

## CHAPTER 6

# Discursive Constructions of Whiteness, Non-White Cultural Others and Allies in Facebook Conversations of Estonians in Finland

Jaanika Kingumets

Tampere University

Markku Sippola

University of Helsinki

### Abstract

This chapter discusses how Estonian migrants in Finland craft their place in Finnish society by appropriating the idea that they as an ethnically and culturally marked group naturally belong to the privileged migrants in Finland, while many other migrants do not. We explore how Estonians in Finland engage in Facebook group discussions with other Estonian migrants and in this dialogical process construct their own whiteness in relation to majority Finns and their racialized others in Finland, imagined as culturally distant, harmful and unfitting in the European North. We show how the discussants, drawing situationally both from their Soviet past and transnational migrant life in Finland, place

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themselves in a “knower’s position” regarding racialized experiences both in Finnish and Estonian society, and through that aim at legitimizing their right to define and strictly delineate the boundaries of whiteness both in Finland and Estonia. In addition to that, we also observe the dynamics of whiteness with regard to Russian migrants in sorting out how ethnic/racial hierarchies are built in Estonians’ mind.

**Keywords:** Estonian migrants, whiteness, racialized othering, Soviet legacies, social media ethnography

## Introduction

Estonians, although often depicted as the best managing migrant group in Finland (e.g. Pitkänen, Saukkonen and Westinen 2019), still constantly need to prove their worth and negotiate their right to fully belong in their host country. Being transnationally active migrants who are closely connected to their homeland Estonia, too, they are sandwiched between various expectations on both sides of the Gulf of Finland facing double pressures to succeed. After the 2015–2019 European migrant crisis,<sup>1</sup> led by the increasing fear over the anticipated social changes in the future and unjust redistribution of resources, not only Finns but also all the migrant groups residing in Finland have needed to rethink their relationship to the growing and diversifying migrant population in the country.

In this chapter, we focus on the attribute of whiteness in social media discussions of Estonian migrants in Finland, approaching it in Ruth Frankenberg’s (1993, cited in Estable, Meyer and Pon 1997: 21) terms as “a dominant cultural space ... with the purpose to keep others on the margin.” We explore what are the various ways in which Estonian migrants construct their own whiteness in relation to the “white” majority Finns, non-white racialized others and “white” Russians in Finland. Leaning on the ethnographic data collected in two Facebook groups that gather Estonians affiliated to Finland, we argue that whiteness, being identified as a valuable resource linked to privilege and rights of many kinds, has acquired increasing significance for Estonians through their transnational experience. To test this argument, the analyzed data encompasses two migrant groups in Finland that are seemingly distant and mutually incomparable: Russians (Russian-speaking people whom Estonians regard as ethnic Russians and subjects of the former Soviet and today’s Russian state)<sup>2</sup> and non-white groups (African, Arab or Muslim background people primarily). While these reference groups are demographically by no means coherent and dichotomous, and may as groups in some cases even overlap, we treat such comparison as relevant since it rises as such powerfully in Estonian migrants’ online discussions.

The Facebook discussions we examined seem to be predominantly characterized by views reflecting *blue-collar identity*, which by Melissa K. Gibson and Michael J. Papa (2000) and Kristen Lucas (2011) are reflected in a sense of dignity based on the quality of work and strong work ethic. The presumption that most of the discussants represent blue-collar workers—visible especially among male discussants who much more often discussed work, while the topics of women frequently concerned situations related to family life, and everyday living in multicultural neighborhoods—is consistent with the fact that most Estonians living in Finland are actually in blue-collar positions (Pitkänen, Saukkonen and Westinen 2019: 23). However, as we elaborate in further sections, there are no firm ways to define our studied groups more specifically, whereby we stick with the label “Estonian migrants in Finland” with a consideration that the occurring whiteness discourses are strongly shaped by discussants’ engagement with two sociocultural contexts, Estonia and Finland.

Since Estonian migrants in Finland often live active transnational lives, being physically intensely connected to the neighboring home country and generally inclined to return migration, we emphasize whiteness as being transnationally constructed and historically informed. Whiteness here should be understood as negotiated simultaneously between two contexts, that of present-day Finland, which for many Estonians is becoming abnormally non-white, and that of post-Soviet nationalist Estonia, where the historical underpinnings and practices of whiteness are even more complex. We thus need to carefully consider Estonian migrants’ (post)-Soviet and transnational subjectivities and their specific practices in Estonian-Finnish transnational space to fully understand how they attach meanings to and craft their social position in Finnish host society.

Such emphasis helps to elaborate and enrich the Finnish (Keskinen 2019; Keskinen, Skaptadóttir and Toivanen 2019) and Nordic transnational perspectives of whiteness and racialized relations. We invite even more careful consideration of old and new migrant populations’ role—each one having their own distinct legacies of racialization—in shaping racial hierarchies in migrants’ host countries. We contribute to the existing understanding on how the discursive production of whiteness dynamically and situationally works in white-dominated welfare countries, allowing the white migrants to create both sameness with and distance between other white migrants (Guðjónsdóttir 2014). More broadly, we also add to existing but still scarce scholarship (Imre 2005; van Riemsdijk 2010; Samaluk 2014) on applications of whiteness in Central and North European contexts when it comes to (post)-Soviet subjectivities.

The chapter is structured as follows. We first explain the Estonian migrants’ special position in Finnish society as the “whitest” but not equal members of the society. Next, we engage with the literature that serves us in approaching whiteness and racialized othering in post-Soviet and Nordic contexts. Subsequently, we will give an overview of how the data were collected as social media ethnography and later analyzed. The next three sections each focus on a

different empirical aspect of the data. First, we examine how Estonian migrants on Facebook draft their boundaries of whiteness by drawing from their experiences in two societies, Finland and Estonia. Second, we discuss how Estonian migrants craft the group of non-white people in Finland, and how certain beliefs, attitudes and prejudices are discursively constructed and reproduced to emphasize their distance and incompatibility with “white” populations in Finland. Finally, we look at how Estonian migrants draw the boundaries of whiteness by discursively constructing sameness with the Russians in Finland, meanwhile still highlighting the difference with Russians in Estonia. Emerging from all these three angles, we show how whiteness is discovered and flexibly constructed by Estonian migrants as long as it helps to reach and maintain their privileged social positions in Finnish society.

