

## **RESPONDING TO ETHNICITY-BASED STIGMATISATION: THE CASE OF RUSSIAN-SPEAKING WOMEN IN ESTONIA**

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**Abstract.** This article examines how ethnic minorities negotiate ethnicity-based boundaries and deal with stigmatisation. This is exemplified by the case of the Russian-speaking women in Estonia. To arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of expressions of ethnicity and responses to stigmatisation, we follow an intersectional approach, considering how constructions of ethnicity and reactions to stigmatisation are gendered. This study adds a gender dimension to understanding belonging and the discursive construction of group boundaries by minority groups. We use the ‘equalisation strategies’ framework developed by Lamont and Bail (2007) to understand how a specific group of Russian-speaking women in Estonia attempt to establish themselves as equal with dominant ethnic groups. Our findings illuminate how, in the Estonian context, claims of belonging can be made and seen as legitimate on the basis of ethnicity rather than stemming from and linked to the discourses of citizenship or civil rights.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, intersectionality, stigmatisation, equalisation strategies, group boundaries, Russian-speakers, gender, Estonia

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2018.1.02>

### **1. Introduction**

This paper contributes to understanding how minority groups construct their identities in relation to dominant ethnic groups and deal with perceived stigmatisation. In this article, we have two more specific aims. First, we examine how members of an ethnic minority group draw and challenge ethnicity-based boundaries. Our second objective is, following the work of Lamont and Bail (2007), to identify and examine equalisation strategies used by members of an ethnic minority aiming to establish themselves as equals with a dominant group.

In studying how ethnicity-based boundaries and ethnic belonging are negotiated through narrative means, we take an intersectional perspective and

consider how ethnicity intersects with gender, in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of expressions of ethnicity and stigmatisation.

We examine these questions on the example of Estonia's Russian-speaking population, which includes the largest ethnic minority group in Estonia – Russian-Estonians. More specifically, we focus on the work and career narratives of a specific group of Russian-speaking women: those who have obtained tertiary education and have good Estonian language skills, but are experiencing employment difficulties. The situation of a minority in the labour market is an apt indication of how well they are doing in the society. Estonia's labour market exhibits similar tendencies to other EU labour markets, where ethnic minority women are more disadvantaged compared to native men and women. Russian-speaking women in Estonia, compared to other groups at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, have been found to have the lowest income, job satisfaction and job security (Hansson and Aavik 2012). This concerns even highly qualified and Estonian-language proficient Russian-speaking women (Aavik 2015).

Following Lamont and Bail (2007:20), we argue that studying the equalisation strategies used by Russian-speaking women in Estonia will not only produce new understandings of how this particular minority group deals with stigmatisation, but also about the nature of discrimination in Estonia, in the sphere of work and employment as well as beyond. Moreover, our findings illuminate how, in the Estonian context, claims of belonging can be made and seen as legitimate on the basis of ethnicity rather than citizenship or rights. This study complements Lamont and Bail's (2007) comparative analysis of four cases, adding a fifth case and a gender dimension to understanding group boundaries and equalisation strategies.

## **2. The Russian-speaking minority and the position of Russian-speaking women in Estonian society**

In much of Anglo-American intersectional scholarship, migrant experiences are primarily understood through the interaction of gender, race/ethnicity and class (see Yeandle et al. 2006, Browne and Misra 2003). However, Russians in Estonia are not distinguished in terms of 'race'. Rather, group boundaries are primarily drawn based on the intertwined categories of ethnicity, language and culture.

In Estonia, 31.17% of the population belongs to ethnic groups other than Estonians (*Statistics Estonia 2016*). As a result of Soviet migration and population policy, large numbers of Russian-speaking immigrants were introduced to Estonia after World War II. These first-generation Russian-speaking migrants had a similar level of education compared to ethnic Estonians and did not experience status change as a result of immigration (Lindemann 2011:94). Today, Russians constitute the largest ethnic minority in Estonia, 25.10% of the population (*Statistics Estonia 2016*). Together with other smaller minority groups originating from the former Soviet Union, such as Ukrainians and Belarusians, they are often referred to as the Russian-speaking population in Estonia.

The Russian-speaking minority in Estonia is unique because of the shift in ethnic power relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of new democracies in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. While in the Soviet Union, ethnic Russians constituted the largest and dominant ethnic group, those Russians (and their contemporary descendants), who were relocated as a result of Soviet managed migration programmes and are currently living in the Baltic countries, have lost their status as a dominant ethnic group since the collapse of the empire. This is exemplified by their changing position in the labour market, which is linked to their position in the society more broadly. Soviet-era immigration was related to industrialisation – labour migrants mostly came to work in Estonian industrial enterprises. The collapse of the industrial sector at the demise of the Soviet Union entailed a loss of labour market position for the Russian-speaking population. Since 1991, Russian-speakers in Estonia began to experience similar problems in the labour market as many first-generation immigrants in Western Europe (Lindemann 2011:94). Thus, the “formerly ‘privileged minority’” (Vetik and Helemäe 2011) experienced a loss of privilege in the labour market and in the society.

