

# Russian migration in Finland amid new geopolitical fault lines

Larisa Kangaspuro

Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki

larisa.kangaspuro@helsinki.fi

## Abstract

*This article investigates the ways in which rising geopolitical tensions—triggered by the escalation of the Russia–Ukraine dispute into a military conflict in 2022—have shaped the lived experiences, identities, and integration trajectories of Russian migrants in Finland. Drawing on critical border studies and geopolitical sociology, it examines how public distrust, securitised narratives, and the closure of Finland’s eastern border have reconfigured migrant subjectivities and everyday life. Based on a qualitative, mixed-methods approach—including interviews, media discourse analysis, and a review of recent changes in Finnish migration policy—the study demonstrates how the conflict has intensified exclusionary dynamics and problematised Russian migrants within public and political discourse. The findings show that disrupted mobility and emotional displacement have produced new forms of social fragmentation and uncertainty. By highlighting the symbolic and affective dimensions of bordering, the article contributes to broader debates on migration, security, and belonging in times of geopolitical crisis.*

**Keywords:** affective bordering, geopolitical conflict, migration policy, migrants from Russia, media discourse, social integration

## Introduction

The complex fabric of international relations is continually being reshaped, with geopolitical transformations acting as the loom upon which new patterns of migration<sup>1</sup> are woven (Castles et al., 2014). Contemporary migration dynamics are inextricably linked to the geopolitical shifts of the twenty-first century. The historical and political contexts of these shifts significantly influence how migration is framed in both media and policymaking discourse. Migration is often portrayed through the lens of crisis and security – a framing that tends to resonate strongly with both policymakers and the general public (Trilling, 2019). This securitised narrative not only garners heightened media attention but also shapes public opinion and institutional responses.

A pivotal moment in this context was the escalation of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which began in 2014 and intensified into a full-scale invasion in 2022. This development marked a significant turning point in East–West relations, reflecting tensions analysed in earlier studies (Mearsheimer, 2014; Haukkala, 2015), and fundamentally altered the security architecture of Europe, with far-reaching effects on global mobility regimes. These broader geopolitical dynamics provide the backdrop for understanding how international conflicts reverberate through local migration contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the words migration/immigration and migrant/immigrant are used interchangeably.

Among the less-explored consequences of this conflict is its impact on the everyday lives of migrants from the Russian Federation residing in neighbouring countries, particularly Finland. With a 1,340-kilometre land border with Russia and a historical role as a geopolitical intermediary between Eastern and Western Europe, Finland occupies a distinctive position within the broader European security landscape (Kaczmarek, 2023; Michalski et al., 2024).

The closure of the Finnish–Russian land border in stages throughout 2023, culminating in its complete shutdown in November, has had wide-reaching implications. It functioned not only as a political act aimed at limiting irregular crossings and enhancing national security, but also as a potent symbolic gesture that disrupted cross-border relationships and daily practices. Among those most affected are migrants from the Russian Federation, whose opportunities for mobility, social integration, and familial connections were profoundly altered. Simultaneously, public and political discourse in Finland increasingly framed migrants from the Russian Federation as objects of suspicion, questioning their loyalty and positioning them within broader narratives of securitisation (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2024).

In this study, I explore the complex entanglement between geopolitical transformations and the lived experiences of migrants. I am interested in how public distrust, fuelled by the geopolitical climate, affects the everyday realities and integration pathways of individuals from Russia residing in Finland. My research sheds light on the ways in which large-scale conflicts shape the symbolic, emotional, and institutional borders that migrants must navigate.

My hypothesis is that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has intensified public suspicion toward Russian-speaking residents in Finland, thereby complicating their integration and contributing to social fragmentation. The progressive closure of the Finnish–Russian border has further exacerbated this trend by limiting mobility, weakening familial and social ties, and reinforcing migrants' symbolic marginalisation.

To test this hypothesis, I formulate the following two interrelated research questions:

1. How have intensified geopolitical tensions following the escalation of the Russia–Ukraine military conflict shaped public and institutional perceptions of migrants from Russia in Finland?
2. In what ways has the closure of the Finnish–Russian border impacted the social integration trajectories of migrants from Russia residing in Finland?

To address these questions, my study adopts a qualitative, mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews with migrants from Russia, discourse analysis of Finnish media, and a review of national migration policy. These methods enable us to capture the layered nature of geopolitically induced changes at both institutional and personal levels.

This article is structured as follows: It begins by situating the research within the broader geopolitical realignments following the Russia–Ukraine conflict and introduces the core research questions. It then turns to a theoretical discussion that draws on concepts from critical border studies and geopolitical sociology. The methodology section outlines the research design, including interviews, media analysis, and policy review. The findings are presented thematically, highlighting identity tensions, emotional displacement caused by the border closure, and civic

mobilisation among migrants. The analysis also considers the role of media and legal discourses in legitimising border policies. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the empirical results, engaging with the research questions and hypothesis, and identifying broader theoretical and practical implications.

## Theoretical framework

My theoretical approach is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework at the intersection of geopolitical sociology, critical border studies, and migration research. I aim to understand how large-scale geopolitical tensions become embedded in institutional practices and migrant subjectivities.

First, I draw on the concept of “everyday bordering” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018), which conceptualises borders not as fixed territorial lines but as dynamic, multi-scalar processes that regulate inclusion, exclusion, and access to rights. This perspective allows us to explore how geopolitical shifts materialise through legal, bureaucratic, and symbolic practices that shape migrants’ lived experiences.

Second, I engage with the notion of “affective bordering” (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2006; Paasi & Prokkola, 2008), which brings attention to the emotional and symbolic dimensions of borders. In my analysis, the closure of the Finnish–Russian border is interpreted not merely as a material restriction but as a performative and affective act – one that reconfigures imaginaries of belonging and reshapes migrants’ emotional geographies.

Third, I build on insights from geopolitical sociology (Minghi, 1991; Mamadouh, 2006), particularly in examining how geopolitical anxieties are translated into domestic politics and institutional logics. From this perspective, the evolution of Finland’s border regime is part of a broader securitisation process, whereby the externalisation of geopolitical threat is internalised through mechanisms of symbolic and institutional boundary-making.

