ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Language, networks, and virtual transnationalism: The case of Russian speakers from Estonia living in Finland

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Abstract

Expanding globalization, widely spread information and communication technologies (ICT), and inexpensive transportation facilitate easy, fast, and necessary connections across borders. Many immigrants maintain transnational connections while gaining local exposure to the national social field. This article studies immigrants' language and social media uses in transnational and national networks. The case regards Russian speakers from Estonia living in Finland who belong to the global Russian-speaking diaspora. The data derive from a survey ($n = 327$) and interviews ($n = 16$). Results indicate that the national and transnational social fields of the studied Russian speakers affect and shape one another. Their good command of Finnish reduces structural barriers to work, housing, and other functional spheres in Finland, but it does not secure their social inclusion. The latter is counteracted by their local multicultural networks and transnational connections with their country of origin—facilitated by ICT and social media—as a source of positive identity, meaningful relations, and emotional support.

INTRODUCTION

Migration to foreign countries has been facilitated by extended globalization, inexpensive transportation, and widely spread information and communication technologies (ICT), the Internet, and social media as well as the need for a labour force in quickly ageing societies. These provide many migrants easy, fast, and necessary connections between their countries of origin and current countries of residence. Furthermore, digital divides (access, ability, and resources to use the Internet) have been narrowed globally because of affordable devices and easy-to-use applications.

In these contexts, many migrants develop and maintain transnational relationships connecting their current and former country of residence. Increasing easiness of physical mobility and digital connections constitute a transnational social field, a wide web of immigrant networks "encompassing those who move and those who stay behind" (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, 1003). The result is that immigrants' "social life increasingly takes place across borders" (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007, 129). However, people are embedded in their places of residence: "Attachment to place must exist in some form and must impact our identities so long as we exist as beings with bodies" (Easthope, 2009, 66). Local, national, and transnational social fields (i.e. local and nonlocal contacts in the current and former country of residence) may not only complement but also oppose each other, shaping the wider integration of migrants into host societies. The command of a specific context-related language is crucial to exercise communication through local and transnational social fields.

Research on immigrants' transnational activities often focuses on Anglo-American contexts. However, interesting new contexts have emerged from East–West migration in Europe (Tiaynen-Qadir & Matyska, 2020). This article studies Russian speakers from Estonia living in Finland. Their free mobility is facilitated by the geographical proximity of Finland and Estonia as well as the right to free movement within the European Union (EU; Silm et al., 2021; Telve, 2020). Russian speakers from Estonia living in Finland represent a community at the intersection of various identities. They belong to the wide diaspora of Russian speakers around the world. During the Soviet era, Russian was the privileged language of the large Soviet Union, including occupied Estonia. After the restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991, Russian speakers became a linguistic and cultural minority in the Estonian nation-state. However, most of them lived in regions and neighbourhoods in Estonia where Russian speakers formed the majority. For example, in some cities in North-East Estonia, Russian speakers are still more than 90 per cent of the local population. Russian speakers in Estonia belong to different ethnic groups. One of these groups, Ingrians, has historic roots in Finland. During the tumultuous political changes of the early 1990s, Russian speakers with Finnish roots (although not necessarily knowing any Finnish language or culture) were allowed to return to their ancestral land in Finland alone or with their families. Later, the accession of Estonia to the EU in 2004 contributed to the increased migration of other Russians and Russian speakers with no previous Finnish ties from Estonia to Finland.

This article studies how the command of a local language (in this case, Finnish) shapes the national and transnational social networks of transmigrants in the era of widespread access to and use of ICT and social media. Transmigrants are immigrants who "develop and maintain multiple relations—familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political, that span borders" (Tedeschi et al., 2020). The particular case regards Russian speakers from Estonia living in Finland in an immigration context in which Russian speakers are often negatively perceived by members of the host society. We address the following research questions: (1) How does the command of the local language influence immigrants' local (host country) and transnational (country of origin) social interactions? (2) Does the command of the local language expand or reduce immigrants' communication in their countries of residence and of origin? (3) How does the use of ICT and social media connect immigrants to their local and transnational social networks, and how is it related to the perceived willingness of local people to establish close interactions (friendships) with these immigrants?

TRANSNATIONAL AND NATIONAL SOCIAL FIELDS, DIGITALLY MEDIATED COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

Schiller et al. (1992, 1) defined immigrants' transnational activities as "the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" requiring immigrants' frequent, active involvement (Portes et al., 1999). Immigrants are nowadays increasingly exposed to local and transnational social fields (Lubbers, 2018) facilitated by their uses of ICT, the Internet, social media, and audio and video tools. These make possible an instant simultaneous membership in many social groups (Foner, 1997), and consequently many belong to multiple locations simultaneously (Portes et al., 1999, 217). Such immigrants "engage in multiple transnational activities such as frequent cross-border communication, remittance sending, return visitation, asset ownership, political engagement, religious involvement, and media consumption" (Verdery et al., 2018, 57). Immigrants use digital communication means to reconnect and maintain their former sociocultural networks in the countries of origin and to adjust to the current place of living and to transform their family networks into transnational ones (Bacigalupe & Cámara, 2012).

According to Levitt and Schiller (2004, 1003), "Migrant incorporation into a new land and transnational connections to a homeland or to dispersed networks of family, compatriots, or persons who share a religious or ethnic identity can occur at the same time and reinforce one another." Earlier research suggested that transmigrants' transnational networks have strong durability over time (Bolíbar et al., 2015; Verdery et al., 2018). Bolíbar et al. (2015, 13) concluded, "There is no general bipolarity in the configuration of the networks between 'before' and 'after' the emigration." Nevertheless, the dynamics of individual transmigrants' networks (e.g. Verdery et al., 2018) are influenced by their backgrounds (e.g. education, class, gender, language skills, employment, and spouse's nationality; e.g. Comola & Mendola, 2015; Hagestad, 1986; Miguel Luken et al., 2015; Ryan, 2015; Soehl & Waldinger, 2010), their migration trajectories (e.g. migration goals, length of residence in the new destination, and geographical distance between the country of origin and that of current residence; e.g. Bolíbar et al., 2015), and their network characteristics. Intensifying transnational connections can have stronger impact on the identities of immigrants who maintain these connections. Frequent formal and informal transnational practices of individuals and civil society can develop into deeper transnationalism in which immigrants develop identities containing elements from their country of origin, the current country of residence, and impacts from other connections (see Tedeschi et al., 2020).