### **Demographic Profile and Social Position of Estonian Migrants in Finland**

The EU expansion in 2004 brought along Estonian workers’ mass migration to Finland as the country offered better-paid jobs and a higher standard of living. Estonian migrants constitute the second largest migrant group in Finland after Russian-speakers, amounting to 51,000<sup>3</sup> permanent residents and complemented by up to 20,000 Estonians who work and reside in Finland on a more temporary basis and spend extensive periods of time in Estonia (Jauhiainen 2020: 234). Among the permanent ones, the share of working-age residents (between 15 and 64 years old) is relatively high, at 78 percent, although the proportion of children (14 percent of all residents) is also fairly high. It is remarkable that the share of retired residents is only 6 percent, which is much lower than that of the other major linguistic group, Russian-speakers (13 percent). The gender division between Estonian males and females among the permanent residents is around 50/50 (Statistics Finland 2021).

Estonians stand out as a relatively successful migrant group by many indicators. For example, they experienced least discrimination at work among the five researched nationalities residing in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Pitkänen, Saukkonen and Westinen 2019: 5). Moreover, Finns’ attitudes toward Estonians whom they perceive as culturally and linguistically close to them are generally more positive than toward most other migrant groups (cf. Jaakkola 2009). Despite this, Estonians have also reported experiences of discrimination (Mankki and Sippola 2015; Zacheus et al. 2017) and recent studies have shown that their integration in Finland has been far less successful than often imagined (Pitkänen, Saukkonen and Westinen 2019). Kristi Anniste and Tiit Tammaru (2014) state that 31 percent of Estonian migrants work in positions below their education level and have experienced downward mobility after moving to Finland. Compared to other major linguistic groups in the Helsinki metropolitan area, Russian- and English-speakers, Estonians end up with managerial and

senior officer positions far less often (Pitkänen, Saukkonen and Westinen 2019: 23). There are thus clear indications that their situation as a migrant population in Finland is considerably more complex and less rosy than generally thought.

The relationship between Estonians and Finns during the three decades after the Soviet collapse and the beginning of free movement between Estonia and Finland, explored mainly through media studies, has been far from harmonious. In the 1990s, Estonians were pictured by Finnish media as victims, objects of compassion and those who needed Finns' help (Raittila 2004: 296), thus supporting the Finns' self-image as Estonians' elder brothers connected to the process of othering. Later, especially after Estonia's membership of the European Union, which increased the standard of living in Estonia and brought Estonians closer to the Western standards, Finns' imaginaries of Estonians have developed to more diverse and ambiguous, but generally to more positive ones (Kaasik-Krogerus 2020). However, the hierarchies—either between Estonia and Finland as countries or the Estonian migrant population versus Finland's white natives—have not disappeared yet.

We propose to explore in further detail the Estonians' ideas and experiences of whiteness while situated primarily as transnational labor migrants (Alho and Sippola 2019; Kalev and Jakobson 2013; Telve 2016) in a dominantly white Nordic welfare society. Migrants from Estonia, although carrying a post-Soviet subjectivity similarly to migrants from Russia, are in a crucially different legal and moral situation due to being recognized in Finland as subjects of the European Union, while many migrants from Russia are not. Yet, there are many competing narratives surrounding Estonian migrants and commuters in both Finnish and Estonian society, both negatively and positively loaded, shaping their experiences of transnational (work) life. In Finland, they are rarely counted as naturally belonging in Finnish society, but are regarded as economic migrants who best contribute and least harm Finnish society. In Estonia, their move to Finland is widely viewed as a sign of weakness and betrayal, looking for an easy way out from economic and social deadlock in post-Soviet Estonia (Annist 2017), and hollowing out the Estonian nation-state. On the other hand, they are portrayed as the resourceful ones having found a way to earn good money from Finland with which to support their families back home and accumulate capital by using the "gullible" Finnish welfare system. Known are also the narratives of how Estonians in Finland skilfully "exploit" the Finnish generous welfare system and are celebrated as heroes for that back at home and by other migrants.

There are also accounts that address extensive economic, social and symbolic deprivation, experienced particularly in the post-Soviet Estonian peripheral countryside and small towns, which has motivated Estonians to seek opportunities in Finland (Annist 2016; 2017). As Aet Annist (2016) notes, social and symbolic deprivation leads to the sense of losing one's value as a member of a society, and even though migration may bring opportunities to economic accumulation, rehabilitating or reinventing one's social and symbolic value through

migration in Estonia or in Finland—if the future is associated more with the latter one—it can give both positive and negative outcomes. In our analysis, we identify the experiences of devalorization of the self in post-Soviet Estonia and the need for seeking strategies to restore one's worthiness as an important factor among Estonian migrants and commuters. We regard the discussion groups on Facebook as one of the central channels through which Estonian migrants attempt to work out strategies to re-establish their worthiness. We view their particular ways of entering into discourses of whiteness and racism—while having little consciousness of being part of shaping respective discourses—as one of their strategies of restoring their value and sense of worth in societies they are part of.

