly, I have examined discourses of Karelianness and nationalism as constellations of ideas and beliefs that are conditioned, constructed, and manifested in particular historical, spatial, and cultural contexts. The approach is critical through its consideration of how the related norms of social differentiation (othering) claim indisputability of certain definitions while excluding others. Pairing Karelianness with nationalism narrows the contextual perspective, emphasising politically grounded regional, ethnic, and civic collective identification. More broadly, relevant national identities have a far-reaching individual and collective significance, including for matters related to kinship, organisations, police, army, sexuality, socio-economic status (Makarychev & Medvedev, 2015; Svynarenko, 2005).

This article starts with a presentation of the research material. From selected internet discussions, I codify three groups of discursive nationalism that I present in the first analytical

section. This codification is instrumental in the second half of this article, which discusses how geography, history, language, ancestry, and culture constitute Karelianness and consequently its paired Other—Russianness.

1. RuNet—the Russian-Language Internet

In this research, I have selected the discussion forums vKontakte and LiveJournal to examine discourses of Karelianness. The Russian-language internet, or RuNet, provides opportunities for people from the Republic of Karelia in the west to Vladivostok in the east to confront and communicate with one another in various forums. Furthermore RuNet is accessible to those located outside Russia, and despite its embedded Russia focus, in practice RuNet connects millions of Russian-speakers globally (see for example Dounaevsky, 2013; Golovnev et al, 2018).

For my research material, I have selected public discussions in which keywords related to Karelianness and nationalism[1] appear. The themes in these research results vary from discussions and posts focusing on Karelian nationalism or nationalism in Karelia, to posts in which the keywords are mentioned banally. It is important to acknowledge the contextualities of the discussions. The mentions of nationalism in selected discussions about Karelianness limit and define the given perspective on Karelianness, often by emphasising its controversial moral and political aspects.

The mass use of the internet is relatively new and constantly developing. Social media and citizen journalism enable bottom-up challenges to top-down power relations in the public discursive sphere by empowering regionally peripheral and socially marginal groups. Simultaneously, however, the internet influences discussion groups by transnationalising, globalising, fragmenting, accumulating, individualising, and homogenising information flows. Ethnic and national bonds are both maintained and challenged in this framework. Overall, when it comes to the relation of online social activities to offline reality, the related research has emphasised contextual contingency rather than making universally applicable conclusions (Abramov, 2012; Georgiou, 2013; Golovnev et al., 2018; Koutsogiannis, & Mitsikopoulou, 2004; Möller, 2013).

I conducted this research within the framework of the 'Flexible Ethnicities'[2] project during winter 2014–2015. This temporal context affects which theories were available for the formation of research questions and hypotheses. Here it is also important to note the historical context of the early 2010s RuNet. With the Arab Spring uprisings having taken place earlier

that same year, the professional malpractice of the 2011 Russian parliamentary elections and the subsequent presidential elections in 2012 sparked a series of anti-regime street protests across Russia. Since the authorities concluded that these protests were stimulated by and organised on the internet, throughout the rest of the decade they gradually increased their online presence, surveillance, and regulations to establish 'sovereign' control over the online sphere. For example, government loyalist editors have taken over popular informational websites previously critical of government policies, such as Lenta.ru and Gazeta.ru (Daucé, 2020; Lonkila et al., 2017). Similarly, VKontakte ousted its founder and CEO Pavel Durov in April 2014 (Reuters, 2014). A recent survey indicates that this tightening of control over RuNet is not without consequence and has gradually led to several users becoming more reserved with their online posting (e.g., Tairov, 2020).

Before the rapid increase of internet users in 2010s Russia, media research highlighted how RuNet provided 'the last fortress' of freedom of speech and flows of information in Russia—free from the restrictive control of the authorities. Gorny (2009, pp. 10–13, 172–173, 214, 229) has emphasised how, compared to Western countries, the internet has had a relatively brief history in Russia. He further claims that several cultural stereotypes of the Russian character, such as collectivism and the high significance of informal networks, were recognisable features of the RuNet in the 2000s. While these RuNet characterisations of the late 2000s have since faded, these established early perceptions arguably still prevailed in the early 2010s.

1.1 Grasping the discussion forums

To find popular forums in Russian social media in the early 2010s, I chose LiveJournal (LJ, *Zhivoi Zhurnal* in Russian) and VKontakte (VK). The earliest posts used from this material are from September 2010 and the latest from September 2014. Most of the research hits from the selected keywords were from VK (61), whereas there were just 14 relevant hits in LJ. These numbers do not include reposts that did not get any comments. There were more hits towards the end of the period than at the beginning. This does not necessarily suggest that people became more interested in the topics of nationalism and Karelianness, since during this period the number of RuNet users increased and some old discussions were deleted.

LJ is an international blogosphere that became very popular among Russian internet users in the early 2000s. In 2014, its pages hosted 80 out of 100 of the most popular Russian-

language internet blogs. Due to its longer text-supporting blog format, LJ has a narrower and, arguably, more 'elitist' niche compared to more popular and faster paced social media (Gorny, 2009, p. 218; Greenhall, 2012; Yagodin, 2014, pp. 29–30). VK resembles Facebook visually and by its operating system. VK's particularities include its own music and video streaming service, while access to its content is often less exclusive to group members or friends than is the case in Facebook. Posts in VK are often shorter and, hence, often more spontaneous than in the blog-based LJ. In the posts examined for this research, a majority of the user profiles on both platforms were pseudonyms.