The communication limitations set by the physical boundaries of immigrant's place and country of residence are partially dissolved by his or her digital communication abilities across places and countries. The intersection between digitally mediated communication and transnational practices has resulted in "transnationalism online" and "digital transnationalism" (Starikov et al., 2018), "virtual transnationalism" (Shklovski, 2011), and "electronic transnationalism" (Gittinger, 2015). This results in physical–digital inhabitation as "trans-spatial and transtemporal imaginaries that dissolve the fixity and boundedness of historical nationhood and state territorial imperatives" (Ong & Nonini, 2003, 288). Furthermore, inhabiting and moving around in such digitally mediated space enable "cognitive travels," despite an immigrant remaining voluntary or involuntary physically immobile in the current country of residence (Hillmann et al., 2018; Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016). Not only are immigrants involved in such cognitive travels, but also their left-behind family members, friends, and colleagues (Telve, 2020).

Research on digitally mediated transnationalism concerns immigrants' personal networks because personal "communication is so key to measuring transnationalism" (Verdery et al., 2018, 58) underlining language as "the essence of communication" (Waldinger, 2013, 79). An emerging body of research aims to understand the connection between immigrants' transnational and national social fields and their commands of different languages. In all, the command of different languages shapes immigrants' local integration, national belongingness, and transnational connections.

Communication in a specific language is an act of identity by which people demonstrate their visions of the world and their places in it (La Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985; King, 2016). Immigrants may avoid using the language

about which they feel anxious—whether that of mother tongue, the local language, or the language of international communication, the latter often English (Sevinç & Backus, 2019). Focusing on the process of learning a foreign language, Risager (2006, 37) stated, "The personal linguaculture of the individual cannot be separated from his or her personal life history and identity formation." For immigrants, acquiring a command of the language of new countries of residence is instrumental, whereas maintaining their mother tongue serves cultural functions and the sense of community (Bian, 2017; Curdt-Christiansen, 2014).

The role of language in transnational communication has not yet been explored in depth. The command of different languages enables connections across borders and cultures and represents "an almost continuous flow (and change) in social networks of people and groups of people" (Risager, 2006, 30). Learning a foreign language is "an eminently transnational endeavor," where code switching between two or more cultures constantly takes place (Risager, 2006). Language proficiency relates to the demographic composition of transnational networks (Doerr, 2017). Although the Internet and social media provide almost unlimited access to almost any community around the globe, the transnational social networks of immigrants are built along their linguistic competencies. King (2013, 51) concludes that "migrants' learning of a new language and maintenance of connections to homeland networks can occur simultaneously and reinforce one another." Crossing linguistic boundaries can take place without losing national identities (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Learning a local (foreign) language may not separate immigrants from their mother tongues; for many, preserving their mother tongues is essential for preserving their personal identities (Alenius, 2018; Risager, 2006; Siim, 2013). Transmigrants may learn national customs and follow local traditions without abandoning their premigration ethnic identities (Light, 2010). The assimilation of transmigrants is thus nonlinear (King, 2013), if it happens at all.

Immigrants' acquisition of the language spoken in their new countries of residence is a personal choice but it also depends on the surrounding community and the state. The state intervenes in the construction and maintenance of immigrants' transnational and national networks through language policies. Together with the size of ethnic communities and national attitudes towards diversity, "the institutional and structural framework of the host country and the social position that people occupy in this framework have an important effect on the possibilities of interaction" (Bolíbar et al., 2015, 4). From the state perspective, the immigrants' command of the local (host country) language is crucial for the population management and structural inclusion of immigrants (e.g. Blackledge, 2002). A poor command of the local language may result in disconnection from the host society, social disadvantage, and residential segregation (MacKie, 2001). Language is thus related to inclusion and exclusion. Interaction with the host country's inhabitants is also shaped by the perception of the host population and their willingness to build friendships with migrants (Schaeffer 2013).

Learning a foreign language requires time and effort, in exchange for which immigrants expect to gain better access to employment, education, or other opportunities (King, 2016). Immigrants need a command of the local (often national) language to enhance their position in their current countries of residence. Learning a local language may expand their connections and intensify interactions. Such ties provide transmigrants with instrumental and emotional support and a sense of belonging (Malyutina, 2013). According to the assimilationist theory, the command of a host country's language may diminish immigrants' transnational networks and communication with people in their countries of origin (Blackledge, 2002; Soehl & Waldinger, 2010). On the other hand, maintaining one's mother tongue positively influences migrants' maintenance of transnational connections (Kwon, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2013). Some migrants, such as highly skilled temporary migrants, are often not interested in learning a local language and integrating into the host society (Anniste & Tammaru, 2014). Their children attend international schools and make friends with other temporary migrants.

The command of two or more languages is an indisputable asset possessed by many transmigrants (King, 2016; Kwon, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2013; Light, 2010). By speaking two or more languages, transmigrants have access to a wider range of social networks and other resources that potentially diversify their social relations in their countries of origin and residence (Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Light, 2010). Based on the case of British–Chinese families, Li and Zhu (2013) demonstrated that having a command of many languages helped their respondents develop and

expand their transnational social networks. The command helps for intergenerational communication and may provide a material advantage by supporting better access to the local labour market (Kwon, 2017). Light (2010, 13) concluded that transmigrants "enjoy linguistic and social capital advantages that outfit them advantageously for international commerce and entrepreneurship."

