5. Russian-speaking immigrants’ vulnerable transnational family lives on the border: the case of North Karelia

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the transnational everyday life of third-country nationals (TCNs) in the predominantly rural region of North Karelia in eastern Finland. It has a sparse, declining, and ageing population, with long distances to markets and in many cases to services. The region shares a 304-kilometre border with the Russian Federation, which was long considered a facilitator of the region’s economic development. It includes the relatively prominent checkpoint of Niirala-Värtsilä in the municipality of Tohmajärvi, with more than a million annual border crossings before the restrictions imposed due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced crossings remarkably. Of North Karelia’s approximately 160,000 inhabitants, 77,000 live in Joensuu, the regional centre. The region is a typical new immigration destination, with historically little experience of international migrants. Russians are currently the dominant group: at the end of 2021 3,949 people registered Russian as their first language (Statistics Finland 2022). Russian citizens constitute approximately 44 per cent of all foreign citizens living in the region (Joensuun kaupungin selvitys 2020). Estimates of the number of Russian speakers in Finland range from 80,000 to 100,000, depending on the calculation method. In 2021 87,552 Russian speakers were registered in the country (Statistics Finland 2022).

In this chapter we examine some traits of Russian-speaking immigrants’ integration into and impact on the Finnish border region of North Karelia. Like most Finnish (and European) rural regions, depopulation is a characteristic trait of North Karelia. Immigration can be seen as having potential to
alleviate this trend (Laine, Rauhut and Gruber 2023). Immigration to North Karelia from third countries has two main patterns: first, from Russia, mainly from areas adjacent to North Karelia, which has lasted for more than three decades; second, the appearance of asylum seekers as reception centres have been established in the region (Pöllänen 2020). Russian-speaking migrants’ presence cannot be dismissed when discussing immigration’s social and economic impact. Russian migrants typically remain in the region because of the border’s proximity and the ease of maintaining transnational family relations and everyday life (Sireni, Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2021). Meanwhile, asylum seekers typically move from North Karelia to more urban regions once they receive residence permits (Pöllänen 2020).

The changing geopolitical situation between the EU and Russia and the COVID-19 pandemic have greatly affected migrants’ transnational everyday lives. This chapter investigates the transnational familyhood of Russian-speaking immigrants in the Finnish border region. It considers how Russian speakers construct their transnational everyday lives in a rural border region that has faced the notable consequences of the changed geopolitical situation, both economically and socially. The data collected for this study are based on interviews conducted in the MATILDE project before Russia started the war in Ukraine, but they are complemented by ethnographic observations and unrecorded discussions with Russian speakers and experts after the war started. Even with the rupturing of border regimes and the extreme wartime geopolitical situation transnational families are building their familyhood in everyday life.

The transnational connections between Finland and Russia are rooted in the countries’ common history (Laine 2013). Nevertheless, during the Soviet period immigration from Russia to Finland was almost non-existent (cf. Leitzinger 2016). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 immigration from Russia and other former Soviet countries has been a noticeable phenomenon in Finland. At first this immigration consisted mostly of people of Finnish descent and their family members. These ‘re-migrants’ currently make up approximately a third of all post-Soviet immigrants in Finland (Davydova 2009). The second third roughly comprises those who moved because of family ties, and the final third consists of every other form of immigration (Leitzinger 2016). Marriage has always been a channel for Russian migration to Finland. It is highly gendered, involving predominantly women (Saarinen 2007; Pöllänen 2013; Tiaynen 2013). Since the 2010s immigration from Russia to Finland has occurred mostly because of family ties, study, entrepreneurship, and work.

The new layer of Russian-speaking immigrants in Finland in recent years is formed by those who have moved for political reasons. Although most Russian speakers arrive not as political refugees or asylum seekers but as students or labour migrants, in practice many seek residence in Finland because of
Russia’s political situation. The character of Russian-speaking immigration to Finland is changing. The arrival of these ‘new’ Russian speakers, who emigrated from Russia to escape the political reality, started before the current war in Ukraine, but the latest developments will only increase this trend.¹ The war’s outbreak will bring and has already brought Russian-speaking refugees from Ukraine and Russia, as well as Ukrainian-speaking refugees.