For observational research in the cyber field, the highly mediated level of communication makes it difficult to verify who has made each post, with what motivation, and in which circumstances. The activity of automated and other misleading accounts further complicates assessment. This is not necessarily relevant to the examination of discursive norms and representations in social interaction. For my research, the websites examined or their users or participants observed are not the main subjects of research. Instead, they are considered to be mediators and platforms displaying discursive representations of Karelianness and nationalism. More relevant than the verifiable identities of participants is how these self-representations are made meaningful or disclaimed as positions of valid authority in their statements and responses. Here the research presented engages with current scholarship studying mediated and reflective representations of national minority identity on online platforms. Whereas in-group dynamics, networking, and organiszation of offline activism often are often examined in relevant research of online groups (e.g., Carlson, 2013; Golovnev et al., , Belorussova, & Kisser, 2018), these are not salient aspects in current research.

While people from the Republic of Karelia can be expected to be well represented in the RuNet's discussions about Karelianness, the extent of the participants' locations is virtually limitless. Generally, the expectations of residence background and "democratic voice" in issues at hand implied that the posts about Karelianness would concern only people living in Russia and in the Republic of Karelia. In previous research, people in the Republic of Karelia appeared to have a low general level of interest in collective forms of action and politics. Reasons for this lay partially in the lack of time and resources required to be active and partially in dependencies on being loyal to their employers (Melin & Nikula, 2005, p. 149). From this perspective, RuNet discussions represent somewhat more rarely heard voices. Moreover, while between the years 2009 and 2014 the Russian population's engagement with the internet expanded from 29% to 70% (Internet Live Stats, 2016), there is a somewhat outdated image of

a stereotypical RuNet user as a young adult oriented towards alternative sources of information (Abramov, 2012, p. 104; Yagodin, 2014, p. 94).

Research ethics are not well established for internet material use. In conducting this research, I strove to follow the ethical direction outlined by Turtiainen and Östman (2013) and by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Tenk, 2019). The core ethical guideline to respect research participants and avoid causing them harm is common in the humanities and I applied this in conducting this research. Internet materials can be considered semi-private (e.g., Kukulin, 2013, p. 112) because people often engage with them from home[3] and with the impression that the readership of their posts is limited in practice. Considering this and the topical sensitivity of nationalism, I have limited identifiers for the selected quotes to the year of publication, name of the forum and (if clear) the author's gender as 'f' or 'm'. Some difficulties were faced in relation to the traceability of material due to its translation from the Russian language[4] and because part of the material was deleted from the web after I used it in 2014. The emphasis in the quotes is presented according to the original.

1.2 Nationalism and Nationality in the Russian Context

In the Russian context, nationality and nationalism are controversial topics. Across Soviet history, official nationality policies varied significantly from embracing people's national awareness (e.g., the *korenizatsiia* policy) to the systematic repression of ethno-culturally profiled public figures as 'bourgeois nationalists'. For example, in the Republic of Karelia, both Finnish and Karelian took turns as languages of school teaching until 1958, at which point Russian became the only medium of instruction. The general explanation for this was the decreasing number of the population with Finno-Ugrian nationality. During the perestroika years, the embracing of ethnic identity became accepted and popular again (Suutari & Davydova-Minguet, 2017, pp. 5–9). In the RuNet discussions analysed for this research, for example, the equation of national awakening with the disintegration of the Soviet Union was referred to as a common knowledge, and it was considered dangerous for the unity of Russia as well.

Particularly in the 1990s, the 'awakening' of nationalism seemed to threaten the unity of the recently established state. This involved local and regional separatist movements and even violent escalations, particularly in Southern Russia. The (Autonomous Socialist) Republic of Karelia was identified as a region with a low-level of nationalist and separatist activity in the period between 1989–94 (Giuliano, 2011). Societal movements profiled as nationalistic

eventually dispersed and faded in the republic. In the 2000s, there was little relevant resistance from within the Republic of Karelia to the centralisation of political power in Moscow and the Federal Districts (Goode, 2011, p. 75; Liikanen, 2013). In his survey research, Svynarenko (2005, pp. 90–91) distinguished how people in the Republic of Karelia identified themselves most strongly in civic, ethnic, and local terms.

Like nationalism, nation is a debated concept in Russian public discussions. Unlike a so-called traditional nation state, Russia is officially and historically presented as a multinational state. This has made the concept of the Russian nation ambiguous and controversial—and consequently an interesting research question for academics. While I believe further linguistically oriented research on the concepts of ethnicity (*etnos*), nation (*natsiia*), and nationhood (*natsional 'nost'*) is worth pursuing, this is not my focus here. That said, generally throughout my research I did not notice significant differences in the ways in which these words were used. Accordingly, in this article I use these terms as synonyms. Following the source material, I refer to ethnic Russians (*russkii*) as one sub-group of the Russian (*rossiiskii*) people.