### **Understanding Whiteness and Racialized Othering in the Finnish-Estonian Transnational Space and Beyond**

Scholars have indicated that the hegemonic black–white divisions remain too narrow to understand how racist views proliferate and contingent hierarchies plant themselves in societies. Therefore, the focus in racial studies has shifted more to scrutinizing white versus non-white paradigms to reveal “a more fluid picture of situational micro-level power relations” that emerges in various social contexts (Garner 2006: 257). Whiteness, “most effectively conceptualized as both a resource and a contingent hierarchy” (*ibid.*) linked to a set of norms or values, has thus become an increasingly relevant framework to understand how groups of people in societies actively position themselves in relation to others, non-white and not-as-white, and gain important advantage. Richard Dyer (1997, cited in Garner 2006: 259) has problematized the fact that whites are blind to whiteness in everyday situations in dominantly white societies, because they do not experience and thus realize difficulties non-white people encounter in those settings, calling whiteness “an invisible perspective, a dominant and normative space against which difference is measured.” Recently, Nordic scholars (Guðjónsdóttir 2014; Leinonen and Toivanen 2014) for their part have broadened that perspective by adding that white migrants, when contrasted to non-white migrants by the white majority populations, may become aware of their white privilege and selectively utilize it in moving toward higher positions in racial hierarchies and securing their advantage. This is the theoretical angle we aim to tackle in our analysis.

Whiteness remains an understudied field in the Finnish context despite important contributions made in recent years (Keskinen 2014; 2016; 2019; Krivonos 2017; 2019; Rastas 2005; 2019;). This is partly because Finland, which until very recently defined itself as a highly homogeneous country, presented for a long time a position that due to its historical homogeneity it did not have issues of racialization based on perceptions of whiteness. The scholarship of whiteness almost exclusively shows how the image and persistence of the

Finnish nation-state is integrally tied up with ideas of whiteness circulating in the society, some of which are universally shared in the Nordics, while others are related to Finnish historical legacies (Keskinen 2011; 2016). The Indigenous Sámi and Roma people's racialized positions, for instance, are argued to be inextricably related to strategies to protect the Finnish nation-state (Helakorpi 2019; Siivikko 2019), based on shared ethnicity and language.

In the light of the radicalization of whiteness discourses in 21st-century Europe (Essed et al. 2019; Poole and Siobhan 2011), the year 2008 marks a discursive change in Finland. It was the start of (online) media and political construction of foreign people, particularly those of Arab and Muslim backgrounds, as a threat to Finnish nationalism due to their perceived incomplicity with local Finnish cultural norms, especially regarding female bodies and sexuality. Suvi Keskinen (2011; 2014) has demonstrated how over a very short period of time, the radical racialized, and in her case, also strongly gendered, discourses in media and especially in online media proliferated and soon became normalized in Finland and were eagerly utilized by far-right politicians to promote their anti-immigration arguments targeted to subverting multiculturalism, and subsequently saving the Finnish welfare state. In that way, both cultural and economic arguments have become neatly tied up in the whiteness discourses in Finland, making it rather difficult to talk about one without discussing another. Over the last dozen years, non-whiteness in Finland is increasingly associated with all-European ideas of "saving" Europe from Muslim "invasion," which is expected to bring violent cultural clashes and destruction of "Western" civilization. The 21st-century evolution of radical racialized othering in Finland, inseparable from that of Europe at large, has not happened in isolation from Estonians in the country and beyond; rather, ideas have quickly traveled and been exchanged.

As in Finland, whiteness in Estonia is implicitly linked to the foundations and coping strategies of the nation-state. On the one hand, scholars emphasize the exceptionalism of the titular nation appropriating a unique culture and language, while on the other, they stress firm belonging in the white European cultural sphere (Berg 2002; Peiker 2016). Long-lasting Russian influence and particularly the 50-year-long Soviet period has caused Estonia to not always be perceived as part of the European cultural space (Feldman 2000; see also Keskinen 2016 for Finland's contested position). From 1991 onward, the independent Estonian state's aspiration was to firmly establish and consolidate its place among the modern "civilized" European states again. In the "return to Europe" discourse (Berg 2002; Pääbo 2014), Estonia has focused on returning its population to Europe. However, this has been done selectively, including native Estonians and excluding Russian-speakers who settled in Estonia as Soviet migrants and their descendants.

In Estonia, whiteness as a subtle hierarchical system of privilege has developed in line with the Soviet ideological stance of condemning othering based on "race," while promoting state-steered ethnic mixing policies. This gave

prevalence to ethnic Russians while particularly suppressing some other ethnic groups, including Estonians, even though the latter were locals in Estonian territory and Russians were largely migrants. Russians were generally not of a different “race” for Estonians. In Estonia, racialized othering thus historically draws from categories of ethnicity and nationality, “race” with its emphasis on physiological features being more of a covert category until quite recently. In present-day Estonia, the dynamics of privileged and suppressed groups is different. The privilege structure has been played around in favor of ethnic Estonians, but the old patterns still linger in the background and continue to be perceived as traumatic experiences across generations. Regardless of the history that poses many challenges to harmonious ethnic or racial coexistence, whiteness as a lived and narrated experience has only now slowly started entering public and academic discourses in Estonia (see e.g. Aavik 2015; Gidwani and Triisberg 2020; Pushaw 2020), although it is still not in mainstream media outlets. There are several reasons for why Estonia is late in entering into global discussions around racism and white privilege: the workings of the Soviet ideology that germinated the belief that racism did not exist in Soviet society; the post-Soviet nationalistic atmosphere in Estonia that placed the focus of ethnic tensions in the country on language and citizenship politics solely, leaving no space for scrutinizing issues of whiteness or racialized othering within the same empirical space (cf. Balibar and Wallerstein 1991); and the long history of Estonians of perceiving themselves as victims of other, superior powers—the communists, the fascists, occupants and the like (Laineste 2017). To put it briefly, there is a lack of understanding among Estonians as a nation of what racialized othering means and how it works within complex webs of power as a structural and multifaceted system of privilege and disadvantage. Therefore, when arriving in Finnish society, Estonians are very seldom able to recognize incidents of injustice directed toward them on behalf of Finnish employers or neighbors as racism.

