Immigrant Russian Women in Helsinki: Beyond Stereotyping and Stigmatization

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Я посвящаю эту работу моим любимым маме и бабушке.

I dedicate this work to my beloved mother and grandmother.
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ABSTRACT

Russian citizens currently constitute the second largest immigrant group in Finland; Russian women represent well over a half of all Russian immigrants. Statistically, a Russian woman is most likely to migrate due to her marriage to a Finn. This visible gender discrepancy in favor of Russian female immigrants only further perpetuates the widely spread stereotype of Russian women as “prostitutes.” Judging gazes on public transportation, poor customer service and inappropriate sexual comments are only a few examples of how the frequently implicit stereotype can affect Russian women’s everyday lives. By using my informants’ narratives as a lens for this study, I explore how the existing stigmatization impacts the ways in which Russian female immigrants in the Helsinki area construct and experience their identities. I argue that women use their agency to shape their national/cultural and gender identity in order to disassociate from the publically homogenized and stereotyped image of Russian female immigrants in Finland. Moreover, I explore how the women’s identity as immigrants offers them flexibility to renegotiate their identity boundaries and create a public image that reflects more appropriately their ideas of self. By focusing on the stories of particular immigrant women, this thesis contributes to understandings of globalization and transnational mobility—moving beyond broad analyses of migration patterns to see immigrants as primary agents in shaping their narratives.
Notes on Terminology and Translation

Unless otherwise specified, I will use the general term “Russian” to refer to former and current citizens of Russia and the Former Soviet Union, who immigrated to and currently reside in the territory of Finland. At times, I will also use “Russian” to specifically highlight one’s Russian *ethnicity* in contrast to other ethnic identities, such as Ukrainian, Ingrian and Byelorussian, represented in the territory of Russia and the Former Soviet Union. I will then use “Russian speakers,” when encompassing ethnic Russians as well as those who emigrated from various former Soviet Republics (for ex. Estonia, Ukraine, and Belorussia) and speak Russian as their native tongue.

I will use the terms “Ingrian-Finns,” “Ingrian-Finnish” and “Ingrians” interchangeably to refer to ethnic Finns born in the territory of the Former Soviet Union. I will use the term “returnee” to refer to Ingrian-Finns who immigrated to Finland based on Finnish ethnic heritage. Therefore, the terms “Russian,” “Russian speaker,” “Ingrian,” “Ingrian-Finn” or “Ingrian-Finnish,” and “returnee” could potentially be used to describe one and the same individual.

“Nordic” commonly refers to the countries of Norway, Sweden and Finland.

For the readers’ convenience I translated excerpts from interviews from Russian and Finnish to English. If the English translations, however, did not fully convey the original meaning, I either edited them accordingly or offered the Russian/Finnish version in square brackets.
Chapter 1: Introduction

In July of 1989 my grandmother married a Finnish man and emigrated from the Soviet Union to North Karelia, the Finnish part of the Karelian Republic. Shortly after the Soviet Union ceased to exist, I was born, and my family started the complicated process of living between Russia and Finland. I vaguely remember the stressful border crossings on the Moscow-Helsinki train. My father had to hide Finnish marks under his shoe insoles in fear of foreign currency confiscation by Russian customs officials, and my mother had to file a declaration form for her wedding ring as we exited Russia in order to make sure she could bring it back as a “legal possession.”

As I now reconstruct my family narrative based on historic facts and personal memories, I better understand the pressure my grandmother might have experienced as she decided to marry a foreigner. During the Soviet regime it was practically impossible to have any interactions with foreign citizens; they were not allowed to enter the USSR and those who did were strictly monitored. Furthermore, a Soviet individual could have been suspected for “state betrayal” or assisting in criminal acts of espionage if maintaining any connection with a foreign citizen. In the late 1980s Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika brought in a series of economic, political and social reforms that, although contributed to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and created wide social unrest, also allowed for more freedom of expression and inquiry. My grandmother married a foreigner and left the USSR as the country was undergoing a period of uncertainties and disillusions. She did not know yet that the next time she

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1 Karelia is a region that is split between Russia and Finland, with its largest territory being on the Russian side. Historically the eastern border of Finland has shifted several times and until today there are ethnic Finns living in Russian Karelia.

2 The term literally translates as “restructuring” and refers to the change in USSR’s political and economic system triggered by its last leader (1985-1991) Mikhail Gorbachev.
would return for a visit, she would already enter the Russian Federation and not the USSR.

My grandmother was one of the first few Russian immigrants to enter Finland during the 1990s; my mother and I followed her in early 2000. Immigration has always been and remains a central part of my own as well as my family’s identity. Moreover, the immigration I have experienced has had a gendered bias from the start—it was my grandmother’s relationship with a Finnish man that “helped us” move to a country with higher standards of living, functioning social services and, what some regard as, the best free public education system in the world. A sense of indebtedness to the Finnish people was literally transferred to me with mother’s milk as I drank infant formula my grandmother brought from Finland on her visits to our crammed *khruzhcheyovka.*

“Tshhh! Don’t speak so loudly!” was a phrase I frequently heard my grandmother tell me, my mother or any of our friends who visited her new Finnish hometown close to the North Karelian border with Russia. There, the suddenly increased number of Russian immigrants in the early 1990s was a big novelty and a matter of public puzzlement. To my grandmother, openly speaking in Russian in public somehow revealed our foreign identity, as if the huge fur hats [ушанки] did not already do so. As a child, I quickly learnt that being Russian was something that had to be concealed. I did my part by learning Finnish when playing with other children, watching Finnish Moomin cartoons and excessively eating licorice candies, the absolute favorite of many Finnish children, until I also started to like them.

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3 Commonly used term to refer to apartment buildings that were rapidly constructed and intended for temporary use and accommodation of growing city populations across the Soviet Union during Nikita Khrushchev’s time.

4 Here I refer to the typical Russian fur hats with earflaps that can be tied either at the crown of the hat or down at the chin. These hats are a common scene in Russian until today, when in Finland they used to be the easiest way to spot Russian tourists.
As I grew older, however, I often overheard public references to Russian immigrant women as “prostitutes” [ilotytöt]. In my grandmother's small town, it was not too unusual to observe a group of drunken Finnish men on a Friday night to scream out “venäläinen huora” [Russian whore] or “venäläinen lutka” [Russian bitch] to several Russian females as they were passing by. In addition to potential verbal abuse resulting from this humiliating stereotype, I also heard my grandmothers’ friends complain about having experienced poor customer service. Judging looks on public transportation or in grocery store cashier lines were also typically mentioned in my informants' narratives. Some have even claimed that they were “intentionally” subjected to a security check at a mall, because they were suspected for stealing (Interview #11). Although such stereotyping was never directed at my grandmother or my mother, I soon realized that the easiest way to avoid this potential stigmatization was to deny being Russian altogether. My opinions have changed since and so have some stereotypes and ideas associated with Russian women in Finland. Throughout the years that I have lived in Finland, I have been exposed to various stories and experiences of female immigrants, sometimes highly negative and disheartening, which served as the initial motivation for this thesis.

Defining the Context: Immigration in Finland

Statistically, the immigrant population in Finland has been steadily changing over the course of the past twenty years. In 2011 there were roughly 183,000 foreigners in total residing in the country compared to only about 25,000 in 1990. Russians constitute the second largest immigrant group, preceded only by Estonians. Russian immigrant women outnumber Russian men and constitute about 62% of all Russian nationals in

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Finland. This striking gender disparity partially results from the fact that the most common immigration channel is marriage. Some research studies illustrate that Finnish men, more so than women, are more likely to marry a foreigner, which consequently creates a gender imbalance in the immigrant population (Heikkilä 2004). In Helsinki immigrants represent almost 11% of all city residents, and Russian is the most commonly spoken foreign language. In most cities, and especially in Helsinki, it is no longer unusual to hear Russian speech in stores and on public transportation.

Travel between Helsinki and Saint Petersburg has become easier than ever with a high-speed train operating four times a day. In addition, there is a ferry that runs along the same route and allows the passengers a visa-free three-day stay in either country. The influence of Russian culture is most easily seen in the Eastern part of Finland, which shares a 1,340 km (832 mile) long border with Russia. There is the Russian radio station Sputnik, the weekly newspaper Spektr, and many Russian kindergartens, schools, and grocery stores. As Finland joined the European Union in 1995, many Russian tourists have since taken advantage of the Schengen Visa Union by obtaining a Finnish visa, which allows them to travel onward to any other EU country. The busiest border control point, Vaalimaa, annually registers up to two million border crossings. My grandmother, now a Finnish citizen, has found herself in a drastically different place. As she visits my mother and me in Helsinki, she cannot stop being surprised that she could choose customer service in Russian, her native language.

The circumstances of the 1990s, with the sudden influx of Russian women immigrants into Finland, created a situation conducive to stereotyping and sexualized labeling. I know of several accounts, where a Russian woman was approached by a Finnish man at a dance restaurant or a bar (where first introductions often happen.

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between single men and women) and received a price offer, instead of his phone number. In 2011, the YLE (Finnish National Broadcasting Company) released a TV series entitled "Kamrat" [Comrades] entirely focusing on various stereotypes by Finnish people about Russians. The second episode specifically addressed Russian women and tackled the following premise: “All Russian women are whores or ‘babushkas.’”

If the producers of a 2011 TV series still felt the need to discuss the prejudice against Russian women, I cannot help but wonder whether enough has changed for this minority group since the 1990s. In my research I investigate to what extent Russian women in the Helsinki area are aware of the sexual connotations associated with their identity and whether they try to renegotiate or counter the ideas often related with their national and gender identity.

Immigrant stories are highly diverse, yet at the same time strikingly similar. They are often characterized by a continuous sense of longing and displacement, fear of native culture loss and feelings of social marginality. The Finnish Population Research Institute along with various Finnish university scholars have produced a number of works concerning the processes of acculturation and integration of various immigrant groups in Finland. Very few, however, allow for a detailed account of immigrant experiences and often rush to conclusive statements and policy suggestions. By carefully analyzing my informants’ narratives throughout this thesis I will aim to bring to light the effects of the widely spread, often implicit “prostitute” stereotype on the experiences of the members of the Russian female immigrant community in Helsinki. I will suggest that women’s identity as immigrants offers them a particular flexibility to negotiate their self- and public perception. I will argue that my informants use their agency when (de)constructing their national/cultural and gender identities. Due to the fear of potentially being labeled “huora” [a slut], women often shape their identities to

8 Russian for “grandmothers”
disassociate themselves from the stereotyped “Russian woman immigrant” image. I will then highlight a range of discursive techniques my informants used during various processes of identity construction in order to distance themselves from the stigmatized group.

**Outlining the Issue: Constructing Russian Female Immigrant Identity**

As a beginning anthropologist I have always admired particular ethnographers’ ability to produce works that skillfully combine theoretical analysis with fieldwork data. From the field of anthropology of gender, Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa: Life of a !Kung Woman* (1981) and Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Writing Women’s Worlds* (2008) are excellent examples of a successful blend between presentation of overarching context with intimate fieldwork narratives. Both Shostak and Abu-Lughod narrow down the scope of their fieldwork to observing one family or, even, one individual in order to avoid generalizations and reach a more emic\(^9\) take on a culture they are studying. Shostak switches between broad descriptions of the social structure of the !Kung and highly personal stories of one individual woman, Nisa, creating an overall vivid illustration of the tribal life of the !Kung people. Abu-Lughod intertwines Bedouin women’s poetry and dialogues into her discussion of family, marriage and gender relations amongst an Awlad’Ali tribe. In my thesis, I will aim to produce a similar style of ethnographic writing using vignettes and personal anecdotes when introducing broader topics of national, gender and immigrant identity construction reflected in the narratives of several Russian women in Helsinki.

The chapters of this thesis are organized according to the main themes that have consistently emerged throughout the interview process and are centered on national, 

\(^9\) In anthropology “emic” refers to the perspective obtained from within a particular culture, what Bronislaw Malinowski referred to as “the native’s point of view.” As oppose to “emic,” “etic” stands for the outsider’s interpretations of a culture.
cultural, gender and immigrant identity questions. I will discuss the various identities of the women I interviewed in order to deconstruct the “Russian female immigrant” category and bring to light the various identity components that contribute to the perpetuation of the “prostitute” stereotype. Chapter 2 serves as a brief overview of the historic context of relations between Russia and Finland. An understanding of socio-political background is essential in order to grasp the long-term tensions and reasons for dislike between the two peoples. I will also outline the history of immigration in Finland and highlight specific facts relevant to the issues discussed in this work, such as the policy on acceptance of ethnic Finns from the territory of the Former Soviet Union. I will then discuss potential implications of these historic and current facts on the Russian female immigrant population in Finland.

The rest of this thesis will focus on three different ways of identity construction among my informants. I choose to highlight national/cultural, gender and immigrant identities since they are directly relevant to the “Russian prostitute” stereotype. The “Russian” part of the stereotype addresses women’s country (or more generally region) of origin; the “prostitute” label then targets their particular expressions of femininity and their status as foreigners in Finland. First, I will discuss in chapter 3 how women perceive their national/cultural identity as Russians and how ethnicity plays into the conversation. I will then examine in chapter 4 women’s gender identity construction and explore whether it has changed upon immigration to Finland. Lastly, I will address in chapter 5 women’s immigrant identity and how it affects their social status and broader ideas of selfhood. The three identities of my informants will overlap and intertwine in various meaningful ways; however, by discussing each one separately I will be able to delve further into the effects and basis of the “prostitute” stigma and the complex ways, in which Russian women in Finland craft their identities.
Chapter 3, then, focuses on questions of national and cultural identity construction in women’s narratives in the Russian community in Helsinki. The discourse on immigration in Finland (and often in other Nordic countries) tends to perpetuate a generalizing view on immigrants as a homogenous group. I will emphasize the fact that within the immigrant population those referred to as “Russians” constitute a highly diverse group that includes individuals with a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. I will discuss what being Russian in Finland means to my informants and how they construct their national and cultural identity in their everyday lives. I will also highlight how these women use agency when shaping their identities: by creating sub-identities based on one’s city or region of origin or ethnicity.

Chapter 4 includes a discussion of gender ideology and gender identity performance amongst Russian women in Helsinki. The negative stereotype associated with Russian immigrant women is rooted not only in Russian-Finnish historic facts and particular immigration statistics, but also in differently perceived ideas on femininity and its display. Hence, I will present Russian women’s own take on gender identity expression. Through the lens of their narratives I will discuss how gender ideology differs in Finland and Russia, and the influence of Soviet and Post-Soviet gender ideology on their experiences.

Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the complex nature of the immigrant experience amongst Russian women in the Helsinki area. No matter how they perceive their nationality and construct their gender, all the women I interviewed have a shared identity as immigrants. Their accent, Russian last names and often lack of recognized professional certification in Finland place them in a marginal position, in which the pronounced cultural divide becomes highly evident. I will conclude by discussing the potential future reputation of the Russian female minority in the context of current events.
Although highly specific in its focus, this thesis raises questions that pertain to broader fields in the study of anthropology such as globalization, transnational mobility and gendered migration patterns. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo (2008) discuss the complexities of global flows in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader* and define globalization as: “the intensification of global interconnectedness, suggesting a world full of movement and mixture, contact and linkages, and persistent cultural interaction and exchange” (4). Russian women’s migration to Finland can be seen as contributing to the global flow of ideas, symbols, capital, and money, as it entails a flow of people in “a world where borders and boundaries have become increasingly more porous, allowing more and more peoples and cultures to be cast into intense and immediate contact with each other” (2008:5). Unarguably, the significant increase of Russian women in Finland since the 1990s illustrates the greater possibilities for transnational migration. The globalization discourse, however, often pictures a world in which anyone can easily transcend borders and nation states, though in reality the processes of migration are not equally accessible to all. It is worth complicating the idea of the global flow of people by focusing in more detail on individual persons’ intimate life stories and experiences in order to highlight the complex processes involved in migration.

Russian women in Finland, to a large extent, represent a specific migration pattern, one that is strongly tied to marriage. Hence, Russian female immigrants in the Nordic are often referred to as “family migrants.” In anthropology, gendered labor migration has been discussed in various ethnographic studies, for instance in the case of Filipina domestic workers (Madinaou and Miller 2011, Parrenas 2001). Rhacel Parrenas explores the implications of discriminatory measures based on Filipina workers’ national and gender identity on women’s social status in their migration destinations. In comparison to refugees or labor migrants, however, family migrants
tend to receive less overall attention, both from researchers and policy makers. This is mostly due to what seems to be the assumption that family migrants’ integration process ought to be less challenging due to their access to the social networks of their “native” spouses (Sverdljuk 2011). As seen from this thesis, however, such a premise is often flawed. Marriage, as a migration channel, frequently makes immigrant women highly dependent on their partners in terms of finalizing the immigration process and integrating into the new culture and, as a result, creates a context conducive to manipulation and, in some cases, even abuse. In the case of Russian women in Finland, it is the fact that many immigrants came to Finland as wives that contributes to the perpetuation of the “prostitute” stereotype.

In Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection (2005), Anna Tsing challenges the view of globalization as a smooth process and brings to light “friction,” which “reminds us that heterogenous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (2005:5). Tsing mostly focuses on exploring the interplay between the global and the local, the various means in which the global discourses (such as environmentalism, feminism or human rights) become appropriated in the local contexts. The author pays specific attention to how these encounters can be productive rather than “destructive.” The author’s argument can serve as a supporting point for our discussion. As Russian women become participants of the global migration flow by moving to Finland—not only as family migrants, but also through various other means such as work, education or ethnic heritage, they often face local stereotypes. “Friction” becomes apparent in the processes of women’s identity construction, which illustrate the continuous negotiation of their position in the Finnish society.