Today, the Estonian labour market is characterised by considerable ethnic and gender segregation, compared to other labour markets in the EU. While non-ethnic Estonians constitute around one third of the entire labour force in Estonia, their situation in the labour market is often more complicated than that of ethnic Estonians (Lepik 2010, Marksoo and Järv 2008, Malk 2010, Krusell 2007, Lindemann 2011, 94<sup>1</sup>). Ethnic segregation manifests itself in the distribution of workers in economic sectors and occupations: ethnic minorities tend to be employed in more low-skilled jobs, while Estonians are disproportionally represented in higher and more prestigious positions (Marksoo and Järv 2008:17, Lepik 2010)<sup>2</sup>. Intersections of gender and ethnicity have become particularly salient in shaping people’s labour market experiences (Hansson and Aavik 2012). Ethnic Estonian men have clearly emerged as the most successful and privileged group in the Estonian labour market. On the other side of the spectrum are Russian-speaking women, who have become the most disadvantaged group if we take into account both gender and ethnicity. By 2008, they had the lowest income, lowest job satisfaction and lowest job security (ibid).

The more disadvantaged social status and labour market position of ethnic minorities, compared to Estonians, is today often explained by factors related to human capital, such as their lack of sufficient Estonian language proficiency, qualifications or citizenship. Yet, studies have found no significant correlation between the incomes of non-Estonians and their language skills (Toomet 2011: 65). Compared to Estonians, the incomes of even highly qualified and Estonian

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<sup>1</sup> However, educational experiences of the Russian-speaking minority and the native population might differ somewhat due to Estonia’s segregated school system. For more on language-based segregation of the school system in Estonia, see Hogan-Brun (2007)

<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive overview of the position Russian-speakers in the Estonian labour market see Lindemann 2011.

language proficient ethnic minorities remain lower (Krusell 2007:5). These findings are consistent with the experience of many Western countries, where the labour market position of ethnic and racial minorities, compared to native populations, has been found more vulnerable (ibid). Thus, other factors beyond those related to human capital contribute to the continuing and increasing disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities, especially Russian-speaking women, in the Estonian labour market.

These have to do with attitudes and practices of the majority population who have a tendency to exclude and reject members of ethnic minorities in certain life situations (Ubakivi-Hadachi 2016). These patterns of exclusion manifest in the minority's perceptions of the majority's construction of the Russian-speakers' permanent symbolic "otherness" and find evidential support in concrete life events as well as in the subtle signs of symbolic violence. As a consequence, these symbolic perceptions prevent inclusionary practices even when potentially integrating factors, such as Estonian language skills, are accounted for (Ubakivi-Hadachi 2016).

### *2.1. The relationship of ethnicity to language*

While in the Estonian public discourse and indeed in much of academic research on ethnicity, an implicit and straightforward relationship is assumed between the categories of ethnicity and language, the interplay between these two categories should be made more explicit. Upon the Soviet occupation of Estonia, as part of the Russification policy, Russian became the language of communication in the public sphere, assuming the role of an official language. Estonians were expected to become bilingual, whereas no such need existed for the Russian-speaking population (Kus 2011:3), as the dominant ethnic group in the Soviet empire. Estonian language skills only became relevant for Russian-speakers after Estonia regained its independence in 1991.

In the Estonian society today, language often functions as a visible category through which ethnicity-based privilege or disadvantage are produced and secured and through which othering and exclusion take place in a number of social contexts, such as the labour market where strict language requirements are present and monitored closely (Lindemann 2011). It is through the use of language in various social situations that the 'ethnic other' is identified, or rather, constructed, as many Russian-speakers are 'marked' by their accents and names. Yet, many of those who do not identify as ethnic Estonians are not subjected to othering, as their fluent non-accented Estonian enables them to 'pass' as Estonian in many contexts; for instance where their names, which might reveal their ethnic origins, are not invoked. This might work to their advantage in a society where linguistic and ethnic boundaries are still very much present and function as a basis for othering. In summary, it is often through perceived linguistic difference that the 'ethnic other' is constructed.

Furthermore, in Estonia, language functions as a prerequisite for granting citizenship, which refers to a formal and legal status, a relationship between an

individual and a state. Hence, it functions as a means of determining who should and should not enjoy the status of a citizen with full legal rights and obligations.

### **3. Theoretical approaches and key concepts**

#### *3.1. Intersectionality*

Much research on ethnic minorities focuses on examining one social category at a time – ethnicity. In order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of ways in which ethnic boundaries are drawn and challenged and how marginalised groups deal with stigmatisation, the consideration of other relevant categories is crucial. In the context of Estonia, the labour market exhibits notable inequalities based on gender. Hence, we follow an intersectional approach here.

Originating from the work of feminist scholars (see for example Crenshaw 1991, Bowleg 2008, Lykke 2010, Hancock 2007, Shields 2008, Yuval-Davis 2006), intersectionality holds that socially constructed categories of identity and difference do not operate in isolation, but interact and reinforce each other in people's experiences. Ethnicity is not the only and not always the primary category that members of ethnic groups identify or are associated with by others.

Intersectionality maintains that social categories shape one another and are fused to “create unique experiences and opportunities for all groups” (Browne and Misra 2003:448). Members of ethnic minorities who are differently positioned in terms of gender, age and other relevant categories are likely to experience their belonging to an ethnic minority somewhat differently. The participants of this study – Russian-speaking women with higher education and good Estonian language skills – are uniquely positioned at the intersection of multiple social categories.