TRANSMATIONAL FAMILYHOOD AND TRANSNATIONAL CARE

Studies of transnational families have become important in the globalization era, and they are tightly connected with migration. The definition of transnational families relies on the assumption that families divided by national borders live their lives transnationally, staying together and creating something that can be seen even across national borders as a sense of collective wellbeing, community, and familyhood (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). Transnational families’ creation and maintenance of familyhood, including ‘relativizing’ and ‘frontiering’, include transnational care and the maintenance of emotional and material bonds between family members. Their everyday life is framed by nation-states’ institutional practices, which are always intertwined with geopolitical regimes and developments (Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2020; Zechner 2010; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002).

The transnational family has previously been studied from various perspectives and geopolitical and geographical contexts. Transnational family studies often consider the requirements of care either from the parental perspective (e.g. Pöllänen 2013) or that of elderly care (Zechner 2010). Fisher and Tronto (1990, 35) argue that ‘human existence requires care from others and such caring is an important part of life’. They continue that women’s care is in the female sphere, which is seen as including private matters, family affairs, unpaid labour, and personal relationships (ibid., 36). This affects the nature of care, which in terms of duty and work is often invisible and poorly paid. How care is organized is culturally conditioned, and definitions of good care and care routines are culturally constructed.

From the socio-political perspective mainstream research has long concentrated on the study of care systems within the public sphere (Zechner 2010; Kröger 1997). Just as state socio-political systems differ, how care in private life is organized varies from one country or community to the next. In private life the concept of care inevitably refers to the family and family relations. In many cultures the family is the main unit of care. However, the organization of care within the family and the concept of family differ not only between but within societies. For example, in Finland the concept is based on the ideal of a nuclear family, whereas in Russia it follows either the extended family...
or the extended motherhood models (see e.g. Pöllänen 2013; Rotkirch 2000; Yesilova 2009; Zdravomyslova 1996). Moreover, the model on which the construction of a particular family is based significantly influences its related caring processes and the organization of care.

Family care is often intergenerational and mostly reciprocal (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 37). It is at least assumed that family care entails reciprocity. In pinpointing the insubstantial nature of care, we assume a more collective viewpoint. Reciprocity can take place collectively between generations (e.g. the members of younger generations take care of those of older generations). Thus, reciprocity does not have to entail direct help from one another. The insubstantial nature of care refers to the emotions existing between family members and generations. Even if I am not physically caring for my parents, I have feelings and emotions which form part of the reciprocity with family care. This leads to a discussion of the emotions involved in care: the emotions and affects of care become important in a transnational context.

In studying transnational familyhood and transnational care, it is important to understand the geographical context of families’ distance from each other. In transnational family care it should be noted that the geographical location of both the country of emigration and the country of immigration is also meaningful. Geographical distance creates everyday transnationalism for migrants. When a migrant lives their everyday life far from their family members, care differs from when they are near their family members. It is difficult to sustain such everyday care practices as cleaning, cooking, or bathing from Finland for elderly relatives who live on other continents. In these cases care is framed more by financial and emotional support. Yet if the family member lives just on the other side of the state border, it is easier to maintain physical care for one’s family members. (Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2020; Pöllänen 2013; Zechner 2010.) Care for family members involving cleaning and cooking is possible in Russian Karelia from North Karelia. However, distance is not the only element that defines the functionality of transnational care, because border regimes also frame it in practice.

In our previous study (Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2017; 2020; 2021) we approached the border regime between Finland and Russia from the perspective of the border area as a precarious zone. We were inspired by the academic discussion of the precarization of everyday life and precarity, which we have developed as intertwined with transnational family relations. We understand precarization as the hollowing out of the welfare state, fragmentation of the labour market, and porosity across societal structures. The forms of work, education, family life, sociality and leisure, civil society and politics, and international relations are shifting from lifetime stable endeavours to temporary, unstable, and uncertain projects and phenomena. These processes mean many populations (especially women and migrants) must face uncertainty not only
from a financial perspective but from the emotional and functional frames shaping their lives. Moreover, the global geopolitical order has become even more unstable and militant and is now vulnerable to conflicts not only in the ‘traditional’ locations of the unstable Middle East but in post-Soviet regimes and even beyond. This instability creates feelings of precarity, especially among population groups with a personal connection to the territories where such conflicts arise. (Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2017, 177–178.)