RUSSIAN-SPEAKING DIASPORA IN FINLAND

Russian speakers in various countries are a diverse community of ethnicities and countries of origin (Sotkasiira, 2018). The migration of Russian speakers increased in times of major geopolitical changes in Eurasia such as the Russian Revolution, the Second World War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union (Ivashinenko, 2019). After the Second World War, millions of Russians and other Russian speakers were relocated to Soviet republics where Russian was the *lingua franca*. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, many Russian speakers suddenly found themselves in restored nation-states where Russian was no longer the preferred language. This change triggered the return migration to Russia and onward migration to Europe and elsewhere (Tiaynen-Qadir & Matyska, 2020).

An estimated 300 million Russian speakers in Russia and other countries connect or reconnect between countries using the Russian language as their main language of communication. These diasporic connections help maintain and re-establish social networks put at risk due to emigration (Shklovski, 2011, 1). By speaking Russian, local Russian communities can connect with the wider transnational Russian-speaking population. It facilitates intergenerational communication between Russian speakers in different countries (Ivashinenko, 2019; Remennik, 2013; Tiaynen-Qadir & Matyska, 2020). To communicate over distances and develop transnational social fields, Russian speakers can use globally connected ICT and social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp and Russian social network platforms such as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte (Golova, 2020).

Malyutina (2013) underlines that for Russian diaspora members, close networks and friendships became particularly important in the uncertain post-Soviet era full of changes and threats. Networks and friends significantly supported families and communities in the Russian diaspora (see also Kharkhordin, 2009). According to Malyutina (2013), many diasporic Russians in London prefer interacting with old friends in their countries of origin over making new friends in London. Emotionality is perceived as significant in Russian speakers' friendships: a friend is a supportive, trustworthy, and compassionate person with whom relations can be maintained over time and distance. In contrast to the functional gains of transnational networks found in many studies, Shklovski (2011) shows that transnational interactions between Russian speakers often involve nostalgia, memories, and emotions.

This article focuses on Russian speakers who moved from Estonia to Finland, a neighbouring country to both Estonia and Russia. Because Finland is a neighbour of Russia, one might expect to find a large Russian-speaking community living in Finland. By the end of 2019, Russian speakers accounted for 82,000 persons (1.5% of Finland's population and 19.9% of all foreign language speakers) in the country (Statistics Finland, 2020). Estonians comprise the largest minority by citizenship from outside of Finland, with around 51,000 persons (0.9% of the total population of Finland and 19.0% of all those with foreign citizenship; Statistics Finland, 2020). The geographical proximity and good transport connection between these two countries provide opportunity for various cross-border practices; migration flows between Finland and Estonia increased significantly during the twenty-first century (Alenius, 2018). The number of people spending considerable time in both Estonia and Finland is approximately 20,000, but many more interact across borders through ICT and social media (Silm et al., 2021). About 6500 Russian speakers in Finland originate from Estonia. They speak Russian but did not arrive from Russia, and they arrived from Estonia but are not culturally Estonians. In addition to Finnish, Swedish is also an official language in Finland. About 5 per cent of the national population speaks it as their mother tongue, and more than 90 per cent of them are fluent in Finnish. Of people with foreign backgrounds in Finland, including Russian speakers, about 75 per cent have at least an average command of Finnish (Statistics Finland n.d.).

Due to a complex relationship history, Finns maintain reservations about Russians, regardless of the country from which they arrive. As a result of the Finnish War between Sweden and the Russian Empire, Finland became a Grand Duchy of Russia from 1808 to 1917, which in Finland is often conceived as a period of occupation by Russia. Finland gained independence in 1917, but the Soviet Union attacked Finland in 1939, which led to a second war between Finland and the Soviet Union. Unlike Estonia, Finland was not occupied again in the course of World War II by the Soviet Union, but it politically pressured Finland until the 1980s. Finland still has concerns over the security threat posed by Russia. Sotkasiira (2018, 122) concludes that social insecurity exists in Finnish society in relation to Russia and the personal transnational networks of Russian-speaking Finns. Haikkola (2011, 158) highlights that Russian immigrants have a complicated status in Finnish society: "Finns prefer Scandinavians and white Americans and are more favorable towards the Polish and Estonians compared to Russians and Somalis." Such an unfavourable situation affects social interactions between the Russian speakers and local Finns. Renvik et al. (2020) claim that the Russian-speaking people and the Ingrian-Finnish returnees' attempts to establish social contacts with Finns may be met with suspicion if not rejection. Sotkasiira (2018) and Haikkola (2011) state that many Russian speakers do not always try to gain acceptance or assimilate into the Finnish community. Instead, they tend to maintain their transnational ties and practices in search of a more positive identity beyond traditional notions of ethnicity or nationality.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This article is based on sequential mixed methods research. First, quantitative data were gathered and analysed. At a later stage, to clarify and elaborate the findings from the survey, qualitative data were collected. Therefore, the quantitative survey provides a general picture of the language situation of Russian-speaking Estonians living in Finland. The data from qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the meanings, personal experiences, subjective interpretations, and role of language in the local and transnational connections of Russian speakers from Estonia. The studied group, Russian speakers from Estonia in Finland, exists at the intersection of various identities and remains widely overlooked in research on European transmigrants (Malyutina, 2013). The article's authors were fully competent in Finnish, Estonian, and Russian languages to gather the material and conduct the analysis.

The first data set is a representative survey conducted in September–November 2019 among an adult population who arrived from Estonia and lived in Finland (Estonian or Russian speakers; $N = 2000$; about 5% of the total population). The survey procedures were designed so that demographic and geographical representativeness of the sample would be reached. Stratified sampling method was implemented, that is, the total population was divided into strata (subgroups along gender, age, and geographical location in main regions in Finland), and then random sampling was used. Each respondent was connected individually by phone and the survey gathering was followed on a weekly basis to guarantee its representativeness.