However, to claim that people's social positioning in terms of these categories entirely determines their lives and experiences, is misleading and denies them agency (Aavik 2015). While people might be placed into categories such as ‘women’ or ‘working class’ etc., “this in itself does not tell us about the kinds of identities they build” (Lawler 2002:255). While our identities cannot be divorced entirely from our social context, neither do externally imposed categories determine people's interpretation of the world (ibid.). Hence, while we enter social interactions as already identified with various categories, we are however able to use our agency to conform to and/or resist tacit norms associated with these categories in our interactions with others (Aavik 2015). In this paper, we follow this fluid understanding of identity construction. An intersectional approach helps to understand how the invoking of categories in narratives is contextual – not all categories are always emphasised. While our research participants explicitly identified ethnicity as the primary source of stigmatisation, we pay attention to how it is intertwined with other dimensions of exclusion that are less explicitly expressed.

It is certainly important to consider other social divisions, such as age, but due to reasons of space and analytical complexity, we limit ourselves to paying closer attention to gender.

### *3.2 Narrative identity and stigmatised identities*

We understand identities as socially constructed and accomplished in social interaction. Identity “is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens 1991: 51). Thus, “social actors continually participate in a process of ‘becoming’ that incorporates their interpretations of past social experiences into their sense of who they are” (Fields, Copp and Kleinman 2006).

We take a narrative approach to identity, understanding identities as ‘narratively constructed’ (Smith and Sparkes 2008). When people tell stories about their lives, they do so in order to “make sense of the world, of our relationship to that world, and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves” (Lawler 2002:249). The function of narrative is much more than just representing experience, it is also ‘constituting reality’ (Bruner 1991:5). Narratives can be conceptualised as actions, as people design and produce pieces of talk with intentions, and what they tell has always consequences in the immediate context of telling as well as beyond it (Aavik 2015).

Not all identities occupy equal positions in the social hierarchy. While some identities are valued, others are ‘stigmatized identities’ (Kaufman and Johnson 2004) or ‘troubled subject positions’ (Staunaes 2003). Social actors “make emotional efforts to resolve fundamental conflicts between valued and stigmatized identities” (Fields, Copp and Kleinman 2006).

### *3.3. Conceptualisations of ethnicity<sup>3</sup>*

According to Fenton (2010:3), “ethnicity refers to the social construction of descent and culture” around which people build meanings and elaborate the idea of a community. Ethnicity operates at different levels – it involves “self-identification processes of individuals, collective internal discourses of ethnic groups and external discourses on ethnicity in the mainstream population” (FRA 2011:15).

In line with our general conceptualisation of identities, ethnicity and ethnic identity too are not pre-given, fixed or static categories. Instead, they are socially constructed and thus “are subject to a great deal of flux and change – both intergenerationally, over the life course, and situationally” at the individual level (Waters 2002:25). Ethnicity then is a situated identity and it is negotiated in social interactions (Noels, Leavitt and Clement 2010:741–742). Following an intersec-

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of ethnicity is often seen as inseparable from the concepts of nation and race (Fenton 2010, Wimmer 2008). However, the ways in which the category “race” is constructed, refer more to nature and biology while “ethnicity” is associated with culture and geographical roots, yet often both labels overlap (Verloo 2006:218).

tional approach, ethnicity does not function in isolation, but shapes and is shaped by other social categories.

Ethnic boundaries too are not rigid. According to Wimmer (2008:976), “ethnic distinctions may be fuzzy and boundaries soft, with unclear demarcations and few social consequences, allowing individuals to maintain membership in several categories or switch identities situationally” (Wimmer 2008:976). Furthermore, boundaries vary depending on specific social, situational or institutional context (*ibid.*).

Barth (1969, 15) argues that “the critical focus of investigation [...] becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff which it encloses”. Fenton (2010:92) explains the importance of Barth’s work by accentuating his attempt to “detach ‘culture’ from ethnic group in the sense that ethnic groups are not described by the sum of their cultural characteristics but by their deployment of markers of difference in relation with other ‘marked’ groups”. This is also the approach followed here.

#### 3.4. Equalisation strategies of stigmatised ethnic groups

In this article, we are concerned with the ways ethnic minorities construct ethnic boundaries and the ways they discursively deal with perceived or expected stigmatisation (Lamont and Bail 2007:1). We rely on the ‘equalisation strategies’ framework developed by Lamont and Bail (2007), which deals with ways in which ethnically/racially constructed groups routinely attempt to “1) challenge stereotypes about their group; 2) transform the meanings associated with their collective identity; and 3) create, enact or demand new forms of personal interaction on a day-to-day basis” (*ibid.*, 1). Lamont and Bail discuss individual equalisation strategies in relation to the strength of ethno-racial group boundaries (both social and symbolic), based on four different settings where stigmatised groups face different types of boundaries of different strength: Palestinians in Israel, Catholics in Northern Ireland, blacks in Brazil and Quebecois in Canada. In terms of the salience of group boundaries outlined by Lamont and Bail, the Estonian case does not entirely correspond to any of the presented cases. However, it is most similar to the context of Quebec, with ethnicity and language functioning as primary categories based on which exclusion takes place. Yet, the socio-economic divide between the two main ethnic groups in Estonia is considerably larger than in Quebec, with strong symbolic divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

We expand Lamont and Bail’s typology of the salience of different types of social boundaries with the example of the case of Russian-speaking women with high levels of cultural capital in Estonia. We aim to complement Lamont and Bail’s analysis by conceptualising the use of Estonia’s Russian-speaking women’s equalisation strategies as a form of agency. We understand this agency as shaped by (negative) opinions perceivably conveyed by “others” (the Estonian-speakers, men etc.) and internalised by the interviewees as a form of constraint. In other words, we examine in what instances the strategies are successful at helping the interviewees articulate a discourse of equalisation as well as at retaining a sense of

proud difference and uniqueness with regard to their ethnicised and gendered identities.