In 2013 the public image of a Russian woman in Finland is more diverse than it was twenty years ago. In the 1990s, as one of my interviewees pointed out, the
prevalent public assumption was that all Russian women are of “light behavior” [легкого поведения], meaning easily agreeable to sexual intercourse. Today there is more awareness and exposure of nationals from each country to one another with a growing immigrant population in Finland, increased travel and a booming tourism industry. This recent familiarity, however, does not necessarily equal a successful cultural integration of Russian female immigrants and complete erasure of negative stereotyping. Although none of my informants acknowledged ever being publically labeled as “prostitutes” in their everyday lives, their narratives often revealed the opposite. “The shadow of the whore,” a term coined by Pirjo Uimonen (2010) to describe the implicit and explicit sexualized stereotyping of Russian female immigrants in Finland, has produced a certain kind of conscience that pushes many women to construct their identities as different from the public image of a stigmatized and homogenous group of Russian female immigrants. In my thesis I will demonstrate how the women creatively use their agency to negotiate the boundaries of their national/cultural, gender and immigrant identities often in complex and resisting ways.

Methodology

In the summer of 2012 I worked for the Helsinki City Tourism Bureau while simultaneously conducting fieldwork over the course of three months. I interviewed twelve women in total and our conversations varied in length from half an hour to two hours. My informants were between 23 and 55 years old and they have lived in Finland for various periods of time, the minimum being six and the maximum 25 years. All women identified as Russians and volunteered to participate in my research. I contacted my informants via Internet outreach, personal connections and word-of-mouth. In the best interests of this research and in order to protect their identity, I will use pseudonyms and slightly modify their identifying characteristics.
The interview process has been a learning experience for me as a young anthropologist as well as a valuable source of information that constitutes the core of this research. I started off with about fifteen prepared questions but always allowed the conversations to take their own course as the interviewee felt more comfortable and relaxed. As I was digitally recording the interviews, I could pay attention to women's gesticulation, facial expressions, style and other details with no concern of missing essential pieces of verbal information. These details offered me additional insights and complemented the narratives. I carefully transcribed all interviews simultaneously translating them from Russian into English with attention to particular linguistic choices. I could have never been able to produce this work without the help of the women I interviewed, who have patiently answered my questions and were willing to share their personal stories.

As a native Russian speaker and a woman, I was able to immediately gain access to the social network of Russian women in Helsinki. At the same time, my insider advantage also produced an undeniable bias towards Russian women whom I interviewed. I always, however, tried to prevent mixing in my personal opinion and history into the narratives of my informants. For instance, I asked whether they themselves identified as Russians, though I perceived them as such. I also inquired whether they believed in the existence of the “Russian prostitute” stereotype in Finland, though I was convinced so myself. Despite the fact that I expected certain replies to these questions, I tried not to assume the answers on behalf of my informants. In addition to interviewing, I paid careful attention to contemporary public discourse surrounding immigration and, in particular, Russian immigrants in Finland. I followed the Finnish media and watched several TV series and films discussed in this thesis. I also read online forum discussions on Russian.fi website as well as the Russian language newspaper Spektr. I attended several cultural events organized by the
Russian community in Helsinki, where I had a chance to observe and also informally gather information pertaining to my research questions.

My choice of interviewing only Russian women and not also Finnish men and women or Russian men was driven by several factors. If I were to increase the number of informants, I would run into the risk of broadening the scope of my thesis and not having sufficient amount of time to analyze my data in a detailed manner. In addition to interviewing twelve Russian women, I would have also had to include a perspective from the same amount of Russian men or Finnish men or women. Instead, I chose to focus on fewer narratives, but with higher level of attention and room for reflection. Even if my approach creates a limitation of only focusing on the perspective of Russian women, it, nonetheless, reflects diverse viewpoints within it. Aiming to reduce the risk of potential Russian-bias, I have exposed myself to Finnish-produced research materials and paid attention to global immigration discourse.

In Venäläinen, Virolainen, Suomalainen [Russian, Estonian, Finnish] (Liebkind et al. 2004) the authors claim that amongst several immigrant groups in Finland Russians are most likely to be unemployed. Furthermore, Russian women, specifically, tend to experience the highest level of psychological distress due to immigration when compared to Russian men. Therefore, Russian women appear to be in a position of triple marginality as Russians, as females and as immigrants. The “prostitute” stigma only furthers the marginal social position of this minority group. It is, hence, essential to bring to light women’s narratives in order to better understand their position in the Finnish society today. Although I started off my research with prepared questions and potential ideas for the key topics, I arranged the contents of this thesis according to the major themes that emerged from the narratives of the women I interviewed. By doing so, in a certain manner I will let them lead this discussion.
Chapter 2: Russia and Finland: Historic and Socio-political Context of Otherness

Until its complete independence from Russian rule in 1917, Finland’s national history was predominantly characterized by continuous domination by both its neighbors—the Swedish Empire, in the West, and the Russian Empire, in the East. The constant need to accommodate and adjust to the imposed laws and practices of changing political leadership has strengthened the shared sense of collective Finnish national identity throughout the years. Although Finland became officially an independent country in 1917, its reception of political autonomy from Russia in 1809 had already granted its government significant decision power. The history of Swedish and Russian influence is still present in the everyday lives of many Finns.

Finland’s population has never, indeed, been linguistically or ethnically homogenous as there have always been Swedes and Russians living on its territory. In addition, the Finnish language itself contains seven regional dialects, which reflect the diversity within the country’s core population. This made communication between residents of various provinces almost impossible until the 1500s, when a Finnish priest Mikael Agricola “collected” the dialects and combined them into, what later became known as, the “official” version of the Finnish language. The attitude of Finns to both neighboring nations and citizens has greatly varied depending on the prevalent political climate. Today Sweden remains a fierce contestant in hockey tournaments and a country whose royal family is closely followed even in the Finnish press. At the same time, the relationship between Finland and Russia is subject to frequent negotiations and keeps the Finns alert towards their Eastern neighbor. In order to fully understand
the current immigration policies and widely spread attitudes of the Finnish people that are likely to affect the experience of foreigners in the country today, it is essential to briefly discuss Finland’s national narrative.

The country of two languages: the Swedish presence in Finland

It is important to firstly highlight the Swedish influence in Finnish history, as it was part of the Swedish Empire until the 1700s. Today Swedish-speakers constitute approximately 5% of Finland’s total population and Swedish is recognized as the second official language along with Finnish. On a practical level this means that Swedish is a compulsory subject throughout the last three years of primary school, in high school as well as in professional schools and university. Anyone has to be able to receive service in either language from government officials and social services workers. This does not seem to be problematic since Swedish is widely taught. In most cities the streets have two names, foods and beverages carry labels in both languages, and the daily Swedish newspaper Hufvudstadsbladet is the tenth most read paper in the country. Until 2005 Swedish was also one of the mandatory exams required for successful high school graduation as a means to ensure citizens’ ability to fluently speak the language once they entered the workforce.

The issue of the official position of the Swedish language in Finland, however, has always been surrounded by a certain degree of controversy that reflects strong feelings of Finnish national pride and desire to separate itself from years of domination by its neighbors. Swedish is often referred to as “pakkoruotsi” [enforced Swedish]. One of the main reasons for eliminating compulsory high school Swedish examination drew on the fact that the 1922 Language Law (that granted legal status to Swedish) was

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outdated. The first official writing system of the Finnish language, however, was developed and synthesized as late as in the 16th century. Moreover, the first novel by a Finnish speaker written in Finnish was published only in 1870. For many years, therefore, Swedish was used as the main language for administration, education and cultural institutions—it simply made sense to maintain its position of public recognition. Over the years, however, the Swedish-speaking population has dramatically decreased and in certain areas of Finland, especially along the eastern border, the use of Swedish has become practically obsolete. Instead, the need for services in Russian and Estonian has recently entered the public discourse and appears to be more relevant in the current population structure, where Russian-speakers constitute 16% and Estonian-speakers 18% of the total number of citizens. It is, nevertheless, significant to keep in mind the fact that throughout its history Finland has been a multi-lingual country with a population that has been exposed to foreign nationals.

The territories of Karelia and Ingria: Russian or Finnish?

The experience of Russian immigrants in Finland is the main focus of this thesis and it is, therefore, essential to further discuss the Finnish-Russian relations. The two countries share a long history of complex political relations that involved frequent border changes with consequent territory losses and gains on each country’s part. Due to its beneficial geographic location that provided access to the Baltic Sea, Finland has always been seen as a strategic territory for Russia to concur. Regardless of these circumstances, the Finnish people were able to maintain a shared sense of a strong national identity that helped them to gain political autonomy from the Russian Empire in 1809, and later complete independence in 1917. The spirit of the Finnish people is best conveyed in a famous quotation from Adolf Iwar Arwidsson (1791-1858), a
political journalist and forerunner of Finnish independence: “Ruotsalaisia emme enää ole, venäläisiksi emme tahdo tulla, olkaamme siis suomalaisia” [Swedes we are no longer, Russians we do not want to become, let us then be Finns]. The “Russification” movements launched by the Russian tsar in 1899 and 1905 did not produce satisfactory results and, instead, only intensified nationalist feelings amongst the Finns. Unlike Sweden, which is often associated with positive developments in the Finnish history such as the establishment of the first university in Turku, Russia is frequently regarded with bitter feelings and negativity.

World War II is the most recent historic event that made the Finnish-Russian relations take on an unfortunate turn. During the period of 1939-1940 the Soviet Union attempted to concur Finland as the country refused to let the Red Army establish military bases on its territory. The war became later known as the Winter War. It is often talked about with a great sense of Finnish pride. The Soviet troops aimed at rapidly advancing into the Finnish territory, but unexpectedly faced strong Finnish resistance. The Finns, who were significantly outnumbered in comparison to the Soviet army, were able to successfully defend their homeland for almost four months until the Moscow Peace Treaty of 1940. As a result, Finland, however, lost the Eastern territory of Karelia to the Soviet Union. The Finns were never able to regain the region and the topic still arises some resentment towards Russia. The Finns feel entitled to Karelia as most of the population there is of Finnish origin. During the Continuation War of 1941 to 1944 Finland became an ally of the Nazi Germany and fought back against the Soviet Union. In this period Karelia was temporarily regained back with additional territories in the East. During this time Finland’s overall territory was the biggest in its history (Kirby 1979:146). Due to the post WWII settlements, Finland, however, had to give up all of its newly obtained territories. Overall, Finland practically led its separate war
against the Soviet Union, during which the lost and regained border regions became highly symbolic to the nation.

Today the generation that participated in the Winter and Continuation Wars, when Russians were viewed as the primary enemies of the state, mostly constitutes senior individuals. The young Finns do not have first-hand accounts or even memories of that period and study the wars as a historic fact in school. Age, in fact, was most commonly used amongst my interviewees as a means to justify some of their unpleasant accusatory experiences from the Finnish people. My informants often said it was “an older Finnish lady” on a bus or on the other side of the telephone line that made an inappropriate comment about their Russian accent or background. Therefore, it was not worth feeling offended. The War seems to be commonly perceived as lacking clear rights and wrongs, and somehow such logic also tends to disregard the discrimination that results from this history. In fact, one of my interviewees was delighted to mention that there is a senior group in Helsinki that studies Russian language in order to prevent and combat the initial stages of Alzheimer's disease. She said she admired them for studying the Russian language regardless of the historic connotations it most likely produced for them (Interview #9).

The history of continuous litigations between Russia and Finland in terms of the ownership of the border regions has greatly affected the population in these areas, particularly in Karelia and Ingria. In addition to dividing the two nations, the Finnish-Russian border is also a border between the Catholic and Orthodox Christendom. Many people from the eastern regions of Finland, where Russian Orthodoxy is widely spread, chose to move to Karelia in order to continue practicing their religion during the time when Catholic Sweden took control of the Western parts of the region. Hence, many descendants of ethnic Finns reside today on the territory of Russian/Eastern Karelia.
In addition to Karelia, the territory of Ingria ("Ingermanland" in Swedish), which creates a bridge between Finland and Estonia and crosses the contemporary area of Saint Petersburg, has also had a significant population of ethnic Finns. “In 1959 census recorded 92,717 Finns living in the Soviet Union,” from whom the largest percentage was concentrated in various provinces of Ingria (Kurs 1994:112). In the late 1930s the Soviet Union commenced mass persecutions towards Ingrians, who until 1920's managed to maintain a tight community with their own schools and churches. “The repressions reached their climax in 1937,” when thousands of Ingrians were deported to Siberia and their homes were re-inhibited with “pure” Russians (Kurs 1994:109-111). During 1943-44 German occupation authorities evacuated Ingrian-Finns¹¹ to Finland. After the war the Soviet Union, however, demanded their extradition. Those who could not remain in Finland got a chance to return to their ethnic homeland in the 1990s.

Sources: [http://www.inkeri.com/Inkeri.jpg](http://www.inkeri.com/Inkeri.jpg); [http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/351/351-152.htm](http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/351/351-152.htm)

In 1990 the Finnish President Mauno Koivisto approved an act that allowed individuals of Finnish descent to immigrate to Finland from the territory of the Former Soviet Union. The beneficiaries of this policy started to be colloquially referred to as the

¹¹ The population historically living on the territory of Ingria is usually referred to as Ingrian-Finns [inkerinsuomalaiset] or Ingrians [inkeriläiset, inkerit]. The two terms are used interchangeably.
“paluumuuttajat” [returnees] who for the most part were Ingrians or their children. It is essential to emphasize that, even though Ingrians were considered Finns in the Soviet Union, once they moved to Finland they did not necessarily associate as such. Especially the second and third generation returnees, who often did not know any Finnish and grew up in the Soviet Union, frequently had a difficult time adjusting to their “native” land (Jasinskaja-Lahti 2007). One of my informants, Olga, identified herself as Russian, even though at the beginning of our interview she clearly stated that her family “moved to Finland based on ethnic belonging.” She said they “didn’t speak Finnish,” even though they “lived in the Finnish community in Petersburg” (Interview #4). Her mother, who is Ingrian, had to frequently face intolerance and ignorance towards Ingrians in the Soviet Union:

My Mom was not treated as equal in Russia. My mother did not speak Russian well; she had, and has, an accent. She spoke Finnish and they were treated poorly in schools. Even at work, they were good workers, but they worked as nurses there and amongst themselves spoke in Finnish. And even the patients said they were speaking some Latvian language among themselves, and couldn’t even conceive how in Russia there could be a Finnish population. (Interview #4)

Olga also highlighted to me an ironic aspect of many Ingrian-Finnish returnee stories.

Her mother married a Russian man and chose to give a Russian last name to her children in order to make the integration process easier for them in the Soviet society. Now, however, as many Ingrians have moved back to Finland, they often seek out to change their last names back to Finnish-sounding ones. A sense of displacement, therefore, is common for Ingrians as well as many other individuals who lived and are living in the border regions between Finland and Russia.

**Immigration in Finland: numbers and policies**

According to 2011 statistics, there are about 183,133 foreign nationals currently living on the territory of Finland. Compared to barely 12,000 in 1976, the change over the course of the past decades has been drastic. In the 1980’s Finland started accepting
refugees from conflict regions in the world, slowly increasing the total annual number from only 100 in 1986, to 750 individuals in 2003 (Liebkind et al. 2004). The Swedes were initially the biggest foreign minority in Finland. Currently Estonians and Russians constitute, however, the largest immigrant groups. In fact, the Swedish minority is the only one to continuously decrease due to the lack of influx of new immigrants.\(^\text{12}\)

Overall, the total number of immigrants in Finland spiked around the 1990’s and continued to steadily grow as a result of the combination of Koivisto’s law on returnees and the opening of the Finnish-Russian border with the collapse of the Soviet Union around the same time. In a 2005 publication by the Family Federation of Finland *Olemme Muuttaneet* [We Have Moved] Söderling predicts that by 2015 the population growth in Finland will be solely reliant on the migration flow into the country. The average birth rate in Finland, though high for a Western European state, is still lower than the necessary 2.1 for continuous sustainable population growth (Söderling 2005). Hence, the Finnish government has recently given more attention to the immigration policies due to the significant increase in number of foreign nationals permanently living in Finland as well as the realization of the vital role of immigration for the future of the country. The concern is not only characteristic to Finland, but also relevant for several other Central European countries facing similar issues.

The term “population politics” could be roughly defined as national goals that address sustainable growth of the population and ensure its balanced distribution across various regions of the country (Söderling 2005). In 2004 the desired total number of immigrants in Finland was set to reach 400,000 by 2040. This means that the country will continue to provide incentives for immigration and, therefore, the need to understand and analyze foreigners’ experience in Finland is essential.

\(^\text{12}\) Tilastokeskus 2011. Sisäasianministerio. [The Statistics Center of Finland] [The Ministry of Internal Affairs].
Moreover, in its 2005 recommendations the Employment and Economic Development Office of Finland suggested to shift the focus to labor migration while *ensuring opportunities for immigrants’ inclusion, successful participation, family life, lawful treatment and non-discrimination.*\(^{13}\) This seems contradictory, since about 30% of immigrants in Finland were still unemployed in 2005 (Paananen 2005:461). It would appear perhaps more logical to focus, first, on successful integration and employment of these individuals.

On May 1st, 1999 the Assimilation Law came into effect, in which assimilation [kotoutuminen] is defined as immigrant’s development and ability “to participate in the work force and other functions of society while preserving their own language and culture” (Liebkind et al. 2004:272). Surveys conducted by the Statistics Center in 2002 reflected that immigrants were generally satisfied with their living conditions, but found it challenging to seek out employment opportunities (Paananen 2005:461). As Finland is one of Nordic welfare states, it is largely reliant on its taxpayers and employment is an important step in one’s socio-cultural integration. The more immigrants will continue to remain unemployed, the more intensified the negative sentiments towards those “living off the unemployment benefits” are likely to become. There have not been many studies conducted specifically analyzing the success of immigrants’ integration and policies associated with their acculturation processes. The majority of publications have been based on government-sponsored research, for instance by The Ministry of Labor, Finnish Population Research Institute or the Family Federation. Various university scholars have also contributed to the studies on immigrants’ integration (Davydova, Forsander, Pöllänen, Saarinen, etc.). Yet, the

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quantity and depth of these works do not seem to reflect the significant increase in the immigrant population that Finland has experienced over the past two decades.