Fourth, my approach is informed by scholarship on migrant agency and subjectivity (Khosravi, 2010; Ehrkamp, 2017), which emphasises the strategic and affective dimensions of how migrants navigate uncertain and restrictive environments. This lens enables us to centre the perspectives and practices of Russian-speaking migrants in Finland and to analyse how they interpret, negotiate, and contest the shifting border landscapes they inhabit.

The concept of “integration” in migration studies is far from monolithic and has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate (Statham & Foner, 2024). Integration can be understood as a bi-directional process of adaptation and belonging, in which migrants engage with the host society while retaining elements of their cultural identity (Berry, 1997). Contemporary scholarship has further problematised this term, noting that integration is frequently framed through neoliberal and assimilationist logics that impose normative expectations on migrants (Schinkel, 2018; Klarenbeek, 2019). Alternative conceptualisations include segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Lee, 2009), which posits that migrants integrate into different segments of society rather than following a linear path toward the mainstream.

Recent research in Finland highlights the role of structural barriers – such as language requirements, labour market discrimination, and limited access to integration programmes – in producing uneven integration outcomes across migrant groups (Nshom et al., 2022). Furthermore, transnationalism complicates the notion of integration by acknowledging migrants’ simultaneous embeddedness in both the host and origin societies (Lee, 2009) – a dynamic particularly salient for Russian-speaking migrants maintaining familial and affective ties across the now-sealed border.

Against this backdrop, I conceptualise “social integration trajectories” not as normative endpoints but as differentiated, context-specific pathways shaped by migrant agency, institutional constraints, and shifting geopolitical conditions. This conceptualisation allows for a more nuanced understanding of how migrants from Russia navigate overlapping fields of symbolic belonging, legal recognition, and emotional attachment in Finland amid deepening geopolitical fault lines.

Additionally, my approach draws inspiration from two complementary perspectives that illuminate the deeper socio-psychological and geopolitical dimensions of this case.

One relevant perspective is offered by Linus Hagström’s work on ontological security, which emphasises the fundamental human need for a coherent and continuous sense of identity in the face of external uncertainties (Hagström, 2024). In the context of Russian migrants in Finland, the intensification of geopolitical tensions and securitised narratives disrupts not only physical mobility but also the existential stability in which identity is grounded. This erosion of ontological security manifests in heightened self-surveillance, anxiety, and symbolic marginalisation.

Another valuable contribution comes from Akihiro Iwashita’s insights into border studies, particularly his conceptualisation of borders as fluid, relational, and politically performative spaces (Iwashita, 2023). His notion of “border governance” foregrounds the interplay between state-driven securitisation and everyday practices of adaptation and resistance in borderlands. In our case, the progressive closure of Finland’s eastern border operates not only as a geopolitical response but also as a technology of symbolic ordering, shaping the social and emotional landscapes of those who inhabit the margins of belonging.

Together, these perspectives enable us to develop a layered and reflexive account of how geopolitical conflict, symbolic bordering, and emotional displacement converge to shape the experiences and integration trajectories of migrants from Russia.

## **Methodology**

My methodological approach is designed to capture the multifaceted ways in which geopolitical developments intersect with migrant lives. I employ a qualitative, mixed-methods design that triangulates data from three complementary sources: in-depth interviews, media discourse analysis, and policy review. This combination enables us to explore how structural transformations are reflected in both public discourse and personal narratives.

I conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with migrants from Russia currently residing in Finland. My sampling strategy aimed to reflect diversity in age, gender, migration background (e.g., students, workers, family reunification), and length of

residence. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, initiated via Russian-speaking NGOs and diaspora networks. All participants provided informed consent, and interviews were conducted in Russian – the native language of both the interviewer and the respondents – to preserve discursive nuance and foster a comfortable communicative environment. Data collection took place between March and May 2025.

The interviews explored migration trajectories, integration experiences, emotional responses to the border closure, and perceptions of changing public attitudes. While my goal was not to produce generalisable claims, I sought to uncover patterns of meaning and affective responses that illuminate broader transformations within the migration regime.

In parallel with the interviews, I carried out a thematic analysis of articles published in major Finnish newspapers between 2022 and 2025. I focused on representations of Russian nationals, border policy, and national security discourse. This media analysis provided a contextual backdrop against which individual narratives could be interpreted and allowed us to trace discursive shifts accompanying the evolving geopolitical climate.

In addition, I reviewed recent changes in Finnish migration and border policy, with particular attention to the closure of the Finnish–Russian border, amendments to the Aliens Act (*Ulkomaalaislaki*), and public communications from the Ministry of the Interior and the Finnish Immigration Service (*Migri*). This policy analysis enabled us to examine how national security logics have been operationalised in institutional discourse and legislation.

By combining these sources, my research traces the feedback loop between macro-level geopolitical confrontation, policy, and media narratives, and the lived experiences of migrants navigating these shifting landscapes.

## **Data collection and sample justification**

The fieldwork was conducted in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and the South-Eastern border region of Finland between March and May 2025. Building on previous qualitative research on Russian-speaking communities in Finland (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind, 2007; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2012; Viimaranta et al., 2018; Stašulāne, 2024; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2024), my study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews to examine how participants perceived the geopolitical transformations following February 2022. This format enabled thematic comparability while preserving the flexibility needed to explore lived experiences in depth.

Recruitment began with a call disseminated through the mailing list of one of the major Russian-language NGOs operating in Finland. To ensure respondent anonymity, the organisation's name is not disclosed. The announcement outlined the academic purpose of the study and clarified issues of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Informed consent forms were signed in Russian. A two-step anonymisation protocol was implemented: direct identifiers were removed during transcription, and transcripts were re-checked prior to analysis.