The respondents consented to take the survey, either responding to the questions by phone or filling the survey in the Internet. The respondents remained anonymous and unidentifiable in the storage and analysis of the data and presentation of the results. The survey was available in the Estonian and Russian languages. For this survey, 327 adult respondents with Russian as their mother tongue were selected (about 6% of the total population of adult Russian speakers from Estonia living in Finland). In addition to information about the demographic, social, economic, and migration backgrounds of the respondents, the survey provides information about their language skills and social media use and the people surrounding them in everyday activities, including family members, neighbours, coworkers, and partners during free-time activities. Furthermore, the survey shows the length of their residence in Finland and the frequency of their transnational communication online and physical visits to the country of origin (Estonia). This material was analysed with descriptive statistics and nonparametric statistical methods, including comparison of means and cross tabulation.

The second data set consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 16 Russian speakers from Estonia who live in Finland and have different background characteristics. They were recruited from the 327 survey respondents who gave consent to be contacted for further research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted via Skype and telephone in the spring of 2020. The interviews were conducted in the Russian language by a native speaker, recorded, transcribed in Russian, translated to English, and analysed using the NVivo program with a combination of data-based and theory-driven qualitative content analysis. In the first stage, the qualitative data were explored in relation to what factors were often mentioned by the respondents in relation to creating new networks and maintaining old ones. The Finnish language was referred to by the majority of respondents. In a later stage, the theories of transnationalism and social networks provided us with necessary concepts and directed our attention towards the respondents' transnational and local connections. Moreover, one goal of the theory-driven analysis was to test whether, as in previous studies, the command of a local language increases the number of social connections in a country of residence and reduces the frequency of transnational communication (Blackledge, 2002; Soehl & Waldinger, 2010). Direct quotations from the interviews are also used. The qualitative data focus on the interviewees' social networks and communications, including their social media use with Russian speakers and other people living in Finland, Estonia, and elsewhere. All respondents gave consent and remained anonymous and unidentifiable in the storage and analysis of the data and in the presentation of the results. The data were gathered and stored following the General Data Protection Regulation in the EU. All names were anonymized.

The interviewees frequently referred to Finnish language-related issues regarding their presence in Finland and in establishing and maintaining their social networks. Thus, the respondents' Finnish language skills were chosen as the starting point of the study. In the original survey, the respondents self-assessed their proficiency in the Finnish language according to a 5-point scale (1 = *fully fluent in Finnish* to 5 = *not fluent in Finnish*). Accordingly, the respondents were divided into three groups: fluent ("I am fluent or I am rather fluent in Finnish"), intermediately proficient ("I have medium skills in Finnish"), and not fluent ("I am rather not fluent in Finnish" or "I am not fluent in Finnish"). There is some subjectivity in the answers since the respondents self-assessed their Finnish language skills.

FINDINGS

Background characteristics of russian-speaking transmigrants

Of the 327 respondents (Russian speakers from Estonia living in Finland), about one third (32%) were male and two-thirds (68%) were female. The respondents' ages varied from 18 to more than 60 years (Table 1). Of the respondents, 47 per cent were married, 16 per cent were unmarried but had a partner, 26 per cent were divorced or widowed, 10 per cent were single, and 1 per cent did not know how to answer this question. Moreover, 80 per cent had children in Finland and 60 per cent had spouses or partners residing in Finland. Regarding the respondents' educational backgrounds, 31 per cent had completed higher education, 43 per cent vocational education after secondary education, and 26 per cent secondary education. Of the respondents, 68 per cent

TABLE 1 Respondents' gender and age background (%)

Age in years	18–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61–	N
Male	12.4	24.8	33.3	21.9	7.6	105
Female	8.6	30.6	28.8	21.6	10.4	222
Total	9.8	28.7	30.3	21.7	9.5	
Total N	32	94	99	71	31	327

were employed by a company or self-employed, whereas 32 per cent were not working, being on parental leave, retired, studying, or unemployed. Eight of the interviewees were male and eight were female, varying significantly in respect to their age, education, and occupation. Unfortunately, detailed information about demographics regarding the total Russian-speaking population originating from Estonia and living in Finland is lacking.

Regarding their language skills, in line with previous findings, the respondents appeared to speak several languages, allowing them access to various social fields. In addition to their native Russian language, many respondents had good command of Estonian and Finnish. In detail, 59 per cent were fluent in Finnish, 28 per cent had median skills, and 13 per cent were rather not fluent in Finnish language. Moreover, 39 per cent were fluent in Estonian, 21 per cent had median skills, and another 40 per cent were rather not fluent in Estonian. Finally, only 1 per cent had good command of Swedish, 4 per cent had median skills, and 95 per cent were rather not fluent in Swedish. Nevertheless, the language they used in ICT and social media was predominantly Russian: 23 per cent used only Russian, 23 per cent used Russian more than any other language (Estonian or Finnish), 40 per cent used Russian and another language equally, 10 per cent used another language more often than Russian, and 4 per cent used either Estonian or Finnish.

All respondents could be defined as digitally skilled (cf. Starikov et al., 2018) or virtual (cf. Shklovsky, 2011) transmigrants. They regularly use ICT to stay in touch with their friends and relatives in Estonia and to follow Estonian media (see also Verdery et al., 2018). ICT and social media are essential for the respondents' transnational activities, providing fast and easy access to physically distant but socially near people in their social fields. Every respondent had a mobile phone and actively used social media such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Phone calls and text messages were the most frequently used methods of communication, with 83 per cent of the respondents using them every day. Facebook and Instagram were used daily by 56 per cent and 22 per cent of the respondents, respectively, and other digital means of communication (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp, or VKontakte) were used by 60 per cent of the respondents on a daily basis. Of the respondents, 40 per cent used ICT on a daily basis to communicate with friends and relatives in Estonia, 30 per cent on a weekly basis, and 30 per cent less often (at least a few times a month).

The use of ICT and social media to support respondents' transnational practices was not limited only to communication with friends and relatives in Estonia. Many also consumed media produced in Estonia. For example, 31 per cent of the respondents watched news from Estonia on a daily basis, 19 per cent on a weekly basis, 28 per cent a few times a month, and the remaining 22 per cent did not follow the news of their country of origin. The respondents updated their knowledge of events in Estonia and thus had common topics to discuss with their friends and relatives left behind. Therefore, the use of ICT helps transmigrants maintain a strong transnational social field.