2. Definitions of Nationalism in RuNet

Framing issues, events, and people as "nationalist" stimulated discussions in LJ and VK notably, reflecting the emotional load of the concept. Nationalism was associated with several topical grievances, such as social marginalisation, social unrest, low level of education, and especially rivalries over political power. Consequently, the significance, legitimacy, and existence of nationalism in the Republic of Karelia were disputed in statements praising the region. One such statement was given in a discussion about the infamous escalation of ethnic tensions between local people and Caucasians in violent riots in the city of Kondopoga in 2006 (see Melin, 2007; Sotkasiira, 2017). In a related thread, a participant disputed the claim that these events were a manifestation of nationalism by referring to her knowledge as a local about the general peacefulness and the lack of nationalists in towns of the Karelian Republic:

> Where in Petrozavodsk have you been confronted with nationalism? Of any kind? We have a veeery (sic) peaceful town and Kondopoga has proven to everybody at least 300 times that it has not been a nationalistic ground... It was presented as such only later… (LJ, 2010, f)

Overall, there was much critical discussion of what defines nationalism and nationalists. Some users on LJ and VK even questioned the ad hoc definitions of it. In academic literature too, the

ambiguity of nationalism has been broadly recognised (Hirschi, 2011; Laine, 2020; Miller, 2010). In this article, nationalism is taken to be an instrumental concept that either creates or strongly influences the discussion about Karelianness. While my understanding of nation is influenced by theory (Anderson, 1983; Hirschi 2011), my approach does not anchor these definitions theoretically, but rather examines how they are defined in the RuNet discussions.

Based on the RuNet discussions, I codify three discursive categories of nationalism: civic, regionalist, and ethnic (see Table 1). Two of these terms have been used often in studies of nationalism in Russia, according to which citizenship (*civic*) or descent (*ethnic*) has been emphasised in the criteria of national self and others.[5] I include a third *regionalist* category, which demonstrates regional self-identification and (re-)produces imagined political communities through othering, as it does not fit into either of the two established categories. As discursive categories, these meaning-making norms are interrelated and inseparable.

Table 1. Discursive categories of nationalism

	Civic Nationalism	**Regionalist Nationalism**	**Ethnic Nationalism**
Emphasised criterion between self and other	Sovereign state	National and regional culture	Genetic inheritance, descent
Relation to the political development of the Republic of Karelia	Suspicious of reforms, establishment loyalist	Reformist or restorative	Radical, revolutionary or disoriented
Interpretation of the reasons of fading Karelianness	Organic process of state unification and modernisation	Political and cultural assimilation / Russification	Intentional and coercive repression

Source: author's own representation

I do not seek to define nationalists through this codification, but to highlight socially constructed norms of public manifestations and claims about Karelianness. In this codification I consider both the declared self-perception and the external recognition that were sometimes contradicting each other, especially since, the discussion participants usually did not recognise themselves as 'nationalists'. An illustrative statement below demonstrates the conflict between self-definitions and external recognition by others in RuNet. The person who initiated a thread calling for the termination of 'radical nationalist groups' in social media embraced how every nation should be unique and hence their genetics should not be mixed with one another. This

started a discussion where one of the participants claimed that the idea about national blood purity is nationalist. In her reply, the thread initiator demanded to be recognised as a patriot instead of nationalist, by trying to negotiate the criteria for nationalists:

> I am not at all against national pride, come on! I am a patriot, as well as my entire family and friends. I formed the [social media] group for patriotic purposes in particular, to raise and support the patriotic spirit. When it comes to nationalism, I am glad that you brought up this question; even I personally started to understand the terminology better than earlier. So, if you dig deeper, then NATIONALISM IS A WESTERN WAY OF STATEHOOD. THE FORMATION OF A NATION STATE. In other words, one nation – one state. Well, Nazism is the extreme point of nationalism. I hope that You [sic] agree that in our country – the Empire of Russia, the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, such a way is unacceptable. Because we have, as You yourself wrote, a MULTINATIONAL COUNTRY. We are strong and rich due to the inclusion of different NATIONS in our country. And we are all RUSSIANS [*russkie*]. Russian Tatars, Russian Karelians, Russian Chechens etc. AND finally, Russian Great Russians. (VK, 2014, f)

This example portrays how the principles of different types of nationalist discourses do not necessarily exclude the existence of one another, but rather, they stand in various hierarchical relationships. The thread initiator, who previously had referred to genetics as the norms of nations (as in ethnic nationalism), continues by emphasising civic norms and stressing how the Russian state should be the main principle of collective loyalty. Interactions like this manifest the mutual interdependency between self and other (see for example Neumann, 1999, p. 3). The codification of nationalism presented here highlights the various social norms, apparent within RuNet discussions, dictating the ways in which it is appropriate and believable for people to manifest Karelianness among other identities.

3. Civic Nationalism

The norms of civic nationalism are characterised by the ideology of state unity and a reservation towards suggestions of change to the social and political status quo. Although the 'We' referred to within this group usually does not refer directly to citizenship, it does vaguely imply membership of a state or perhaps of a 'fatherland' (*otechestvo*). According to civic nationalist discourse, the main criterion for collective identification ought to be a modern sovereign state. In this relation, Karelian sub-nationality and regional identity are referred to as secondary

belonging compared to Russianness. Civic discourse emphasises Russian particularity compared to other countries in signifying similarity and difference of collective identity. The norms of civic nationalism should not be confused with the residence-based membership of citizenship studies, as they are closer to the restricted and strongly binding membership of a state (see Faist, 2007).