In total, 18 interviews were completed – 17 in person and one via Microsoft Teams. All interviews were conducted in Russian to preserve discursive nuance and promote a comfortable communicative environment. The interview guide, informed by previous Finnish migration studies, included prompts related to discrimination, the 2023 border closure, and perceived shifts in public sentiment. While the guide provided a structure, interviews remained open-ended, allowing participants to shape their narratives. Sessions lasted from 25 minutes to over two hours, with an average of approximately one hour. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

In addition to procedural safeguards, I acknowledge the sensitive and potentially distressing nature of the study's core themes – displacement, identity, and psychological vulnerability. The lead researcher shares a migrant background with participants and possesses comparable linguistic and cultural repertoires, having herself immigrated from Russia. This shared positionality fostered trust and openness during the interviews, enhancing the emotional depth of participants' accounts. At the same time, it required sustained reflexivity to mitigate potential biases that could affect both data collection and interpretation. While cultural proximity facilitated rapport, it also introduced interpretive risks, which were addressed through methodological transparency and analytical rigour.

A two-stage purposive sampling strategy was adopted. First, the call targeted Russian-speaking adults (17+) residing in municipalities with the highest absolute and relative numbers of migrants from the Russian Federation – Vantaa, Helsinki, Lahti, and Lappeenranta – reflecting patterns identified in earlier studies (Statistics Finland, 2023; Martikainen & Pyykkönen, 2011). Second, participants were stratified into two cohorts: those who migrated prior to 24 February 2022 and those who arrived after the onset of the conflict. This allowed us to compare pre- and post-crisis migration experiences. Familiarity between researchers and respondents was intentionally minimised to reduce expectation bias.

The sample size was determined according to the principle of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereby data collection continues until no new conceptual categories emerge. Saturation was reached after 15 interviews, with three additional cases included to confirm the robustness of emerging patterns – aligned with recommendations for relatively homogenous populations (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010; Stašulāne, 2024).

The final cohort (N = 18) included nine citizens of the Russian Federation, five dual citizens (Finland–Russia), and four naturalised Finnish or Estonian citizens. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 70. Gender distribution was close to parity (10 women, 8 men). Educational backgrounds ranged from upper-secondary to doctoral level. Employment statuses included students, professionals, service-sector workers, and retirees. To prevent deductive disclosure in a relatively close-knit diaspora, specific socio-demographic attributes (e.g., exact ages, occupations) are not reported.

Given that this article draws in part on interviews with Russian citizens, explicit references to the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine – particularly the use of the term “war” – were deliberately avoided. This decision reflects an awareness of the political and legal constraints in the Russian context, where such terminology may pose significant personal risks. The choice was guided by both ethical and

methodological considerations: minimising perceived danger was essential to fostering a safe environment conducive to candid responses. Although the study followed rigorous ethical protocols – including anonymity, data encryption, and informed consent – these additional linguistic precautions were taken to further protect respondents and preserve the integrity of the data collection process under restrictive conditions.

## Contextual background

Finland's geopolitical and historical proximity to Russia, coupled with its transformation from a traditionally homogenous society into an increasingly diverse one, renders it a particularly compelling site for examining the interplay between migration, securitisation, and bordering practices (Stašulāne, 2024; Näre & Maury, 2024). The Finnish–Russian relationship has long been characterised by a mixture of cooperation and tension, with key historical episodes – including the incorporation of the Grand Duchy of Finland into the Russian Empire in 1809 and its subsequent autonomous status, the Winter War and post-Soviet border negotiations – shaping political imaginaries on both sides. In recent years, and especially after February 2022, public discourse in Finland has increasingly invoked historical references to the Winter War, with renewed anxieties about potential Russian aggression becoming a salient feature of national security imaginaries.

Since the early 1990s, Finland has received a steady influx of migrants from the Russian Federation, many of whom arrived through the Ingrian return migration programme (1990–2016), which targeted individuals of Finnish ancestry residing in the former Soviet Union (Stašulāne, 2024). These migratory flows reinforced familial, cultural, and linguistic ties across the border, particularly in eastern and south-eastern Finland.

According to Statistics Finland, in 1990, only 0.08% of the population reported Russian as their mother tongue. By 2000, this figure had increased more than thirteenfold, driven largely by an influx of young Russian-speaking migrants (Fedorov, 2015). As of the end of 2024, an estimated 102,487 individuals in Finland reported Russian as their native language, accounting for approximately 1.8% of the population (Statistics Finland, 2025). In 2023 alone, approximately 4,300 new immigrants with Russian citizenship arrived in the country.

The social profile of Russian immigrants has evolved significantly over the past three decades (Stašulāne, 2024). Today, the Russian-speaking population in Finland includes not only descendants of Ingrian Finns but also highly educated professionals, international students, labour migrants, and other groups (Cultura-säätiö sr, 2024). Many ultimately acquire Finnish citizenship or register Finnish as their official mother tongue, contributing to a systemic underestimation of the Russian-speaking population in national statistics.

In this study, however, my focus is specifically on migrants from the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, rather than the broader category of Russian speakers. This narrower focus allows us to foreground the geopolitical dimension of the Finnish–Russian relationship and better analyse the effects of the border closure. The heterogeneity of this population renders it analytically problematic to treat Russian speakers as a homogenous group with unified attitudes or political orientations.

Prior to 2022, migrants from the Russian Federation occupied a relatively ambiguous position in Finnish society: although often highly educated and economically integrated (Habti, 2019), they were simultaneously perceived in public discourse as culturally and politically distinct (Brylka et al., 2015; Laine, 2015). However, following the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the full closure of the Finnish–Russian border in 2023, the position of this group became increasingly precarious. These developments coincided with a broader securitisation of migration, whereby issues of border control, loyalty, and national security began to dominate both policy agendas and media narratives.

Finnish political and media discourses have increasingly framed migrants from Russia not only as cultural outsiders but also as potential security threats (Stašulāne, 2024; Näre & Maury, 2024). This securitised framing has contributed to a climate of suspicion and marginalisation, intensifying migrants' sense of social exclusion and altering the conditions under which they access services, maintain transnational family ties, and navigate integration structures.

As I demonstrate in the empirical sections that follow, these transformations were not experienced merely as administrative or policy shifts. Rather, they constituted deeply affective ruptures in migrants' sense of safety, identity, and belonging – undermining the emotional and symbolic foundations of everyday life.