Transmigrants' Finnish language skills and structural inclusion

We found a positive correlation between respondents' increased length of residence in Finland and their better command of Finnish within the first 10 years after immigration. Later, their Finnish skills seemed to stay relatively stable. Those who had moved to Finland within the last five years were the least skilled in Finnish (Table 2).

A good command of Finnish facilitated the respondents' exposure to the everyday environment of the local Finnish population in families and in the neighbourhood, at work, and during free-time activities. Many respondents spent several years learning Finnish before getting their first jobs. Indeed, low proficiency in Finnish is considered an important barrier to obtaining a career and getting access to better housing and other opportunities. Thus, the command of Finnish eliminated structural barriers to successful inclusion in Finnish society. As our data suggest, respondents with better Finnish language skills were less segregated into ethnic neighbourhoods, less often employed at companies with mainly immigrant employees, and less isolated from local Finns in their free-time activities. A comparison between the respondents' Finnish skills and the presence of Finnish neighbours,

TABLE 2 Respondents' Finnish language skills[a] vs. respondents' other background variables

Variables	Means	Std. deviation	Sig.
Year of migration to Finland			
1999–2001	1.5000	0.73108	0.000
2002–2004	1.6207	0.62185	
2005–2007	1.7073	0.51205	
2008–2010	1.5692	0.66071	
2011–2013	1.4588	0.69954	
2014–2016	1.2653	0.72960	
2017–2019	0.8421	0.89834	
Total	1.4654	0.70849	
Finnish neighbours	1.7190	0.51999	0.000
Non-Finnish neighbours	1.3438	0.74956	
Total	1.4888	0.69386	
Finnish coworkers	1.6570	0.59610	0.000
Non-Finnish coworkers	1.2662	0.75734	
Total	1.4823	0.69943	
Finnish free-time activity partners	1.7838	0.53412	0.005
Non-Finnish free-time activity partners	1.4364	0.71388	
Total	1.4776	0.70333	
Social media partners residing in Finland			
Majority	1.5714	0.66613	0.002
About a half	1.5493	0.60448	
Less than a half	1.2857	0.78284	
None	1.1579	0.85507	
Total	1.4519	0.72013	

[a]Finnish skills: 0 - I am not fluent, 1 - I have intermediate skills, 2 - I am fluent.
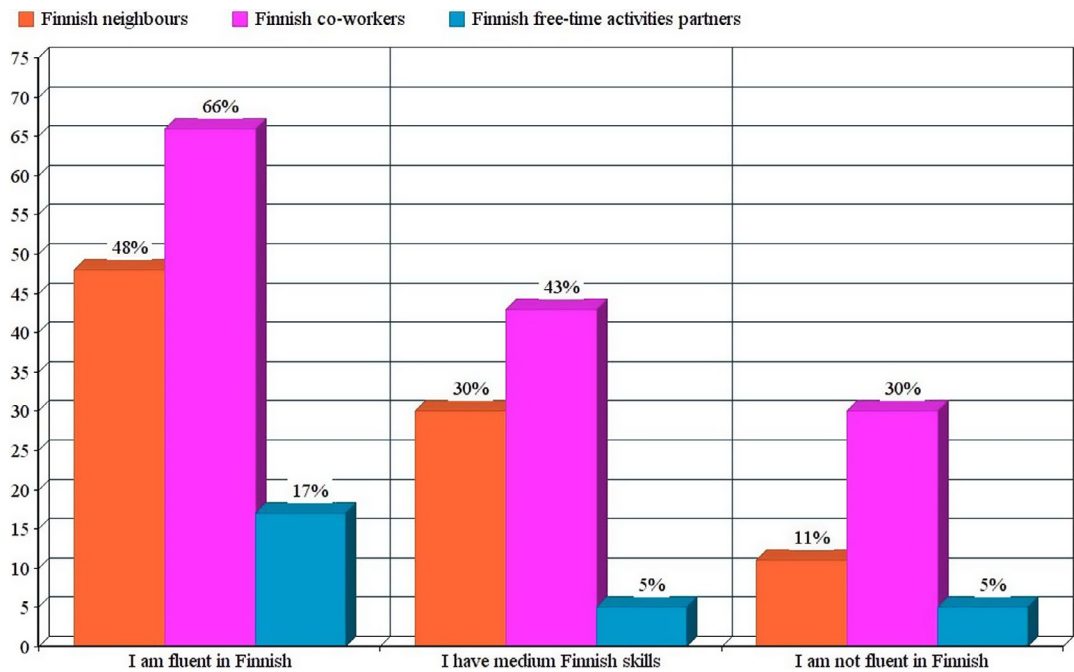
coworkers, and free-time activity partners showed that better Finnish skills were associated with an increased communication with Finns at work, in the neighbourhood, and/or during the pursuit of hobbies (Figure 1; Table 2). For example, 48 per cent of the respondents with good command of Finnish reported that they were surrounded by Finns in their neighbourhoods, while 30 per cent of those with medial Finnish skills and only 11 per cent of those not at all fluent in Finnish stated the same.

Egor described his access to the labour market in Finland:

> I moved in 2010 [*to Finland*]; I work as a bus driver. I did not move for work; my father is an *Ingermalainen* [*Ingrian*]. I thought that I would try something here; maybe something would turn out somehow.... I learned the language a little, went to two courses, and then, in 2012, I went to work.

Nikita perceives that having a poor command of Finnish is a strong barrier for him to social inclusion in Finland:

> The language barrier is still here. There is a lack of knowledge of local structures and language. This is very disturbing.