This contrasts Lamont's and Bail's approach which is more concerned with either universalistic or particularistic arguments presented in equalisation strategies fighting stereotyping, and thus with the way a stigmatised group attempts to either find commonalities with the dominant group on universal basis ('we are all humans') or seek empowerment through the affirmation of its distinctiveness (through specific ethnicity, religious beliefs etc.). We claim that it is much more fruitful to adopt a less rigid framework where universalistic and particularistic criteria can exist simultaneously and have conflating functions. We thus aim to delve deeper and examine how equalisation strategies create a suitable terrain for the diffusion of symbolic violence<sup>4</sup> or act in accordance with its logic. This enables us to study the instances in which our interviewees become entrapped by the equalisation strategies and downplay their difference (which could be valuable and important in its own right) in order to be able to belong to the majority group. The chosen approach contributes further to Lamont and Bail's by adding the category of gender to the different types of group boundaries (in addition to religion, language, race, place of residence and socio-economic background as presented by Lamont and Bail).

#### 4. Research materials and method

The analysis draws on 11 in-depth narrative interviews conducted (by one of us, Kadri) from December 2011 to March 2012 with Russian-speaking women (aged 32–62), who at the time of the interview were unemployed or working at jobs below their educational qualifications. All participants had tertiary degrees. All of them were Estonian citizens living in the two largest cities of Estonia, Tallinn and Tartu, and were found using snowball sampling.

While much qualitative research on ethnic minority women in Europe focuses on first-generation newcomers, the participants in this study are overwhelmingly second-generation migrants. Eight participants were born in Estonia and three elsewhere in the Soviet Union at the time, having migrated to Estonia with their families in their childhood. Thus, they are a part of an established ethnic minority in and citizens of Estonia<sup>5</sup>.

Participants were asked to narrate their employment (and educational) paths, starting from their high school, and describe their current job or, if they were unemployed, their last job and experiences relating to unemployment. The interview design was open and participants were able to and encouraged to raise and

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<sup>4</sup> Symbolic violence is treated here as "*violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:167, italics in original)

<sup>5</sup> However, as of 2012, 6,53% of the Estonian population do not have citizenship, this group overwhelmingly includes Russian-speakers who arrived in Estonia during the Soviet era (Statistics Estonia 2012)

pursue topics that they considered important, relating to the general theme of the interview. During interviews, the interviewer usually refrained from referring to the participants' ethnicity explicitly; however, as respondents spontaneously brought up this issue, the interviewer pursued the topic by asking further questions.

Interviews were conducted in Estonian, as all participants had Estonian language skills that ranged from upper intermediate to proficient. However, participants were often self-critical and insecure about their Estonian language skills (for more on this, see Aavik 2015). Interviews were analysed following the main tenets of the narrative method (Riessman 2008, Gubrium and Holstein 2009).

### **5. Analysis and findings: ethnic boundaries and equalisation strategies**

When presenting their career paths and rationalising their labour market situation, Russian-speaking women in this study typically raised issues relating to ethnicity spontaneously, without being asked about it directly. The emergence and prevalence of this category in the interviews was likely facilitated by the fact that the participants were initially approached as *Russian-speaking women*, not just as *individuals* in the labour market, thereby drawing attention to their ethnicity and gender.

While the interviews concentrated on the theme of work, the category of ethnicity was invoked also beyond the context of employment. Prioritising ethnicity over other social categories suggests that constructing themselves as employees in the labour market as well as citizens in the Estonian society more generally, through referring to ethnic and linguistic markers, was a relevant way of self-identification to the participants. It also constituted a mode of self-presentation that was the most available for them in this context, given their positioning on the axis of the category of ethnicity vis-à-vis the interviewer who identifies as Estonian. It is likely that ethnicity and ethnic identity would not have been emphasised (perhaps not at all) if the interviewer had spoken to other Estonians about their employment experiences in the Estonian labour market, due to the shared experience of both parties belonging to 'unmarked groups' (Choo and Ferree 2010) or occupying 'untroubled subject positions' (Staunaes 2003:105) on the axis of ethnicity, in other words, between members of groups who lack experiences with discrimination and stigmatisation based on ethnicity.

In the following sections, we present how our research participants deal with perceived stigmatisation. We consider how and in which contexts ethnicity was invoked as a means to draw or challenge boundaries based on this category. We also outline the equalisation strategies employed. The analysis is divided into three themes – the first relating to Russian-speaking women's experiences in the labour market, the second concerning citizenship and integration, and the third dealing with issues related to the younger generation of ethnic minorities in Estonia.

### 5.1. Employment: Russian and Estonian work cultures

Our research participants' first references to ethnic boundaries primarily occurred when they described their educational experiences and some of their earlier jobs; however, these references figured more prominently in accounts on their more recent work experiences. Ethnic and linguistic boundaries<sup>6</sup> were seen as the primary basis for their perceived exclusion and lack of success in the labour market.