## **Geopolitical tensions post-2022**

The military conflict between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022 marked a critical turning point in regional migration dynamics. Following the announcement of military mobilisation in the autumn of 2022, a significant number of Russian citizens – primarily men – sought to evade conscription by leaving the country. According to media reports, during the final week of September 2022, approximately 17,000 individuals crossed the Finnish border to avoid enlistment (Fouche, 2022).

In response, the Finnish government introduced a series of restrictive measures. Beginning on 1 September 2022, the daily quota for processing visa applications at Finnish consulates in Russia was reduced to 500, with a maximum of 100 tourist visas. By 30 September, Finland had effectively closed its borders to Russian tourists, allowing entry only under exceptional circumstances (e.g., for study, work, or family reunification).

These policy shifts had significant and immediate consequences. While the Finnish Border Guard recorded a short-term spike in asylum applications from Russian citizens in the autumn of 2022 (peaking at 1,172), the total number of applications dropped to just 416 in 2023. In parallel, the Finnish Ministry of the Interior reported a near-collapse in labour migration from Russia, attributing the decline to the *de facto* closure of Finland's eastern border (Finnish Government, 2024). By 2024, inward migration from Russia had virtually ceased.

These transformations were not merely administrative adjustments in migration control. Rather, they reflected a broader securitisation logic driven by heightened geopolitical anxieties and institutionalised suspicion. As I demonstrate in the sections that follow, these developments substantially altered the material conditions,



emotional landscapes, and perceived belonging of migrants from the Russian Federation residing in Finland.

## **Closure of the eastern border: Timeline and significance**

The progressive closure of Finland's eastern border represents a critical juncture in the evolving nexus between national security policy and migration governance. My research investigates how these measures, framed as responses to geopolitical instability, have reshaped the legal and symbolic contours of asylum and mobility in Finland (Näre & Maury, 2024; Näre et al., 2024).

Following the suspension of EU–Russia air links in mid-2022, Finnish authorities – acting in coordination with the Baltic states – initiated the suspension of the visa facilitation agreement with the Russian Federation. On 30 September 2022, Finland formally closed its border to Russian tourists (de Fresnes & Tikkala, 2022), signalling a transition from selective restrictions to comprehensive exclusion.

Tensions escalated further in the autumn of 2023, when a notable increase in third-country nationals, originating primarily from Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, arriving via Russia, prompted enhanced security measures. According to the Ministry of the Interior, over 1,300 asylum seekers crossed the eastern border during this period. In response, the Finnish government enacted a full closure of all land border crossings with Russia as of 15 December 2023.

To institutionalise this closure, the Finnish Parliament adopted a special legislative measure in July 2024 addressing what was termed the “instrumentalisation of migration.” This act authorised the rejection of asylum claims submitted by individuals entering overland from Russia. Although initially introduced as a temporary measure valid for one year, the Ministry of the Interior – under the leadership of Mari Rantanen – proposed extending its validity through to the end of 2026.

Despite the lack of publicly available evidence supporting these claims, Minister Rantanen asserted that the risk of instrumentalised migration remained “high and unpredictable” (Hytinen, 2024). Prime Minister Petteri Orpo similarly reaffirmed Finland's sovereign prerogative to close its borders “if necessary.” On 16 April 2025, the government extended the closure “until further notice,” citing ongoing national security concerns.

These decisions have not gone uncontested. At the international level, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, issued an open letter reminding Finland of its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, emphasising that border closures must not undermine the right to seek asylum (Council of Europe, 2023). At the domestic level, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman noted that the indefinite nature of the closure “seriously undermines the right to seek asylum” (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman of Finland, 2023), while Chancellor of Justice Tuomas Pöysti called for a more robust legal justification for the measures.

In this context, my research examines how such policy shifts – justified through the language of security and sovereignty – have affected the lived experiences of migrants from the Russian Federation. In particular, I analyse how the closure of the eastern border has contributed to the erosion of legal protections, the intensification of

symbolic exclusion, and the reconfiguration of migrants' emotional and social geographies.

## **Political mobilisation of the Russian-speaking community in response to border closure**

The closure of Finland's eastern border has acted as a catalyst for political and civic mobilisation among Russian-speaking residents, highlighting the complex interaction between state security measures and minority political agency. This study investigates how these developments have given rise to new forms of collective action, legal contestation, and democratic participation within a community situated at the intersection of geopolitical suspicion and domestic marginalisation.

In late 2023, public demonstrations emerged in response to the full border closure. On 18–19 November, an estimated 200–300 individuals gathered in Helsinki and Lappeenranta to protest the restrictions. Many participants maintained familial or personal ties to Russia and expressed deep concern over the indefinite suspension of cross-border contact. The slogan “Rajat auki!” (“Open the borders!”) became emblematic of the protests, reflecting both emotional urgency and political dissent. One demonstrator, Vera Ponomaryova, poignantly held a sign reading “Iron Curtain – 2023”, voicing fears that she might never again see her elderly parents. A subsequent protest on 17 December in Lappeenranta, involving approximately 50–60 participants – primarily bilingual Russian-speaking Finns – called for humanitarian exemptions to facilitate family reunification. Similar gatherings occurred in other Finnish cities, indicating a broader mobilisation.

These protests were part of a wider politicisation of the Russian-speaking minority in response to several legislative and institutional developments. Debates around the potential closure of the Itä-Suomen koulu (School of Eastern Finland), proposals to revoke dual citizenship, and initiatives to restrict property ownership by Russian nationals were widely perceived as disproportionately targeting this community. Although the proposed school closure was partially justified on national security grounds (Nurmi, 2024), the Finnish Security Intelligence Service later confirmed that no formal warnings had been issued (Paljakka & Kosonen, 2024). Similarly, discussions on dual citizenship (Tolkki, 2023) and property restrictions, though limited in legal scope, were perceived symbolically as exclusionary. These developments contributed to a climate of heightened anxiety and prompted a shift toward legal and institutional channels of redress.