We understand precarity as an affective stage caused by societal institutions, their functions, and transformations – for example, state borders, border regimes, and bordering processes that cause the unpredictability of everyday life in border regions. The fragility of transnational family relations in border regions has for decades been a lived everyday. However, since February 2022 the situation on the Finnish–Russian border has shifted from precarity to permanent vulnerability. The new situation demands quotidian resilience. This quotidian resilience, as Laine (2021a) notes, is more than an ability to recover as quickly as possible but to adapt and emerge more strongly. Laine (2021a) observes that such resilience seeks tools for solidarity and adaptation to the new everyday situations created by geopolitical threats.

EVERYDAY ETHNOGRAPHY AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

This chapter’s methodology is based on the tradition of the ethnography of everyday life (see Vila 2003; Jokinen 2005). The chapter focuses on transnational everyday family relations and care practices in the border region in a changing geopolitical situation. The everyday is seen as a tool for understanding human behaviour, daily routines and practices, interactions, and communication. The significant markers of everyday life are routines, habits, and repetition, which often remain unrecognized by the actors themselves. The everyday becomes visible and acknowledged when it is contradicted by something perceived as extraordinary. When one faces something extraordinary (such as disease, falling in love, death, birth, migration, or war), everyday routines are ruptured until new practices replace the old and become familiar, and some routines become one’s new everyday. We see ethnography as an important data collection and analysis tool. Ethnography is a long-term, empirical, simultaneous, diachronic, and localized social research practice (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). Everyday ethnography refers to a holistic way of doing research and an interest in knowledge. We attempt a holistic approach by using multifarious data and maintaining the flexibility and innovativeness of the data analysis.

The chapter’s analysis is based on data collected in the MATILDE project. It consists largely of 18 semi-structured interviews with local residents in the
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border region of North Karelia, experts working with immigration issues, and migrants of various origins. We also conducted two group interviews, six focus groups, and two roundtables. We undertook field trips in the border municipalities of Lieksa and Kitee to familiarize ourselves with the surroundings and the various actors working with immigrants. Beyond the data collected in the MATILDE project this chapter is built on the authors’ long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the border area between Finland and Russia. We also use ourselves as instruments of research in our border ethnography, following the ideas of autoethnography (Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2017; Uotinen 2010).

The data collection for MATILDE took place mainly in three phases between September 2020 and February 2022. In the first phase, in the autumn of 2020, expert interviews were conducted locally, regionally, and nationally. In the spring of 2021, we interviewed immigrants and those working with them in North Karelia. We also organized two focus groups. In the last phase we conducted field trips, attended events, and conducted four focus groups in the municipalities of Kitee and Lieksa. We familiarized ourselves with various NGOs and other actors organizing activities for and with immigrants in these two border towns. Although all these data were useful to obtain a broader view of the phenomenon, we will largely use the data from the two most recent phases, which focus more on the border region’s Russian-speaking immigrants. Even if the data were mostly collected before the invasion of Ukraine, they were complemented by ethnographic observations and unrecorded discussions after the war started.

In the following we analyse the data from the perspective of transnational family practices, everyday familyhood, and transnational care. The content analysis method is used in the interview analysis (see Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2002). The method is classically applied: it represents ‘a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from the text’ (Weber 1990), in our case to make valid inferences from interviews and ethnographic observations. Weber (1990) points out that this method can be used for many purposes; in our study the relevant purposes are to ‘reflect cultural patterns of groups, institutions, or societies’ and ‘reveal the focus of individual, group, institutional, or societal attention’ in the context of transnational everyday familyhood. We create the analytical themes by detecting key themes based on our theoretical understanding of the research topic and on conclusions emerging from our previous studies. Content analysis was chosen as a methodological tool to identify any thematic structures running throughout the interview data because it ‘brings meaning to a recurrent topic or experiences and its various manifestations’ (Graneheim, Lindgren and Lundman 2017, 32).
THE VULNERABILITIES OF THE TRANSNATIONAL EVERYDAY AMONG RUSSIAN SPEAKERS IN THE BORDER REGION IN NORTH KARELIA