In civic nationalist discourse, the preferred state of relations between Russian nations was referred to in accordance with the Soviet concept of the 'friendship of peoples' (*druzhba narodov*). Meanwhile, relations between 'blood brothers' ('*brat'ia po* krovi'), such as those between Karelians and other Finno-Ugrian peoples, were considered to be unwanted relations based on ethnic ties. In the following quote, an apologist for the Russian Run (*Russkaia probezhka)* campaign, which presented itself as a patriotic movement to promote a healthy way of life, answered the critique that its slogan "Russian (*russkii*) – means sober" is ethno-nationalistically exclusive of many peoples of Karelia:

> Russian people never feuded with brotherly peoples, but lived in peace and co-understanding. However, here your aggressive reaction to this slogan just smells strongly like Karelian nationalism. No one here insults Karelians, so where is the Russian nationalism? (VK, 2014, m)

This statement demonstrates the suspicion of a message noting Karelian exclusivity from ethnic Russianness. The response implies a belief in a negative correlation between the awakening of (ethnic) nationalism and the well-being of Russia, which often reflects people's collective historical memory. In this discourse, the rise of nationalism marks the reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union, whereas the unity of the peoples is the reason for the golden ages of Russia. The escalation of violence in Ukraine in early 2014 became a popular case to refer to as an example of the harm nationalism can cause to the social order and sovereign state, but this causal reasoning was apparent in discussions even earlier:

> What kind of nationalism can there be in a multinational state? Tatar, Bashkir, Chechen or Karelian? Perhaps Komi, Soha [sic] or Udmurt? If you want to talk about Russian nationalism, then take only the territory of the Middle Belt, excluding the Volga, Urals, East Siberia, Chukotka etc. And there is no need to take pride in an enormous land, because then it will NO longer be YOURS! All talk about nationalism leads to the FALL OF THE COUNTRY. (VK, 2012, m)

Accordingly, nationalism was understood here as an existential threat towards Russian identity,

which implies a geopolitically strong state and harmonic unity of its many nations. The civic nationalistic view presents the main Other to be foreign to Russianness and external to Russian state borders, whereas the internal Other is described as unnatural and imported. This idea about controversial internal othering often resonated in rejections of the claims of Karelian self-manifestation and political emancipation.

In writings manifesting civic nationalism, a portrayal of national pride was positively perceived when it was about the Russian 'Us' and included the accomplishments of the Russian (multi-)national historical state, physical culture, military might, military prestige, and geographic richness. These statements embraced peoples' interest in their collective historical roots as a virtue, but harboured strong reservations towards any manifestations of ethnic favouritism. However, in the civic nationalist logic the nation-mindedness of ethnic Russians was implied to be a certain special exception as it was argued to be the guarantor of the multinational order. Since being part of a multinational state of Russia was perceived as an existential matter for ethnic Russians, more so than for other sub-nations, Russian national pride was presented as less threatening than that of Karelians. In addition, the dominant and paternal position of ethnic Russians among Russian nations was claimed to be legitimate through its demographic majority.

Despite rejecting ethnic and national emancipation, civic nationalist statements constantly reconstructed the ideals of nations, particularly in relation to the 'Russian multination'. This discourse contained elements of the Soviet ideas of citizenship and ethnicity that were defined by statistics and generational heritage simultaneously (Aktürk, 2012, p. 200). Moreover, civic nationalist discourses strongly resonated with what several researchers of Russian nationalism have recognised as the official Russian narrative for constructing all-Russian identity in the early 2010s. At the time of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian ethnicity was emphasised within the official narrative in an ad hoc manner. However, the longevity and the extent of this shift is, so far, inconclusive (Laine, 2020; Teper, 2016).

4. Regionalist nationalism

Among the three discursive categories identified, regionalist nationalism highlighted regional and pluralist cultural identities, revival of traditions, and political decentralisation the most. Accordingly, the centralisation of political power in Moscow was perceived to threaten small ethnic cultures with assimilation into the majority, particularly in Karelia, but also elsewhere in Russia. Dubbing regionalist discourses as 'nationalist' is questionable, because rather than

nations, they construct regional identities. However, in the discussions in LJ and VK, this ideological model was associated with nationalism. Furthermore, this approach is not unique in academic research, as for example Neumann (1999, pp. 113–141) has studied (Nordic) regional identity-building in terms of constructing imagined communities.

The Regionalists (*regionalisty*), the Republicans (*respublikantsy*), and occasionally even separatists (*separatisty*) were all groups affiliated with regionalist nationalism in the RuNet discussions. This is a consequence of the looseness of this term in vernacular discussions. In academic discussion, the uniting feature of the forms of regionalism is the pursuit of regional autonomy (Iarovoi, 2007, p. 38), which is also what I apply to codifying regionalist nationalism from the LJ and VK discussions. In statements manifesting regionalism, the decentralisation of political power was called for in order to revive regional cultures. The visions about the scale of the required measures varied greatly. These calls often spawned heated debates about the compatibility of regionalisation with a strong Russia. The apologists of regionalism did not bring ethnic descent forth in their statements, but their neutrality in relation to ethnicity was sometimes questioned in the discussions arising from their claims.

In autumn 2012, across Russia people rallied at the third demonstration of the March of Millions—a campaign which marked a continuation of the protests against Putin's third inauguration (BBC News, 2012; see also Østbø, 2015). One of the groups participating in the demonstration in Petrozavodsk, the capital of the Republic of Karelia, was the Karelian Regionalists. On their social media page, the Regionalists displayed their protest against the centralisation of power driven by the regime's United Russia party with several pictures. The slogans and symbolism of the Regionalists expressed their desire of being distinguished from the ”Russian nationalists”, who in uploaded images were shown waving the Russian imperial flag. Further pictures of the event revealed that there was also a group with Communist flags present; however, the Regionalists wanted to be distinguished particularly from the nationalists.