Instead, to bolster their easier arrival and existence in Finnish society, Estonians have widely accepted society’s prevailing deservingness discourse that works in their favor when claiming their rights for “social citizenship” in their host country (Alho and Sippola 2019). In Estonians’ view, this is a justified expectation considering their serious contribution to the Finnish welfare state by means of diligent tax-paying and reasonable use of welfare state benefits (*ibid.*). While some of the earlier findings indicate that Estonian migrants’ perceptions of non-deserving migrants may have racialized underpinnings (*ibid.*: 353–54), their own whiteness has not, so far, been argued to be a constitutive factor for their own privileged position in Finnish society. Comparatively, Daria Krivonos (2017; 2019) has recently contributed to the yet only emerging research on whiteness in Nordics combined with the post-socialist context from young Russian-speaking migrants’ perspective. While Russian-speakers in Russia and some other post-Soviet societies hold an image of their white

supremacy (cf. Sahadeo 2019), Krivonos (2019) demonstrates how Russian-speaking youth, disillusioned by their “Western” imaginaries and in hope of being included in the Finnish mainstream society as similarly “white,” experience degradation in their whiteness privilege by becoming deskilled, unemployed and devalued in Finland after their migration. Her contribution on how white post-Soviet migrants’ racialized identities play out “within the neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state” (ibid.: 103) “through re-inscribing themselves into whiteness by racializing Others” (ibid.: 114) calls for more scrutinization on post-Soviet applications of whiteness in dominantly white Nordic societies.

### Social Media Ethnography

The data we use was produced as part of a research project on constructing ethnic hierarchies among the largest migrant populations in Finland, Estonian- and Russian-speakers.<sup>4</sup> Our research team looked at how the ethnic or racial hierarchies were discursively produced in Facebook groups created by and intended for the aforementioned migrant groups in Finland, during a span of four years between 2015 and 2018. In this chapter, we only focus on the content produced in Estonian-speaking Facebook groups. The choice of conducting online ethnography rather than “real-life” ethnography or thematic interviews in our research design was guided by two principal considerations. First, ethnic and racial hierarchies are subtle processes that occur and are possible to disentangle in specific contexts, and this is unlikely to happen in interview situations. And, second, the relatively short period (from mid- to the end of 2018) we were able to dedicate on data gathering in our project did not allow for ethnographic research in “real-life” situations, which typically require more time. Among the many existing Facebook groups intended for Estonian-speaking migrants in Finland, we scrutinized two large, closed groups where the conversation language was thoroughly Estonian.<sup>5</sup> For the sake of anonymity of our data, we reveal neither the names nor the more detailed Facebook group descriptions.

While we carefully followed all the anonymization procedures typical to working with qualitative data, we needed to take extra cautions. For avoiding any risk that the users and data linked to them can be potentially revealed when Facebook would change their privacy measures, we decided not to quote any data produced in Facebook groups. Instead, we conducted non-participative social media ethnography where conversations were only followed, and notes made, translated from Estonian to English as an extra step of anonymization, to summarize the content of the conversations in aspects that were of our interest. All descriptions and points made in the empirical section of this chapter are thus retellings and analysis based on the ethnographic notes we wrote, not quotes, and should be read as such. All in all, our study on Facebook groups that needed to comply with GDPR rules initially posed several methodological

and ethical challenges, which we successfully overcame. The study was conducted with the approval of the ethical committee of Tampere University.

By undertaking non-participative ethnography we mean that we followed the conversations and reactions silently, without any attempt to participate in conversations by liking, commenting or producing topics that other group members could react on. Following retrospectively an extensive number of conversations that were produced often daily on Facebook, we learnt with time to easily distinguish topics that potentially raised ethnic or racial issues and produced different viewpoints. We were not interested in the quantitative aspects of the conversations, but rather in the variety of viewpoints and the context in which certain perspectives emerged, following the principles of thematic analysis at first. Most broadly, we explored how Estonians in Facebook groups talked about other Estonian migrants in Finland, about native Finns, and about other migrant groups. Following David A. Snow and Leon Anderson's (1987) embracing and distancing framework, we developed an analytical lens that focused on how Estonian discussants discursively constructed cultural proximity and distance with non-white groups, Russian migrants and Finns. As we have emphasized earlier, our analysis may include the perspectives of Estonian migrants, commuters and sometimes even family members, and while we recognize the inability to distinguish perspectives belonging to any of those groups separately in this study, more important is the shared factor—the experience that emerges from being exposed to two societies, Estonia and Finland, and one's transnational subjectivity in that space.<sup>6</sup>

Our online research provides rich data and deep insights regarding what kind of imaginaries circulate among Estonian migrants in Finland, people who are “bound by a shared view of reality,” even if that reality is negotiated online only (Ruelle and Peverelli 2017: 15). Scholars who have earlier studied discursive constructions online have noted this often to be connected to processes of collective identity making (Coretti and Pica 2015), which is hardly characterized by the “democratic exchange” of ideas among the group members (Ruelle and Peverelli 2017: 16). Instead, members encounter various mechanisms that limit their possibilities to equally contribute to the identities emerging from discussions, starting from group administrators' rights to moderate conversations to some members' more vocal presence that overshadow alternative perspectives.

Relying on social media data also presented various limitations: we were unable to make any conclusions regarding the generations, education background or any other demographics, because we had no reliable access to this data and the research ethics would not have allowed us to analyze the data on the level of individuals. Deciding from the posted content, tone and the style of writing of the most vocal and active discussants, we, as noted earlier, saw traits that are likely characteristic to blue-collar Estonians, many of whom are likely to have experienced various kinds of disappointments, deprivation and devalorization prior to their move to Finland (cf. Annist 2016; 2017). Yet, we strongly suggest

that the interpretation of our research results must be taken as an indication of what processes were ongoing in the social world in late 2010s and by no means should those be regarded as fully descriptive of the Estonian population in Finland at the time. Another limitation concerns conducting ethnography in a retrospective way. Apart from mid- to the end of 2018, our explorations did not emerge concurrently with the actual social context, whereby we could not analyze our data in a more integral way with the social and political happenings.

The following analysis first present how transnational Estonian migrants discursively construct whiteness in their inhabited Estonian-Finnish transnational space. We then continue discussing how non-white migrant groups in Finland are systematically discursively racialized by utilizing economic and evolutionary right-wing arguments. We finally convey how Russian-speakers to whom Estonians hold different attitudes in their home country are discerned from other migrants and depicted as white and almost as worthy as Estonians through arguments of cultural closeness.