The existing literature on immigrant experiences often discusses the attitudes towards various immigrant groups in contemporary Finland. Magdalena Jaakkola is a researcher at the Finnish Ministry of Labor, who has studied the general attitudes of Finns towards immigrants. According to the findings published in 2005, the stance of the Finnish people has overall become more positive towards foreigners during the period of 1993 to 2003 (Jaakkola 2005). There are still, however, differences in the way the Finns view immigrants from various countries and the “ethnic hierarchy” has largely remained the same over the years. According to this research, the attitudes were commonly more open towards ethnic Finns (Ingrians) and Estonians, rather than towards Russians (Jaakkola 2005). The tone of the study tends to present the situation in a rather positive light, focusing on the generally improved take on immigration amongst the Finns, perhaps overlooking the fact that one of the largest immigrant groups, the Russians, has remained at the bottom of the list of “favorites” now for years.

**Russians in Finland today: do they have it any easier?**

In 2011 there were roughly 30,000 Russian citizens living in Finland and about 58,000 Russian-speakers. This makes Russians the second largest immigrant group in Finland, and Russian the third most commonly spoken language after Finnish and Swedish, respectively. Although many research studies present Finland as a country with a relatively short immigration history and small immigrant numbers in proportion to its overall population, Finnish-Russian history, however, is significantly longer and has had a prominent influence on the country.

14 Tilastokeskus 2011. Sisäasianministerio. [The Statistics Center of Finland] [The Ministry of Internal Affairs].
There are several reasons that could suggest that Russians\textsuperscript{15} may face fewer difficulties when integrating into the Finnish society (Jasinskaja-Lahti 2007:54). Russians are usually not significantly distinct from the Finns in terms of their physical appearance—many are blond and fair skinned. They are often highly educated, which should theoretically help in finding employment and learning the Finnish language. In 2002 an estimated number of 70\% of Russians spoke Finnish at least “sufficiently” (Jasinskaja-Lahti 2007:54). Although most of my interviewees did not appear satisfied with their Finnish language proficiency, they all recognized its central role in their integration experience (See Chapter 5). One of the challenges of the Finnish language acquisition could be lack of everyday practice due to mostly Russian-speaking social circles. Moreover, compared to other immigrant groups, such as Estonians, “Russians keep the most contact with their home country,” perhaps due to Russia’s geographic proximity (Jasinskaja-Lahti 2007:56).

My personal experience as well as the stories of my informants, however, do not seem to support the idea that integration of Russians into the Finnish society ought to be any easier than for other immigrant groups. The research presented in Venäläinen, Virolainen, Suomalainen [Russian, Estonian, Finnish] (2004) demonstrates that, in fact, the position of Russian immigrants is often much weaker than that of Estonians or Ingrian-Finns returnees (274). Ironically, the Finns express more positive attitudes towards Ingrian-Finns, even though the majority of these “ethnic Finns” do not speak Finnish at the time of immigration, having grown up in the exact same country as ethnic Russians, who are overwhelmingly more disliked. In 2004 the unemployment percentage was the highest amongst Russian immigrants, 32\%, compared to only 12\% amongst Estonians and 27\% for Ingrians. Furthermore, the same study suggested that Russians had the hardest time learning the Finnish language regardless of the amount
of time they have lived in Finland, their age, level of education or ethnicity of their spouses (2004:277). Russians have also admitted to being victims of racism more frequently than Estonians or ethnic Finns from Russia (2004:280). The predominant negative attitudes of the Finnish people are commonly explained by historic aversion towards Russians. This, however, does not seem to present a sufficient explanation at a time when the majority of the population grew up with Russia representing business development opportunities and tourism influx rather than a war enemy. It is, therefore, essential to closely analyze the experiences of Russians currently living in Finland in order to reach a better understanding of the challenges this particular immigrant group is facing. I decided to approach this issue by focusing on several personal stories of Russian women in the Helsinki area as a means to unveiling the bigger narrative of Russians in Finland today.

**Russian women in Finland: reality and stereotypes**

The majority of Russian immigrants in Finland are women, who constitute approximately 62% of all Russians residing in Finland (Liebkind et al. 2004:20). Since women represent such a visible Russian immigrant majority, they are at the center of a whole set of popular discourses. Why are Russian women, and not Russian men, more likely to move to Finland? What ideas and stereotypes are created as a result of this statistic? Every woman identifying as a Russian living in Finland has a different personal narrative and varying immigrant experiences. There are, however, certain widely spread ideas and unfortunate negative connotations associated with the Russian female immigrant identity, of which most immigrants as well as native Finns are aware. One such label is that of a “Russian prostitute” (venäläinen huora). In the next pages I aim to briefly discuss the potential factual basis for the emergence of this stereotype, its historic origins and present application.
After the year 2000, marriage and ethnic heritage have been the two predominant reasons for immigration of the vast majority of Russian-speakers, at least to the eastern part of Finland (Davydova 2012). As for ethnic migration, gender has not played a significant role in the process—a more or less balanced number of Ingrian-Finnish men and women have returned to Finland since 1990. “Multi-cultural marriage,” a marriage between two individuals from different cultural backgrounds, is the second most common immigration reason and has created a skewed perspective on the immigration process as a whole. Statistically it is more probable for a Finnish man, as opposed to a Finnish woman, to marry a foreigner, and their wife is most likely to be Russian (Heikkilä 2005:25). In fact, in the past ten years the highest number of unions between Finnish men and foreigners were either with Russian or Thai women. According to the Statistics Center, in 2009 about 10,400 Finns were married to someone, who was born either in the Former Soviet Union, Russia, or Estonia (Davydova 2012). These numbers illustrate the noticeable gendered bias of migration from the Russian-speaking world to Finland.

Olga Davydova (2012) in “Venäjän Lännestä Suomen Itään” [From Russia’s West to Finland’s East] writes that “Russia” and “Russian-ness” are “living cultural constructs” in Finland that result from historic processes and are also part of the production of “Finnish-ness.” The contemporary discourse on “Russian-ness” includes a widely spread belief that most Russian women immigrated following their Finnish husbands. Therefore, it is significant to highlight the fact that not all Russian women have moved due to their marriage to a Finn. Russian women who immigrated because of employment opportunities (a migration pattern that the Finnish government seeks to currently endorse the most) are often overlooked, as they constitute a minority. One of my informants, who came to Finland with her mother, who was hired by the University of Helsinki to work as a researcher and a professor, discussed with me her
resentment to learning the Finnish language. She openly admitted that she is afraid of being automatically considered “one of those” the moment she would start speaking Finnish with a noticeable Russian accent. Speaking in English, therefore, differentiates her from the homogenized group of “Russian wives” (Interview #9).

Heikkilä (2005) writes that amongst those Finns who have a foreign wife, those who are married to a Russian woman are likely to have the lowest educational level. Instead, those Finns who are married to a Chinese woman are likely to have the highest level of education. This split potentially results from the fact that the majority of Finland’s industrial manufacturing has been transferred to China and companies’ high-level employees often travel there on work-related issues to Asia. This pattern, however, adds additional negative connotations associated with the Russian female population in Finland (Heikkilä 2005:26).

It is impossible to pinpoint the exact moment or reason why “venäläinen huora” [Russian prostitute] stereotype entered public discourse in Finland. The overall number of Russian female immigrants (as opposed to Russian men or male nationals of any other ethnic group in Finland) and the high number of marital unions between the Finns and the Russians offers a contextual explanation for the stereotype. One of my informants suggested that there is another factor that played a role in the construction of the negative stereotype. Before the 1990s, with the Soviet Union being practically a closed country, the only Russian women who interacted with foreign tourists and could get the opportunity to have relations with foreign men were prostitutes. Therefore, there was a general sense that the majority of Russian women who could move away from the Soviet Union had a background as sex workers (Interview #8). I will further discuss the presence of Russian women in the sex industry in Finland in Chapter 5. This folkloristic explanation, however, illustrates how Russian women today try to
rationalize the unfair generalization often associated with their national or ethnic identity.

All of the interviews for this thesis were conducted in Helsinki and my informants suggested that they never felt directly labeled as “Russian prostitutes” in their everyday lives. It does not, however, invalidate such label’s existence in the public discourse or erase its unfortunate history. Helsinki, the capital city of Finland with the largest and most diverse immigrant population in the country, presents a rather different social context compared to towns in close proximity to the Finnish-Russian border. In their article “Gender on the Finnish-Russian Border: National, Ethnosexual and Bodily Perspective,” Davydova and Pöllänen (2010) discuss how the border objectifies and produces the image of Russian women as easily accessible to the Finnish men. Their ethnographic material was obtained at Niirala-Viartsilia border checkpoint, where one can often notice Red Cross’ HIV/AIDS campaign signs with writings such as “Don’t fuck yourself to death” (2010:29). These posters target sex tourists, mostly Finnish men traveling to Russian border towns (2010:29). In this geographic area the “prostitute stigma” is alive and present, and socially marks every single Russian female crossing the border—she, too, could be a prostitute (2010:30).

Not having been a direct victim of such labeling does not necessarily erase or diminish its overall effects on Russian women’s lives in Finland. In fact, in another article by Davydova (2012), the author suggests that the fear and anticipation of potential “sexual labeling produces indirect (self)control mechanisms,” which were also reflected in the conversations with my informants. Among such mechanisms is the denial of the existence of stigmatization in attempts to create an aura of normality associated with the Russian female identity, as opposed to the negative hyper-sexualized image. Many of my interviewees acknowledged the existence of the Russian prostitute stereotype, but attributed it to the 1990s immigration wave. Just like in
Davydova’s fieldwork, my informants continuously referred to stories of friends or experiences of others’ facing discrimination, but none openly admitted having experienced stigmatization themselves. I have noted several instances in which my informants described their discursive mechanisms used to prevent and avoid potential labeling or discrimination. Some of them consciously choose not to mention their country of origin at all when they meet new people, while others try to intentionally “slip” the information to the interlocutor when introducing themselves as a way of cautioning the others of their background and avoiding uncomfortable remarks. In such manner, although my informants have not had to face direct labeling, they, nonetheless, have experienced the “shadow of the whore” in their everyday lives (Uimonen 2010).

The above discussion regarding the overall integration challenges of Russian immigrants in Finland allows us to conclude that Russian female migrants are placed in a position of not only double, but even triple marginality based on their national, gender and immigrant identities. They experience prejudice and frequent stereotyping, even if it is not direct and immediately obvious. Liebkind et al. (2004) emphasize that, regardless of the county of origin, female immigrants on average feel more distressed by the process of assimilation into a new culture when compared to men. In Finland, Russian women represent a minority group that is likely to face an array of difficulties. Through my fieldwork I aimed to gain insight into diverse stories of Russian female immigrants in the Helsinki area. I wanted to further understand their own perspective on the construction of the discourse on Russian women and see how they negotiate the “prostitute stereotype” and other forms of “othering” in their everyday lives.
Chapter 3: Being a Russian in Finland: Constructing National and Ethnic Identity within the Immigrant Reality

When I asked Anastasia whether it is important for her to let others know where she comes from, her answer was immediate: “Yes.” I gave her a moment to think about the question and paused. She nodded and confidently repeated: “Yes. Yes, because I like the place where I was born. I am proud of the culture I come from. I treasure what I received there. If I grew up in Finland, I would not be who I am now” (Interview #6).

The majority of works discussing immigrant assimilation in Finland starts with an apologetic foreword. The authors generally tend to state that the country has had a rather short immigration history and, as a result, has a small overall number of foreigners. This seems to automatically provide an excuse for the faults of the system and the challenges immigrants often face in Finland. Such justifications, however, do not appear productive when trying to gain a deeper understanding of immigrants’ everyday experiences in Finland. Before delving into the gendered aspect of the “Russian prostitute” label, it is, first, important to explore another rarely discussed generalization—the question of who is referred to as “Russian” in the Finnish context. This seemingly straightforward definition is, in fact, far more complex. Is someone born in Finland to a family of Russian-speaking immigrants from the Former Soviet Union “Russian”? Is a woman from Ukraine who married an Estonian residing in Finland “Russian”? And is her ten-year-old daughter, who has now lived almost half of her life in Finland also “Russian”? Would the woman’s “Estonian” husband who grew up in a Russian-speaking family also be referred to as “Russian”? In the context of transnational migration defining one’s national identity becomes a messy process, which never fully reflects the reality. The term “national identity” in itself is problematic: what do we mean by “nation” and “identity”? And who has the power to
establish and assign these categories? By critically analyzing the definition of these concepts and evaluating their applicability in the context of my informants’ narratives I will aim to underline the discrepancy between the rarely questioned “Russian” label and the ways in which individuals themselves view and construct their ideas of national belonging. Moreover, I will allude to how national and cultural identities overlap and are intertwined in this particular case. Being Russian does not always necessarily refer only to national or ethnic identity, but more often also encompasses linguistic and cultural traditions. For instance, many Ingrians, who are ethnically Finnish and are Finnish citizens, continue to identify as Russians.

**Russia as a geographic place and “Russian-ness” as a popular discourse**

Before addressing the definition of national identity, which symbolically connects individuals to particular places, it is necessary to discuss how these spaces are socially constructed and perceived. Geographic locations gain meaning and significance when “cultural difference, historical memory, and societal organization are inscribed” onto them (1992:7). In “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference” (1992) Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson suggest that, for instance, for many living in the UK, “England” refers “far less to a bounded place, than to an imagined state of being or moral location” (10). The authors argue that “places are always imagined in the context of political-economic determinations that have a logic of their own” (1992:11). The discussion of space and place is especially relevant in the context of migration. Geographic mobility does not necessarily always correspond with a migrant’s experience of “existential mobility”—and moving away can, instead, make one feel “stuck” in a grey in-between state, not fully being one or the other (Hage 2005). I will further discuss how “Russia” is conceptualized as a physical space and, at the same
time, as a discourse (a set of statements and ideas) that circulates and is reproduced in the narratives of my informants.

The most common way my informants pictured Russia was certainly as a geographic location, to where many of them often travel on visits to their relatives and friends. The experience of where “Russia” starts and ends, however, is perceived differently by every single one of them. Some were born in Saint Petersburg and have never been further east into the country than Moscow. To them, the space between the Finnish-Russian border and their final destination is likely to be representative of “Russia.” Whether some were born in Karelia and others on the outskirts of the capital, Moscow, their perceptions of this vast country are varying and continue to change as they live abroad. Yulia stated that since she moved to Finland, she can now evaluate Russia from the outsider’s perspective: “My attitude changed more towards Russia. Now I notice that when I visit or read about something, I cannot accept certain things that seemed normal before. I’ve got an outsider’s perspective” (Interview #3).

Another one of my informants, Yelena, is originally from Moscow, but spent her teenage years in New York City, then returned to Russia and later married a Finnish man. She moved to Finland about eight years ago and currently works in advertising. When I asked her where she is from, Yelena gave me a much longer answer than I anticipated:

I was born in Moscow…. And you know, Moscow is not Russia, right? It has a certain category of people…. When I was taking courses [Finnish language courses], there were people there who would say: “I am from Moscow.” So, I thought I would pass things to my relatives with them, when they travel…. But then you find out that the person is from Smolensk actually [220 miles from Moscow]. Well, why do you even bother to pretend to be what you are not [зачем выдавать желаемое за действительность]?! (Interview #1)

Yelena’s comments further illustrate her perception of Russia, in which Moscow is somehow different from the rest of the country. Throughout our conversation I
observed a sense of superiority that Yelena attributed to those from Moscow as opposed to immigrants from other regions in Russia or the Former Soviet Union:

I often hear Estonians mispronounce words and place the stress on the wrong syllable and it makes me shiver. I hear them on the commuter trains when they “звонят” [“are calling on the phone” with the stress on the wrong syllable]—clearly, either the person is from the periphery or from Ukraine. (Interview #1)

A sense of linguistic superiority highlights Yelena's ideas of who can truly be called “Russian.” In Yelena's opinion, Estonians, Ukrainians and immigrants from smaller towns, who would likely be referred to as “Russians” by most Finnish people, do not share the same place of origin with her—and their linguistic habits are the ideal proof of that.

Benedict Anderson defines nation as “an imagined political community,” all members of which will not necessarily ever encounter each other, but are linked though various shared national symbols, newspapers and other media, etc. Anderson states that all communities “larger than primordial villages” are imagined and need “to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (2006:6). Hence, he places the focus on how people perceive their relations to each other and to the nation state. Most Russians, living on the territory of the largest country in the world, would never meet each other. Yet, almost all of my informants strongly identified as Russians without any second thoughts. Marina is a 43-year-old single mother, who has lived in Finland for 12 years. Marina told me: “I consider myself Russian. I was born in Russia. I speak Russian. I moved to this country when I was already an adult, I was 35-years-old” (Interview #11). Marina’s sentiments reflect how national identity is often naturally tied to a specific geographic location. Although every single of my informants has a different view of Russia, almost all of them agree that, since they were born in Russia, they are Russian.
In her article “From Russia’s East to Finland’s West” Olga Davydova discusses the discourse on “Russian-ness” [Venäläisyys] in Finland. Davydova states that to many of her informants “Russia” does not simply refer to a geographic location, a border or a place, where relatives live, but is representative of a more complex phenomenon; “Russia is present in their narratives, behaviors, usage of Russian media, social networks, at work and during free time” (2012:3-4). Thus, “being Russian” extends far beyond being born on the territory of Russia or the Former Soviet Union. “Russian-ness” is a broad discourse that involves widespread ideas, traditions, superstitions, customs and behavior. It is “a living cultural construct,” which has been shaped historically and has also been part of producing “Finnish-ness” (2012:4). Already in the 1800s the Finnish people defined themselves in opposition to Russians and Swedes as they declared: “Swedes we are no longer, Russians we do not want to become, let us then be Finns.” Interestingly, today Russian immigrants still often define themselves in contrast to the Finns (see Table 1.1).