Importantly, the Russian-speaking community is not monolithic in its response. On 13 January 2024, a smaller group of approximately 10 individuals gathered outside the Finnish Parliament under the banner “No to Russian racism in Finland”, expressing support for the government's security measures. They described the restrictions as “soft and civilised” and endorsed them as necessary for safeguarding national interests. This internal diversity underscores the heterogeneity of political orientations within the community and challenges simplistic portrayals of a unified bloc.

Legal contestation has also emerged as a central strategy. At least seven appeals were filed in Finnish courts challenging the legality of the border closure. After domestic dismissals, the case was brought before the European Court of Human Rights. On 12 March 2025, the Court communicated the case *D. and Others v. Finland* (no.

16398/24), posing five questions to the Finnish government concerning possible violations of the rights of the Russian-speaking minority – formally unrecognised but socially acknowledged (European Court of Human Rights, 2024).

Additional complaints were submitted to national oversight bodies, including the Chancellor of Justice, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, and the Parliamentary Ombudsman. Although all were ultimately rejected, my analysis suggests that negative media portrayals of pro-migrant advocacy may have influenced judicial and administrative decisions, a pattern observed in previous studies (Spirig, 2023; Hoetger et al., 2022). Concerns about judicial independence intensified when the President of the Supreme Administrative Court, Kari Kuusiniemi, publicly acknowledged pressure on the judiciary, including calls for the resignation of the Deputy Chancellor of Justice following his dissenting opinion on the initial closure (Kuusiniemi, 2023; Hallikainen, 2023; Helsinki Times, 2023). In parallel, Russian-speaking activists submitted a petition to the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Professor Nicolas Levrat, thereby internationalising their claims.

This legal mobilisation coincided with increased political engagement. The municipal and regional elections of the spring of 2025 marked a turning point, with several candidates from migrant and post-Soviet backgrounds securing elected office. For the first time, explicit opposition to border policy featured as a salient electoral platform. According to Mattila (2025), Katja Marova, an organiser of the *Rajat auki!* protests – was elected to the South Karelia Regional Council as a Left Alliance candidate, receiving 653 votes. In Lappeenranta, Ivan Deviatkin, a vocal advocate for minority rights and critic of the border policy, won a seat on the City Council with 541 votes. As reported by Yle, a Finnish national broadcasting company, Deviatkin believed that a majority of his supporters were Russian-speaking (Mattila, 2025).

In this context, I interpret the political mobilisation of Russian-speaking residents between 2023 and 2025 as a strategic shift from street-level protest to institutionalised civic participation. This transformation reflects both a reaction to perceived symbolic and legal marginalisation and a conscious effort to assert minority rights through democratic mechanisms.

While Finnish authorities have generally maintained a measured rhetorical stance, official discourse continues to invoke the threat of “instrumentalised migration” as justification for ongoing border controls. Minister Rantanen, for instance, warned that “hundreds, if not thousands” of individuals were waiting to cross the border once seasonal conditions permitted. However, by April 2025, no such movement had occurred.

Ultimately, my findings suggest that the eastern border has become a symbolic site of contestation—both a locus of securitisation and a catalyst for civic mobilisation. The evolving situation underscores the importance of sustained scholarly attention to how geopolitical tensions become embedded in domestic policy frameworks and are actively negotiated by affected communities.

## **Media discourses and the legitimisation of border policy**

This section examines how media discourses have contributed to the legitimisation of Finland’s eastern border closure by constructing a dominant narrative of national

security. In particular, the analysis focuses on how political rhetoric and journalistic framing have coalesced to present the closure not as a contested policy decision, but as a necessary and self-evident response to an existential threat.

A prevailing perception – widely disseminated in political and media discourse – is that migration from Russia (and via Russia) poses significant risks to national security, social cohesion, and economic stability (Eberl et al., 2018; Innes, 2010; Trilling, 2019; Eraliev, 2025). This narrative architecture reinforces the notion that irregular migration is a form of hybrid warfare, blurring the boundary between humanitarian mobility and hostile infiltration.

Since the implementation of the closure, leading Finnish media outlets have largely mirrored government framings. Reporting has centred on official statements and security briefings, with minimal analytical distance or critical inquiry. For example, Interior Minister Mari Rantanen declared: “Based on information gathered by authorities, the threat of renewed and expanded Russian hybrid influence, as previously experienced, is highly likely. Therefore, it is necessary to continue the closure of the eastern border” (Virkkunen, 2024). Such rhetoric links perceived threat directly with policy necessity, rendering alternative courses of action politically untenable.

Crucially, the justification for the closure rests on classified intelligence, thereby precluding public scrutiny. As Virkkunen (2024) notes: “The decision cannot be further disclosed to avoid compromising intelligence operations. At the same time, criticism is very difficult because it is not clear what information the decision is actually based on.” This lack of transparency produces a rhetorical asymmetry: while security concerns are asserted with confidence, critical perspectives are delegitimised as uninformed or even dangerous.

My analysis indicates that public discourse has been shaped by what might be termed a “narrative closure”—a process whereby the parameters of acceptable debate are narrowly defined. Media coverage tends to privilege institutional voices, reproducing official threat assessments while marginalising dissenting experts, migrant perspectives, or legal critiques. As a result, opposition to the border closure is often construed not as a legitimate democratic position but as a challenge to national unity or public order.

These dynamics have significant implications for democratic deliberation. While the legal framework underpinning the closure is formally acknowledged, it is rarely examined in detail or subjected to critical legal analysis in public forums. The predominance of securitised narratives has created a communicative environment in which policy choices are treated as objective necessities rather than political decisions with human consequences. This discursive landscape reinforces perceptions of consensus, inhibits accountability, and ultimately curtails the possibility of substantive democratic contestation.

## **Critique of legal expertise: Martin Scheinin’s position**

Despite the dominance of the official narrative, my research identifies notable interventions by legal scholars that challenge the prevailing securitised discourse. Among the most prominent is Professor Martin Scheinin, a leading expert in

international law and human rights, who has publicly questioned the constitutional and legal foundations of Finland's eastern border closure.