### **Discursive Construction of Whiteness in Estonian-Finnish Transnational Space**

We understand whiteness through Estonian migrants as the group's attributed social positioning in Finnish society, which secured them important privileges, but which they did not directly formulate as "whiteness." Our ethnographic data illustrates that Estonians had a sense of entitlement as white people ethnically close to Finns and they took this privilege for granted. Yet, they did not generally see themselves as equal to Finns. They rather accepted that, as not native to Finland, they could be entitled to less than Finns, but only concerning the Finns who were genotypically white, that is, the "true" Finns in Estonians' terms. Finns' perceived superiority was manifested in the ways in which Estonians in their online conversations commonly agreed that while in Finland, they needed to live in accordance with this country's and majority population's normative framework, generally closely observing and adhering to both institutional rules and regulations, as well as everyday normativity. They, for example, followed the routines at workplaces, including the time and length of coffee-breaks and the time and ways of finishing the work day, even if they did not understand some of the routines inherent to Finnish work culture.

When crafting their position in imaginary ethnic and/or racial hierarchies in Finland, Facebook discussants typically referred to racially and ethnically underpinned bodily features, as well as to both cultural and economic arguments inextricably. While such conversations did not occur often, when Finns' racial/ethnic bodily features were discussed, they were portrayed as albinos with extremely light skin complexity, thin blond hair, round faces and round body shapes—features that were regarded as *too* white by Estonians, who in

contrast saw themselves as having more character thanks to their history of blood-mixing under various rulers. Curiously, this paradoxical position in view of Estonians' strongly felt fear of racial mixing with "black" people did not receive particular attention in online discussions. Nevertheless, despite the bodily distinctions between Estonians and Finns, in cultural terms, Finns and Estonians were depicted as sharing the same cultural space. Both Finland and Estonia were culturally positioned in Europe and regarded as members of European nation-states. Consequently, both Estonians and Finns were ascribed to the notion of European whiteness, which meant a shared legal, moral and developmental framework. Even when the economic arguments were discussed, we noticed that those leaned in this context not so much on deservingness discourse (Alho and Sippola 2019; Krivonos 2019; van Oorschot 2006) *per se*, but on its cultural undercurrents.

While relating to the deservingness discourse, Estonians elevated their own migrant group's position based on their significant tax contribution and small burden on Finnish welfare society as known facts, but underneath there was nearly always the understanding that these behaviors are a result of the Western moral framework and work ethos which belonged exclusively to white people. Interestingly, there was much online talk about Estonian migrants who behaved contrary to this moral framework as they avoided taxes, subscribed to welfare benefits and services undeservingly and disregarded laws and regulations (Sippola, Kingumets and Tuhkanen 2021). These practices were usually condemned; however, this seemed to have little effect on their European whiteness. When going against the norms of Finnish society, Estonian migrants were simply encouraged to return home to Estonia by their compatriots, pointing out that while they did not deserve a place in Finnish society, they still remained assigned to a place they had come from. Despite being unable to comply with the rules of the Western societies, they could not have been excluded from those societies either.

The online discussants frequently presented themselves as experts of multicultural context in two societies, Estonia and Finland. As subjects of the post-Soviet Estonia who had experienced life in ethnically mixed Estonian society, where the Soviet time ethnic hierarchies in their view favored the Russian-speakers, they saw themselves as more experienced than Finns when it came to the possibility of losing one's privilege to migrant populations. Drawing from this argument, the discussants were eager to parallel the current historical moment in Finland with that of their own Soviet past, emphasizing the danger that nation-states as defined by the titular nations, either Finns or Estonians, may disappear when non-white migrants are accepted *en masse* and take over their societies. In this, the discussants sympathized with the critical anti-immigrant views toward multiculturalism. They maintained that the Finns' inclination to multicultural tolerance and letting non-white people easily enter their country was a sign of naivety, which would eventually result in the cultural

clash between Finnish and non-white migrant populations. In such discursive construction, the holders of these views did not see themselves as migrants to Finland.

Other Estonians, however, clearly stated that as migrants themselves, it was not their business to dictate how Finland should treat other migrants, but Finland has the sole right to decide over their *own* country, whereas they as *migrants* should just accept the situation. The latter perspective outlines succinctly how in online discourses Estonians, as migrants, see their role in shaping the ethnic or racial hierarchies in Finland; some were clearly more vocal and critical and expressed readiness to “teach” the Finns about the possible danger lurking round the corner, and others were inclined to take much more passive positions.

As much as Estonians on Facebook were concerned with Finland becoming increasingly populated by non-white people, they were even more uneasy about this likely happening to Estonia as well. As transnationally active migrants who often kept one foot in two societies and whose return to Estonia was likely, it was understandable that they wanted to influence the future of the Estonian state, an important part of that being the preservation of Estonia’s dominantly white future. The discussants often claimed having experienced the worsening societal situation with a population becoming gradually non-white in Finland, meanwhile taking a position as people who know how white societies negatively transform as a result of the “influx” of non-white persons. They talked from this “expert” position to warn Estonians in Estonia about the change that is inevitable should they tolerate the immigration of non-white migrants (see also Ojala, Kaasik-Krogerus and Pantti 2019: 168).

### Discursive Constructions of Non-White Immigrant Groups

One of the observations in Facebook conversations was that Estonians generally regarded becoming exposed to a multicultural society that included large numbers of non-white people only after moving to Finland. This change brought “race” into their consciousness and placed it at the centre of discourses and practices of racialized othering. Moreover, racializing non-white groups through a set of discourses that were in line with those already proliferating among the white European people and identified as normative European whiteness (Essed et al. 2019), can be seen as the way to craft more space and reserve value for themselves among other migrant groups in Finland. This is not to claim that prior to Estonians’ mass migration to Finland from 2004 onward racialized othering focusing on exclusive characteristics of “race” did not exist in post-Soviet Estonia, but real-life contacts with non-white persons enabled them to present their disturbing exceptionalism as a real experience, and thus as more credible.