The very word “Russia,” hence, can signify various meanings in different social contexts. It can refer to a particular geographic location, an “imagined community,” or a broad discourse created and reproduced by those who identify as Russians.

**Identity Issues: neither Russian nor Finnish**

The sexualized labeling of Russian female immigrants in Finland as “prostitutes” results from stereotypical ideas associated with their national identity as “Russians” in combination with their gender identity as females. National identity is a concept that, indeed, has played a central role in many conversations with my informants. “Russian” national identity in Finland is often marked by complex historic facts and current political events. Therefore, it is essential to discuss how Russian women view, construct and de-construct their national identity in the Finnish context and how it
overlaps with the concept of cultural identity. In Identity as Ideology Sinisa Malesevic critiques the recently popular overuse of the term “identity.” He argues that it is too vague—“a common name for many different and distinct processes that need to be explained” (2006:36). I choose to use the term throughout my thesis, however, exactly for these reasons. It encompasses the multitude of social processes, acts and interactions, symbols and beliefs that constitute an individual’s perception of selfhood.

Although my informants often used “national identity” interchangeably with “citizenship,” the two concepts are rather different. I define citizenship as a legal status, a symbolic set of rights and an extension of political power of a nation state. National identity, instead, refers to a more complex set of experiences, feelings, narratives and bonds related to a particular nation state (Pöllänen 2010). Natalia moved to Finland when she was 10 years old. She is currently a PhD student at the University of Helsinki and has a Finnish passport. She says, however, that “it was just convenient to get the Finnish citizenship,” and she is “not Finnish at all” (Interview #9). Many Russians who live in Finland have Finnish citizenship, but also keep the Russian one. One can often hear the expression: “I have double,” referring to their dual citizenship. National identity, however, is not a passport; it is not something tangible or static. One can feel more, or less, Russian (i.e., having a set of experiences, feelings, narratives and bonds that tie them to Russia) depending on certain social situations or environments.

Discussing the term “Russian” strictly in terms of national identity, however, is not productive, as cultural and national identities frequently overlapped in the narratives of my informants. In fact, cultural identity seemed to often better align with my interviewees’ perception of what it meant to “be Russian.” Stuart Hall in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1994) makes a distinction between two definitions of cultural identity. One is rooted in the ideas of common past and histories, certain “oneness” defined within “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference” (393). I view
this definition as closer to national identity. The other definition treats identity as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ ” as it “belongs to the future as much as to the past” (394). For Hall, cultural identity has its history, but like everything historical, it undergoes transformation. Hall’s view of identity as something continuously created and produced is applicable to our discussion and was reflected in my informants’ sentiments.

Maria was born and raised in Finland. Both her parents are from the Former Soviet Union, her mother from Ukraine, and her father from Central Russia. In her early twenties, she is an economics student and has recently spent a semester studying abroad in southern Spain. National identity is something she continuously reflects upon and explores:

I considered myself Finnish for a long time, until I moved from Helsinki to another town to go to university. When I ‘stood on my own two legs’ [became independent] and thought about what I want from life, I realized that I simply couldn’t throw away my Russian part. (Interview #10)

At the same time, when Maria travels to visit her extended family in Saint Petersburg, she often feels alienated:

I want to explore the Russian culture more in my life. I can’t say I see myself as a Russian woman in the future, I can see myself more as international. I am afraid of saying that I am a Russian, because I don’t fit into the frameworks of a young Russian woman. In Saint Petersburg I am absolutely different from all Russians. (Interview #10)

Maria says that she does not see herself as a “Russian woman” in the future–she conceives of her national identity as changing and fluid, something she has control and agency over. Furthermore, as she says that she “would like to explore the Russian culture,” it becomes apparent that Maria’s conception of “being Russian” is more reminiscent of Hall’s definition of cultural identity. She sees her Russian-ness as something she can continuously work on. She also acknowledges that there are certain attributes that could make one fit into “the frameworks of a Russian woman.” Once
again, her statement reflects how cultural identity is never fixed but always positioned within a social context.

Yulia is in her mid-twenties and moved to Finland as a teenager after her mother married a Finnish man. Her perspective also illustrates the interplay and continuous slippage between national and cultural identities. After difficult years of teenage anxiety, rejection of anything Finnish and a strong desire to return back to Russia, Yulia finally found her niche. She got involved with a youth organization that helps young immigrants integrate into the Finnish society. After a few years as an active member, she became the President and is currently the Vice President of the organization. Yulia has traveled to other Nordic and Baltic countries where she took part in various conferences that focused on promoting collaboration between Russian youth abroad. When I asked her whether she considers herself Russian in Finland, Yulia sighed:

It is a very difficult question... Through our Youth Organization I took part in various conferences. There was one in Petersburg, there is one every year, and it was dedicated to “соотечественники за рубежом” [compatriots abroad]. And there they asked us this question. It's kind of an identity problem. So, when I come to Russia, I can't say that I feel at home there, because 10 years abroad certainly leave a mark. And based on what my friends who live in Russia tell me, I am not really Russian anymore. But... I don't think I can say I am Finnish either. But I am very grateful to Finland, I think it gave me a lot. So, I am not one of those Russians who sit here and “хают” [slang = speak badly] of Finland.

(Interview #2)

I found Yulia's story particularly representative of the sense of incompleteness that many immigrants experience in regards to their identity. The sentiment of not being one or the other was common amongst my interviewees. It highlights the view of national and cultural identities as something that is continuously reconstructed and reshaped by social interactions and experiences, as it is in Yulia's case.

Oksana is in her late twenties and had her first child a few years ago. She has been married to her Finnish husband for about six years. She works in a prestigious
software engineering company in Helsinki, where her primary language of communication has until recently been English. Although both Oksana and her daughter “have double,” she says that she “feels Russian.” However, she immediately adds: “but not the same way anymore.” She goes on to tell me a story from one of her recent visits to Saint PETERSburg where her parents still live:

Once in Russia, I was visiting my parents and I was walking with my child in a stroller, and I heard someone comment to my back: “Finally, she put some make-up on!” That was so ridiculous! Because there you have to put on make-up and high heels even to go throw out the trash. The clothes, too, are totally different—everyone wears dresses, heels. (Interview #3)

Oksana did not feel Russian in her parents’ neighborhood, because of the way she was perceived by others. She did not match the expectations set for the looks of a “Russian woman.” Furthermore, Oksana recognizes that living in Finland has deeply affected her views of Russia.

The experiences described in the narratives of the women I interviewed demonstrate how those who are generally referred to as “Russian” in Finland, in fact, do not necessarily agree with such a simplistic definition or share the same sense of national or cultural identity as others. On the contrary, “being Russian” is perceived as something that can be lost with time as in Yulia and Oksana’s situations. Moreover, Maria’s case reflects how one can decide to “explore their Russian part” more and regain a stronger Russian identity.

“Russians have a ‘stamp’ on their face”: shared national character and physical attributes

After the discussion on how national and cultural identities are constructed by Russian women in Finland, it is now necessary to highlight the main themes that were continuously brought up in the interviews as particular to and distinctive of the Russian identity in Finland. The opinion that there is a visible (in physical features, dressing styles and the manner of presenting oneself) and perceivable (in national
character, values and habits) difference between Russians and Finns was confirmed practically in every interview. Anastasia, a conversation with whom is presented in the opening vignette of this chapter, moved to Finland with her family as her father found employment in a small town in Central Finland. They left busy Saint Petersburg for a quiet Finnish provincial atmosphere where she grew up. She has always studied music and we met when she was about to graduate from the most acclaimed conservatory in Finland. Many texts on the Russian minority in Finland tend to glance over the differences between Russians and Finns and accentuate the potential of the Russian community to smoothly integrate into the Finnish society. Anastasia’s comment, however, seemed to contradict such claims:

Our mentalities are so different, they will never be like us, and we will never be like them. It’s important to be aware that we are different, and why and how to live with it. For example, the point where I am at is that I know how they are, I know, approximately, how we are. I know how to behave with Finns, and with Russians, and, of course, I use that in different situations. And I think that makes life easier. (Interview #6)

Anastasia perceives the two identities as profoundly distinct. Furthermore, she states that she has acquired two separate cultural registers, which assist her in communicating and interacting with both Russians and Finns.

My informants often described Russian-ness as a shared “national character” that involved particular values and habits they have been able to observe. Based on the interview materials I took note of ten most frequently used adjectives to describe the two national identities (See Table 1.1). The women I interviewed seemed to use antonyms when talking about one or the other identity. Yulia went as far as stating: “Russia and Finland are two polar opposites” (Interview #2). This illustrates a perpetual reproduction of ideas on difference, challenging to overcome, as well as a sense of inherent incompatibility between the two groups.
Table 1.1

Other aspects that were attributed to Russian-ness often involved a great sense of hospitality and depth, and commitment to friendships. Most of my informants identified their closest friends as Russians. After a slight hesitation, Maria confessed that a Finnish woman would never be truly able to understand her:

Deep down I would say no, it is not possible [to have a best friend who is Finnish]. Because no Finnish girl would understand in the end why I act the way I act…. Russian mentality is soulfulness [душевность], understanding people, being open. You relate to people in a very human way. It’s not just about being social, but how you relate to people. I think in Russian culture people understand that each person has their own history. They try to listen why someone does what they do. I think in Finland, it is present, too, but here it is not common to dig into other people’s business, they way we do. So, it seems, as they are not as open. Maybe they just share things only with those who they really know…. And not with strangers … the way we can do that. (Interview #10)

In her article “Interrmarriage and Segmented Integration into Finnish Society: Immigrant Women from the Former Soviet Union” (2003) Anni Jääskeläinen suggests that the integration of immigrant women who married Finnish men, versus those who are married to non-Finns, is overall more successful. It is easier for those married to a Finn to find “access to the Finnish and co-ethnic networks” and they are also “more economically integrated,” hence, more frequently employed (Jääskeläinen 2003).
Oksana, who is married to a Finn, however, does not feel connected to a Finnish network and, instead, mostly socializes with Russians: “My closest friends are Russians. I have acquaintances, colleagues, with whom I can talk during the lunch hour about children or something. But I think even our understanding of friendship is different” (Interview #3). Once again, Oksana’s sentiments emphasize the difference in the core values of the two national identities.

In addition to the notion that there is a certain national character, or personality, shared by all the members of each group, my informants almost unanimously reassured me that they could spot Russians in a crowd of Finns based on certain physical attributes. Lyuba, an undergraduate engineering student, shared with me a long checklist by which she could identify her co-nationals:

They [Russians] dress differently, their facial features are different, hair is darker usually. Finns usually have lighter hair. Noses are different, Russian girls have bigger noses. Finns have smaller ones. We behave differently. When we talk, our voices are louder, our gestures and facial expressions are more telling. We act more liberated. (Interview #5)

Besides the obviously noticeable attributes, such as particular clothing style or facial features, some of my interviewees also asserted that they were able to identify other Russians by “the glow in their eyes” or by the “stamp on their face” (a less romanticized expression). I will return to discussing the manner of dressing and presenting oneself in Chapter 4 that specifically addresses gender identity construction amongst Russian women in Finland.

The many faces of “Russian”: highlighting ethnic identity and regional diversity as a means to distance oneself from the “prostitute” stereotype

One important purpose of this chapter is to underline the significant diversity of the frequently homogenized group of “Russians” in Finland. Although we have seen a fair amount of agreement amongst my interviewees about how Russian are, many,
nonetheless, tried to separate themselves from the larger group by emphasizing either their ethnic identity or a concrete region/city they were from. Yelena’s comment “Moscow is not Russia, right?” most vividly illustrates this point. Aino Saarinen (2007) writes that all, except for one, participants of Scandinavia-wide research project “Russian immigrants in women-friendly Norden” have experienced some degree of sexual harassment related to the “prostitute” stereotype. I will argue that the desire to place oneself outside of the uniform group of “Russians” by highlighting one’s ethnicity or regional identity shows how Russian women in Helsinki struggle to avoid the negativity and stereotypes associated with their national identity and create a sense of normality by distancing themselves from a stigmatized group. I will then connect this discussion to the global context of transnational migration and understanding of ethnicity by paralleling my fieldwork with Dhooleka Raj’s ethnography “Where are you from?” (2003)

Dhooleka Raj conducted her fieldwork with the Hindu Punjabi community in London. In her ethnography, she delves into the discussion of the crossroads between ethnicity and national identity. Initially she considers herself an “insider” in the Hindu Punjabi community. A statement by one of her informants, however, makes her reconsider the usage of such terms. “You really are a Canadian. You see, I am not British, but you really are Canadian,”—this remark illustrated to Dhooleka Raj that to her informant she “was from Canada not the same way he was from Britain” (2003:4). This difference in conceptualizing one’s national and ethnic belonging among individuals, who are commonly homogenized under the same label, is reflected in the experience of many migrants, including Russians in Finland. I was similarly perplexed
to learn that someone, for instance, from the Komi Republic strongly identified as Komi, rather than Russian.¹⁶

Raj writes that, on one hand, the frequently asked question: “Where are you from?” often does not create any discomfort and is likely to be perceived as an informative inquiry. On the other hand, in certain contexts the question can appear intrusive. Those who have changed the location of their “home” several times, crossed multiple borders and identify with several communities, find this question challenging, time-consuming and, eventually, simply irritating. The one asking is most likely expecting a one-word-answer that would match up a person with a socially constructed place, a culture mapped onto a territory and confined within nation state’s borders. This need to be from a specific location, the “nostalgia for culture,” as Raj refers to it, “re-creates a perpetual trap in which the only possible model of diversity imaginable is assimilation” (2003:5). Likewise, the general discourse on immigration in Finland creates the expectation that Russians (i.e., all the individuals who are commonly included under this umbrella term) ought to successfully assimilate in Finland, since they tend to possess the desired characteristics for successful integration: high educational level and ability to quickly learn the language. Grouping those from Komi, Estonia, Ukraine and Belorusussia under the same term “Russian” makes it easier to

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¹⁶ At the initial stages of my fieldwork, I came across a Master’s thesis that discussed employment challenges of Russian women in the Helsinki area. I found the work extremely illuminating when focusing my research topic and reached out to the author. Her name seemed clearly “Russian” to me and I decided to inquire about a potential interview. In her reply she sounded rather brisk declining my request and stating that she is not even “Russian,” she is “Komi.” I happen to be personally familiar with the Komi Republic, which was part of the Soviet Union and is currently part of the Russian Federation, as my great-grandmother was born there and our family still maintains contact with relatives “from the North.” I have never conceived of my great-grandmother as “not Russian.” Yet, this woman’s comment made me more aware and sensitive regarding whom I referred to as “Russian.” In each interview I inquired whether my informants personally identified as Russian and I paid more attention to ethnic identity and its role in the experience of my interviewees.
comprehend the complex history of the Soviet Union and those who emigrated from its former territory.

In Jana Sverdljuk’s work “Russian Women Immigrants in the Nordic Countries: Finland, Norway, Sweden–Gender Perspective on Social Justice” (2011) the author critiques the integration model of the Nordic states as it creates perpetual structural discrimination of particular immigrant groups, such as family-migrants17 and, specifically, women. Furthermore, Sverdljuk cites Ali Osman (2006), who suggests that the current system, for instance, in Sweden, constructs immigrants as “a homogenous cultural group, whose members share most of the common characteristics, above all the lack of knowledge and competence, which are necessary for successful inclusion into the Swedish labor market and work culture” (Sverdljuk 2011:237). Hence, the concept of diversity is not reflected in “the design of the introduction programs” for immigrants or in the general discourse on immigration (Sverdljuk 2011).

My informants, however, reminded me and demonstrated the importance of acknowledging the variety of ethnic identities hidden under the “Russian” label. Natasha was initially comfortable referring to herself as Russian. As we started discussing the question of what makes a Russian “Russian,” she began listing particular characteristics and quickly corrected herself: “It’s not even Russian culture, it’s more Ukrainian. I have roots there” (Interview #9). Although Ukraine’s national narrative is very much intertwined with Russia and the Soviet Union, the country has spent centuries resisting the conquering attempts of the surrounding nation states. Today’s Ukrainian government’s fierce nationalistic approach reflects the prevailing desire to exist as a separate entity, independent of the Russian influence. Due to the shared historic past, however, many ethnic Russians reside in Ukraine and vice versa. In the

17 Sverdljuk uses the term “family-migrants” to refer to immigrants, who moved on to a country though marriage and creation of new family nuclei.
Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine, even more than in other regions of the country, Russian language can be heard alongside Ukrainian. To Natasha, however, having “an exploding personality,” “minding and interrupting other’s business” and “gossiping” were more of Ukrainian characteristics, rather than Russian.