One way in which the Russian-speaking women created ethnicity-based boundaries was through constructing Estonians and Russians differently as employees, as expressed by Marina (35):

*"I prefer to work with Estonians of course [...]. Well, I don't know, perhaps my mentality matches better with Estonians. Russians, they are like emotional and I myself am also very emotional, I love my husband, my parents, my child, but I don't need to love people in my workplace... but Russians, they just can't. I like normal, precise [people]... well the communication has to be correct. But in a Russian-speaking workplace it is very difficult, there are very personal relationships there [...]. I like Estonians more as colleagues."*

Marina refers to 'different mentalities' that she perceives Russians and Estonians to have, constructing Estonians as more detached and aloof compared to Russians in the context of work. In this framework, her statement that she would rather work with Estonians could be seen as an equalising strategy through which she seeks to demonstrate that she fits in and seeks to be seen as a suitable employee in workplaces occupied by the dominant ethnic group. However, by using this strategy, she attempts to present herself as similar to ethnic Estonians and to distance herself from what she presents as the 'stereotypically Russian' work culture to which she implicitly attributes more inferior qualities compared to what she sees as the typically 'Estonian work ethic'. Hence, this desire to belong and be accepted by the dominant ethnic group in the context of work involves distancing herself from other Russian-speakers – whom she casts in a negative light. This, however, precludes Marina from using her 'Russianness', including her bilingualism, as a source of positive encouragement or advantage in the context of work. Instead, this constitutes as something she has to compensate for.

While in Marina's account, ethnicity is the only explicitly articulated category, Svetlana (49) implicitly includes the category of gender, as she sets herself apart from her Estonian colleagues, suggesting that her female Estonian co-workers might not like her because of her 'Russian temperament':

*"In [name of insurance company], when I entered, I was an employee with a free schedule, so that I only came to the office if I needed to hand in some work... and you come in, everyone is sitting like mice, like this, I said what's up now, quick quick quick, and then the bosses were like well, Svetlana has arrived again, well, now everyone is waking up [laughs]... I said, ok well, half an hour,*

<sup>6</sup> Ethnicity and language are often conflated in public discourse as well as in academic research on the Russian-speaking in minority in Estonia. For a more detailed discussion on the relationship between the two categories in Estonia, see Aavik 2015:24

*I completed all the work, so I run, so, [they said] where [are you going], where [are you going], it is warmer in the room and everyone smiles right away, well, this is [my] character... Well, but Estonians are more like... of course they whisper there behind the wall like this... and of course some women, they do not tolerate, when one is very so temperamental and very successful."*

In this self-presentation, Svetlana is relying on some commonly used cultural representations pertaining to Russian women in particular. The oppositional stereotypes of 'temperamental Russians' and 'aloof Estonians', as well as the gendered narrative of women's jealousy towards each other are easily available and rarely contested narrative tropes which Svetlana makes use of to differentiate herself from her Estonian colleagues in a way that is simultaneously gendered and ethnicised. She explicitly identifies herself here as a Russian-speaking woman and as such, different from Estonians and specifically, from Estonian-speaking women.

Like Marina, Svetlana draws an ethnicity-based boundary in this narrative. However, her construction of this boundary is distinct from Marina's and she seeks to overcome it in a different manner. She presents herself as dissimilar from her Estonian colleagues, based on the intersection of ethnicity and gender – as a Russian-speaking woman. She sees herself as standing out from her Estonian colleagues, but in a positive way. She wishes to be accepted as a colleague in an Estonian workplace despite, or in fact, *because* of her difference, which she attributes to her ethnic identity. This is an attempt to fit in while preserving her "uniqueness". Hence, Svetlana's way of dealing with stigmatisation here is to emphasise her distinctness in terms of ethnicity as something positive and enriching in an ethnic majority work environment, highlighting positive change that she, as a Russian-speaking woman, brings to her workplace, but perceives not to be appreciated by her (particularly Estonian female) colleagues.

### 5.2. Citizenship and integration: constructions of 'home'

While the initially agreed central topic of the interview was employment, participants typically did not confine their stories to the theme of their career. It was common for them to discuss ethnicity in a wider social and political context, including interethnic relations in Estonia. In this section, we discuss how they negotiate ethnic boundaries and deal with stigmatisation in the context of integration and the construction of "home" as a major theme that spontaneously emerged from the narratives.

In giving an account of her experiences at school, Ekaterina (32) points to the issue of integrating Russian-speakers into the Estonian society. This is a major question of public debate and a politically divisive topic in Estonia since the restoration of independence in 1991. Ekaterina presents her own integration into the Estonian society as a conscious choice made by her family in order to "fit in":

*"My mother was a very good accountant with a lot of experience. She said that we have to learn the Estonian language as well as possible. Because we are inhabitants of Estonia, despite the fact that our family has Russian-speaking*

*members and we call ourselves Russians, Estonia is our home. I may say that when I'm in Russia, for example on vacation or visiting my grandmother, who was also born in Estonia and moved to St. Petersburg at a young age, I don't feel that Russia is my home, because the mentality, life experiences, lifestyle, culture etc. of people living there differs a lot from how I am used to living in Estonia, communicating with people here, with Russian-speaking and also Estonian-speaking inhabitants. So if the question comes up where is my homeland, then I usually say that I've been deprived of it. Russia is not my home, because I was born in Soviet Estonia. **This new Estonia is also not my home**, because I constantly feel that Russian-speaking people are excluded. And this comes from the upper level, from people holding power. Because when communicating with whichever Estonians, I don't feel like this. Our family has a lot of Estonians among our acquaintances."*