In his analysis, Scheinin argues that the measures pose a “threat to the Finnish rule of law,” particularly because they conflate irregular and legal migration. As he observes: “Throughout, it is repeated that the aim is to stop illegal immigration, but now legal immigration is being stopped” (Summanen, 2023). This conflation, in his view, undermines fundamental legal principles, including the right to seek asylum and the prohibition of collective punishment.

Scheinin has further emphasised the importance of maintaining robust legal procedures and institutional safeguards rather than relying on sweeping restrictions. He has strongly criticised the legal rationale behind the “border exceptions law,” including its endorsement by former Supreme Court President Pauliine Koskelo, which he considers incompatible with international human rights norms (Scheinin, 2025). Given his distinguished standing – including previous work with the United Nations and the European Court of Human Rights – Scheinin's critique has lent credibility and visibility to broader concerns about the erosion of legal protections.

In 2024, Scheinin, together with a group of Finnish legal scholars, submitted a formal complaint to the European Commission, questioning the compatibility of the newly introduced “deportation law” with EU legal standards (Demokraatti, 2024). These expert interventions have introduced an alternative legal framing into the public sphere, rooted in constitutionalism, proportionality, and the rule of law. Nevertheless, this counter-narrative has remained marginal within dominant media discourses.

In sum, this dynamic raises broader questions about the dual role of the media in this context: as a conduit for government narratives and as a gatekeeping mechanism that filters and constrains dissent. While critiques such as Scheinin's offer a rigorous and principled reframing of the debate, their limited visibility underscores the challenges of sustaining pluralistic democratic discourse in a securitised environment. This, in turn, invites reflection on the conditions under which legal expertise can meaningfully shape public deliberation in contexts of perceived national crisis.

### **Limited public discourse: Jussi Laine's perspective**

In my analysis of the discursive environment surrounding Finland's eastern border closure, I find that public debate has become increasingly constrained. In particular, I draw on the perspective of Professor Jussi Laine, a prominent scholar in multidisciplinary border studies, who has critically examined the narrowing boundaries of permissible discourse in Finnish society. According to Laine, the political and media landscape has evolved into a space “where different opinions are not allowed” (Heikkonen, 2024). This observation underscores a broader concern: that dissenting views are not merely marginalised but actively delegitimised.

Laine's critique centres on the erosion of foundational democratic values under conditions of geopolitical anxiety. He poses a critical question: “How much are we willing to distance ourselves from the values upon which our society is built?” His concern is that the ideological tone of public discourse has become increasingly polarised, where any deviation from the dominant “zero tolerance” stance on migration is framed as a betrayal of national unity or security. This rhetorical rigidity, he argues,

reflects a departure from pluralistic dialogue and open deliberation – hallmarks of a democratic society.

Drawing on his broader body of work, including his analysis of the perception of Russia in Finnish public consciousness (Laine, 2015; 2017), Laine had earlier argued that bordering processes not only occurred at the geopolitical margins but also permeated everyday life, shaping social interactions, political debate, and the media agenda. In securitised contexts, subtle linguistic framings and selective representations of “outsiders” contribute to normalising exclusionary attitudes, even in societies that formally uphold liberal-democratic principles. Laine further notes that perceptions of Russia are often mediated through historical narratives and entrenched stereotypes, rather than direct experience. Such perceptions can be rapidly reactivated during moments of political tension, serving both as a tool for political mobilisation and as a justification for restrictive border and migration policies.

The personal consequences of such critique are also significant. As reported by Heikkonen (2024), Laine became the target of “abusive messages and death threats” following his public criticism of the government’s border policy. This case illustrates not only the personal risks faced by academics who challenge dominant narratives but also the broader pressures placed on intellectual freedom in securitised contexts.

My research suggests that the media plays a dual role in this dynamic. On the one hand, it can provide a platform for expert commentary – as in Laine’s case. On the other hand, it also contributes to the stigmatisation of dissenting voices, transforming critical engagement into grounds for public vilification. As a result, key issues – such as the legal status of Russian-speaking residents, the boundaries of freedom of expression, and the normative foundations of national security policy – are increasingly debated in fragmented and polarised terms, rather than through balanced civic dialogue.

Moreover, the media’s portrayal of Russian-speaking communities has evolved in ways that reinforce public suspicion. While some coverage has acknowledged the human impact of the border closure, other narratives have cast Russian speakers either as potential “fifth column” actors or as self-interested advocates for open borders. Rarely are they depicted as legitimate members of Finnish society with their own rights, needs, and vulnerabilities. This selective framing contributes to an overarching dynamic of polarisation wherein national security imperatives are prioritised over inclusive democratic discourse and minority rights.

## **Constructing the threat narrative**

In my examination of the discursive landscape surrounding Finland’s eastern border closure, I observe the emergence of a dual narrative. While certain media outlets have offered humanising portrayals of individuals affected by the policy, a parallel rhetoric of suspicion has gained increasing prominence. This latter discourse, embedded in the language of national security and hybrid threats, has contributed to the construction of a threat narrative – one that frames civic mobilisation by Russian-speaking residents not as democratic participation, but as potentially subversive activity.

A salient example is the portrayal of the Aleksanterinliitto movement. In a 2024 article, the magazine *Seura* (Salovaara, 2024) suggested that the organisation’s activities may

be linked to the Kremlin, citing alleged “roots in Russia” and reported contacts with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Eromäki, 2024). Although speculative and unsubstantiated, these claims were echoed by other publications, reinforcing suspicion around the group’s motivations and affiliations.

This framing was further legitimised through official rhetoric. Interior Minister Mari Rantanen publicly stated that the Finnish government feared Russia could exploit “vulnerable population groups as a tool of hybrid influence” (quoted in Tvaltvadze, 2024). In response, leaders of the Russian-speaking movement sought to distance themselves from such accusations and to reaffirm their democratic commitments. Aleksanterinliitto chairman R. Vladimírski, for instance, insisted that their actions constituted “Finnish, democratic civic activity”, explicitly rejecting any ties to Moscow.

Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of this discourse has been the conflation of civic dissent with geopolitical threat. The blending of internal security concerns with questions of minority loyalty has narrowed the discursive space for legitimate political expression. Rather than being recognised as part of Finland’s pluralistic democratic fabric, Russian-speaking residents are frequently positioned as either opportunistic actors demanding open borders or as latent sympathisers with a hostile foreign power.