Our online observations support the general understanding that the majority of Estonian migrants were located in the Greater Helsinki area, which was considerably more non-white than most places in Finland. As migrants who generally rented housing from state-owned and private housing companies rather than owned properties, Estonians tended to live more in neighborhoods where migrants were plentiful and so this resulted in public encounters with non-white residents. Estonians' contacts with non-white people took place overwhelmingly in public settings: in yards and streets in their neighborhoods, shops, public transportation, their children's schools and libraries, and already much less often in workplaces. Frequent mentions were made also about living together in the same multi-storey buildings and encounters in stairwells. In identifying multicultural non-white settings, Estonians typically focused on people's visual markers related to skin and hair color, as well as special clothing such as headscarves and long robes, which were related to distinct bodily features, but also manners, style, habits and taste distinct from their own. Also, audible markers—the volume of the voice and the sound of foreign languages unintelligible for Estonians—were frequently drawn to attention and regarded as unpleasant or unfitting in their surroundings. Similarly, the smell of food spreading in stairwells when the non-white neighbors were cooking was told to be unpleasant. These encounters made Estonian migrants on social media to continuously reflect upon the cultural distance they felt with non-white migrants as groups, contrasting it with the felt proximity with the white people in Finland, most often other Estonians, Russians and Finns. And yet, we observed several long discussions where Estonians struggled with heavy-smoking Finnish neighbors in rented public housing, their cigarette odors leaking into their apartments, and such experiences never marked Finns negatively as a group.

There was a tendency in the online discussions that the discussants classified all people, whose skin complexity they perceived as different from their own, either as “black-skinned” (literally: Black), or drew arbitrary divisions between “black-skinned,” “dark-skinned” (literally: dark, Brown; referring to persons of Arab appearance mainly, but people of Latin or Central American origin could also have easily been counted as “dark-skinned”) and Muslim. For all these categories, there were a wide variety of pejorative names in use, pointing to cultural and physiological features being associated with certain groups of the non-white migrants. Estonians' ability to distinguish groups of non-white migrants by their ethnic, linguistic or religious specificities alike (this was typical when discussing people who were perceived geographically and culturally close) appeared very weak.<sup>7</sup> Often, non-white people were called pejoratively with a racial slur,<sup>8</sup> which indicated that they were broadly conceptualized as African origin regardless of whether or not this was true. Importantly, although multicultural Finland described as such was a place long before Estonian migrants arrived, Estonians saw African or Middle East origin people as non-fitting to Finland and expressed their discomfort with the presence of non-white people, despite them often already being second-generation migrants in Finland.

Non-white people were repeatedly depicted in online conversations as culturally extremely distant and primitive, this being expressed blatantly rather than covertly. Some discussants seemed to believe that there existed evolutionary, behavioral and religious reasons all arbitrarily tied together as to why those people were terminally distant to Western people. Non-white children, while residing in Finland, were pictured as untamed, fearless and misbehaving. Meanwhile, the Facebook discussants seemed to generally recognize that it was a question of a different kind of education as to why these children's behavior seemed to differ so much from that of the Finnish or Estonian children. In response to these arguments, some discussants argued that these children, raised under the influence of their parents, will not be able to learn Finnish educational norms and will eventually reproduce their own culture and norms, dangerous to Finland. Only very seldom were we able to track opinions that the experience of multicultural Finland was considered positive; much more often was such change of environment described in terms of anxiety, fear, discomfort and reluctance.

The notes from the data described above, highlighting often anecdotal imaginations of non-white people inhabiting the Nordic spaces, are nothing new to be heard in Finland. They very much reflect the ideas circulating in Finnish online media platforms and those in other European countries. The Facebook discussions of 2015 to 2018 on which we focused had already largely adopted the conceptual shift of discussing non-white people in Finland primarily as Arabs or Muslims in line with what had happened in Finnish forums after 2008 (cf. Keskinen 2011). Yet, we were also able to observe how the Arabs and Muslims started to be overwhelmingly associated with the notion of "refugee" by the Estonian Facebook discussants after the summer of 2015, which marked the beginning of the "refugee crisis" in public consciousness in Finland. Media images of non-white and non-European-looking young men, women and children dominated Estonians' imaginations of how the refugees look and were used as such. Young Arab men moving around in groups, dark-skinned foreign students and women wearing burkas accompanied by several children were all immediately categorized as refugees. Furthermore, non-white people's non-conforming and disturbing behavior was increasingly associated with being a refugee. On the other hand, some Estonians in the researched Facebook groups pointed out that there was clearly no way to unmistakably recognize refugees in brief everyday public encounters and in doing so one runs a serious risk of calling a person with a darker skin complexion born and raised in Finland a refugee. However, in heated social media discussions, these arguments did not seem to have much weight.

We as observants got an impression that the discussants who at first tried to object to highly racist standpoints used much more controlled and polite language, but as their language was not responded to in a like manner, but typically, altogether offensively, they quickly withdrew from the discussions. In that way, the dynamics of Facebook discussions clearly indicated that the

more radical and racist viewpoints tended to dominate and attract more attention and prolonged participation, because the negative emotions carried on longer. Although it was striking how few of the members of our studied groups reported having personal relations with non-white people, we assume—taken the general atmosphere of mistrust and hostility toward non-white persons in online discussions—that some group members actually preferred to conceal or silence their relationships with non-white friends and neighbors in order not to become objects of offensive talk by others. The few who expressed their support, and mentioned existing friendships or intimate relations with non-white people, generally received personal insults and devalorization, and their support to racialized people was associated with sexual relations, naivety or pathologies, thus intersecting race with gender.