While not straightforwardly calling for independence, the Regionalists proclaimed their political self-perception and goal of autonomy by showcasing the Ursa Major flag of the unrecognised historical North Karelian state (1918–1920). The page also manifests a Regionalist banner, in which Louhi, a witch in the Finno-Karelian national epic *Kalevala*, is holding the Karelian flag and casting a spell on the bear symbol of United Russia.[6] The original bear has an added sack in its teeth, which can be understood to represent the stolen wealth from Karelia. The banner has a caption “Louhi! Chase away the swindlers”. The swindlers (*zhuliki*) refer to United Russia's famous nickname: ‘the party of swindlers and thieves’. Besides the

Louhi banner, another related image on the page presented a banderol with the text ”Stop feeding Moscow!”. This refers to the infamous slogan of Russian nationalists ‘Stop feeding the Caucasus!’ (*Khvatit kormit' Kavkaz!*) (see for example Askerov, 2011). These slogans portray post-colonial narratives of Karelia as the producer of economic resources for the centre, Moscow.

While few of the statements supporting regionalist nationalism would go as far in their demands for Karelian autonomy as calling for complete independence, there were exceptions. At the same time as Russia organised the referendum for Crimean reunification with Russia in March 2014, self-proclaimed nationalists organised a poll in one social media group on whether the Republic of Karelia should separate itself from Russia. This was not presented or received as a serious initiative, but rather as a theoretical discussion. The organisers emphasised the poll’s analogy to the Crimean referendum, possibly criticising this event more than seeing it as an opportunity for Karelia. Many of the objections argued that secession would not make sense, because ethnic Russians constitute a majority of the republic’s population—in other words a nation-state logic. The objections also legitimised the belonging of the regional minorities and their territories to historical Russia.

The ‘Karelian independence poll’ was one of several discussions in RuNet that manifested a popular idea in which a serious collective tragedy or suffering caused by the ruling nation can legitimise separatist claims by the oppressed group. Accordingly, calls for more regional autonomy in Karelia often included arguments for a historical view that the Russification processes in the region were unjust or even a coercive political project initiated by Moscow.

In the discussions in LJ and VK, separatism was often interpreted as an extreme form of nationalism and extremism, even if it did not embed the element of ethnic hostility. Indeed, there is legislative backing for this rejection, as calls for separatism are defined as illegal in the Russian Criminal Code, whereas the anti-extremism law is ambiguously defined and hence applicable in an ad hoc manner (see SOVA Center, n.d.). It is noteworthy that, in the RuNet forums considered, extreme nationalism was often associated with Nazism – as such extreme nationalism was rejected on moral grounds and perceived as a historical or ‘natural’ geopolitical threat for Russia. Since separatism was seen as a treasonous attack against Russians and their historical heritage, the discussions about it involved strong emotional tensions. While Karelia experienced separatist periods in its own history (see Giuliano, 2011, p. 31; Liikanen, 2013, pp. 72, 77–79), the people in the LJ and VK discussions referred mostly

to foreign examples of separatism instead.

5. Ethnic nationalism

With the discursive category of ethnic nationalism, I refer to the orientation in which ethnicity, such as Karelian or Russian (*russkii*) descent is given priority as the most crucial factor in collective identity. This position does not necessitate chauvinism and racism, but these associations were strong in the RuNet discussions. While it was a popular perception that an ethnic nationalist would advocate for the chauvinistic ’purity of blood’, even people writing in a non-rejecting way that there are ‘mixed marriages’ were also sometimes associated with ethnic nationalism. In these few cases the idea of differentiating genetic groups defined ethnic nationalism more than any stance towards them.

This was arguably the least accepted discursive category of nationalism and several people fiercely denied this label. Based on the idea of ethnic nationalism, the word ‘nationalist’ was often used as an accusation or slander. People who disclaimed such accusations against them were further accused of hiding their ideology or failing to understand it due to their ignorance. It more often was speculated that ethnic nationalism was a hidden ambition behind people’s ’nationalistically resonating’ claims, such as the calls for more autonomy for the Republic of Karelia: “…Karelians have their culture, language, republic, flag, great songs and runes.[7] What more do you nationalists need? Blood?” (VK, 2014, m).

Like the discussion surrounding the March of Millions event demonstrates, nationalism in the Republic of Karelia was not associated only with national minorities but also with ethnic Russians. In another example, the Russian Run (*Russkaia probezhka*) was claimed to be a nationalist project because its members used symbols of the Russian empire and rhetoric emphasising Russian ethnicity. Promotion of this movement with slogans such as the aforementioned “Russian – means sober” and “Russia for Russians” (*russkie*) in the streets of Petrozavodsk in 2014 drew criticism on VK claiming that their use excluded all non-ethnic Russians, including Karelians. In additional claims about their ethnic nationalism, some of the Russian Run members were said to have made xenophobic statements and have violent backgrounds.