My findings suggest that this securitised framing has contributed to the broader perception that the border closure is not merely a discretionary policy measure, but an unavoidable necessity. Political slogans invoking “border security” and “hybrid defence,” amplified through media repetition, have cultivated a sense of inevitability. However, as critical observers have noted, this sense is both socially constructed and epistemologically fragile. The secrecy surrounding the justification for the policy – often rooted in undisclosed intelligence – has rendered meaningful public debate exceedingly difficult. As Virkkunen (2024) points out, “Criticism is very difficult because it is not clear what information the decision is based on.”

## **Affective bordering and identity tensions**

My research reveals that the current geopolitical climate, coupled with media representations of Russian nationals in Finland, has intensified feelings of ambiguity, vulnerability, and conditionality in identity formation among migrants. I am particularly interested in how these dynamics give rise to what I conceptualise as affective bordering – the internalisation of symbolic boundaries that regulate emotions, behaviours, and senses of belonging.

These intensified identity tensions must be situated within broader theoretical debates on integration. In the Finnish context, integration is not merely a matter of structural inclusion through employment, education, or language acquisition, but also involves symbolic recognition and emotional security. As Nshom et al. (2022) note, migrants often experience integration as a fragmented and precarious process, shaped by societal perceptions and the (un)availability of safe spaces for identity negotiation. The narratives I collected reveal that such tensions are not isolated experiences but are deeply embedded in migrants’ position within the Finnish integration regime. Here, affective bordering reproduces exclusion and restricts full belonging – even among legally settled residents.

Participants described a social atmosphere in which expressions of cultural identity – such as language, memory, or nostalgia – had become politically charged. For instance, Olga, who has resided in Finland since 2022, reflected on the discomfort of speaking Russian in public: “You never know who’s listening or how people will react,” she explained, and continued: “It makes me feel like I have to shrink myself.”

This emotional self-regulation extended beyond language. Several interviewees reported unease in displaying cultural symbols or acknowledging ties to Russia, fearing misinterpretation or social sanction. As Pavel, a dual-heritage citizen, put it: “It’s as if you have to constantly signal that you’re ‘safe’ or ‘not like them’.” He described a sense of being watched – not necessarily by the state, but by *ambient social expectations*.

These affective dynamics reflect a broader erosion of ontological security, as theorised by Hagström (2024), whereby individuals lose the stable frameworks through which they make sense of their social world. Migrants’ testimonies point to an acute sense of existential insecurity: an inability to rely on formerly predictable social scripts, cross-border routines, or cultural expressions. In this sense, the securitised environment in Finland produces not only exclusion but also a *loss of narrative coherence* in migrants’ self-understanding.

The media’s portrayal of Russian migrants as potential security risks further contributed to an atmosphere of heightened vigilance. Respondents such as Vera and Igor noted Finland’s increasing alignment with broader EU narratives of Russian threat perception. “I don’t blame them,” Igor remarked, “but it hurts to feel like you are being judged based on your passport, not your actions.”

For younger migrants, particularly students, the pressure to *perform loyalty* and distance themselves from Russian politics was even more pronounced. “We are constantly asked what we think about the war,” one student explained. “If you hesitate, people make assumptions.” This example illustrates how public discourse permeates intimate social interactions, assigning moral weight to otherwise neutral behaviours such as silence or hesitation.

These findings resonate with Lönnroth-Olin’s (2025) argument that public perceptions of threat are mediated through “symbolic hierarchies of protectability and accountability”, wherein certain groups – depending on age, gender, or ethnic origin – are more readily positioned as either victims or sources of danger.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that the border is no longer merely a geopolitical demarcation. Rather, it becomes emotionally internalised through micro-interactions, ambient suspicions, and social pressures. The result is a form of affective bordering that fractures identity and produces a condition of conditional belonging – a state in which inclusion is contingent upon visible disassociation from one’s origins.

As the Finnish state continues to articulate security through exclusionary narratives, migrants from the Russian Federation are compelled to negotiate not only legal and material survival, but also emotional legitimacy in everyday life. This negotiation, as my interviews demonstrate, is often marked by fatigue, adaptation, and a quiet but persistent questioning of where – and whether – they belong.



## Border closure and emotional displacement

One of the most frequently recurring themes in my interviews was the emotional toll of the Finnish–Russian land border closure in late 2023. For many participants, the border had never functioned merely as a geopolitical demarcation – it had operated as a *lifeline*: a conduit for maintaining familial ties, cultural practices, and emotional continuity. Its abrupt closure, justified on national security grounds, was widely experienced as a deeply affective rupture.

Dina, who fled with her husband in 2022, described the closure as producing a profound sense of “disconnection from her world.” While she did not fully feel at home in Finland, she also no longer belonged in Russia. “There is no home anymore,” she said. “Not here, not there.” This *in-between condition* – marked by nostalgia, uncertainty, and the impossibility of return – was echoed by many others.

Irina, of Finnish descent, a mother who had long dreamed of relocating to Finland and had carefully prepared for the move, spoke of the border as a *symbol of finality*: “When the border closed, it felt like everything that connected us to our past was sealed off. Even the hope of visiting relatives or graves became a political question.”

For some, the closure disrupted *vital caregiving and familial obligations*. Marina, who moved after February 2022, reflected: “I left my parents behind, thinking I would visit them soon. Now I don’t know when or if that will be possible. I feel like I abandoned them.” While she expressed gratitude for the safety Finland provides, she also emphasised the *moral burden* of geographic and generational distance – something she had never anticipated becoming permanent.

Interviewees who had previously navigated between both societies now felt a *forced choice* being imposed upon them. Polina, who holds Finnish citizenship and has a Russian family background, stated that the closed border compelled her to “define herself in narrower terms” and to “suppress one part of her identity” in everyday interactions.

The *symbolism* of the border was particularly potent among those who had maintained transnational routines – such as regular travel to care for ageing parents or to celebrate cultural holidays. The interruption of these practices was not merely logistical but *profoundly psychological*. Respondents described feelings of *loss, grief, and guilt*, with several associating the closure with an irreversible “*break*” in their lives, identities, and sense of temporal continuity.