Eve Kyntäjä (1997) suggests that there are different ethnic identities even among different age groups of Ingrian-Finns. Younger “returnees” mostly identify as Russians or Estonians, older ones often strongly feel Finnish, when middle-aged Ingrian Finns find it challenging to identify as either. Hence, even within a small minority group that seemingly shares the same ethnic identity, there are individuals who view themselves as belonging to various ethnic groups. Olga, my only Ingrian-Finnish informant, considers herself Russian, yet makes a distinction between herself and the Russians residing in Finland. She told me:

There are different categories of Russian people who move here: purely Russian women who come here to marry—they live their own lives; Ingrians are their own nation, they have their own mentality, with positives and negatives. It is easier for them to integrate because they have roots here. And then there are Russian women who move with their [Russian] husbands, who found employment. (Interview #4)

Olga never finished her list of categories. Instead, she went on to tell a story about a Russian surgeon, who married an Ingrian woman in Finland and had a really tough time integrating in the country. The fact that Olga, however, acknowledges the differences between various groups of Russian immigrants once again highlights the diversity that is frequently overlooked. She also seems to give priority to immigration reasons rather than to ethnic background when distinguishing between those who are usually considered simply “Russian.”

Furthermore, I suggest that ethnic diversity was intentionally emphasized by some of my informants and often arbitrarily created based on one’s place of origin. For instance, Yelena’s perception of Moscow as different from the rest of Russia reflects her
unease with her Russian-ness. Throughout our conversation she kept referring to Russians in Finland as “uncivilized, inadequate,” to the fact that she was from Moscow herself, and that “Moscow is not Russia.” Moreover, she, and several other informants, differentiated between those who emigrated from urban areas versus those who were originally from rural places. Many of my informants said they would want to know where exactly in Russia/the Former Soviet Union the person came from—“just out of curiosity.” When I brought up the “prostitute” stereotype, Lyuba agreed that it exists, but it refers to “Russian Russians” and not to “European Russians:”

Lyuba: Yes, yes…. It depends on the Russian woman, though. I agree for example [that the stereotype exists], because I know many Russian women, who act exactly like that: they swear a lot, at 22-23 they already have three or four children, no husband. Their husbands run away from them. There is a huge number like that…. It’s not even a stereotype, it’s what people see the most that is what they notice. But to normal Russians they don’t pay that much attention. We are sitting here now, no one is looking at us. But if we were like them, everyone would be looking at us. If no one hears us now, no one would even know we are Russian. What people notice a lot, that’s what they base their opinion on. All my friends are of European type, not Russian Russians.

*Eve Markvardt: What do you mean “Russian Russians”?*

Lyuba: On high heels, in mini skirts. I think only one body part should be revealed, either legs or your chest, not both. I don’t know…. Russian Russians behave differently. For example, they go to a store and start explaining to a Finnish woman: “What’s up - is this on sale or not?!” Heels like that [pictures high heels with her hands], skirt like that [indicates skirt above her knees], here everything is falling out [points to her chest]. Typical Russians don’t understand Finnish. Russian men do that, too, they come up to a Finn and start explaining something through hand gestures as if that would help. But European Russians act more like Europeans, without such attempts/acts. (Interview #5)

Lyuba’s distinction between “Russian Russians” and “European Russians” is another way of distancing herself from negative generalizations associated with Russian women. She normalizes the “European Russian” identity and describes “Russian Russians” as a group that she dislikes and is not a part of.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to emphasize that it is essential to understand that one’s sense of identity is never static, but rather fluid and changing, being influenced by the environment. Hall argues that identity is a “production which is
never complete” (1994:392). Russian women in Finland continuously negotiate their national and cultural identities defining themselves as “more” or “less” Russian. In fact, what is “Russian” is placed in opposition to and often framed as “that which is not Finnish.” Amongst all my interviewees, there was a shared notion of profound difference between the two. Furthermore, the diversity of ethnic backgrounds is often obscured by the “Russian immigrant” label, which encompasses anyone from Ingrian-Finns to Estonians and Byelorussians. By creating sub-groups and taking on particular ethnic and local identities, Russian women attempt to distance themselves from the homogenous group labeled "Russian." These strategies may be viewed as a defense mechanism to counter the prostitute stereotype frequently associated with the Russian female identity in Finland. The sub-groups are often discursively created and based on the city of origin or ethnic heritage. In such manner, many Russian women make their own identity, free of the degrading stereotypes. In the chapter to follow, I will discuss how gender identity performance plays into in the overall construction of “Russian woman” identity and adds to the basis for stereotyping.
Chapter 4: Acting Like a Russian Woman: Cooking, Clothes and Children

It was a cool summer day in Helsinki and I was on my way to interview Tatyana. In her early 50s, she recently lost her husband and was having a difficult time dealing with the unexpected loss. They met each other in Saint Petersburg – the young handsome Finn charmed Tatyana immediately and they were married shortly after. He adopted her little daughter, Sasha, and they all moved to a small town in the North of Finland, where the only other foreigner was a “construction worker from Portugal.” A few years later Tatyana became pregnant with her second daughter, Emilia. Today Tatyana runs a dancewear store in downtown Helsinki. Work became the main source of distraction for her as she was going through the challenging times after her husband’s death. Throughout the summer I was helping Tatyana to manage various business affairs and translate documents. Her husband spoke fluent Russian, so she never had to fully grasp the Finnish language. As we spent more and more time together, I finally asked her for a formal interview. I was looking forward to the opportunity to ask her questions related to my research. She was one of my informants who has spent a significant amount of time living in Finland – having experienced the 90’s immigrant rush as well as today’s “post-Russian-prostitute” Finland.

We were sitting in the backroom of Tatyana’s store, which is located in the basement of a historic apartment building. The room is equipped with the essentials: a tea kettle, a microwave, a small fridge, a bed and a couch to accommodate friends and relatives who sometimes visit from Russia. They often stay at the store as it is conveniently located in the city center. Tatyana lit her first cigarette, one of the many she will smoke during our conversation. Sipping tea, which was still too hot to drink, I started the interview:

Eve Markvardt: Tell me a little about yourself, your background.

Tatyana: I am 53 years old. I was born in St. Petersburg and my husband was studying in St. Petersburg, when we met. I was 28 years old when I moved to Finland.

EM: Are you a Finnish citizen?

T: Yes, about five to seven years ago I got Finnish citizenship. I was not even considering changing my citizenship, until they allowed having double citizenship. So, I kept both passports.

EM: So, it was important for you to keep the Russian citizenship?

T: Yes, the question has never even been discussed in our family. And my kids have double now, too.

EM: So, would you say you are Russian still, regardless of having the Finnish citizenship?

T: Yes, I consider myself Russian. I tell people I am a Russian from St. Petersburg.

EM: Do you think when people meet you, they can understand you are Russian?

T: They probably understand by my accent, we have our own accent.
EM: And what if they didn’t hear you speak and just saw you passing on the street?

T: They would probably think it is a Russian woman walking.

EM: Why?

T: We have a different way of dressing and presenting ourselves.

EM: For example?

T: Not too high, but thin heels, in the morning! [laughs]

EM: And Finnish women wouldn’t wear that?

T: No!

EM: Why do you say so?

T: They wear thick heels, in order not to fall into the holes [on cobblestoned streets]. I walk very slowly on cobblestoned streets! But it is elegant.

EM: Why is it so important for Russian women to dress elegantly then?

T: Because a Russian saying goes: “People greet you based on your dress, and they say good-bye based on your mind/cleverness” [“Встречают по одежке, а провожают по уму”]. (Interview #7)

I decided to open this chapter with Tatyana’s interview, since it was a conversation that focused the most on the interpretation and various ways of expressing Russian female identity. Although I discussed the topic of “being a Russian woman in Finland” with all my interviewees, I felt that Tatyana truly embodied that particular Russian female essence, which many of my informants described. Although she has lived in Finland for about 25 years, the longest period among all the women I have talked to, she still strongly identifies as a Russian woman and was excited to share with me her perspective on what makes Russian women so different from Finnish.

In the opening of “Gender and the Overlapping of Region, Nation, and Ethnicity on the U.S. - Mexico Border” (2003), Pablo Vila states that “any discussion about gender is always crisscrossed by other dimensions of identity.” Vila’s work parallels the discourse on Russian women in Finland in several ways, since the “Russian prostitute” stereotype is also created at the intersection of nationality and gender. Vila conducted his fieldwork throughout Mexico with a specific focus on Juàrez, often referred to as the “City of Vice” due to female residents’ frequent involvement in the sex industry. In
particular, Vila discusses how the stereotype of every Juarense being a prostitute affects Mexican women also in other regions of the country. Moreover, it even plays into the construction of gendered stereotypes about American women on the “other side” of the border. The author states that in the U.S. - Mexico context “gender is framed in regional and national terms,” I would argue that that the same pattern occurs in the case of Russian women in Finland (2003:74).

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Russian women view and construct their national/cultural and ethnic identity. Their ideas often contradict the common tendency to perceive Russian-speaking immigrants as members of one homogenous group. Throughout the conversations, I also noted that Russian women often position themselves in contrast to Finnish women when discussing their gender identity. In this chapter, my main objective is to bring to light how my informants understand, create and perform their gender identity. In their narratives, gender was often tied to nationality, hence, the previous chapter will serve as a framework for the ensuing discussion. I will also address the likely influence of Soviet and Post-Soviet gender ideology on my informants and their views on gender roles within the family and workforce.

**Defining gender and double marginality**

In order to theoretically ground the discussion of gender identity among Russian women in Finland, I will outline the main arguments on gender identity formation within the body of anthropological literature. The split between sex, as biological, and gender, as socio-culturally constructed, has gained a firm position amongst social theorists since the late 1960s. Already in the 1930s, however, upon conducting her fieldwork in Samoa, Margaret Mead proposed that anatomy does not necessarily always neatly align with gender identity and the particular traits associated with such.
The idea that one’s sex does not determine their gender behavior was sensational for the times. Since Mead’s work was published, gender identity discourse has been picked up by many, from feminists to biologists, from philosophers to human rights activists. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) has argued that the gendering process starts as early as the moment the baby is born. Doctors’ “It's a boy!” serves as a perfect example of “what bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender” (4). Furthermore, Emily Martin (2007) has suggested that the science of reproductive biology as a whole is gender-biased even in its descriptions of the egg, as passive or wasteful, and sperm, as active and precious.

It is key to mention that beyond the academic scope, the definitions of sex and gender quickly gain a politically charged dimension. For instance, sex/gender discussion within the context of the feminism movement is often used to support projects with various agendas. Linda Nicholson (1994) writes that “gender is a strange word within feminism,” as it is at times used to simply contrast “sex,” when at others to “refer to any social construction having to do with the male/female distinction, including those constructions that separate “female” bodies from “male” bodies” (79). Hence, various groups use the term to validate their own claims and objectives. For the purposes of my thesis I will broadly define gender identity as a set of behaviors, habits and customs that individuals take on to express their understanding of their own gender within a given society. I strongly rely on Judith Butler’s (1990) idea of “gender performance,” in which gender is seen as culturally formed and as a domain of agency and freedom. Although it is essential to highlight how my informants take charge of defining, reframing and performing their female gender, I will also highlight various social structures that could have potentially influenced their views and expressions of gender identity: Soviet gender ideology, Western feminism and Scandinavian welfare system.
Scholarly work in the field of anthropology of gender often reflects the constant debate between the centrality of personal agency versus the influence of larger structures upon one’s role and position in a society. Authors like Michelle Rosaldo (1974) and Sherry Ortner (1974) have analyzed the position of women cross-culturally seeking the answer to arguably universal inferiority of women. Rosaldo suggests that women's ability to give birth and responsibility of rearing children translates into their frequent allocation within the domestic sphere and makes womanhood into an “ascribed” status, something they cannot choose. Men's need to achieve their status leads to stronger male presence within the public realm and, hence, grants them more authority. Similarly, Ortner argues that women's social position is perceived to be “closer to nature”: they give birth to children, but, at the same time, are also responsible for socialization of the new members of society (1974:84). Therefore, females take on a mediating role, in between nature and culture. Yet, Ortner highlights that most societies rank culture above nature and, hence, women are placed lower within the gender hierarchy. Both theories illustrate the struggle of understanding the difference between men and women and their roles within society.

Although discussions of the universal subordination of women imply that there is something inherent to women across cultures underlying their subordination, there are unarguably also external factors that influence women’s position. Gender ideology is a set of widespread beliefs adopted and perpetuated through various acts by individuals. It often dictates the social roles for various genders and their consequent status and extent of potential agency and power. Further in this chapter I will discuss how Soviet gender ideology has potentially affected Russian female immigrants’ views and life choices. I will also explore the influence of Western feminist beliefs in Finland on Russian women’s everyday lives.
The “prostitute” stereotype that sparked the idea for this thesis is of course strongly correlated with discussions of gender identity and its expression in Finland. Davydova and Pöllänen (2010) cite a recent court case, in which a Russian woman, living in the region of the Russian-Finnish border, accused a Finnish magazine for using her photo for an article on sex trafficking. This example illustrates some of the prevalent social assumptions and stereotypes regarding Russian women in Finland. Their identity as women in combination with their perceived Russian nationality, although not always accurately defined by others, sets up a stage for potential passive or active social discrimination. As already seen from Rosaldo and Ortner's work, women can be subordinated due to their gender identity. In the case of Russian women in Finland, they are in a position of triple marginality due to their gender, national and immigrant identities. Thus, Russian female immigrants in Finland are socially perceived as “the other” thrice. A person unfamiliar with what is generally associated with either Finnish or Russian culture may start to wonder what is so different about Russian women that sets them apart in the Finnish context. In the following discussion, I aim to present the views of Russian women on the expression of their gender identity and self-representation as one way to illuminate how and why Russian women are “othered” in Finland.

**Clothes and other means of gender performance: “People could never tell I am Russian, except when my Mom used to dress me up”**

Russian women are viewed as the “other” often due to their different and easily perceivable public self-presentation. In particular, many would agree that Russian women’s clothing style and manner of speaking in public are noticeably different from that of most Finnish women. Although such a claim is a broad generalization, it was, nevertheless, mentioned by each one of my interviewees and is worth exploring via
their narratives. When I asked Natalia whether people address her in Finnish or Russian when they meet for the first time, she jokingly answered: “Russian women address me in Russian—phenotypes don’t disappear anywhere [laughs]. But Finnish women address me in Finnish... probably because of my clothing style. I can’t dress anymore like a Russian woman” (Interview #9). According to Natalia, therefore, there is a Russian and a Finnish way of dressing. By adopting the Finnish clothing style, she can appear to the Finns as “one of them.” When I asked her whether her mother still dresses “like a Russian woman,” Natalia answered that her mother definitely still “feels like a Russian woman.” She could see that her mother’s clothing style has become sportier: “I remember her telling me that on her first day at the university, she was the only woman in heels and a skirt. So, she changed quickly to sweaters, jeans and comfortable shoes” (Interview #9).

The contrast between comfort and beauty was present throughout many conversations, the first being tied to Finland and the latter to Russia. Yulia seemed to take the fact that Russian women are considered beautiful for granted:

Why are our [Russian] women the most beautiful? It’s not like it just falls to us from the skies. Since we have few men, even when you are taking the trash out, if you don’t look 100%, you will never survive in this competition. That’s it. Here [in Finland], everything is of course different. I know I don’t dress anymore like our girls dress. But, at the same time, I really like the Finnish competition for comfort. Comfortable—so that nothing pushes, presses. But, at the same time, there should be a happy medium. Russia and Finland are two polar opposites, and Russian women in Finland are the perfect medium. They adapt a bit, start maybe wearing more sporty things. (Interview #2)

Yulia’s comment illustrates that in her opinion Russian women in Finland differ from those back in Russia in their manner of presenting themselves. She realizes that beauty associated with femaleness is built, created and needs to be maintained, since it does not “just fall from the skies.” It supports the idea that gender identity is performed and, in this case, strongly expressed through clothing.
The choice of wear, however, is not simply associated with being Russian, but also often linked to the “prostitute stereotype” as reflected from Maria’s remarks:

Finns tend to say that Russian girls dress like prostitutes.... I never felt it, because I never really expressed myself in clothing, I didn’t stand out from the mass. I saw it amongst my friends or acquaintances, who would put on a fur coat or something in leopard print. And the clothes bought in Russia are still different. In Finland they dress more calmly, more comfortably to some extent. But this stereotype is true. I don’t know who is behind it, but it is there. (Interview #10)

Maria recognizes that particular clothing choices, often including short mini skirts and high heels, are simply a manner in which Russian women express their femininity. Yet, in Finland this style has become associated with the prostitute stigma. Nonetheless, an important focus on appearing attractive and feminine was unanimous amongst my informants. Tatyana even told me that Russian women tend to be more economical, so that if they save some money they could purchase something “to look good” [чтобы хорошо выглядеть].

The challenge of continuing to express their femaleness in a manner that has been labeled as “prostitute-like” makes many women conscious of what they choose to put-on on an everyday basis. When I asked Yulia whether she is worried about being called a “whore” at a restaurant based on what she is wearing, she replied that “however you personally feel that’s how they [Finns] will perceive you” (Interview #2). Overall, this comment reflects the general sentiment of taking on an active role in resisting the stereotype. Yulia continued: “So, if someone approaches me, I know a way to reply in such a manner that he won’t ask anything again. And when I go out, I just have fun and I don’t think about these things. A normal person would never assume things. I am not scared of this” (Interview #2).

Many start wearing sporty clothes and do not put make-up in order to blend in and not to attract unwanted attention. Although such decision may appear superficial and not of any great significance, it often, however, affects how Russian women
experience their female identity. Oksana has lived in Finland for six years and has adopted the “Finnish style.” A neighbor back in Saint Petersburg, however, verbally bullied her for not wearing make-up. Now she reflects on the differences between the two countries: “There [in Russia] beauty is the most important thing and it requires sacrifices on the part of women. Russians often have expensive clothes; they could live in a shared apartment, but save up to look good [хорошо выглядеть]. They stand out the way they dress. Here, even a director of a big company won’t iron his shirt—and it’s normal” (Interview #3).