When the ethnic nationalists were profiled in RuNet discussions, they were often characterised as young, ignorant, disorganised, and hence dependent on or prone to external

control and manipulation. This othering of the nationalistic as ignorant, and lacking both organisation and responsibility stands in contrast to officially promoted attributes of the patriotic self in Russia: educated, good-mannered, and goal-orientated (see Svynarenko, 2005, p. 96). The colour revolutions of the 2000s and the events of Maidan in the winter 2013–2014 were referred to as examples of manipulated nationalism. This perception is illustrated in the following quote from a discussion about the hypothetical separation of Karelia from Russia, where one of the commentators suggested that these ideas of separatism could come not only from outside Russia, but also from St. Petersburg or Moscow:

> I only want to remind certain people that Karelia has been a part of Russia for more than 1000 years… And the Russian population here is not less native than the Karelians and Vepsians… But the most astonishing is that all the supporters of Karelian independence from “evil” Russia are located in Stockholm, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and even in Kiev… But this is not supported in Karelia. (VK, 2014, m)

While ‘nationalism’ and ‘nationalists’ were often written about with the expectation that everybody reading would roughly agree with their meaning, some also criticised the politicised use of these concepts. A good example of this was in comments about a news article, in which a known Karelian blogger was accused of nationalism. The news commentators interpreted these accusations to be a classical politically motivated excuse, due to which the blogger was predicted to be forced to turn into ”another future emigree” (VK, 2013, m). This statement refers to a known past of political repression in Karelia, particularly the Stalinist purges, the history of which was addressed in several articles that were circulated both in LJ and in VK.

According to the modernist paradigm, nationalism is the chief constructor and bearer of a nation, which is not biological or objective, but a socially constructed community (Hirschi, 2011, p. 22). One of the strongest perceptions of nationalism in the LJ and VK discussions highlighted the aspiration to establish an *ethnically* homogenous nation state as the main way to identify nationalism. The nationalists of this perception were characterised as being politically disoriented and aggressive. Accordingly, the discourse of ethnic nationalism was something that manifestations of Karelianness needed to avoid being associated with in order to be presented in a popularly acceptable way.

6. Formula of Karelianness

In simplified terms, the idea of Karelianness in LJ and VK discussions was constructed as a sum of the following elements: geography, language, history, descent, and culture. In this

section, I will analyse what kind of meaning these elements were given, starting with geography. It is a popular thesis in Russian studies that geography plays an important role in the Russian national worldview (e.g., Helanterä & Tynkkynen, 2003; Etkind, 2009). This thesis draws on the status of Russia as the world's largest state, and considers its vast natural resources and long borders – many of which have a history which is deeply carved into the national narrative.

In the LJ and VK discussions, only a few discussion participants referred to themselves as 'Karelian' solely due to their regional residence. However, regional identification was at least instrumentally important in legitimising the authority of their statements about issues in the Republic of Karelia. This kind of participation manifested a certain resistance against externally defined public perceptions of Karelia and outsiders making claims about Karelian issues.

While people did appeal to their own Karelian location to lend authority to their arguments about Karelia, their statements were far from idealising territorial separatism. The importance of geography was more apparent in another way—Karelianness was imagined only in its relation to the Republic of Karelia. People with Karelian ancestry, language, and culture residing outside the 70-year-old borders of the titular republic were completely excluded from the related discussions. This does not mean that these people would not have recognised the Karelianness of, for example, the ethnic exclave of Tver Karelians, but in practice they were completely excluded from statements made about Karelianness through the naturalised boundaries of the republic.

In the RuNet discussions, common knowledge about the numerically small population of Karelians often referred to the official census statistics of the republic, which represented the 'scientific truth' about Karelians. Consequently, the borders of the republic limited perceptions of the significance of Karelians, which further affected ideas about the legitimacy of their political authority. A few exceptional statements included the reasoning that at least in *towns* Karelians are neither seen nor heard. Even if speculation about the nation's largest possible territory is globally popular in the nationalist discursive imagination, the Karelian Republic's borders were undisputed even in the nationalistically orientated statements in LJ and VK. Hypothetically, people could have highlighted the most ethnically Karelian regions inside the republic. Alternatively, they could have speculated by including named Karelian regions, such as the Karelian Isthmus, in a 'Greater Karelia'.

In several VK and LJ discussion on the regional identification of Karelia, cohesion with Russia was strongly emphasised. Meanwhile, other regional affiliations of the republic, such as with the North-Western Federal District or the Barents Euro-Arctic Region were not mentioned. When the participants described themselves, none claimed that they were from the Karelian countryside or socially connected there. From this perspective, the voices of the Karelian countryside and small villages were not represented in the public RuNet discussions, despite the fact that, theoretically, their participation was made possible by the internet.

Occasionally, some messages in LJ and VK suggested that due to the name of the Karelian Republic, the titular people should have more societal influence than they currently have. This was stated not only in the calls for more resources and power for Karelians, but also in challenging the name of the federal subject. In 2012, a thread about amazement over the whereabouts of the titular group of the Karelian Republic was initiated in VK with a popular RuNet meme consisting of four images of populist politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Users of this meme can make up lines as if they were said by the politician when giving four expressive gestures. In the first image, he points towards the camera with the caption "*Läksin Karjalah...*" (I went to Karelia…). In the following image Zhirinovsky points to his right with "*Nämä venäjäksi puajitah*" (These talk in Russian), on the third he points to the right "nuo – ruočiksi! (those in Swedish[8]), and in the last, he spreads his hands with an astonished facial expression "*missäkä karjalaiset?*" (So, where are the Karelians?). This meme described how the existence or absence of the Karelian language in public space was associated with the existence of Karelians. One relevant comment suggested that Karelians existed in silence because of their national characteristics of silence and compliance. The meme, however, did reflect a strong discourse in LJ and VK, in which language was generally implied to be a pivotal criterion of Karelianness. Based on the examined discussions, I distinguish four main meanings given to the usage of the Karelian language:

1) an act manifesting Karelian peculiarity towards its Russian Other
2) an act stirring political discussion and nationalist ideas
3) a demonstration of the institutional usability and strength of the language (avoid silence)
4) a demonstration of personal expertise and legitimate interest in the Karelian language