Since the Soviet Union collapsed Russian speakers’ numbers in Finland have grown steadily. Finland and its eastern border regions have been a desirable destination for Russian speakers, especially for those from areas close to the Russian–Finnish border, because it allows them to keep in close touch with families in Russia. The everyday life of Russian speakers is often transnational as they maintain family and friendship networks over the border. Moreover, as previous research suggests (e.g. Pöllänen 2013; Pöllänen and Davydova-Minguet 2017; Tiaynen 2013), Russian speakers, especially women, often have care obligations in Russia. Transnationality is also becoming part of the everyday because some Russian speakers also have properties on the Russian side of the border. Some also receive social benefits (e.g. a pension or their mother’s capital) from Russia. Before 2014 this transnationality was more practical, and although the border crossing of individuals, capital, or belongings has never been easy, Russian speakers are used to coping with it. Our analysis of Russian speakers’ transnational family life focuses on three chronologically appearing layers: the post-Crimean period (from 2014); the COVID-19 period; and the post-February 2022 era. We examine the insecurities and vulnerabilities Russian speakers have faced since the post-Crimean period in their transnational everyday family life.

The Effects of the Post-Crimean Period on Transnational Family Relations

After the Russian annexation of Crimea and western countries’ resulting sanctions in 2014, the reality in the Finnish–Russian border area drastically changed (Laine 2018; Laine 2021b). The open atmosphere in the border region surrounding migration and transnational connections rapidly deteriorated. Bolstered by the arrival of asylum seekers in considerable numbers in 2015, the security discourse in Finland significantly changed. These shifts influenced the proliferation of the security and danger discourse. New fears emerged about the Russian Federation, embodied in the figure of Putin, as well as immigrants more broadly. The annexation of Crimea had a direct influence on Russian speakers’ everyday life in Finland. Russian speakers were conceptualized as a potential danger through their inevitable transnational connections to Russia and possible dual citizenship. Russian speakers’ transnational connections at different levels were securitized in the overall framework of confrontation.
with the West (cf. Oivo 2021; Oivo and Davydova-Minguet 2019; Oivo, Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2021).

Because of Russia’s shrinking democracy and ever tighter atmosphere, a new wave of Russian speakers began to migrate to Finland after the beginning of the 2010s. According to data collected during the MATILDE project in North Karelia young and even underage Russian citizens began moving to Finland, especially to the border region, to study. Russians with the financial means to educate their children abroad appear to find this migration channel desirable. Many young students said they had been preparing to emigrate to Finland by studying Finnish via online courses.

I studied Finnish for a year with a private tutor in Russia before I left for Finland, and remotely with a computer. (FIK37, December 2021)

In recent years student migration from Russia, even to Finnish rural areas like North Karelia, has increased dramatically. This is at least partly because study is one of the easiest routes to residence in Finland. As students from outside the EU/ETA countries have had to pay for tuition since 2016, most come from middle-class families, often from major Russian cities. This has coincided with active recruitment efforts by Finnish educational institutions like the Riveria vocational school in North Karelia. In the last decade the number of new foreign-language students at Riveria has rapidly increased (Education Statistics Finland 2022), from 152 new students in 2012 to 342 in 2020. This concerns both young people and adults. Riveria and folk high schools offering vocational education programmes are also a gateway for those who already have established careers and lives in Russia. While it is reasonable to think people migrate to study for many reasons, our data make it clear that in recent years many have done so because they want to leave Russia due to the political situation. For older migrants, for whom studying the language beforehand may be impossible, and whose life is more established in Russia, the situation is thus much more precarious than for younger students who have been preparing for the change. The language barrier can be high, and the recognition of education and skills is uncertain.