■ Finnish neighbours ■ Finnish co-workers ■ Finnish free-time activities partners

FIGURE 1 Share of Finnish neighbors, co-workers, and free-time activities partners that respondents mainly communicate with in Finland vs. Finnish language skills

Moreover, as discussed earlier, language is important for cultural integration. The command of the local language is essential for navigating through the unknown cultural environment of a foreign country. During the interviews, many respondents regularly used specific Finnish words because they could not recall a word in their native language conveying the same notion. For example, Katya, who received her degree in Finland, used Finnish for various higher education terms such as *perustutkinto* (vocational upper secondary qualification), *ammattitutkinto*, and *erikoisammatti-tutkinto* (further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications). Proficiency in Finnish allowed these respondents to be part of Finnish culture with its unique notions, symbols, and references. In contrast, a poor command of Finnish constrained the respondents' access to important cultural codes. According to Sergey,

> This is not such a problem, but because I don't know the language, I can't communicate with Finns and I can't discuss their simple everyday problems, and I still can't understand what a Finn is, what Finns are like.

Transmigrants' Finnish language skills and social media networks

Touching upon the process of building networks, a good command of Finnish correlates with the creation of new networks in the respondents' current country of residence (i.e. Finland; Table 2). The better command of Finnish the respondent had, the larger the share of her or his social media partners who resided in Finland. Those respondents, who interacted with residents of Finland as the majority of their social media partners, had better than intermediate Finnish language skills. Being fluent in Finnish, Igor commented,

> Here are a lot of family friends, that is, a lot more friends right here, than I ever had in Estonia.

Nevertheless, even if the respondents' newly created networks were located in Finland, they were not necessarily comprised of ethnic Finns. Of the respondents who were fluent in Finnish, only 4 per cent communicated on social media predominantly with Finns (Figure 2). This share, already quite insignificant, was 2 per cent for respondents with medium Finnish proficiency and 0 per cent for individuals not fluent in Finnish. In contrast, the number of multi-ethnic social networks increased when the command of Finnish improved, while the share of Russian-speaking networks decreased. Thus, although respondents' new networks were created in Finland, they did not include many Finns but instead included other local ethnic communities living in Finland.

A comparison of the respondents' number of social media partners residing in Finland and the number of people with whom the respondents communicated via both telephone and social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Instagram, etc.) demonstrated that the majority of respondents' contacts in Finland were, indeed, not Finns (Table 3). Even for those respondents whose majority of social media partners resided in Finland, Finns constituted only 6 per cent of those contacts, Russians constituted 34 per cent, and other ethnic groups constituted 57 per cent. Even having a large share of Finnish neighbours and coworkers did not predict the immigrants' deeper incorporation into the Finnish social field. Among the respondents who had Finnish neighbours, 6 per cent had Finnish social media partners compared to 2 per cent among the respondents who did not have Finnish neighbours. Of the employed respondents with Finnish coworkers, 5 per cent had Finnish social media partners compared to 1 per cent of the employed respondents without Finnish coworkers.

Our qualitative data provided extensive evidence of the tendency to form social networks with other ethnic groups. Although many respondents acquired a good command of Finnish that gave them better access to resources in Finland, it did not assist them in establishing meaningful connections with Finns. The interviewees frequently mentioned that their main reason for not having Finnish friends was the Finnish people's lack of motivation for social interaction. Some interviewees perceived that Finns did not generally show interest in establishing friendships with foreigners and preferred networks among Finns. Sergey stated,
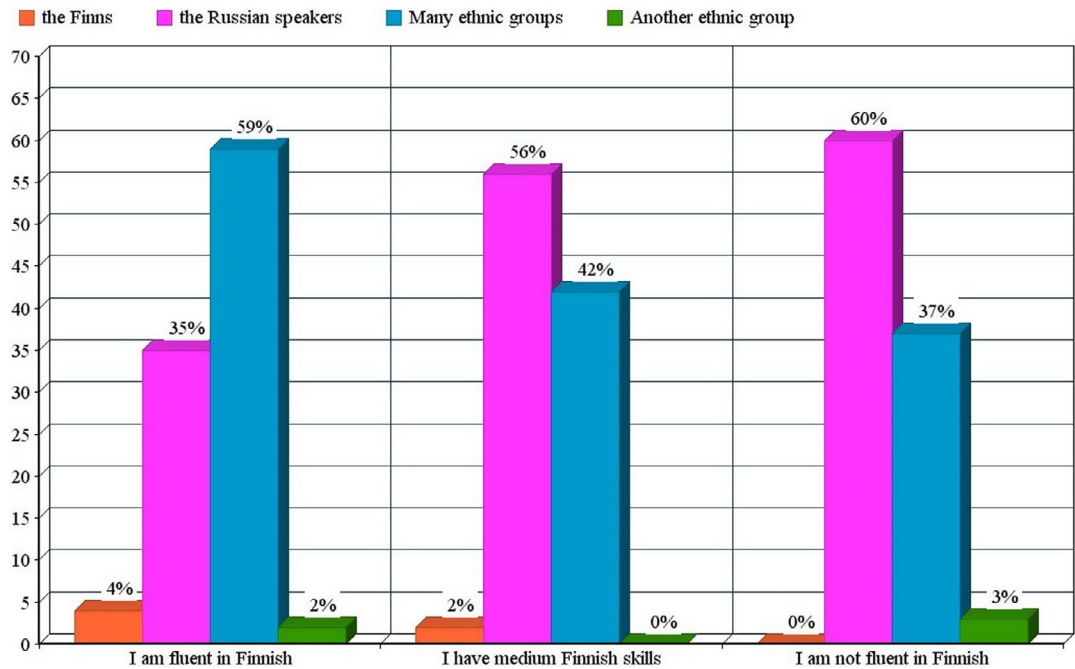

FIGURE 2 Nationalities with whom respondents mainly communicate with via telephone and social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Instagram, etc.) vs. Finnish language skills

> I would love to have more contact with Finns, but they are closed. Finns communicate with the Finns, and they don't really want to communicate with foreigners. It is difficult to integrate into their society, so we have to look for people from Russia and Estonia.