Ekaterina emphasises her family's conscious efforts to be accepted as equal citizens in their new homeland by learning the Estonian language and by making friends with members of the ethnic majority population. Her narrative serves as a response to some popular sentiments in the Estonian society, which are expressed particularly by nationalist (political) groups in connection to ethnicity and ethnic belonging as greatly politicised issues. This discourse includes questioning Russian-speakers' loyalty to Estonia, as well as their willingness to make efforts to integrate by learning the Estonian language. Further, she responds here to related discourses attempting to determine or question where the 'true home' for Russian-speakers in Estonia lies, as well as constructing them as fundamentally different from Estonians. Ekaterina's narrative is an attempt to respond to these claims circulating in the Estonian public discourse, by stressing that she has done what is expected of her as a member of an ethnic minority to integrate properly, highlighting her own and her family's agency in this. Yet, despite the described efforts, she considers it a failed endeavour, resulting in her not feeling home anywhere. She thus relates her personal sense of belonging to the political project of belonging in Estonia, which she quite consciously states as problematic. In the last narrative, Ekaterina uses a similar equalisation strategy as Marina, presenting herself as different from Russians living in Russia, to send a message that she is more similar to Estonians and should therefore be accepted as an equal citizen in Estonia. Thus, her personal sense of belonging is reinforced by and infused with the negatively assessed political project of belonging.

The same strategy was employed in other narratives as well. Surprisingly, even those research participants, who initially highlighted how Estonians and Russian-speakers differ in terms of mentality in the context of work, however later on emphasised similarities between the two groups when discussing citizenship and integration. Specifically, they highlighted ways in which the Russian minority in Estonia is culturally close to Estonians and differs considerably from Russians in Russia, in terms of mentality, as Marina declares:

*"...Well Russians in Russia are of course..well different. If a person lives for a long time among this group [Estonians], then the mentality of course... changes... [...] This cultural tradition that we have here... that's why we are*

*more like Estonians than Russians [in Russia], it seems to me. I think that Estonians think that Russians in Estonia are totally different, [...] Estonians think that Russians are different from them, but actually people are similar. Although the language is different, the cultural traditions are the same, the parties etc. We drink the same way [laughs]... There are no big differences in the mentality.”*

Similarly, Svetlana contradicts herself, as she recounts how she learned the Estonian language. In this narrative she elaborates on the differences between Russian-speakers in Estonia and Russians in Russia:

*“It [Estonian language] has simply come to me, we haven’t ever noticed if you are Russian or Estonian or what language you speak. Well, it was just simply a natural language for me. And why can’t it be natural now, why all the time everywhere you are being fed in and repeated that there are Russians, that there are those. Our culture is like this! Our culture has been totally mixed up since those Germans were here 1300 and so on, well, from that time the cultures have been mixed up. [...] I don’t understand what’s the difference between Russian and Estonian. I don’t see a difference... for example, if I go to Russia, they tell me all the time that I speak Russian with an accent... [...] When I go to Russia, I don’t stand some of the things, I mean I communicate in a different way. They say, where have you come from, perhaps from the Baltics? I said yes, from the Baltics. They right away feel that you are... you behave differently and you talk ... and you express yourself differently, compose yourself differently. [...] I once... [...] I told my husband, let’s go to Russia, I will take some courses there... He said, well, where are you going with your character and your mentality, to live in Russia. First of all this dirt and all. [...] Their life there is like this, if the village is dirty and filthy, so let it be. And when you start building there beautiful gardens and house, there, on the Petseri<sup>7</sup> side there are those Estonian villages, you can see right away, the tiny beautiful houses, the grass is cut.”*

The aim of our discussion in this section, however, is not to identify and critically evaluate contradictions in the participants’ narratives, but to examine the use of equalisation strategies in different contexts. The discursive distancing from Russians in Russia and constructing Russian-speakers in Estonia as culturally close to Estonians serves as an equalisation strategy through which these Russian-speaking women seek acceptance in Estonia as rightful citizens as well as members of the community in a symbolic way. This sense of marginalisation on the basis of ethnicity does not include explicit references to their acquired citizenship and to the rights they have thus attained. Hence, the respondents seem to greatly downplay their status as Estonian citizens and feel compelled to reinforce it by lessening ethnic distance with the majority. The use of this strategy (in spontaneously presented elaborate stories) in the context of citizenship and integration suggests that they feel insecure about their place in Estonia.

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<sup>7</sup> Petseri, known in English as Pechory, is a town and territory on the border between Estonia and Russia. Estonia lost the territory to USSR in WW II. After lengthy border disputes, it remains part of Russia.