Roughly, the responses to instances in which the use of the Karelian language was perceived

as a statement in were itself split between praise for noble causes and critique of provocation. These perceptions were evident, among others, in comments and discussions on a publication about the youth organisation *Nuori Karjala* (Young Karelia) translating price stickers from a grocery shop into the Karelian language. There was no covering note for this deed in the initial post, but the comments were divided between praise for this activity as much-needed support for the language and criticism that the newsworthiness of the event was exaggerated. Some of the critics even claimed that the event was a provocation. In the context of claims of provocation, I note that the Karelian language was in some cases used to enhance people's statements linguistically. However, generally people announced a preference for avoiding political stigmatisation of their efforts to support the language by arguing that its usage is an end in itself because it contributes to Karelian culture and the existence of the Karelian people.

The critiques voiced was not principally against the usage of the Karelian language, but instead it questioned its ideological motivations and the societal relevance of the language issue. In this regard, criticism reflected a belief in the futility of reviving the Karelian language due to demographic factors and a lack of general public interest. This 'lost cause' discourse was also referred to in comments voicing suspicions that lobbying for Karelianness is a pretext for less acceptable, but covert political ambitions or ethnic nationalism. In a couple of cases the people presenting this critique emphasised that it would be particularly suspicious if an apologist for the Karelian national cause did not personally know the Karelian language. The writer of the comment below, for example, demanded that a person who suggested making Karelian the second official language in the titular republic prove his own language skill and the feasibility of the language:

> …you can learn only what actually exists, but why learn something that doesn't? Now speaking about the Karelian language, you may tell me that 15,000 people speak it according to the census, but what language do you speak? You didn't answer me yet; you are not Karelian if you don't even know anything about the Karelian language. By the way, what is "helicopter" [in Karelian]? […] and now imagine an 11th grade algebra lesson in the Karelian language, the literary language of which appeared through a decision of the Karelian government in 2007. To which academy would a graduate of such a school be accepted? It is all exactly the same that already has been realised in Ukraine. (VK, 2014, m)

The civic nationalist statements that objected to the revival of the Karelian language appealed to its limited benefits in public interactions and particularly in career advancement.

Accordingly, since there is no such problem with the Russian language, its dominant role in the Republic of Karelia was justifiable. Even the apologists for the Karelian language often recognised this institutional weakness to a certain extent, despite their strong opposition towards the implied qualification of useful and useless languages. However, they argued that this weak state is a consequence of the long-term illegitimate support for the Russian and Finnish languages at the expense of Karelian in regional institutions such as schools and the press.

Cultural aspects, such as Karelian clothing, cuisine, and spirituality were not discussed when nationality was mentioned in LJ and VK, possibly due to their lack of controversy. However, a few discussions manifested strong disagreements on whether the historical culture of Karelia is Finno-Ugrian or rather multinationally Russian. In this regard, the differences in understanding of the regional history of Karelia were reflected not only in the previously mentioned debate on the reasons for the "Russification" of the Karelian people, but also in the national identification of regional cultures. People debated whether the cultural symbols of Karelia, such as the *Kalevala*, folk music, and the historical monuments of Kizhi island museum are in fact Karelian, or similarly common to all the peoples of the region, including the Russians. Despite this debate, the celebration of regional identities was a relatively accepted way to manifest collective identities overall.

While my research material from the early 2010s highlighted the existential importance of language for Karelianness, religion was an absent element. This is noteworthy because religion, rather than language, has previously been the key criterion for group identities in Karelia in ethnographical descriptions of the nineteenth century Finns, Swedes, and Russians. Moreover, particularly Slavophiles continued to highlight this criterion for much longer (Björn, 2013). On the other hand, after the fall of the Soviet Union, people from former Soviet countries which are often associated with Islam have been positioned as the Other in Russia and the Republic of Karelia (Svynarenko, 2005, pp. 78–81). The absence of religion in the RuNet discussions about Karelianness and nationalism can be understood as the result of several factors, such as an increasing number of people being secular or otherwise disinterested in discussing this rather intimate topic. Dismissing religion is in line with the discursive practice in which Karelianness is othered in relation to Russianness. Emphasising religion would be logical for a lobbyist of civic nationalism, because religion historically united Karelians with Russians and separated them from Finns and several Western nations.

The topic of genetics and Karelianness can be interpreted as taboo to some degree. It

was discussed, but with apparent discomfort and tensions. Above I have discussed how the promotion of one's ethnicity was often strongly rejected based on associations with pejorative ethnic nationalism. Simultaneously, however, descent was often recognised as an important factor that makes a person Karelian. There was some debate about whether a person would stay Karelian by his or her ancestry and self-perception alone, even if he or she did not know the national language or culture. Particularly the civic nationalist discourse suggested that the Karelianness of a person can vanish along with the language and culture. The comment cited below took a challenging position in this debate as it claimed that Karelian descent should not be considered as a recessive national feature in relation to Russianness:

> …Numerous descendants of mixed marriages make up the vast majority of the republic's citizens today. This scattered majority is at the crossroads in the world where every nation seeks its own unique identity, but this majority has a choice, either become faceless Russians with a set of balalaika, vodka and matryoshka dolls, or become heirs of the ancient Karelian people, Kalevala and the mysterious Hyperborea.[9] The latter should become the basis for the unification of all citizens of the republic into one nation, one family… (VK, 2013)

In this citation, the claim of Karelian uniqueness was based not only on descent, but also on a shared culture and history of the contemporary regional residence. This statement highlighted an identity political standpoint, by which the ability to exclude the Russian Other from the Karelian (ethnic, cultural, and regional) self was perceived as pivotal for the recognition of Karelianness. The importance for human collectives to actively reconstruct their identities vis-à-vis others is well discussed in the social sciences (see for example Connolly, 1991; Neumann, 1999). However, Karelian identity-building conflicts with the civic nationalist discourse, because Karelianness is perceived as an inseparable part of the Russian self and, hence, the differentiation is seen as antagonistic towards Russianness.