Difficulties in establishing friendships with Finns pushed the respondents to return to and foster their meaningful pre-migratory networks or integrate into immigrant communities and/or minority groups in Finland. Indeed, the interviewees indicated highly diverse friendship circles in Finland that include various ethnic groups. The command of Finnish thus positively correlates with the ethnic diversity of people's personal networks (Figure 2). Although the respondents faced challenges in establishing friendships with Finns, Finns did enter their networks. The Russian speakers often characterized these Finns who were part of their social networks as "coworkers" or "acquaintances" rather than friends. In fact, Finns rarely belonged to the respondents' intimate friendship circles, and the respondents did not often meet Finns in their free time, share meals with them, or maintain long and meaningful relations with them. In short, even a good command of Finnish did not guarantee closer relations with Finns, as Max said,

> Well, if a person speaks Finnish very well, well, he sort of communicates with Finns, but they still don't let him get close to them.... They never came to visit, to make a barbeque together. ... So they came only once for a grill party and that is it, and, so, we didn't communicate [with each other] anymore. That is it; I do not communicate with Finns in my free time, let's say just for business.

Transmigrants' Finnish Language Skills and Transnational Social Fields

Although the length of residence in Finland positively correlated with the respondents' Finnish language skills, it did not clearly affect the frequency of their contacts with Estonia (Table 4). The number of years since migration did not affect the frequency of their communication with Estonia. Only recent migrants (living in Finland up to 3 years) were more deeply involved in their former home country networks; they communicated with friends and relatives in Estonia almost daily. However, even those who moved to Finland five, 10, or even 20 years ago still communicated with friends and relatives in Estonia on at least a weekly basis. Indeed, transnational social connections may be durable and preserved for decades. Thus, the respondents with longer residence in Finland did not disrupt their transnational ties.

The geographical proximity of Finland and Estonia and affordability of travel between these two countries could be possible reasons for the durability of transnational networks of Russian speakers from Estonia who lived in Finland. Of the respondents, 92 per cent visited Estonia at least once per year. In more detail, 3 per cent visited Estonia weekly, 20 per cent monthly, 30 per cent 4–7 times a year, 39 per cent 1–3 times a year, and 8 per cent less than once a year. Frequent visits were associated with more intense communication with Estonia and, as a result, preservation of transnational networks (Table 4).

Our qualitative data support these findings. For example, Galina said that despite living in Finland for 18 years, she had not created meaningful connections in Finland, whereas her ties with Estonia had stayed unchanged over the years. She continued calling and messaging her friends and acquaintances in Estonia every day. Galina, who was fluent in Finnish, said,

> How many years I have lived here, and I do not have a single Finnish friend. Not talking about a friend, not even a person with whom I would be constantly communicating... but the ties with Estonia that were there, they remain. They're the only ones that haven't changed, I guess.

Immigration to Finland changed the meaning of connections with those left behind in Estonia for some of our respondents. For instance, Galina mentioned that her friends in Estonia used to provide her with various

TABLE 3 Respondents' social media partners in Finland vs. respondents' communication via social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Instagram, etc.)

Variables	I mainly communicate in social media with the Finns	I mainly communicate in social media with the Russians	I mainly communicate in social media with another ethnic group	I mainly communicate in social media with many ethnic groups	Total (N)
Majority of my social media partners reside in Finland	6%	34%	3%	57%	134
About a half of my social media partners reside in Finland	1%	35%	3%	61%	71
Less than a half of my social media partners reside in Finland	3%	56%	0%	41%	70
None of my social media partners reside in Finland	0%	74%	0%	26%	35
Total	4%	44%	2%	60%	310

Note: $p = 0.000$.

TABLE 4 Respondents' frequency of communication with Estonia[a] vs. respondents' year of migration to Finland and respondents' frequency of visits to Estonia

Variable	Means	Std. deviation	Sig.
Year of migration to Finland			
1999–2001	2.0667	1.04826	0.518
2002–2004	2.0000	1.06904	
2005–2007	2.0732	1.03417	
2008–2010	2.2121	0.96898	
2011–2013	2.1573	0.95226	
2014–1016	2.1176	0.84017	
2017–2019	2.5789	0.96124	
Total	2.1538	0.96913	
Frequency of visits to Estonia			
At least once a week or almost every week	2.5455	1.03573	0.000
At least once a month or almost every month	2.5000	1.01147	
About 4–7 times a year	2.2200	0.90543	
1–3 times a year	2.0236	0.92122	
Less than once a year	1.5000	0.86023	
Total	2.1545	0.96617	

[a]Frequency of communication with friends and relatives in Estonia: 0 – not at all, 1 – a few times a month or less, 2 – twice a week, 3 – almost every day, 4 – several times a day.

kinds of material support in Estonia; for instance, they provided her with accommodation. After she moved to Finland, those ties acquired a new deeply emotional meaning based on common memories and experiences. Other respondents noticed that time and distance demonstrated which relations were the most meaningful for them. They drew a clear line between "acquaintances" they had in Finland and "real friends" who were left behind in Estonia.

The respondents' access to their previously built social networks combined with their transnational connections with Estonia created a comfortable language space for them. This space was filled with common memories, beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyles surrounding the language they had mastered. Moreover, the Russian language provided access to education, culture, and entertainment. Regarding communication, the respondents underlined that Estonia had a more Russian-language-friendly environment than Finland, as Roman noticed,

> The Russian-related content is also very popular in Estonia, so you can also go to all kinds of theatres, museums, and all performances in Russian. In Finland, there is a big problem with the Russian language. It is much more convenient and comfortable for a Russian-speaking person to live in Estonia.

The role of ICT and social media in the maintenance of transnational connections

Our findings suggest that ICT and social media allow the interviewees to mitigate the social disadvantages of immigration. In other words, continuous socialization within the transnational social field postponed the establishment of local social relations in Finland. Katya, who moved to Finland around 10 years ago, was still

in close touch with her relatives and friends in Estonia. ICT tools allowed instant messaging and a virtual presence to make the communication process easy and real. Irina stated that video calls reconnected her to distant relatives, allowing them to support each other emotionally and show their lives through sharing pictures and videos. Katya said,

> We are generally aware of everything that is happening. Everything, starting with how they [parents] got up in the morning. … With video communication, we don't feel that everyone is far away. Even with those who live closer here in Finland, I do not communicate with them as often as I do with my parents, sister, and relatives.

