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Young Researchers of the Barents Region : Teemu Oivo

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I'm a researcher of Russia, (trans-)national belonging, and information dissemination in public media discourse. My doctoral dissertation, which I defended in 2021, focused on reasoning Russian nation-ness for transnational audiences, on how the self is extended, the 'other' alienated, and order constituted. Themes of my past and current research include identities, nationalism, (trans-)national and civic belonging, border identities, problematic information, media literacy, and textual content distribution. I have used discourse analysis, content analysis, and netnography as methods. On a more general level, I seek to enlighten the frictions and specifics in mediated transnational communications.

As a relatively young scholar, I have had dual affiliation with the Karelian Institute (University of Eastern Finland) and Aleksanteri Institute (University of Helsinki) for several years. Currently, I work in a Kone Foundation-funded research project Flowision, where we scrutinize how state actors, corporations, journalists, experts, and civic activists work with (in)visibilities of energy and waste flows in Finland and Russia. My second current project is the Academy of Finland-funded project on transnational death, which examines what death-related practices reveal about transnationalism in Finnish and Russian social contexts. As often happens in academic careers, my research profile has developed gradually and piece by piece through several research projects.

My academic journey started at the University of Lapland in my hometown of Rovaniemi in 2008, when I started my BA studies in political science. I envisaged working in the public sector, an international organization, or a political party, so I chose to study Russian language and culture as my secondary subject as an additional skill – a fourth language in addition to Finnish, English, and Swedish.

I decided to profile myself as an expert of Russian social and political matters in 2009 and did two student exchanges, first in the State University of Petrozavodsk in 2010 and then at the Federal University Named after Mikhail Lomonosov (in Yakutsk) in 2012. Already in my BA and MA theses, I started using social media discussions and news media publications as my research material.

Under the supervision of professor Lassi Heininen, I studied the discourses of foreign agents in Russian news media between 2012 and 2013 for my master's thesis. I have since often conducted 'Foucauldian' discourse analysis and examined the othering of Russian/foreign through knowledge categories. I also established contact with the Aleksanteri Institute by completing their nationwide master's programme.

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Soon after graduating, I moved to Joensuu in 2014 to participate in the Academy of Finland-funded project Flexible Ethnicities, where I also wrote two peer-reviewed articles on discursive Karelianness and Russianness in Russian language online discussions. The project was organized within the Karelian Institute of the University of Eastern Finland, where I have been affiliated ever since. The bond to Joensuu was further consolidated in 2015 when I embarked on the doctoral programme in social and cultural Encounters (human geography) under the supervision of professor Paul Fryer and professor (since 2021) Olga Davydova-Minguet.

I started full-time research in 2015 in a project on Russian speakers as media users in Finland (2015–2016). I studied information influence in Russian national and transnational media, especially in television news and talk shows discussing the downing of the Malaysian passenger plane MH17 in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. In particular, I analysed how the representations of Western journalism produced the subjectivity of a Russian media user. While this project lasted less than a year, I have often returned to the related perspectives on Russian state media influence, conceptualization of problematic information (such as disinformation and propaganda), not to mention the insightful research outputs of my colleagues in this project.

The following research project tackled perceptions of Russia across Eurasia through memory, image, and conflict (2016–2017), which included research cases from Finland, Estonia, Poland, Moldova, and Kazakhstan. This was the first time I studied Finnish discussions and the only time so far when I have studied non-digital media, namely the regional (North Karelia) newspaper *Karjalainen*. As supportive research material, I examined the North Karelian section at the online forum Suomi24. After documenting all the Russian-related newspaper content from July to mid-November 2016, I focused on the identities and subjectivities that the perception of Russia discursively produced. As the perception of Russia is a timely topic, I took a new look at this research material for the current issue of *Barents Studies Journal* and used qualitative content analysis from the perspective of early 2022. However, it should be noted that I wrote the basis of this article before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Multilayered Borders of Global Security, “GLASE” (2017–2019), is the biggest research project I’ve been involved in thus far. The project spanned several years and involves several scholars from four different institutions. In this project, I examined security aspects related to the dual citizenship discussion in Finland from 2014 to 2018. In three research articles that emerged from GLASE, I considered how policymakers securitized the transnational bonds of Russian-speakers in Finland, frictions between national and everyday securities from the perspective of Finland’s Russian-speakers, and perceptions of citizenship as membership in online discussions. In the project Flexible Ethnicities I had already applied specific methods for analysing discussions on online platforms, but in GLASE I more specifically utilized netnography to systematically select and contextualize online contents. I have since given a couple of lectures on how to conduct online research as well as discourse analysis.

The first research project that formally affiliated me with the University of Helsinki and the first that was completely separated from my doctoral dissertation was Strategies of Persuasion: Russian Propaganda in the Algorithmic Age (2019–2020). In this project, we were interested in the dissemination and tailoring of Russian propaganda for audiences in different countries. In my case study, I examined how Finland’s counter online media platforms curated Kremlin’s strategic narratives through contents from Russian state-affiliated international news agencies Sputnik and RT. Unlike in my dissertation research, in this case I did not examine discursive Russianness, but conducted content analysis on the dissemination of potentially problematic information.

I continued to do research on the dissemination of problematic information on the internet's alternative web pages. The next research project, on the ancient Finnish kings, was a computational study of pseudohistory, medievalism, and history politics in contemporary Finland and Russia (2020), where I got to work with colleagues from the University of Turku and the University of Tallinn. This project enabled me to test new research approaches when working together with computer analysts to examine the formulation of a pseudo-historical cluster on the Russian language internet. The related article is currently awaiting approval.

While my research perspective on Russia is mediated – ‘virtual’ in a way – I consider the physical world first-hand experience important here as in any social and area studies. Besides my two exchanges in Petrozavodsk and Yakutsk and several shorter trips, I have lived in Russia during two three-month-internship periods, first when working at the Finnish embassy in Moscow from December 2013 to the end of February 2014 and 18 months later in the House of Finland in St Petersburg. Currently, a mediated image of Russia as a country is all that I get, but transnational lives and social bonds remain even during the times of war. We have moved from the pandemic era of travel restrictions to precarious international relations following Russia's most recent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Obviously, the war is devastating first and foremost for the Ukrainians and Ukraine. As an academic professional and a citizen, I seek to be a part of the transnational and international community contributing to a better, more peaceful, united, and sustainable future for us all.