### Constructing Cultural Closeness with Russian Migrants

Our third perspective in this chapter is to make sense of how the Finnish context works for Estonian migrants in defining the boundaries of whiteness with Russians from Russia and beyond, especially against the backdrop of a proposition that despite the lack of such theoretical framing, Russians may be regarded as Estonians' racialized others in post-Soviet Estonia. Considering Estonians' rather recent renegotiation of privilege with Russians and tense relations between the two groups in Estonia, we expected that Estonian migrants' attitudes toward Russians in Finland were somewhat negatively influenced by those in their home country. Our ethnographic data revealed that in the Facebook conversations, certain influence of that context was present, yet the Estonian migrants' attitudes toward Russians were far from straightforwardly negative and constituted rather a complex web of different positionalities, some of which we will explain here.

The visual and audible markers related to Russians in Finland, especially when contrasted with those of non-white people, were typically clearly distinguishable as often mentioned in Estonians' online talks. As neighbors and co-residents in Finland, Russians were typically pictured as pleasant and well-behaving people in comparison to other migrant groups, behaving close to Estonians' own cultural norms. It could even be said that while in Estonia Russians were regarded as "others," in the Finnish context they became "us"—white European cultured people (cf. Krivonos 2017 on Russians in Finland). Thus, despite the local frictions in Estonia, and condemnation of Soviet rule that continues to be associated with the will of Russians, in Estonian Facebook discussants' view, their shared experience of once cohabiting the Soviet space nevertheless gives ground to a common normative and mental framework facilitating the self-understanding and comfort between Estonians and Russians in Finland.

Especially in the narrations of Estonian women who were born and raised in a Soviet atmosphere, many of the norms and traditions regarding upbringing

and educating children, dressing and beauty standards, ideas of femininity and gender roles, cooking skills, codes of politeness and hospitality, a sense of commitment and emotional engagement were reported to have very similar features for Estonians and Russians. We found that these norms were rather idealized, because as much as it was possible to conclude from online conversations, the social circuits of many discussants did not actually include Russians similarly to non-white people. However, Russians' cultural norms were considered in some ways distinct from those typical to Finland, other Nordic or even Western European countries, and acting as bridges especially between Estonian and Russian women, forming a space of commonality and togetherness. Notably, if in the Estonian nation-state setting, Estonians constructed Russians as negative "others" who remained foreign and distinct because of the grave cultural divide described mainly in terms of linguistic and religious mismatch (Petersoo 2007), then in Finland those differences seemed to lose significance.

Sometimes Estonian online discussants even presented Russians positively as the people Estonians in Finland should learn from when it comes to their ability to keep their own cultural traditions, norms and language vibrant as opposed to many Estonians, who easily gave up on their own in an attempt to become *too* Finnish. This finding was curious, as it points to the very subtle processes in ethnic or racial hierarchy construction in which Estonians reproached non-white migrants for being culturally too distant from the Finnish cultural centre, but at the same time celebrated their own and other white migrants' ethnic and cultural traits and even wished those to remain clearly recognizable in a host society. Constructed commonalities between white migrant groups such as Estonians and Russians crafted meaningful spaces for downgrading some non-white migrant groups, but at the same time the very same mechanisms enabled uplifting groups of white migrants in comparison to the white majority population. We discerned that the visually observable and performative acts such as dressing up for school celebrations or presenting flowers to teachers on the first day of the school year not only discursively brought Estonians and Russians together, helping them to see each other as the "civilized" migrants in Finland, but also stressed their shared difference from Finns who appeared in this respect as uncultured or uncivilized and in some ways perhaps even less white accordingly.

One of our general observations was that Estonian migrants on Facebook were usually not very familiar with the social context of Russians in Finland—just the same way as they remained ignorant about the non-white migrants' backgrounds and trajectories of mobility. Russians were usually considered in ethnic terms and associated with Russia, and in some specific cases with Estonia. Only rarely did Estonians recognize the multiplicity of Russians' backgrounds and mobile paths to Finland. For example, the very fact that many Russians were considered people of third countries by the Finnish state, whereby their conditions of staying and working in Finland were considerably different from Estonians as residents of the European Union, seemed to be something Estonians were generally not mindful about.

However, the Facebook conversations occasionally highlighted that, according to the discussants, the Russians who had moved to Finland from Estonia were different from the rest of the Russians residing in Finland. In practice, this meant for them that Russians from Estonia could sometimes stand out as a negatively perceived group of Russians among other Russian migrants in Finland. For example, Estonians might have stressed that Russians, “but of course those ones from real Russia, not Estonian Russians,” are particularly warm-hearted and helpful workmates in Finland, and they mentioned having had only good experiences with “Russians from Russia.” In our view, making such distinctions with regard to Estonian Russians predominantly appointed to past and present racialized experiences, particularly Soviet-era experiences with Russification and the suppressed position of the Estonian language during the Soviet period. This was followed by the contemporary understanding that Russians were resistant to learning the state language in their serious attempt to perform the continuous superiority of Russian language in post-Soviet Estonia.

While this could be seen as something that potentially feeds negotiations of whiteness in contemporary Estonia—if this would be the lens to use in analyzing ethnic relations in Estonia today—this dynamic plays out differently in Finnish society, where both Estonians and Russians are speaking their native languages as foreign in Finland, which evens out the racialized friction from a linguistic perspective. In effect, Estonian migrants admitted that their attitudes to Estonian Russians had become generally more positive after their own migration to Finland. Living in a foreign-language environment, facing challenges in sorting out everyday matters and struggling with officials had made Estonians more understanding of other people in a similar situation. Yet, sympathizing with non-white people on the same grounds was not the case. All in all, it can be concluded that Estonian migrants on Facebook perceived Russians as considerably less visible, less topical, deserving less negative attention and causing little confrontation in comparison to non-white migrants in Finland.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we presented how in the Facebook group discussions Estonian migrants in Finland discursively drew boundaries between “native” Finns and their own ethnic migrant group, between Russians recognized as another ethnic-linguistic migrant group and the non-white migrants who were depicted as a group of a different “race.” We identified that in such discursive constructions Estonians used the attributes of ethnicity, language, culture and ‘deservingness’ (Krivonos 2019: 104), which all, sometimes individually, and sometimes in combined forms, contributed to the production of whiteness and racialized othering. There were different normative discourses at play, depending on

whether the Estonian discussants targeted being embraced by the white Finnish population, sought for enlarging the group of white migrants as allies of a kind in Finland, or aimed at creating more distance from the non-white groups.