The variety of available social media platforms and applications created the division in the purposes of their use. The majority of the respondents mentioned several social media platforms on which they were registered. They explained that different people preferred different applications, and to stay in touch with all of them, one needed to diversify his or her use of social media tools. For example, Facebook was often addressed as a website used for maintenance of friendships and family connections, whereas WhatsApp was used more often for work-related issues (e.g. as evident in the interviews with Alex, Nikita, and Sergey). Moreover, some applications were more popular in one country and less popular in another. For instance, Sergey said that his motivation to use WhatsApp stemmed from the fact that after immigrating to Finland, he learned that the Finnish population prefers it. Lena specified that she used Viber to connect with her friends in Belarus, while she used WhatsApp for other contacts. Alexander mentioned that he used Odnoklassniki and VKontakte to contact friends in Russia. Nikita described the different purposes of the available social media:

> I have Facebook Messenger; I communicate with my sister and mother in it, and someone I have at work there, and friends. … I have Viber; I communicate with a friend there, because it seems to be more convenient for him, and it's not difficult for me. WhatsApp is there for business, for all sorts of things. Well, what else do I have?.. Telegram, Telegram is very cool. Each social network has its own purpose, because Telegram is for groups. Telegram has a lot of useful groups, and I follow some projects there.

The chosen telecommunication means for the maintenance of transnational networks may depend not only on the country of origin and of residence but also on the skills and ages of distant friends and relatives. In this respect, age played a crucial role. Older family members were less skilled at using various social media applications and thus were restricted to communication by phone. On the other hand, Lena mentioned that her children motivated her to learn how to use social media to stay in close contact with them. Describing his tools for transnational communication, Nikita stated,

> With friends, I use social networks, such as Viber, WhatsApp, or Facebook Messenger, and with my grandmother [I communicate] only on the phone. We did not teach her how to use the Internet.

Nevertheless, despite acknowledging the high value of ICT and social media for supporting transnational ties, the respondents noted that virtual communication was not able to replace face-to-face interactions. Such interactions were vital for romantic relationships and other deep, meaningful friendships. Having left his partner behind in Estonia, Alex shared his experiences of a long-distance relationship:

> Yes, we started communicating more often on Viber for a while, but then it started to fade. That is, then less, less, and less. If we talk about a married couple, then real contact is indispensable. And for a while, people can stay apart and even communicate well, and it will not affect them in any way, but after a while, when a certain line is passed, people start to grow apart.

CONCLUSIONS

This article contributes to the discussion on the changing dynamics within social networks of transmigrants in regard to their local (national) language skills and ICT and social media uses. The focus was on Russian speakers from Estonia living in Finland, a particular group of the large global Russian-speaking diaspora. The findings show that many Russian speakers maintain transnational connections while gaining local exposure to the national social field. The national and transnational social fields affect and shape one another. A good command of the local language (here, Finnish) reduces structural barriers to work, housing, cultural fields, and other opportunities in the host society, but it is unable to secure deeper social inclusion for immigrants in the community of local people, for example, in forming closer friendships (cf. Hannerz, 1992). Deeper social inclusion requires the means and ability to communicate, mutual acceptance, and the motivation to establish closer social connections.

Due to challenges in establishing closer friendships with members of the host society, the respondents developed at least two strategies to mitigate the social disadvantages of immigration: transnational connections with their country of origin—facilitated by ICT and social media—and interaction with other local ethnic communities as sources of positive identity, meaningful relations, and emotional support. Similar findings were obtained in previous research (Haikkola, 2011; Malyutina, 2013; Shklovski, 2011; Sotkasiira, 2018). Facing social exclusion in a host society, immigrants tend to opt for mixed embeddedness: they become structurally incorporated into their countries of residence through work and other functional roles, and they continue to maintain their pre-migratory social networks and build new networks in the host society with groups open to closer social interactions. The diversity of available ICT and social media platforms gives the respondents access to various social groups across ages, countries, and interests. Since all migrants irrespective of their origin and ethnic belonging seek social contacts in their new homelands, the new local social networks they form are more likely between different migrant and minority groups than with members of the host population. The closure of the host society's members may further be triggered by historical factors such as wars between the origin and destination countries, as in the case of Russia and Finland.

Our broader findings support the assimilationist theory in regard to structural integration but not in regard to the formation of closer social contacts such as friendships. Improved local language skills do not necessarily contribute to such social interactions with locals; thus, transnational ties may be preserved over an extended time (e.g. Soehl & Waldinger, 2010). Local people are perceived as coworkers and acquaintances, while people left behind in the country of origin are perceived as friends. The results support previous findings on the simultaneity, diversity, and durability of transmigrants' personal connections to various locations (e.g. King, 2013; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Light, 2010) and that local and transnational social fields mutually shape each other (cf. Levitt & Schiller, 2004). More specifically, the ways immigrants' build up networks in the host society and how they are accepted in the host society affect the meanings of their transnational connections.

To conclude, this study points to some shortcomings of current integration policies on newly arrived immigrants, at least regarding Russian speakers in Finland. These policies stress a command of the local language as a crucial factor for social inclusion. Nevertheless, although learning the local language is crucial for accessing locally embedded employment and housing opportunities, its command is not sufficient for the deeper social inclusion of migrants in the local social field. Therefore, immigrants establish new social networks with other migrants and ethnic groups who are trying to do the same. Entering into closer local networks, such as by establishing friendships with local native speakers, is challenging even for migrants fluent in the local language. Because of difficulties with entering local networks, their common strategy is to maintain their pre-migratory networks with friends and relatives left behind in their countries of origin, which has been made easy with ICT and social media. If deeper integration is the aim, policies should go beyond language to include network-building initiatives and development of intercultural competences among the wider population. Therefore, modern policies on the integration of newcomers and preservation of social cohesion should stem from the rationale that integration is a two-way road requiring shifts in thinking among both migrants and local residents.

PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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