When we’re discussing immigration in general it’s language, language, and again language. If you have the language, everything else comes with it. Many, many who come from Russia and Ukraine are immigrants who’ve left everything behind. Most of us were unprepared for emigration, and in this sense, we lose to those who have consciously prepared for it. For the most part this situation I’ve just told you about affects those who are over 40 or 30 years old. You can be a good professional but without the language … [interrupted]. (FIK56, through a translator, February 2022)
Despite the dramatic reasons for emigration from Russia, people need to maintain their family relationships over the border: young students’ nuclear family may be in Russia, whereas adult emigrants who emigrate with their nuclear families have intergenerational care obligations. Tense international relations frame these everyday family relationships. Previous research (Oivo and Davydova-Minguet 2019) indicates that the deterioration of Russian–EU relations in 2014 directly affected everyday lives and transnational relationships in border regions. The influence of the crisis was multidimensional. In Russia the state authorities issued several laws, instructions, and restrictions targeting Russian citizens with residence permits abroad and those with dual citizenship. Yet in Finland Russian dual citizens were conceptualized as a potential threat to national security. Dual citizens’ opportunities to study and work in security-related sectors were restricted. Previous research (Oivo and Davydova-Minguet 2019; Oivo 2021) maintained this created an atmosphere in which Russian speakers felt they were ‘between the devil and the deep blue sea’. Russian speakers’ affiliations and levels of state trust were polarized and even traumatized (see Oivo and Davydova-Minguet 2019; Oivo 2021).

Russian speakers living in the border region also faced a new labour market situation. The political crisis resulted in economic sanctions from both sides, and it affected international trade and tourism following the crash of the rouble’s value. Many Russian speakers faced fewer job opportunities. Furthermore, our ethnographic fieldwork reveals that since 2014 those with Ukrainian passports and transnational families experienced considerable difficulties in crossing the border at Finnish–Russian checkpoints. As a legacy of the Soviet Union families with members in various post-Soviet countries often have sisters, brothers, uncles, and other relatives in both Russia and Ukraine or elsewhere in territory of the former Soviet Union.

Since 2014 it has become clear opinions about the geopolitical situation are diverse, depending on the side of the border people find themselves. Such opinions are largely conditioned by media involvement. The media plays an important role in Russian speakers’ everyday lives. They follow different media sources originating in both Finland and Russia but also beyond. The media is used transnationally in Russian speakers’ everyday lives. Previous research (Davydova-Minguet et al. 2016) notes that the Russian state-sponsored media discourse has divided Russian speakers into different pools and created new divisions and collectives that are tightly bound to different types of transnational media involvement. Media involvement can both unite transnational families and divide them.
The COVID-19 Pandemic Changed Transnational Everyday Life

The COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting restrictions greatly affected the everyday lives of Russian-speaking immigrants and immigrants in general. In our data experts working with migrants were concerned about migrants’ integration into Finnish society because the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions interrupted in-person contacts. Many social activities important for the integration process were replaced with online meetings or cancelled entirely, and this disrupted the everyday security and interactions between other migrants and Finnish speakers.

Russian speakers’ transnational everyday was also ruptured because the pandemic dramatically complicated crossing the border. In March 2020 the Finnish–Russian border was closed for private and business crossers, something that had not occurred since the fall of the Iron Curtain. The problems for people with trans-local contacts, transnational families, those working with Russian tourism, and businesses connected with the border became insurmountable.

Many Russian speakers with care duties and obligations on both sides of the border worried about how their relatives were coping after physical contact was severed. The border was all but closed for months. Those with family members on the other side of the border could cross the border for urgent matters a limited number of times a year. For example, it became more difficult to go to Russia to care for elderly relatives. This understandably had dramatic effects on affected families. However, this was not the case for every Russian speaker: our interviews reveal some wished to avoid travel to Russia because of the unpredictable pandemic situation there.