These findings suggest that border policies – even when framed as geopolitical or security imperatives – function not only as instruments of control but also as technologies of emotion: reshaping migrants’ attachments, social imaginaries, and perceptions of self and belonging. In the Finnish context, the shift from openness to closure has had a disproportionately heavy impact on migrants from the Russian Federation, whose experiences of integration have become inseparable from the pain of interrupted transnationalism.

These insights resonate with Iwashita’s (2023) conceptualisation of borders as politically charged arenas where state authority is both enacted and contested. The abrupt shift from permeability to impermeability has redefined the Finnish–Russian border not merely as a geopolitical demarcation but as a powerful mechanism of

emotional and symbolic restructuring. The closure disrupted the everyday performativity of cross-border belonging, generating a sense of enforced fixity in a formerly dynamic space of transnational life.

While deeply personal, these narratives point to broader structural and symbolic consequences of the border closure for migrant integration. They illustrate how the closure disrupted not only practical mobility but also the emotional scaffolding upon which many migrants had built their sense of belonging. In such cases, integration becomes fractured and incomplete – not due to a lack of structural inclusion, but because of a persistent affective and symbolic rupture.

The inability to return, to visit family, or to maintain cross-border ties undermines the relational continuity that migrants rely on to feel anchored. In this sense, the border closure operates as a form of affective bordering – producing involuntary and emotional displacement that compounds the precarity of migrant subjectivities. Rather than fostering inclusion, such policies deepen the experience of suspension between societies and erode the very conditions necessary for emotional integration.

## Discussion

This article has examined how the intensification of geopolitical tensions following the escalation of the Russia–Ukraine military conflict in 2022 has reshaped the lived experiences of migrants from Russia residing in Finland. Drawing on qualitative interviews, media discourse analysis, and a review of migration and border policy, my research has demonstrated that the securitisation of Finland’s eastern border has produced not only material restrictions but also profound emotional, symbolic, and political consequences.

First, I found that Russian-speaking migrants have increasingly been positioned within a securitised narrative that frames them as potential risks to national cohesion. This framing, while often implicit, manifests through media representations, institutional practices, and everyday social interactions. Migrants reported a heightened need to perform political loyalty and distance from their origins, resulting in a condition of conditional belonging and emotional self-regulation. This observation supports the concept of “everyday bordering” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018), in which the boundaries of belonging are reproduced through subtle and ubiquitous interactions, rather than solely through formal legal frameworks.

Second, the closure of the Finnish–Russian land border in 2023 emerged as a deeply affective rupture. While officially justified on national security grounds, for many migrants the closure severed transnational ties, disrupted caregiving responsibilities, and foreclosed the possibility of return. These disruptions were experienced not merely as logistical obstacles but as sources of grief, guilt, and identity fragmentation – highlighting the emotional infrastructure of borders. These dynamics reflect processes of affective bordering (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2006; Paasi & Prokkola, 2008), whereby borders function not only as geopolitical devices but also as symbolic and emotional technologies that reconfigure the lived geographies of migrants.

Third, my findings reveal that these developments have catalysed new forms of civic and legal mobilisation. Russian-speaking residents, often excluded from mainstream political discourse, responded through protests, legal appeals, and increased

participation in local elections. These actions reflect both resilience and a strategic reorientation toward institutional engagement. However, the broader political and media environment has frequently responded with suspicion, reinforcing the marginalisation of this group. This illustrates how migrant agency (Khosravi, 2010; Ehrkamp, 2017) can persist and adapt under restrictive conditions, even as securitised regimes attempt to curtail dissent through discursive and legal containment.

Fourth, I observed that the Finnish media has played a central role in legitimising exclusionary policies. By largely reproducing official narratives and limiting space for dissent, mainstream outlets have contributed to a discursive environment in which the border closure appears both necessary and inevitable. Critical voices – whether from legal scholars, researchers, or migrants themselves – have been marginalised, narrowing the scope for democratic deliberation.

In this context, my research contributes to discussions in geopolitical sociology (Mamadouh, 2006; Minghi, 1991) by illustrating how macro-level conflict narratives are internalised within national policy logics and media discourse, thus reinforcing symbolic boundaries between “trusted citizens” and “suspect others.”

Fifth – and most critically – my findings call for a conceptual rethinking of migrant integration in times of geopolitical rupture. As previous scholarship has shown (Berry, 1997; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Lee, 2009), integration cannot be reduced to structural indicators such as employment or language acquisition. Contemporary critiques highlight that dominant integration frameworks are often underpinned by assimilationist and neoliberal logics, which impose normative expectations of conformity (Schinkel, 2018; Klarenbeek, 2019). My study reinforces these critiques by showing how integration is shaped not only by access to rights and services but also by migrants’ capacity to feel safe, emotionally anchored, and symbolically recognised within the host society (Nshom et al., 2022).

This further substantiates the relevance of affective bordering to the study of integration, by showing how emotional exclusion – rather than material deprivation alone – constitutes a significant barrier to full belonging.

## Conclusion

Together, these findings contribute to critical border and migration studies by revealing how legal, symbolic, and emotional bordering practices converge in reshaping migrant subjectivities. The case of Russian-speaking migrants in Finland illustrates that bordering is not limited to territorial regulation, but extends into emotional life, political participation, and identity maintenance. It also speaks to the erosion of ontological security (Hagström, 2024), as migrants face disruptions not only in their legal status or physical mobility, but in the narrative structures that support a coherent sense of self.

Considering these findings, I call for greater critical attention to the unintended social and psychological effects of securitised migration regimes. Policymakers should consider the long-term risks of treating entire communities as latent threats, particularly when such treatment undermines integration and democratic participation. Moreover, academic and civil society actors must continue to defend

spaces for pluralistic dialogue and minority rights, especially in times of geopolitical uncertainty.

Future research should examine how symbolic and affective bordering shapes different forms of migrant incorporation across geopolitical contexts, and how it interacts with structural dimensions of integration over time.

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