### 5.3. Intersections of gender, place and age: ethnic minority motherhood

A significant concern that emerged from the narratives had to do with younger generations of Russian-speakers in Estonia, namely their identification with and attachment to Estonia. This was well encapsulated by 58-year old Oksana, who worried that her children in particular – and Russian-speaking youth more generally – would not identify strongly enough with Estonia as their home and will consequently leave the country. She explained the Russian-speaking youth leaving Estonia with prevalent negative attitudes towards the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, which she describes as having worsened after the incident of the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn in 2007<sup>8</sup>. She voiced her opinion on the highly politicised issue of the Bronze Soldier, which involves conflicting interpretations of history. She elaborated on the meaning of May 9th, positioning herself as a representative of the Russian-speaking community in Estonia, to an interviewer whom she implicitly assumed to hold a different view on the matter as a member of the dominant ethnic Estonian population:

*“I say again... and a thousand times I say that for us, the war... when they talk about this 9th of May... then for me personally, for me and for many Russians this is first and foremost the Siege of Leningrad... Those children, who died there... and well... we... do not like ally ourselves with Stalin... no... this topic is for all of us well... and all this... well children were raised to be loyal... to the Estonian state... And then... there everything was broken [the 2007 Bronze Soldier incident].”*

Oksana’s obvious passion and defensiveness evident here demonstrates the great sensitivity she feels around this issue. Differing perspectives on the Bronze Soldier highlight the competing histories that underlie ethnic tensions in Estonia. This spontaneous narrative initiated by her in this interview constitutes another reaction to the wider public narrative in Estonia according to which Russian-speaker’s loyalty to Estonia should be questioned, in this case, on the basis of the meanings they attribute to history. In this broader political narrative, as voiced primarily by Estonian nationalist political groups – one can take either of only two positions or ‘sides’, representing two polarised meanings: a) WW II ended with the occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union and with the beginning of a totalitarian regime, with the Bronze Soldier monument symbolising this b) Soviet Union was one of the winners of WW II and the monument represents Soviets as liberators of Tallinn from the Nazi Germany. Those who take the latter view are automatically judged as disloyal to the Estonian state and, as such, not worthy of the status of equal citizenship.

Oksana’s effort to offer this explanation in the course of the interview can be viewed as an equalisation strategy, in which she is keen to prove that her ethnic belonging as a Russian does not make her disloyal to Estonia. She seeks to bridge the perceived ethnic divide by attempting to correct what she feels to be a misrepresentation of the Russian-speaking community’s perspectives of this key

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview, see Lehti, Jutila and Jokispilä 2008.

political issue as one of the major sources of the divide between the two ethnic communities even in contemporary Estonia. By discursively demonstrating her loyalty, she emphasises her role as a good Russian-speaking mother, which in this context means raising her children in the spirit of ‘loyalty’ to the Estonian state:

*“I was born here, my mother was born here, actually... well... my father was of course an occupant... according to this terminology... but I would say that my life has only been connected to Estonia, only with Tallinn. Tallinn is my city, I was born in the Old Town Square [central square in Tallinn Old Town], our first room was on the Old Town Square... in the most beautiful house with two windows. [...] In this house I spent my first five years. So this is my city and my country, this is my city... and I raised my children like this too, so that when they were small, I read to them all Estonian fairy tales, well everything... I did everything, so that they would be integrated and after this 2007 [incident with the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn, see Lehti et al. (2008)] my eldest son said, I think I will leave the country and then everything was... broken, it was all broken...”*

The categories of gender and ethnicity intersect, as Oksana emphasises her efforts to integrate her children into Estonian society by systematically immersing them in the Estonian language and culture – the ‘right thing to do’ as an ethnic minority mother. This could be considered an equalisation strategy in which appeals to equal citizen status are made through the younger generation. However, in this narrative, Oksana considers herself to have failed in this task, and thus her feelings of guilt are stemming from her identity as a *Russian-speaking mother*. As presented in the Estonian public discourse, it is usually the Russian-speaking population on whom the task to integrate lies; the process is not viewed as a mutual responsibility of the two population groups.

Additionally, in this narrative, Oksana attempts to affirm her belonging as an equal citizen through evoking her connection with place – with the centre of the capital Tallinn, a space symbolically belonging to ethnic Estonians. It has been pointed out that a strong sense of belonging to the country and to its land can be considered as a positive integrative sign (Nimmerfeldt 2011) and as such could be seen as a successful equalisation strategy. Our respondents indeed expressed their affinity towards Estonia through the concepts of place and space. However, while this connection with place can help to build a sense of belonging, it is not enough in itself, as our findings demonstrate. Indeed, these narratives express a struggle for acceptance through the idea of a common ‘homeland’ or a ‘home city’. However, these stories speak of our respondents’ frustration when their efforts go unrewarded, as they do not achieve inclusion under these categories. Thus, it is important to ponder whether the majority actually accepts the minority’s plea for a shared spatial identity or whether Russianness ultimately partially overlaps with the notion of being an occupant and not an equal inhabitant, as was expressed in one of the narratives. Will the stigma of ‘Occupiers’ ever be overcome?

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has dealt with ways in which representatives of a marginalised group see themselves in relation to hegemonic ethnic groups and respond to stigmatisation. We used the concept of ‘equalization strategies’ as ‘micro-level recognition struggles’ by Lamont and Bail (2007), to identify individual actions used by members of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. We looked at a specific group of Russian-speaking women, examining ways in which they construct ethnicity and negotiate belonging in the spheres of employment, citizenship and integration, as well as regarding the younger generation of Russians in Estonia. We do not aim to generalise our findings to the entire Russian population in Estonia, but sought to gain a deeper understanding of how a particular group of Russian-speaking women negotiate ethnicity-based boundaries and deal with stigmatisation.