And when it comes to travel, I haven’t been to Russia in over a year and have no urge to. I don’t want to take the risk. At some point in the Republic of Karelia the situation was very bad. I think it was third after Moscow and St Petersburg in those … sad numbers. It’s like this. Many, many have now passed up on travel, at least to Russia. I know this at least from my immediate circles. (FIK19, March 2021)

The pandemic was psychologically demanding for all immigrants, especially those with relatives and close family members in parts of the world where the pandemic has been much worse than in Finland. According to our interviews it was clear the lockdown created anxiety among Russian speakers as it did among other immigrants. A teacher who was teaching migrant children said this anxiety among migrants and their concerns about their family members could be seen in children’s behaviour and concentration at school. Migrants worried about their family members and their health, and this created considerable extra stress. The teacher reported that during the distance schooling period
in the spring of 2020 some migrant pupils just disappeared. Families also faced substantial pressures in supporting their children’s coping with distance learning. In some families this was demanding.

How it showed on the school side was that I had students from multilingual families that just disappeared. Unfortunately, there were incidents in families where parents divorced, for example, or another parent was left on the other side of the border for work-related and other reasons. This changed the family dynamic. And depending a little on the cultural background, the coronavirus could be seen as so frightening that the parents were unaware of where it would be safe for their child, in the school or in distance learning. Then if the parents couldn’t support them with the difficulties of distance learning, they might just leave the tasks undone or not attend meetings with the teacher. (FIK12, February 2021)

Later, when the total lockdown ended, but the restrictions on border crossing remained in force, some peculiarities also began to be seen in social behaviour. The informants reported that people in schools and workplaces wondered how those who crossed the border were following the quarantine restrictions, and if not, if it was a risk to others. Russian speakers’ transnational everyday caused confusion in local communities. This was especially the case in municipalities close to the border with a significant Russian-speaking population. The interviews revealed that Finnish speakers in local communities worried that Russian speakers, often those with dual citizenship, who were regularly crossing the border were spreading COVID-19.

According to the interviews there was also an everyday challenge with holiday trips to Russia. If Russian speakers travelled to Russia for holidays, they needed longer periods to comply with quarantine rules. This was emphasized in an interview in which the participants were working in a municipal day-care centre:

… It also has an impact if some Russian speakers, for example, travel somewhere – they’re quarantined for two weeks, so the child is away for that time … (FIK22, March 2021)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when family members and friends were unable to cross the border as often, networks of Russian speakers in Finland developed and strengthened in North Karelia: in the absence of the possibility to visit relatives, the maintenance of familyhood happened by sending presents and goods to families through acquaintances crossing the border. Strong and lively networks of acquaintances living in the same situation are very important in meeting this task. Social media platforms and local Russian speakers’ social media groups play a key role in establishing such networks.
The New Layer of Increasing Vulnerability: The War in Ukraine

In early 2022 the situation’s precarity deteriorated further. When Russia started the war in Ukraine, transnational family life changed dramatically. In a focus group conducted in Kitee a week before Russia launched the invasion in February, the tension among Russian speakers was already tangible. It became evident that there was considerable variation in the opinions of Russian speakers living in North Karelia concerning the current political situation in Russia. As previously stated, many Russian speakers who have emigrated in recent years are motivated by Russia’s democratic deficit. There is therefore a generational gap between Russian-speaking immigrants who moved to North Karelia in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union and those who have moved more recently. It is noteworthy that ‘generational gap’ does not necessarily refer to immigrants’ age but to the timing of and reason for migration.

Russian speakers who immigrated during the 1990s or early 2000s arrived mostly as re-migrants on the grounds of their or their spouse’s Finnish descent, to study or work, or as migrant spouses. Their reasons for migration differed from those who have moved to Finland in recent years. This also influences the perspective on how Russian speakers see Russia’s everyday democratic reality. After the Soviet Union’s collapse the reason for many Russian speakers’ migration was more financial than in recent years, when people have moved in many cases for political reasons. Recent Russian-speaking migrants have in some form been seeking political asylum, even though they often use student residence permits to gain residence in Finland.