Conclusions

In this article, I have examined Karelianness through its representations in RuNet public discussions related to Karelianness and nationalism from 2010–2014. While numerous Russian-speakers and Karelians reside outside Russian borders, the language framework of these discussions practically limited the topic to the context in Russia. Based on this material, I codified the discursive categories as civic, regionalist, and ethnic nationalism to highlight how people perceive societally and politically appropriate manifestations of Karelianness and

examined normative meanings of its signifying features. Generally, these representations highlighted the rarity of first-hand experiences with Karelians among the people participating in public RuNet discussions of the early 2010s.

Based on the common knowledge of census statistics and the lack of participants' personal meetings and observations of Karelians, the Karelian people were perceived to be in a vanishing state of being. This discourse excluded the possibilities of extra- and sub-regional developments of Karelianness. Also related to statistics, the discussions revealed a strongly accepted association between the Karelian-speakers of the statistics and the existence of Karelians. This reflected people's beliefs about the ability of Karelianness to form a legitimate basis of a political collective. The observations of Karelians also were relevant when people used the Karelian language to give Karelians recognition as opposed to remaining silent, which was associated with 'extinction'. The possibility of the existence of layered identities which are simultaneously Karelian (ethnic or regional) and Russian was recognised at the level of discussion. However, there was barely any critique towards the ability (or lack thereof) of census statistics to effectively acknowledge multiple ethnic and linguistic identities.

It is perhaps surprising that Karelianness was not discussed in LJ and VK apart from in terms of its relationship with Russianness. The region of Karelia was emphasised as a historical part of Russian territory which is populated by Karelians and Russians alike, while the descent and regional culture of the people living in it were characterised as mixed. Despite, or possibly because of this, the definition of Karelianness was only discussed in relation to Russianness. This is significant considering the historical, linguistic, and geographical closeness of Finnishness to Karelianness on the one hand and the importance of the European Other for Russianness (Neumann, 1999, p. 179). Othering Russianness was challenged because it conflicted with the civic nationalist discourse about multinational Russianness. On the other hand, distinguishing 'Karelian' from 'Russian' was perceived to be essential for the recognition and existence of Karelians.

The inclusive word search conducted as a part of the current research provided a qualitatively mixed data set of social interactions. While both platforms provided a great variety of content in regard to the interactivity of discussion and argumentation, LJ tended to provide more in-depth discussion, whereas VK provided a larger quantity of posts and participants. However, despite the differences in format, they did not manifest notably different conceptual discourses. Nationalism is one of the most disputed and sensitive topics conveying thoughts that perhaps would not have been expressed in offline public forums. This is particularly

relevant concerning discourses of ethnic nationalism, which, as the discussions demonstrated, are extremely stigmatised and associated with pejorative ideas of separatism, extremism, and Nazism. The ethnic type of nationalism was considered harmful for the Russian state and social order locally, which is why many even suggested to refrain from discussing it.

Finally, there are a number of temporal factors that can be expected to have affected relevant discussions in RuNet before and after 2014, and which should be noted here. First, internet access in the countryside, where many of the Karelian-speakers reside, has improved since the early 2010s, but this does not automatically mean that they would join the RuNet discussions. Moreover, the increasing internet control by Russian officials may affect the discussion of sensitive issues such as nationalism. Indirectly, this could impact the way in which small groups will manifest their national identity in Russia, for example by making these discussions less public and more exclusive.

Notes

[1] I conducted the search using the Russian variations of the words *Karel* (Karelian person), *karel'skii* (adjective), *Kareliiia* (Karelia, proper) and *natsionalist* (nationalist), *natsionalism* (nationalism). I collected the search results in September 2014. Later, some of the discussions could not be recovered.

[2] See https://www.uef.fi/web/fe for more information.

[3] The proliferation of mobile technology decreases the relative share of writing on the internet from home, but during the 2010–2014 period, its usage was not yet high in Russia (Tadviser, 2018).

[4] I have translated the Russian language quotes together with Olga Davydova-Minguet and the Karelian language quotes with Pekka Suutari.

[5] While several scholars have used the civic–ethnic dichotomy, much of the more recent research has criticised its inability to explain understandings of Russian politics or the popular understanding of the foundation of 'Us' (see Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2016; Laine, 2020).

[6] Unlike in the *Kalevala*, Louhi was represented as a protagonist in this banner. In the comments on the group's homepage, it was explained that the village of Louhi in the Republic of Karelia has rebranded their titular character to be positive.

[7] Poems from the Finno-Karelian national epic *Kalevala*.

[8] Karelians have sometimes referred to Finns historically as Swedes due to the religious criterion and the Swedish reign that lasted in Finland from the Middle Ages until 1809 (see Björn, 2013, pp. 410 & 423).

[9] Hyperborea is a northern land in Ancient Greek mythology.

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