There is a shared awareness of what it takes in order to match the expectations of being a woman in Russia and how these ideals have changed for many after their move to Finland. Natalia confessed to me that she would not be able to move back to Russia: “I have thought about it, but I wouldn’t be able to fit back in... I would feel like a foreigner” (Interview #9). Their current expressions of femininity do not necessarily align with the expectations back home and, as Yulia said, they become “the perfect medium” by taking on an identity specific to Russian women in Finland. Although the women themselves perceive a change in self-representation, they are aware that the Finns still can often identify Russian women based on their flashy outfits.

Clothing is a manner in which individuals express their culture, identities, various moods, etc. It is, hence, often a more public representation of the inner sentiments and the very idea of self. Some of my informants distinguished between “being” and “feeling” like a Russian woman. For instance, Anastasia’s comment expressed yet another dimension of defining oneself as a Russian woman:

Something that I miss here [in Finland] as a woman, and what I start feeling right away once I cross the border, is some kind of attention to the fact that you are a woman. And here there is almost none of that. I like when someone opens the door for me, when someone looks at me and sees me, which rarely happens here. Even though at our workplace it doesn’t happen, because we work with many foreigners. I like everything beautiful, something that is very feminine. There is not much of that here. (Interview #6)
Anastasia articulates a certain nostalgia for the attention based on her gender identity, which contrasts sharply with the negativity the same identity often generates in Finland. Maria, who mentioned that she would like to explore her “Russian part” more, describes the difference between Russian and Finnish women beyond clothing and make-up:

Maybe, [the difference is in] the way you present yourself—the femaleness. And to what extent you open it up, explore it; whether you understand that you are a woman and that you should act like a woman. Or whether you see yourself just as an individual/persona, something that is more Scandinavian-like, not whether you are a man or a woman. So, I am Maria, and I present myself as Maria, not as “I am a young woman called Maria,” which is more Russian. (Interview #9)

In her view, for Russians, gender identity is what defines an individual as a whole in the first place. The fact that one is a woman is of primary importance. She argues that in Finnish culture gender is almost irrelevant to one’s social position. Later in the conversation, Maria admits that she likes the idea that a woman should behave in a manner that highlights her femininity, and that she should be “like a cat.” The need to emphasize one’s gender identity is perhaps not so deeply encoded in the Finnish culture, and Russian mini-skirts and “heels in the morning” appear excessive and strange to most Finns.

Another way of rationalizing the prostitute stigma and contrasting expectations for Russian and Finnish women was reflected in Tatyana’s final comments of our interview. As I was about to conclude the conversation, she decided to go back to our original question about stereotyping:

Of course, there is another side to the stereotype: the local women add to the prejudices against Russian women. Maybe they had a negative experience: when her husband left for a Russian woman, because she cooks borsch [laughs]. I don’t get offended by them. It is a public opinion, but the female side of society mostly shapes it. [Finnish] Men for some reason are still attracted to Russian women. ... The Finnish men never have approached me as a prostitute; they are always respectful and tactful. I think there is a slight jealousy on [Finnish] women’s side. (Interview #7)
Tatyana had a Finnish husband and her desire not to blame solely men for the stigmatization of the Russian female identity is understandable. However, it was interesting to observe how at the end of our almost two-hour long interview she concluded that it is the female jealousy that perpetuates negative stereotypes. A sense of superiority over Finnish women was also mentioned by some of my other informants. Russian women were often described as well-educated, beautiful, economical and practical—all qualities that Finnish women could not possibly embody, at least not all at once. All of the above interviews illustrate the awareness of Russian women regarding their public image in Finland and their continuous negotiation of gender identity performance.

How “Russian prostitutes” became “Russian wives”: the role of family and marriage in the construction of womanhood

Besides one’s physical appearance in relation to female identity, family and marriage were amongst the most frequently discussed topics during the interviews. As mentioned before, women represent a disproportionate amount of Russian immigrants in Finland. In addition, the most frequently used immigration channel is marriage to a Finn. If the woman is a divorcee, she often already has a child from a previous union since, as Therborn (2004) notes, “the Eastern European marriage model...is associated with a tendency toward motherhood at an early age in European terms” (Säävälä 2010). Naturally, this statistic raises questions about the experience of marrying a foreigner and creating a multicultural family.

It is essential to emphasize that the gendered nature of immigration policies affects women and their status in the receiving country. To an extent, Finnish immigration laws augment the dependency of immigrant women on their Finnish husbands. Temporary residency permits are extended at the end of each year and
require signatures from both partners. Only after four consequent years of marriage, the immigrant wife can be granted permanent residency which does not require yearly extensions. The initial four years, hence, create a situation, where the Finnish partner has direct influence over the immigration status of their foreign husband/wife. This creates a dynamic through which autonomous women are made into dependent wives (Saarinen 2008:133).

It is not only the immigration legislation that perpetuates such dependency, but also the Nordic welfare system. A Scandinavia-wide research project conducted through the Nordic Gender Institute\textsuperscript{18} explored the effects of the welfare system, commonly regarded as generous and women-friendly, on female immigrants from Russia and the Former Soviet Union. Saarinen and Sverdljuk (2006) state that as women move from the East to the West, they cross one of the deepest welfare divides on the globe. Furthermore, the authors argue that the system excludes the immigrant women from the hosting society rather than contributes to their successful integration: “many women find their agency being restricted due to discriminating institutional boundaries, time lines and the construction of degrading social categories.” Frequently, immigrants’ academic and professional degrees received in their home countries are not recognized, and many find themselves relying on unemployment benefits over extended periods of time. In addition, prejudice and lack of cultural recognition add to the challenges of finding employment (Saarinen and Sverdljuk 2006). Women’s unavoidable dependency on their husbands for immigration purposes and continuous reliance on the state place them in a marginal position, which is difficult to escape.

\textsuperscript{18} The Nordic Gender Institute or NIKK (Nordisk institutt for kunnskap om kjønn) was established in 1995 by the Nordic Council of Ministers and closed down in 2011 with hopes for re-opening in the near future. As stated on the website, NIKK mission was “to collect and pass on knowledge of policy and practice, facts and research on gender equality in the Nordic countries.” The Institute produced several projects focusing on well being and acculturation process of immigrant women in Norway, Sweden and Finland.
The structural disadvantages in combination with the perceived importance of family, common to many Russian female immigrants, generate a context conducive to the creation and perpetuation of negative stereotypes about all Russian women in Finland as “unemployed housewives” and/or “stay-at-home mothers,” not willing to work. The fact that the Finnish welfare system offers an increase in financial assistance per each child only strengthens the assumption on behalf of the autochthonous population that immigrant women benefit from their (in reality) marginal position. Minna Säävälä explores the perspective of Albanian and Russian female immigrants on their status in the Finnish society in her article “Forced Migrants, Active Mothers or Desired Wives: Migratory Motivation and Self-representation in Kosovo Albanian and Russian Women’s Biographies” (2010). Interestingly, the author finds that Russian female immigrants themselves often view “their agency in the migratory process largely as reactive” (2010:1146). Although several of Säävälä’s informants actively “looked for a Finnish husband” through friends or newspaper postings, nevertheless, most presented their role in marriage and the immigration process as passive, perhaps reflecting “the ‘traditionalist’ attitude, in which women are considered as reactive to men’s initiative in the romantic and sexual encounter” (2010:1147). Hence, the widespread Finnish view of Russian women being eager to marry a Finn and then choosing to stay at home are sharply contrasted with women’s own take on their social status in Finland. In fact, relying on Eve Kyntäjä’s work on the “Russian whore” stereotype (2005), Säävälä points out how immigrant women continuously struggle to create a more “positive self-image when being part of a rather stigmatized ethnic group…and cope with the stereotype of sexually lax Russian women” (2010:1148). I will suggest that focusing on family and being a good mother is one way of attempting to challenge the degrading stereotype.
The centrality of family and motherhood to one’s fulfillment as a woman became apparent to me through multiple comments and discussions with my informants. Yelena, who was very dissenting in her remarks regarding both Finnish and Russian women, stated that she moved to Finland “only because of her daughter.” Tatyana went as far as saying that being a mother is in “women’s nature:”

[A Woman] is a future mother, it is in her subconsciousness, she doesn’t even think about it, but she needs to create a better environment for her offspring. Any woman, in any country, would marry a man from a wealthier (благополучной) country. Thai and Philippine women aim to move to a better country, too.... [In Russia] It was bad only during Perestroika when even if you had money, you could not get anything, because there was nothing in the stores. You probably don’t remember that? (Interview #7)

Although for legislative purposes Yelena migrated based on her marriage to a Finn, in her perspective she did so to secure a better future for her daughter. The diversity of motivations behind the most common reason for women’s migration from the Russian-speaking world to Finland is often overlooked. Yelena and Tatyana’s comments highlighted the primary role of Russian women as mothers, an idea that seemed practically unanimous across the interviews. Hence, motherhood, more than wifehood and marriage, plays an important role in the migration decisions and everyday life choices of Russian female migrants.

Since marriage to a Finn, however, is the most frequent channel for female migration, the number of multicultural families and children has been progressively increasing over the past decades. Hence, there are more and more Russian wives and mothers in Finland. Oksana discussed motherhood and how her daughter’s birth has changed her as a person. Moreover, she touched on the challenges in finding a balance between Finnish and Russian parenting styles:

Oksana: I think you can combine the two cultures in the upbringing of a child and in a family. Even in our personal example, we try to find the happy medium—the basic principle is no physical punishments what so ever. But again, I think some Finnish parents are too strict in terms of discipline. They do not push the child, but it’s almost like some sort of training. I try to put the
emphasis on child’s emotions, react to problems more vividly, help the child… The mother of my daughter’s best friend is a teacher and I think they overdo it.

_Eve Markvardt: Why do you say so?_

Oksana: I am not sure. They overdo it because they have Finnish ideas on child rearing and her being a teacher also plays a role. When my child was born, I had many disagreements with my Finnish mother-in-law. She was trying to give advice, which went completely against what I wanted to do. (Interview #3)

In Oksana’s opinion, therefore, there is a notable difference between parenting styles of Russian and Finnish parents. She suggests that Russian mothers pay more attention to children’s emotional development and are more sensitive to their individual needs. This perpetuates characteristics that were typically attributed to Russian women by my informants. In comparison, Oksana views Finnish mothers as more cold and focused on strict discipline, once again associating the typically Finnish traits (being practical and rational) with the parenting style of Finnish mothers.

In the past few years, Russian media has brought to light several scandals concerning child custody debates between Finnish fathers and Russian mothers. Approximately once a year, in Russia there appears a news piece portraying the Finnish officials as completely unreasonable, cruel and discriminatory towards Russian mothers who were often forbidden from seeing their children, communicating with them or even remaining in the country with them. In comparison, the Finnish media has not given the same level of attention to these custody debates, and Finnish police officials often do not publicly disclose any detailed information regarding such cases. The press has, however, pointed out several false facts presented in the Russian media on several occasions.¹⁹ The custody controversies have taken on their own life via

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¹⁹ In January 2013 there was yet another article on a dispute between a Finnish father and a Russian mother from Petrozavodsk, Karelia. According to Russian media, the father was keeping twin boys in Finland and not letting them return to Russia, where the mother was currently residing. According to _Helsinki Times_ article, however, the mother herself gave the permission for the boys to travel to Finland. The Finnish media published about 300-word article on the case, when in Russia it gained a much wider coverage.
popular online forums where individuals of both Russian and Finnish backgrounds tirelessly speculate upon the “true” reasons behind the scandals.

In 2011, a Russian director Vladimir Shevelkov filmed a TV series “На край света” [To the edge of the world]. The show portrays a common situation: a Russian woman from Saint Petersburg marries a Finn, has a daughter with him, but ends up divorcing her husband. In the midst of the divorce process, the Finnish husband accuses his Russian wife of using physical force against the child and files for full custody of their daughter. In despair, the Russian wife flees the country taking her daughter with her. The show clearly portrays a black and white picture: the husband and the Finnish legislative system mistreat the innocent Russian woman. The show emphasizes the cultural divide between the two countries and highlights the stereotypes commonly associated with Finns in Russia.

“To the Edge of the World” is by far not the first Russian TV series that portrays a marriage between a Russian and a foreigner as negative and often fatal. In 1989, a Soviet film “Интердевочка” [Intergirl] presented a story of a young nurse, Tatyana, who due to financial restraints becomes a prostitute working for foreign tourists. Tatyana meets a Swedish man, who wishes to marry her. In hopes of a better life, Tatyana leaves Leningrad and her mother and chooses to immigrate to Sweden. Life in Scandinavia, however, is not what she expected: her husband seems stingy, the language and culture are completely foreign and, besides, her husband’s male friends sexually harass her. The film gained an overwhelming success in the Soviet Union in the 1980’s and summarized the fears and stereotypes associated with marrying a foreign man. Although “To the Edge of the World” did not have as big of an audience as “Intergirl,” the TV show serves as a symbolic representation of the new era that

characterizes female migration as migration of wives and mothers, rather than prostitutes.

When I first met Oksana, I did not know that she is one of the moderators of an online discussion forum for Russians in Finland. As she recently had a child, we ended up spending a long time discussing the challenges of raising bi-cultural children as well as various questions and compromises she has had to face during her marriage to a Finn. As our conversation went on, I learnt that she and her friend started an online group on vkontakte.ru (Russian equivalent of Facebook.com) called “Русские жены” [Russian wives]:

_Eve Markvardt: How old is the online group?_

Oksana: I honestly don’t remember... I think two or three years. Yeah, we have a lot of people, but the most active are maybe 30 - 40 people... I even heard the newspaper that you get at the border, “Stop in Finland,” had an article about Finnish-Russian marriages and our group was even mentioned there!

_EM: How do you choose who can join the group?_

O: Initially we admitted everyone. The administration of an online group is really hard, because people are very different and have their own ideas, requests. First, we assumed it will only be for the wives of ’real’ Finns, but because I have good friends, whose husbands are Russians and who moved, or returnees, later we made it more widely open to have our good friends there, too. But now, the procedure is such that we ask for a personal message where they explain why they’d want to join the group. It is enough if the husband is Finnish, or a returnee, sometimes we make exceptions, and, of course, they have to be under their real name.

_EM: What are the most relevant topics discussed?_

O: Probably administrative and legal questions... about the registration of marriage, what documents, how to do it in Finland, what to do afterwards in Russia, etc. Some events maybe come up, what is happening, people suggest to go somewhere together, to a theatre, musical; everyday life questions, too, where to go if something happens, insurance, medical documents; and in general talking, complaining about life sometimes (but less...), traveling, which tourism company to choose.

_EM: How did you get the idea to start the group?_

O: I guess we just wanted to socialize without any crap from the forum [the general forum for Russian-speakers in Finland], there is such an atmosphere
that every question gets covered up in irrelevant comments. And then again, there are many stereotypes about Russian women amongst the Russian community and amongst men. ... Many moved here, live on unemployment, and when there is a person who says that they work and everything is good for them, jealousy and desire to say bad things appears immediately! I even heard such comments addressed to me: “They come and marry here, wait four years until they get permanent status and then divorce and bye!” It is true, too, but not for everyone and especially not for me! I have a friend, who is married to a Finn, but she decided not to move here, because she has a job in Russia, and she is happy there. So they visit each other back and forth. It’s been five years now. She said if they were to have kids, she’d reconsider, but now it’s not the case to run abroad like it used to be before. (Interview #3)

The fact that Oksana and her friend started a group specifically called “Russian wives,” and not, for instance, “Finnish wives,” highlights the important role of national identity in defining oneself. Moreover, such a name points out that these women feel comfortable identifying as “Russian wives,” an emerging identity label, which seems to have been appropriated by the community with a positive spin.

**At the crossroads of (Post-) Soviet gender ideology and Western feminism**

At the time of our interview, Yulia was single. She told me she has never dated a Finnish man, even though she has lived in Finland since she was a teenager: “It is this feminism, crazy equality…. What they get is that a man equals a woman, is that normal? No, it’s not normal! But our women, too, should change their demands because otherwise you’ll be alone” (Interview #2). Yulia’s comment was not the only one that touched upon the issue of the differences in gender roles between Russia and Finland. Oksana, who has been striving to find a balance between Russian and Finnish family structure, shared her experiences with me:

House chores are split evenly. We both work, don't have much time and split everything in half. In Russia, this stereotype is still alive that a woman needs to stay at home, take care of the kids, and the man needs to make money, even if he would make less than the wife…. I hear a lot that people here have separate bank accounts. But for us, for example, though we have two different accounts, the one who has money just pays. We don’t really count and talk about who makes more. All money is shared. (Interview #3)
Yulia sees gender roles in Russia as defined by the dichotomy, in which men work and provide for the family and women stay at home and take care of the household.

In Finland, however, the divide between public and private spheres is not as clear since there is an “equal split” in household duties and financial responsibilities. Besides being primarily responsible for the child rearing, in Russia women are also often expected to be good cooks. I asked Tatyana to explain the importance of cooking in her and her daughters’ lives:

Eve Markvardt: Do you think Russian women will always be able to cook well and continue to cook at home? Or will that change?

Tatyana: Yes. For example, my older [of her two daughters] cooks and is very economical with her household. She has money left, so they can afford to travel and have a car. She cooks well and does not spend much on that.

EM: Why do you think she cooks so well?

T: It comes from the upbringing, but also from the need, because on the saved money you can buy nice clothing, and look good. But also by following the example of the parents obviously. If they didn’t see me do it, how would they know? When I cook, I imagine how people will be happy to taste it! Maybe I don’t love cooking itself that much, but I love treating people, so I cook with pleasure. At times, when you had really no money, you had to think how to cook in a healthy and economical, and tasty way! (Interview #7)

Tatyana sees a “good” Russian wife as someone who manages her household independently and finds enjoyment in this role. She does not perceive cooking as a burden, but rather as an activity through which she expresses herself and her identity as a mother and a wife. Cooking is often associated with social gatherings and is treated as a tradition to be passed to children, especially daughters. Hence, Russian women view the kitchen as a female space within the home and the preparation of food largely as a women’s task.