In our analysis, we emphasized the specific historical legacies of Estonians related to the underlying logics and dynamics of racialization in the Soviet and post-Soviet Estonian state, and their migrant as well as transnational subjectivities, which in this complex combination positioned them differently compared to the majority Finns in Finnish society, therefore revealing how the whiteness privilege among Estonian migrants should be understood as featuring ideas, practices and ongoing negotiations of a specific kind. While Estonians and Finns equally use the underlying idea of normative European whiteness (Essed et al. 2019) in claiming their own and neglecting non-whites' place in the European North, Estonians also seemed to use other strategies to secure their place as the privileged migrant group within the structure of Finnish migrant populations. When Russians have clearly perceived losing their white privilege after migration to Finland (Krivonos 2019), our studied online discursive constructions of whiteness indicated that this was not an issue for Estonians. Rather, Estonians became more aware of their own whiteness after migration to Finland and collectively cultivated the discourse that highlighted their whiteness as a useful cultural resource in negotiating their better place in Finnish society. This can be explained by their group's crucially different unemployment figures in comparison to Russians, which allowed for self-perception of constituting a "deserving" migrant group in Finnish society which contributes to rather than consumes resources automatically entitled to those belonging to the white national core. In formulating those positions, it was clearly visible how Estonians utilized the popular discourses similarly circulating among the Finns themselves.

One of the interesting findings was Estonians' tendency to depict Russians in Finland as their closest migrant group, and a kind of cultural ally among all migrant groups in Finland. Russians often appeared as a reference group in relation to whom Estonians measured the composition of their own whiteness as opposed to non-white migrants, as well as the white Finns. Curiously, when Estonians seemed to be wanting to craft for themselves a place in a Finnish society that would bring them legally and normatively closer to the white Finnish majority, they situationally also collectively worked toward discourses that separated them from Finns and the Finnish whiteness, both physiologically and culturally. This seemed to point to the subtle strategies of gaining power and self-worth in situations where the institutional settings of interaction allowed for more space to negotiate one's own culture without the danger of compromising one's whiteness. However, such ambiguous processes deserve further research for drawing firmer conclusions.

The racialized talks that drafted difference from non-white migrant groups were grounded in similar arguments known to be reproduced also

among white Finns, the difference being, however, that the rhetoric that was dominating the large Facebook groups targeted to the average Estonian audience in Finland was much ruder, to the extent that it more resembled the discussions in intendedly radically right-wing Finnish forums. This can be partly explained by the more blatant forms of racist talk that has been tolerated in the public sphere in Estonia compared to many Western countries, including Finland. Deriving from the abundant “good worker” discourse typical of blue-collar workers, which we witnessed in the groups, we may assume that the radical anti-immigrant sentiments directed toward non-white migrants belonged to blue-collar and service workers who see globalization as economically and socially threatening (Haubert and Fussell 2006). Furthermore, the active vocal presence of members and fierce supporters of the Finnish branch of Estonian right-wing populist party EKRE known for their anti-immigrant racist stance was clearly visible in the groups, especially from mid-2018 onward, when the Estonian parliamentary elections approached. There were thus politically influenced exchanges of transnational and global reach that affected the discursive constructions of whiteness and racialized othering beyond the Finnish social context.

In conclusion, our analysis clearly indicated how Estonian migrants easily imported and found use of the prevailing normative frameworks of whiteness in Nordic and European societies, even if their own experiences of whiteness and racialized othering in societies in which they operated were different. We anticipate that if Estonians in Finland manage to maintain their privileged position as worker-migrants protected by deservingness discourse and full entitlements to the welfare state when needed, the status quo of their whiteness is likely to remain similar to what we observed. However, should Estonians experience growing social and economic deprivation in Finland, the racialized frictions are likely to escalate.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> During the crisis, high numbers of people arrived in the European Union overseas from across the Mediterranean Sea or overland through Southeast Europe, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, where armed conflicts had been going on for years and resulted in mass migrations.
- <sup>2</sup> Our ethnographic data indicates that the ways in which Estonians categorize people as “Russian,” pointing to cultural and linguistic specificities mainly, is often highly arbitrary and leads the category to fluctuate. In daily-life situations from which Estonians discursively draw their categorizations, it is often impossible to distinguish whether people considered migrants from Russia are not in fact Russians or ethnically mixed Russian-speakers from Estonia or elsewhere.
- <sup>3</sup> The number refers to citizenship, which means that those included are not only ethnic Estonians, but also Russian-speakers with Estonian citizenship, and those excluded have resigned their Estonian citizenship.
- <sup>4</sup> Dialogue in the making: Research and development project on reciprocal relationships between migrant populations in Finland (DIARA), funded by the Kone Foundation, 2018–2020.
- <sup>5</sup> Concluding from the first names and surnames, but also content, we encountered while studying the groups, the discussants were almost entirely ethnic Estonians. Only on a very few occasions did people of Russian background participate in conversation and, if so, in Estonian language.
- <sup>6</sup> At the same time, we are also aware of transnational subjects not being necessarily equally active in keeping ties in both societies, but generally speaking the membership in Facebook groups which we studied is an indication of one’s need to stay connected to other Estonians and their mindsets while living in Finland.
- <sup>7</sup> The only African origin migrant group occasionally specified by Estonians was Somalis. Turks were the only group of migrants whom Estonians considered positively Muslim; known as the kebab and pizza places’ owners and employees, Turks were contrasted to Somalis as work-loving and tax-paying rather than lazy, undeserving migrants.

- <sup>8</sup> There is still little sensitivity in Estonian society about the word “Negro” and its profound racialized underpinnings. Many in Estonia hold the view that “Negro” is a neutral, innocent word and Estonians can use it unproblematically.

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