In terms of the permeability of group boundaries, Estonia does not neatly fit into the typology outlined by Lamont and Bail. Out of the four contexts, the position of Estonia’s Russian speaking minority comes closest to the case of the Francophone Quebecois, but exhibits even stronger linguistic boundaries, as well as more salient socio-economic divisions. Hence, Estonia could be thought of as a fifth, unique case supplementing this typology. The specificities of this case can be analysed as follows.

Some of the equalisation strategies we identified appear somewhat contradictory. While our research participants actively constructed ethnicity-based boundaries and appealed to ethnicity as the primary source of their disadvantage in the labour market and other spheres of life, they simultaneously sought to reduce ethnicity-based divisions when talking about work and citizenship more generally. This involved discursively differentiating themselves from ethnic Estonians in some contexts, while emphasising similarities between the two ethnicities in others. Our study thus highlights the contextual nature of the strategies used and adds to the framework of universalistic versus particularistic criteria of group comparisons presented in equalisation strategies, as theorised by Lamont and Bail (2007). Our findings suggest that it might be more important to ask, how particularistic criteria may be perceived, presented or internalised as positive or negative (in the case of different ‘labour cultures’), how universalistic concepts, such as similar gender, can become particularistic in intersectional constellations with ethnicity (in the case of Russian women and Estonian women in the workplace), how universalistic attributes can be seen through a particularistic lens and not thus understood as universalistic (in the case of our Russian-Estonian respondents and Estonian citizenship) or how seemingly universal roles, such as that of a mother, might be impregnated with a myriad of particularistic tendencies when the intersectional approach is adopted.

The equalisation strategies utilised by the Russian-speaking women as a response to perceived stigmatisation highlight the work that ethnic minorities have to engage in on a daily basis: a discursive process of making claims of belonging

that members of ethnic majorities do not need to undertake. We identified instances when these strategies were successful in helping Russian-speaking women to articulate a discourse of equalisation without denying, compromising or downplaying their different kinds of belonging and internalising the stereotypically negative sides of being positioned as ‘Russian’ on the axis of ethnicity. However, we cannot automatically assume that these kinds of strategies were always successful in the eyes of the majority. Furthermore, in some cases, the equalisation strategies were accompanied by a sense of internalised stereotypical negativity regarding Russians living outside of Estonia, as well as with regard to what were considered stereotypically Russian cultural traits. These findings provide insights into the discussion about the connections between equalisation strategies and assimilation, as the minority’s adoption of the symbolic ‘other’ constructed by the dominant group points to this direction.

In our view, focusing solely on the category of ethnicity to study the experiences of ethnic minorities does not enable to arrive at a nuanced picture of how ethnicity is constructed and how equalisation strategies are chosen and used. Hence, we relied on an intersectional perspective, which conceptualises identities and experiences as shaped by various socially constructed categories that people are classified into and identify with. In this paper, we showed some ways in which the construction of ethnicity and the negotiation of ethnic boundaries are gendered and thus are manifested in quite a specific manner in the narratives of Russian-speaking women. Gender was most prominently present in the context of the generational dimension, where the gendered category of motherhood was invoked. It can be argued that ethnic minority mothers construct both motherhood and ethnic identity in a unique way, based on some particular expectations that they are confronted with due to their intersectional positioning *as ethnic minority mothers*. For example, as primary carers and educators of ethnic minority children, the burden of instilling ‘proper’ values regarding loyalty to the nation state and successful integration to the society lies primarily on them. Unsuccessful integration can easily induce feelings of failure in some key dimensions of their identity as mothers. Thus, we consider the appeal to equal citizen status through younger generation as a gendered equalisation strategy.

Our findings raise some important questions about the basis on which minorities (can) make legitimate claims of belonging. Our interviewees refrained from using their Estonian citizenship status as leverage to explain or reinforce their right to belong. They resorted to the prevalent hegemonic narrative, which posits that they need to defend and justify their belonging in Estonia, thus uncritically identifying with the majority view on what it means to be Estonian in Estonia. The Russian-speaking women sought to articulate how similar they were to ‘ethnic’ Estonians, rather than appealing to a more universalistic, rights-based belonging. They thus lost the prerogative to choose their cultural attachments freely. They felt compelled to enter the muddy waters of claimed cultural affiliation with the majority group, rather than trying to enforce their rights to be accepted as Russians, Russian-Estonians or as whomever they choose to identify

with ethnically. In this context, citizenship seems to have lost its effect as an equaliser.

There might be another reason why the acquisition of Estonian citizenship is not enunciated in Russian-speaking women's equalisation strategies. As discussed earlier, some of the narratives imply certain suspicion towards the government or 'the people above'. Hence, the sense of belonging that our interviewees forged is strongly connected to the perceived official state of affairs regarding identity politics. This finding has not yet been extensively discussed in existing literature. As Yuval-Davis (2011) points out, it is important to analytically distinguish *belonging* from the *politics of belonging*. However, in our case, it is of utmost importance to see the links between the two. It appears that the personal feelings of belonging are constructed with the 'help' of the perceived politics of belonging and through the lens of the negative effect it has had on the creation of common identity based on citizenship. Through the lens of the dominant politics of belonging in Estonia, claiming one's belonging on the basis of citizenship or civil rights is considered insufficient. This important finding calls for further investigation on the question of the bases which belonging is sought on in different contexts.

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