In Finland inside and outside-of-the-home responsibilities are usually shared, or it is, at least, expected that husband and wife both work and take care of house chores. Such perspective is strongly associated with Western feminist values. Although many
of my informants live by and agree with a more egalitarian approach to gender roles, there is a particular sense of nostalgia for a more “Russian” family. Yulia confessed to me:

Sometimes... I wish I could get a surprise. But then I know that we ran out of money already, so I understand. There is a little [pause], not a regret, but maybe a wish that family life would resemble traditional family life in Russia. That husband makes money, wife stays at home and takes care of kids—and you wouldn't have to worry about all these finances. But here it's all split in half. In my family it so happens that I have to plan finances...and I wish I didn't have to think about that! For us, my husband picks up the kid, comes home and makes dinner. Usually though it is either something simple, or whatever I prepared from the night before. So, I come home, everything is ready, the child is fed, the dinner is ready, or almost ready - you lay down on the couch and feel like a complete dude! (Interview #3)

The constant internal negotiation of gender roles within a family or marriage seemed to be characteristic to many of my interviewees. Since the preparation of meals is so strongly linked to the Russian female identity, not having enough time to make dinner made Yulia “feel like a dude.”

Just as Russian women in Finland choose to adopt a sportier and more comfortable clothing style, they also often start dividing household responsibilities with their partners as part of cultural integration. Although receiving help with house chores from their husbands is unarguably welcomed and appreciated, nonetheless, it alters the common Russian ideas of gender roles and one’s perception of womanhood. Tatyana suggested that the very definition of family is different between the two cultures: the Russian concept of family is “more broad and inclusive.” Indeed, the Soviet family commonly consisted of “multiple generations living in one household, often with a grandmother figure who ran the household and was responsible for rearing the grandchildren” (Solari In press: 256). A more individualistic, rather than collective, view of family accepted in the Finnish culture seems foreign to many Soviet-raised Russian immigrants. Therefore, the introduction to a different definition of gender roles and alternative household organization plays a role in Russian immigrants’
changing views on womanhood and performance of gender identity.

Olga Davydova (2012) writes that “female normality” in Finland is based on the combination of career and family care. The idea of working while also being highly involved within the household is not entirely foreign to many Russian women. According to Berdahl (1999), during the Soviet Union times women were regarded as “worker-mothers,” “they were officially defined both in a professional sense as working for the state and building state socialism, and as shouldering the primary responsibility of caring for families” (Bloch 2010). In addition, Russian immigrant women are often highly educated and comprise a large group of potential skilled workers for the Finnish job market. However, high unemployment rates across the board, and especially in the service industry where women tend to be employed the most, often push Russian women to become even more family-oriented due to the lack of suitable job openings. Work is perceived as something compulsory in order to successfully integrate into the Finnish society, which is not often accessible to them due to the high unemployment rate (Davydova 2012). As a result of these processes, Russian female immigrants often see employment as a pressuring obligation.

In addition, Annika Forsander argues that the strong Finnish welfare system further “hinders immigrant integration into the labor market and therefore into society in general” (2008:3). Forsander states that based on public opinion polls in the Nordic countries, immigrants are seen as “a financial burden to the welfare state because they have (too) many children and are often unemployed or stay-at-home mothers” (2008:7). The ability to rely on the state often diminishes the incentives of facing the stressful job application process. Hence, high unemployment rates in combination with the prejudice against immigrants as “unmotivated employment seekers” often perpetuate the unemployment cycle for Russian women leaving them with no other option than self-realization through their roles within the family.
It is not only the socio-structural circumstances in Finland that often further the marginal position of Russian immigrant women, but also the Post-Soviet gender ideology that naturalizes women’s position in the private sphere. Although the Soviet gender ideology strongly advocated for women as workers, the Post-Soviet context brought radical changes to “the dominant gender contracts defining society” (Bloch 2010:4). “In the 1990s discourses across the region came to emphasize women’s space as a naturalized domestic one,” a woman now had to be protected and fully supported by her husband (Bloch 2010:4). The reasoning behind the Post-Soviet gender ideology is partially rooted in the economic challenges faced by many Former Soviet States. In “Gendered Global Ethnography: Comparing Migration Patterns and Ukrainian Immigration” Cinzia Solari suggests that, for instance, in Ukraine the choice of returning women “back home to where they belong” was largely a solution to the prevailing unemployment after the collapse of the Soviet Union (La Font 2001). Furthermore, such shift in gender ideology beneficially presented the Soviet discourse of “worker-mothers” in a negative light as unnatural, “contrary to their [women’s] biology” (Solari In press:258). Hence, women who migrated to Finland during the 1990s suddenly transitioned from experiencing women’s position as primarily associated with the private sphere (a recently promoted ideology that condemned Soviet “worker-mother” thinking as backwards) to being immersed into the Finnish ideology, where gender equality and women’s participation in both public and private spheres is strongly valued and encouraged.

Alexia Bloch conducted her fieldwork amongst Ukrainian women, who, faced by receding job markets, travel to Turkey to buy various merchandise and resell it in Ukraine. As a result of frequent traveling, many end up marrying Turkish men and remain abroad. Bloch (2010) argues that dominant gender discourses can strongly shape migrants’ intimate practices. In Turkey, “Russian” women often encounter
“widespread public imagination [of them] ... as sexualized others who live physically distant from close family members for months” (Bloch 2010:14). As they seek emotional comfort and often “tangible means of securing residency in Turkey,” they choose to marry Turkish men. Bloch suggests that “gender matters because women are keenly aware of how very much their intimate relationships with Turkish men define their experience of mobility” (2010:14). Similarly, “Russian” women in Finland are highly aware of the stereotypes that their gender identity produces. Their nationality and the fact that marriage is the most common migration channel create a favorable context for stigmatization of female immigrants. As a result of family-oriented Post-Soviet gender ideology and in hopes to prevent potential sexualized labeling, women often tend to find security in their commitment to their role as mothers and wives, which offers a shield from being viewed simply as “another Russian prostitute.”

In this chapter I aimed to present how gender identity places Russian female immigrants in a doubly marginal position. The widely spread “Russian prostitute” stereotype casts a shadow on women who often self-consciously re-evaluate the ways of their gender expression and performance. Many adopt a sportier style of clothing and embrace novel gender roles which assume a more equal participation of both partners in both private and public spheres. Russian women’s hospitality and focus on family and upbringing of children partially result from the Post-Soviet gender ideology, which emphasizes women’s role as strongly tied to the household. Yet, many also find being “full-time” mothers and wives as the only feasible option due to high unemployment rates and cultural prejudice in Finland. Today, many Russian women in Finland embrace their identity as “Russian wives,” as seen from the example of the online forum group, in hopes to escape the negative label of a prostitute.
Chapter 5: Navigating the Immigrant Experience: Russian Female Minority in Finland Today and in the Future

- Olya, is it time to go to work yet?
- No, Mom, no, sleep!
- But I will be late!
- There is no work today, it’s the weekend. We can stay home. Don’t worry. Sleep!
- Ah, alright then.

Olga turns to me and whispers: “She thinks she is still working.” Olga lives with her 90-year-old mother, who cannot manage alone anymore as she suffers from a severe case of dementia. Olga is a certified nurse and is not married, so she chose not to place her mother in a nursing home. Instead, she decided to move in with her mother in order take care of her. As the primary caregiver, she can barely leave the apartment, only when her mother is taking a nap or Olga’s son takes over for a few hours. Olga’s family is ethnically Finnish, even though only her mother identifies as Finnish. Both Olga and her 30-year-old son consider themselves Russian.

I was interviewing her in a small two-bedroom apartment, which she shares with her mother. I was, of course, offered tea and Olga’s perspective on immigrants’ reality in Helsinki:

We [immigrants, specifically Ingrians] all move here [to Finland]. We all move here and we all think we will be accepted here. And the first five, six, seven years we all live by the same scenario—we believe that we have been accepted. After eight-ten years you start to realize that you are not being accepted, as you should. And from here, it starts. [Olga paused and looked towards her mother’s room where she was mumbling something through her dream.] When she moved here, everything was good. But I think she got more negative, because she really does not feel “first class” here.... We [Ingrians] got invitations now to Finland: Ingrians are seen as cheap additional labor [invitations to return for permanent residency to Finland based on Finnish ethnic heritage]. But many already got jobs there, in Russia, houses, and they don’t want to move anymore. They don’t want to start over anymore like we did years ago. They say, in the 90’s, they were moving with pots and pans, but now with very expensive cars. (Interview #4)

So far the chapters of this thesis have focused on presenting how Russian female immigrants actively construct their identity as “Russians” and as “Russian women” in Finland. It is, however, the fact that these women are also immigrants that makes them particularly vulnerable to potential discrimination and subjected to gendered stereotyping. It is, hence, important to address their experience of migration as an
important part of women’s personal narrative. Alexia Bloch (2010) writes that “scholars and the public media have tended to emphasize women’s victimization as migrants,” as they are often negatively labeled and perceived as sexually accessible and unprotected in their migration destinations. In the vignette above, Olga, who is a member of Ingrian-Finnish immigrant community, expresses her sentiments regarding the immigration process, which is strongly marked by feelings of disillusion and otherness. She says that everyone immigrates with high hopes for integration, but eventually realizes that they will always remain the “other” in Finland. Olga’s case is a disheartening example, especially because, being ethnically Finnish, she has high potential for successful assimilation. The remark that her mother does not feel “first class” in Finland illustrates the profound divide between native Finns and immigrants, which might often feel impossible to overcome.

Immigrant women, however, should not be solely viewed as passive subjects of stigmatization, but also as active and aware agents, for whom being an immigrant often becomes an essential part of selfhood. Immigration contexts are various and highly personal, but experiences of linguistic isolation and social alienation similar to the ones recounted by Olga were frequently reflected in my interviewees’ immigration stories. In this chapter I will bring to light the flexibility that the immigrant identity offers to some of my informants as it creates an opportunity for redefining their identity. I will also discuss how their identity as immigrants is explicitly and implicitly reflected in their linguistic choices. In conclusion, I will discuss the potential factual basis for the existence of the “prostitute” stereotype rooted in ethnic patterns of Finnish-Russian sex market. I will then address the changing image of Russian women in Finland looking forward to the potential future for this minority group in Finland.
The immigrant experience: romanticizing and realizing

“Immigration is like war,” is what Yelena told me, “The strong ones get better, the weak ones don’t survive” (Interview #1). She has immigrated twice in her life: first to New York in her late teens, and then to Finland when she married her current husband. She was 29 years old and already had a child. Yelena is highly selective of the individuals she spends time with or considers friends. She shared with me some of her criteria: people who are younger than her, those of mixed heritage, no Russians, and, preferably, no Finns either. She does not think of herself as Russian either and is sure she does not “look Russian.” In fact, she told me others often mistaken her for an American. I acknowledge that, although sharp in her opinions, Yelena’s remarks, nonetheless, reflect the challenging and complex nature of negotiating one’s social position and identity as an immigrant in Finland.

On the one hand, Yelena said that she is “not attached to any Russian stuff.” She aims to distinguish herself from the homogenized group of “Russian women in Finland” by creating a different ethnic identity for herself. On the other hand, she reassured me that she does not want to give up her Russian citizenship and continues to own real estate in Moscow. Yelena’s explicit comments were aimed at creating an image of herself as a global individual, specifically not Russian. Her desire not to be associated with Russians was obvious as she stated: “Russians have bad taste, they don’t know how to dress and their men always drink.... I guess that’s right.” Yelena described to me what clothes she usually wears, making sure to mention expensive American brands, not accessible for a “typical Russian immigrant:”

Today for example I was in jeans, Ed Hardy keds and a button-up shirt.... Some ‘тетки’ [derogatory for ‘women’] look sad here. I don’t look sad.... I don’t look Russian. Among my friends there is only one Russian woman, but she grew up in

20 Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to meet Yelena in person, since I used Skype for our interview. Thus, I am unable to comment upon my impressions of her physical appearance.
Germany, so her mentality is not Russian at all. I also have a friend who is Latvian, and a friend who is half Swedish. (Interview #1)

Many Russian women choose to find a sub-identity within the Russian community or deny/cover up their Russian-ness altogether, as it is in Yelena’s case. Aino Saarinen (2007) writes that the prostitute stigma directly and indirectly ultimately affects all Russian female migrants in Finland. As a result, many have received or given advice, according to which it is better to hide or negate their Russian identity altogether (2007:136). Although many of my informants did not feel as if they were ever explicitly sexually labeled, many, nonetheless, aimed to be disassociated from being Russian. The search for identity, or the need to change it, is often part of the immigrant experience, which offers certain flexibility for doing so. By transcending physical borders, many individuals also have the opportunity to negotiate the figurative borders of selfhood.

Some of my informants felt that “being Russian” in Finland was all of a sudden not enough; in fact, it somehow lessened their social status. Many said they had to prove themselves more than their Finnish peers at school or co-workers. In Anastasia’s narrative, she highlighted the fact that her role as a professional violin player helped her to earn more respect from her Finnish classmates. In that manner, she was not just “a Russian immigrant,” but also a talented violinist:

After two weeks of being in school, I was asked to play violin in front of the class, and immediately was taken into music school and admitted. So, I felt as if I was respected, and that I was engaged and I was not bad at it, so I felt that people looked at me differently. Of course, people always look differently, but not in a bad way any more…. People who had a hobby, or an activity, they had by far fewer problems in socializing and integrating than those people who rejected everything and closed in. (Interview #6)

Anastasia’s example reflects how finding an identity in music performance helped her to distance herself from being blended in with a homogenous immigrant population. She acknowledges that in order to feel accepted she had to establish herself as a
violinist in as a means to escape the immigrant stigma, which she defines as “when others look differently at you.”

In addition to remaking and shaping one’s social status, immigration is usually a process characterized by failed expectations and often romanticized ideas of the migration destination. Olga described her initial view of Finland prior to moving from Saint Petersburg:

We were arriving here with ‘pink shades’ over our eyes. We thought everything abroad is great, no problems exist, no one lives in shared apartments, and everyone is rich. Our grandmothers came here to visit us and saw cars in back yards, and told later that everyone had two cars here. But no one understood that all these cars were bought in credit, and that without cars you cannot survive these distances. Later, we learned more and our opinion changed. Everywhere there are own [particular to local contexts] problems and challenges. And now we see that everyone struggles in their own way. (Interview #4)

Olga’s narrative illustrates how social imagination often constructs the “other” place as better and with more opportunities for upward mobility. Similar thinking is not only common to Olga’s story, but also to most of my informants and immigrants around the world. In Hage’s “A not so Multi-sited Ethnography of a not so Imagined Community” (2005), the author presents a story of one of his informants, who chose a job at a distant relative’s restaurant in Caracas, Venezuela over a rather comfortable lifestyle in his home village in Lebanon. To an outsider, a low-paid job in a poor neighborhood in Venezuela would not necessarily seem as a step up, but, to Hage’s informant, it represented “the possibility of upward mobility” and offered him “a sense of going somewhere” (2005:74). As Marina said: “I thought it would be better in Finland, and there will be things we did not have in our country, in Russia” (Interview #11). Most of my informants could not predict what to expect in Finland, but they knew that migration would bring, at least, new opportunities.

Many psychologists and researches have proposed advanced views on the cultural adaptation curve. Kalervo Oberg (a Canadian of Finnish descent) was one of
the first anthropologists to coin the now widely applied term “culture shock.” Oberg defined the term by proposing four main stages most individuals are likely to experience when moving to a foreign culture: the honeymoon period, the crisis or cultural shock stage, recovery and, finally, adaptation to the new culture (1960). I would argue, however, that when applied to the immigration process, the “culture shock” framework does not account for the frequent prolonging of the “crisis stage,” which might last for the entire lifetime of an immigrant. Many of my informants still described the “crisis” phase, even after many years of living in Finland. Marina told me: “I know people who have jobs, who have lived here for twenty years and still they don't have satisfaction with their position in the Finnish society. I don’t know why, maybe it is the mentality, ... but they still cannot find a place, they still feel foreign” (Interview #11). Hence, the final step of “adaptation” to a new culture, where one ought to be comfortable, participate and contribute to the society, seems to be a problematic concept.

The “culture shock” theory tends to assume that culture is somewhat unchanging and can be eventually learnt and acquired. I suggest a slightly more complex view on this perspective when applied to the context of immigration. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine exactly when one has adapted or become fully acculturated. As immigrants adjust to the new socio-cultural environments, they often create a cultural “blend” characteristic specifically to their community. This “blend” often includes various aspects from immigrants’ native culture and newly appropriated characteristics of the host culture. It is most apparent perhaps at dinner tables in many Russian immigrant households in Finland, where dishes from both countries are served together and Finnish customs are often modified to the Russian taste. The blending, however, also reaches out beyond immediately apparent and tangible expressions of culture, such as cuisine, and is often reflected in wider social structures. For instance,
as seen in Chapter 4, Russian women frequently negotiate gender roles and parenting approaches with their Finnish spouses, seeking a balance between Russian and Finnish perspectives. When adapting to living in Finland, Russian women do not necessarily abandon common to them views and practices, but rather combine various parts of the two cultures creating a “blend” that most appropriately reflects their situation.

Russian women in Finland often realize the negativity attached to the label of a female immigrant from Russia and aim to redefine their identity through various discursive means. The process of “cultural blending” may allow individuals to renegotiate their identities; an activity both forced and willingly carried out. Navigating and creating a new social identity as well as transitioning from a romanticized to a more realistic view on Finland, where immigrants do not always smoothly fit into the new cultural milieu, seem to be prevalent experiences for many of my informants.