The tensions caused by different ways of seeing the political situation in Russia affect Russian speakers’ social relationships in the post-February 2022 era. Our data show that friendships and family networks are being redefined, and the situation is causing significant worries for those with family members in Russia. These worries range from security-related issues to social and financial problems. In a later roundtable discussion one informant said she was worried her relatives might have to participate in the war in Ukraine if Russia declared a mobilization. This worry is quite common among those with young male family members in Russia, and it was raised in many conversations. The other common concern is elderly relatives, and how they are coping with pensions with the constantly rising prices resulting from the sanctions against Russia.

There are also people with family members or close friends in Ukraine. Their worries are even more intense. In everyday conversations Russian speakers speak of relatives trying to escape warzones, or of how and when they last heard from their relatives. There are doubts that their family members are still alive. This situation is complicated because Russian speakers may have
relatives who live in Ukrainian regions occupied by Russia such as Donbas, where in addition to the hostilities the danger of being mobilized is quite high.

The affectional condition of Russian speakers seems contradictory in many ways (Tolkki 2022). Some support the Russian action and feel somehow empowered by knowledge about Russia’s activities garnered from the Russian mass media. Some oppose the war but are unaffected by it through personal contacts and family relationships. Russian speakers are also commonly distrustful and lack any clear opinion about the information they receive about the war, and many seek to distance themselves from the news flow. The affectional condition of some is heavily affected by the war. Pre-war vulnerability has become stifled pain.

Both the importance and vulnerability of transnational family relations since the war in Ukraine started have become visible. According to the data it is obvious that people seek to maintain their transnational familyhood in every possible way, but it seems transnational family relations are in a frozen state for many Russian speakers. While the split is not completely clear cut, those family members who live in Russia and mostly follow the Russian media often see the war in Ukraine as justified, whereas many Finnish Russian speakers condemn the war (see also Cultura Foundation 2022). However, people still wish to maintain their transnational familyhood, and this is possible if people completely avoid discussions of political issues. Family relations are maintained, but an informant said it was impossible to discuss almost anything today. The war touches every aspect of everyday life.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter we have discussed the vulnerabilities that have become the lived everyday in the Finnish–Russian border region of North Karelia since 2014, and which affect Russian speakers’ transnational familyhood. The region has become increasingly transnational in the last three decades, but since the outbreak of the war in eastern Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the pandemic, and now Russia’s invasion of Ukraine this transnationality has become not only precarious but very vulnerable. This vulnerability has a significant bearing on society in general but especially on individuals’ lives.

North Karelia has long been a desirable immigration destination from nearby Russian areas, but since 2014 this desirability has been evaporating, and in 2022 the region’s image has changed. The border’s proximity has shifted from an advantage to a factor that creates insecurity. The decline in Russian trade and tourism has reduced business and job opportunities for Russian speakers. The war in Ukraine affects both the local and immigrant residents of this Finnish border region, regardless of their attitudes towards the war. At the same time the arrival of new immigrants and growing migration
pressures from Russia benefit local educational institutions that previously established their contact and educational programmes with Russian-speaking immigrants. Immigration through education now seems the main channel to North Karelia for Russian speakers. However, this poses further challenges for the accepting communities. How can they help those who have completed their education find jobs and thus keep them in the region? How can they help families immigrate and integrate?

The integration and settlement of Russian speakers in the rural border region of North Karelia have been possible for three decades, and Russian speakers have become habitual everyday neighbours. Attitudes towards them have become smoother during these years. The new geopolitical order is changing population relations in border regions such as North Karelia, not only between Finnish speakers and Russian speakers but also among Russian speakers. We have described these effects in this chapter. From the perspective of good governance and good population relations immigration policy regulations for gaining a residence permit, family reunification, or entering Finland as an asylum seeker or refugee should be clear, transparent, and fair. In rural surroundings like North Karelia the prerequisites for entering Finland as TCNs are perceived as unfair and arbitrary among the various Russian-speaking communities. This needs to be fixed to develop good population relations in Finnish society.

NOTES

1. This was the case before 30 September 2022 when Finland implemented restrictions to the border crossings of Russian citizens to Finland.
2. According to the data collected in MATILDE most are Russian speakers.

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