**Perpetual sense of linguistic otherness: “us” and “them”**

Language played an essential role during my interviews in several meaningful ways. First and foremost, my ability to speak with the women in their native language allowed me more freedom and decreased the potential for misunderstandings. As a Russian-speaker I was able to pick up on discrete remarks and attitudes, which often offered additional insight into my informants’ experiences. One such detail was the particular use of pronouns “us” and “them” when referring to Russians and Finns respectively. Secondly, each of my informants brought up the issue of language barrier as the most challenging obstacle to the integration into the Finnish society. Thirdly, the linguistic divide was also reflected in the dichotomy of public and private life. For most, friends and family were associated with the Russian language, whereas work and administrative institutions were connected with Finnish. By closely analyzing the
various roles language takes on in my informants’ lives, I will aim to gain further insight into their experiences as immigrants in Finland.

The implied contrast between the autochthonous population and immigrants was vividly expressed and emphasized through language my informants used. Referring to Russians as “we” and to Finns as “they” was typical for almost all of my informants. For instance, Tatyana, who has lived in Finland almost half of her life, nonetheless, differentiated between Russians and Finns:

Finns are quite pessimistic, we are more optimistic. Finns see only their own family as important; we also care about our friends’ families. They don’t suffer from not having friends. They don’t worry. They have different relations with friends; they are not like ours. They love sports more than we do. (Interview #7)

A similar pattern was reflected in Anastasia’s comment:

They [Finns] don’t open their arms to you. To achieve some contact with them takes a lot of effort. Maybe that’s what constitutes the initial shock and then it’s hard to recover from it. It’s not because they are bad or angry, they are just closed and slow. Slowness is not always bad though, hurry could be worse. Their mentality and pace are just different. At the same time, they are also very responsible…. The Finns don’t have impulsiveness, and we have a lot of that. (Interview #6)

Hence, the indicative patter of using “us” versus “them” only further highlights the continuous positioning of the Finnish characteristics as antonymous to the Russian ones.

It would be, however, too simplistic to argue that the use of these pronouns always aligns neatly with an individual’s conceptualization of the group of his/her belonging. Maria, my only informant who was born and raised in Finland, said she does not necessarily identify with one ethnicity or the other. Interestingly, her way of using “we” and “they” reveals continuous slippage between Russian and Finnish identities:

I think in Russian culture people understand that each person has their own history. They [Russians] try to listen why someone does what they [people in general] do. I think in Finland, it is present, too. But here it is not common to dig into other people’s business, the way it is for us [Russians]. So, it seems as they [Finns] are not as open. Maybe they [Finns] just share things only with those
who they [people in general] really know. And not with strangers like we [Russians] could. (Interview #10)

Trying to distance herself from the Russian group, Maria starts off by referring to Russians as “they.” Once she speaks about Finns, however, “us” / “we” becomes reserved for Russians and “they” is now used for Finns. This nuance is striking and highly symbolic of Maria’s view of her identity as not fully Finnish or Russian. As discussed in the earlier chapters, she wishes to explore her “Russian part” more—she views her ethnic identity as something fluid, over which she has control. Therefore, the slippage between “we” and “they” can potentially illustrate how she positions herself outside of the default group. When talking about Russians, she chooses to say “them” to show that she is not a member of the Russian immigrant community. When talking about Finns, she, however, uses “they,” too. However, the fact that still reserves “we” only for Russians highlights her preference and closer relationship with the Russian group.

Besides being an implicit indicator of an individual’s perception of their social position, language was often discussed as having an explicit impact on one’s access and acceptance into a group. Many of my interviewees expressed anxiety and fear about speaking in Finnish in public. Yulia said every time she could not identify the number calling her, she felt stressed: “Of course, I have somewhat of a linguistic foundation, but it was always difficult. I was nervous even when the phone rang. I would think: “Oh no, I have to speak Finnish now!” After having lived here for ten years, I still had this fear!” (Interview #2) Similarly, after having lived over ten years in Finland, Marina still cannot say she speaks fluent Finnish:

Insufficient knowledge of the language [is the biggest challenge]. The conversation just does not flow; there are not enough words. We have neighbors, to whom we say “hello.” If someone stops, you try to talk with them. When I was doing an internship in a Finnish work group, I talked with them, but just about the basics. (Interview #11)
The language barrier is seen as one of the key reasons that makes the acculturation process challenging, since it limits the opportunities to expand immigrants’ social networks to include more Finns. Instead, many remain limited to spending most of their time with other members of the Russian-speaking community.

Oksana, who has used English as the primary language at work, admitted that communication was the hardest part at the beginning, as she felt that she could not fully express herself:

Of course, you would want to socialize with people in your native language. I only could say “Mo!” [Hello] in Finnish to neighbors and my husband’s family. So, the language, of course, was a problem, because not knowing Finnish you can’t really make friends. And, I didn’t really want to start friendships like that. (Interview #3)

The linguistic divide eventually becomes a self-perpetuating pattern. Insufficient knowledge of Finnish leads to Russian immigrants having more Russian friends. As they integrate into the Russian-speaking circles, their motivation to learn Finnish decreases proportionally. Hence, the integration process becomes halted and cannot develop further as the social needs of an immigrant are already met at a lesser linguistic and psychological cost. The language barrier creates a dichotomy, in which private life (family and friends) is strongly tied to the Russian community, and Finnish is only used when necessary, in the public sphere (at a bank, employment office, or at work). Oksana, who is also the moderator of “Russian wives” online group, said that all of her social life is in Russian, in real life and online. Maria and Anastasia were the only ones to say that they have a more or less balanced number of Russian and Finnish friends. Yet, both still admitted that their closest friends are Russian-speakers.

Moreover, some of my informants consciously refuse to speak Finnish in order to avoid potential associations with the “Russian prostitute” stereotype (See Chapter 2). Yelena and Natalia both intentionally continue to communicate in English at work. The work environment has allowed them to do so from the start, but they also do not
intend to switch to Finnish in the future. By distinguishing themselves linguistically they aim to be disassociated from the more or less homogenized Russian immigrant group, members of which tend to have a weaker grasp of either Finnish or English. The conscious refusal of speaking in Finnish is highly symbolic of their desire to mask the negatively perceived Russian identity. Thus, implicit linguistic references such as the alternating use of “we” and “they” as well as the explicit use of a third language (non-Russian and non-Finnish) demonstrate how Russian women in Finland view their social position in relation to others.

“Russian prostitute,” “Russian wife” or “Russian tourist”: the future of Russian female minority in Finland

Compared to the early 1990s, catching judgmental gazes from passers-by or hearing whispers behind one’s back might have become more rare for Russian women immigrants in today’s Helsinki. The Finnish capital attracts the highest number of foreigners in the country, and the influx of tourists adds more diversity to the city’s atmosphere. A group of Russian women trying on clothes in a store does not look like an exotic scene anymore, but is rather treated as part of everyday normality. Although the situation might be different on the Finnish-Russian border, where stereotypes are more present in the public discourse and “the very process of crossing the border is deeply gendered” (Davydova and Pöllänen 2010), my informants seemed to agree that the “Russian prostitute talk” is gradually becoming part of the challenging history shared by the two countries. Nonetheless, it is significant not to disregard the existence of sex trafficking between Finland and Russia. Many of my informants were not aware of the facts pertaining to sex market inside Finland, which continues to operate with relatively high numbers of women and a significant presence of foreign women. Moreover, every day many Finnish customers also make trips to the “other” side of the border to purchase sex services in Russia.
In 2011, the YLE (Finnish National Broadcasting Company) reported on “dozens of victims in human trafficking investigation” in Lahti (a smaller town about an hour away from Helsinki). Among many involved, there were “women from Thailand, Africa, Russian, Estonia.” Analogous news articles appear in the media from time to time, but never become the focal point of public attention. The European Parliament provides the following account regarding Finland’s human trafficking profile:

Prostitution is neither illegal nor regulated. Pimping and promoting prostitution are forbidden. Prostitution has not been common in Finland and it has not been professionally organized. Previously there used to be no street or child prostitution. However, the situation has changed since the beginning of the 1990s, when prostitution became more common and more organized. The police speak of hundreds of women from Estonia and Russia who come to Finland on a tourist visa for a few weeks. These women work as prostitutes in their home countries but come to Finland to earn more money.

Regardless of this alarming account, the Finnish government does not foresee prostitution becoming a major problem and little public attention is paid to the issue.

In 2003, Anne-Maria Marttila presented at the “Gender and Power in New Europe” Conference addressing the sex trafficking problem in her article “Consuming Sex–Finnish Male Clients and Russian and Baltic Prostitutes.” The author suggests that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, “the demand and supply of commercial sex have met each other,” and the situation was further aggregated by sharp differences in the living standards between the “East” and the “West.” “Cheap” bodies of Eastern girls and women became available to the pressure of demand in the “West” creating a fast growing sex market (Marttila 2003:2). Furthermore, Marttila states that today “thousands of Finnish men” still go on “sex tours” to the neighboring country. About 90% of prostitutes in Finland are foreigners, and the majority is from Russia or from the Baltic states, where Russian is spoken by minority groups.

Marttila argues that in the context of sex industry, female body is often “made consumable by reducing it to a mere object,” when woman’s personality is perceived as unimportant in terms of the client’s preference. The body is, instead, marked “with non-personal attributes,” such as ethnicity, which makes the woman desirable. The buyers of sex, therefore, place importance on the geographic origin of the prostitute, who usually comes from the exotic “East” (Marttila 2003:6). Based on these statistics, sex industry in Finland is strongly marked by foreign women’s presence, and their identity as immigrants, or exotic “others,” plays a key role in the industry’s consumerism culture. The prostitute identity becomes connected to the immigrant identity. Hence, the seemingly fading stereotype of the 1990s continues to find basis in the current statistics of the Finnish-Russian sex market. It is not surprising that the “shadow of the whore” is and will continue to be cast over many foreign women, and the topic is likely to remain part of the public discourse in Finland.

Although sex trafficking between Russia and Finland continues to operate, it is an “invisible” market, not readily apparent to those not involved. In the past years, thousands of Russian tourists have become frequent visitors to Finland throughout all year. As a result of lively tourism, everyday interactions with Eastern neighbors are now more noticeable. According to Statistics Finland, in 2011 “visitors from Russia comprised the largest visitor group.” “45% of the visitors, or approximately 3.3 million visitors in total, came from Russia. Compared with the previous year, travel from Russia to Finland increased by 27%.” Currently the revenue from tourism constitutes approximately 2.8% of Finland’s GDP, and shopping is the second highest contributor. During my fieldwork months, I worked for Helsinki Tourism and Convention Bureau as an Information Services Officer. Due to a growing demand of Russian-speaking

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employees, I was warmly welcomed to the team. From my observations over the summer months, most Russian tourists come to Helsinki for a short-term stay and, for many, shopping is the main leisure activity. Statistics Finland reports that “the highest amount of money per day was spent by visitors living in Russia.” Indeed, Finnish products are usually praised and valued for their high quality by many Russians, who are likely to spend 111€ on average per person per day on their trip.\textsuperscript{25} This consumer pattern is obvious to many native residents of Helsinki as they hear increasingly more and more Russian speech in the downtown shops.

In support of the above statistics, several of my informants articulated that there is a new emerging stereotype of Russian women as “shopping tourists.” These Russian women are likely to visit a variety of stores in Finland, from regular grocery shops to high-end boutiques, and leave behind a significant amount of money spent on various items. When I asked Natalia whether the image of Russian women in Helsinki is changing, she jokingly answered:

> There is a new stereotype. It’s not of a Russian woman, who has arrived and is looking for a rich Finnish husband. It is now a rich Russian woman, who has arrived and wants to buy everything here. I am afraid of these Russian women with crazy eyes during the sales period!” (Interview #9)

In addition to Natalia’s humorous comment, several of my informants highlighted the fact that Russians who visit Finland today contribute to the creation of a different, more positive image associated with their national identity. Oksana proudly told me that one of her friends from Saint Petersburg married a Finn, but decided against moving to Finland. Since she was employed in Russia, she had a stable income, which she was not willing to trade for an uncertain professional future abroad. They decided to continue their marriage on a distance, with frequent visits. Wealthy tourists from Russia as well as women who go against the typical scenario of “marrying and moving” are likely to

gradually contribute to the reshaping of the popular stereotypes about the Russian minority in Finland. Furthermore, the increasing popularity of Finland as a travel destination for Russian tourists positively affects Finnish public attitudes about Russians in general as their presence contributes to the economic well-being of the country.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The relations between Russia and Finland have been historically marked by continuous political tensions and wars. Until today the Finns remain alert towards their eastern neighbor. One of the key objectives of this thesis was to explore the effects of the widely known, yet often implicit, “prostitute” stereotype on the members of the Russian female immigrant community in the Helsinki area. In the public discourse in Finland, Russian women are known for their flashy outfits and are often labeled as “huorat” [sluts] behind their backs. Although most of my informants never felt directly stigmatized, their narratives revealed a continuous need to distance themselves from the Russian female immigrant group in order to escape potential stereotyping. In my thesis I explored how women negotiate their national/cultural and gender identities and how they use their agency to shape their experience as immigrants.

Based on my informants’ narratives, Russian women in Finland are a minority group in position of double marginality due to both their national and gender identity. According to the statistics of the United Nations, women “who actively or passively take part in globalization processes (refugees, workers, family immigrants) are one of the least protected and most vulnerable groups” (Sverdljuk 2011: 230). I then suggest that Russian women’s position can be seen as that of “triple marginality:” as Russians, as women and also as immigrants. Yet, the perspectives of the members of this group are little understood. Hence, it is essential to discuss Russian women’s experiences through the lens of their narratives in order to gain further insight into their position in Finland as one of the highly marginalized groups.

During the 1990s, the influx of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union to Finland significantly increased, as the travel between the two countries was no longer
restricted by the Soviet foreign policies. Since then, the most common immigration channel for Russian women has been marriage to a Finnish citizen. The stigmatized identity of Russian women has only been further emphasized by their frequent dependency on their Finnish partners in terms of the overall immigration process as well as for socio-economic integration into the Finnish society. In support of this claim, Finnish sociologist and researcher Anni Jääskeläinen points out that the Finnish spouse has “a significant role in the formation of the immigrant wife’s networks” (2003:49). In theory, a Finnish spouse could contribute to women’s faster integration into the Finnish society. However, as seen from this thesis, the lack of employment opportunities and pre-existing cultural prejudice often slow down Russian women’s acculturation process.

By analyzing how my informants deconstruct their “Russian” national and cultural identity I have brought to light the various discursive techniques they use in order to escape the potential of sexualized labeling. Many choose to renegotiate their identity as “Russians” and, instead, associate themselves with a particular sub-category, often tied to a town or region (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Ingria, or Komi Republic) or ethnicity (Ukrainian, Ingrian, Byelorussian). Some do not mention their country of origin at all and wish to be completely disassociated from what they perceive as a homogenized group of Russian female immigrants in Finland. Others strategically refuse to learn and use the Finnish language, since their apparent accent would easily give away their identity as “yet another Russian woman.” By renegotiating their national, or even more so ethnic, identity they aim to distance themselves from the stigmatized group. Moreover, the general discourse on immigration in Finland frequently tends to overlook the diversity within various immigrant groups. The women’s narratives brought to light the important range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds encompassed under the “Russian” label.
The “prostitute” stereotype concerns not only the national/cultural identity of Russian female immigrants, but also their gender identity. Russian women's expression of femininity is commonly perceived as rather different from that associated with Finnish women. In order to avoid the unwanted gazes, some re-evaluate their clothing choices, often embodying a sportier style. Besides shifting outfit preferences (a more easily noticeable characteristic), Russian women immigrants often feel compelled to accustom themselves to Western gender roles by assuming a more equal participation of both partners in the household chores. However, the frequent lack of employment opportunities and the influence of Post-Soviet gender ideology, which emphasizes women's principal role in the private sphere, often result in Russian female immigrants' need to remain at home and focus on domestic responsibilities.

Gradually, the “prostitute” stereotype, which used to exoticize and stigmatize the Russian female immigrants in the 1990s, is now being replaced with the “Russian wife” label. As seen from the case of the online discussion group, entitled similarly, it appears that Russian women are, however, more willing to embody this category. Oksana, one the founders of this online group, proudly mentioned to me that “Русские жены” [Russian wives] was mentioned in a local newspaper and she was very happy to spread the word about its existence (Interview #3). Moreover, my interview with Tatyana ended with her concluding that Finnish women are simply jealous of Russian women, since a Finnish woman could never make as good of a wife as a Russian one with her abilities to cook well, take care of the children and look beautiful—all at the same time (Interview #7).

The lingering “prostitute” stereotype and the disproportionate presence of foreign women in the Finnish sex market, nonetheless, continue to perpetuate the stereotyping of the Russian female minority. The Red Cross HIV/AIDS campaign “Don’t fuck yourself to death” posters were aimed at raising awareness of sexually
transmitted diseases and, posted at border crossings, mainly targeted Finnish male sex tourists traveling to Russia. At the same time, these same posters also indirectly pointed at all Russian women travelers and marked them as potential prostitutes. Unarguably the “shadow of the whore,” the remaining hyper sexualized public image of Russian women in Finland, continues to affect the everyday life experiences of Russian female immigrants throughout the country. This thesis aimed to unveil, however, women's perspectives on their public image and demonstrated their desire to actively take charge of their identities. Russian women in Finland remain one of the largest immigrant groups, and only fairly recently they have started to receive more attention from research scholars. The recent increase of tourism between Russia and Finland has also contributed to the creation of a more positive image of Russian women as shopping tourists. By better understanding Russian immigrant women's position and their self-representations, we can facilitate a more successful integration process and, as a result, work towards eliminating the negative stereotypes from the public discourse.
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