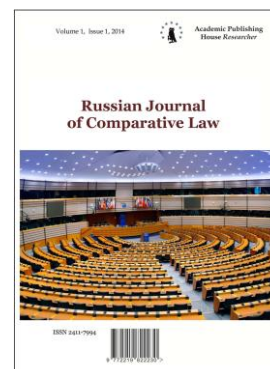


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Attitudes of Russian-speakers in Finland towards AntiCOVID-19 Restriction Measures in Spring, 2020

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Abstract

This contribution comments on mitigating the vulnerability of individuals belonging to national minorities amidst the COVID-19 crisis by inquiring how governmental campaigns affect the adherence to observing anti-pandemic recommendations by Russian-speakers in Finland. This is done by virtue of contextualizing the findings of an internet survey of attitudes of Russian speakers towards governmental antiCOVID-19 restriction measures conducted during the period of 1-8 April 2020 – or amidst the culmination of restrictions introduced by the Finnish government. The goal of the survey was to study the attitudes of Russian-speakers towards COVID-19 limitations with respect to observing self-isolation measures.

Keywords: minority media, antiCOVID-19 recommendations, attitude studies, social norms approach, Russian speakers in Finland.

1. Introduction

It is not only a matter of scientific curiosity to extend the existing state of knowledge of accommodating minority-majority relationships in separate legal and societal systems. More importantly, it is vital to explore the reasons for the adherence of minority group members to governmental recommendations in situations of national emergency. The interest in this theme is also driven by significant policy considerations in investigating the social implications of the current legislative and organizational framework of minority protection vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic, promoted by international bodies. For instance, on 28 May 2020, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities ([the FCNM Committee, 2020](#)) pointed out that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the vulnerability of persons belonging to national minorities in the CoE member States. Response for this should come from inclusive societies where rights of persons belonging to minorities are protected and respected which is also “a prerequisite for ensuring democracy, peace and security.” ([The FCNM Committee, 2020](#)).

These two rationales justify our goal to study possible solutions to mitigating the vulnerability of individuals belonging to national minorities amidst the COVID-19 crisis by inquiring how governmental campaigns affect the adherence to observing anti-pandemic recommendations by Russian-speakers. We examine the hypothesis that during the COVID19 crisis situation, the urgency of Russian speakers in Finland to adhere to the majority social norms was transformed into the matter of both, common and self-interest. In other words, in a crisis situation, the pressure to observe social norms coincides with conscious self-interest to counteract a significant national threat, which then becomes a common goal for the entire society. Thus,

the survey lets us further contextualize its findings against the background of scholarly findings in the area of majority-minority relationships.

During the period of 1-8 April 2020 – or amidst the culmination of restrictions introduced by the Finnish government, – the author launched an internet survey of attitudes of Russian-speakers towards restriction measures. The goal of the survey was to study the attitudes of Russian-speakers towards COVID-19 limitations with respect to observing self-isolation measures. This is a preliminary inquiry rather than a representative survey since distribution the question forms via internet makes it difficult to verify the representation samples. The article nevertheless comments on the findings of the said survey.

2. Methods and materials

Attitude study methodology was used for the purposes of devising survey questions. Attitudes include three elements: cognitive element (what I know about X), affective element (how I feel about X), and behavioral element (what I do about X) ([Marcinkowski, Reid, 2019](#)). Although the relationship between attitudes and behavior has been a topic of considerable debate ([Kraus, 1990](#)), it is established that the attitudes majorly predetermine the behavior ([Ajzen, 2001](#)).

As mentioned earlier, our understanding of the impact of antiCOVID-19 governmental campaigns on practicing self-isolation is based on the social norms approach. The authorities issued recommendations on how to behave in a certain societal context which can be considered social norms, if followed by society. Adherence to social norms comprises two elements: “reputation-driven” and “self-motivational” ([Lubchenco et al, 2016](#)). When the governments appealed to citizens to abstain from visiting friends and public places in order to slow down the COVID-19 contagion, the reputational element of anti-pandemic recommendations was reinforced, enabling individuals to act “in their self-interest in a fashion that also aligns their behavior with the larger goals of communities or society” ([Lubchenco et al, 2016](#)). A reputational element can thus affect individual, personally motivated incentives, which are “primarily intrinsic and driven by a belief in what constitutes “correct” individual behavior” ([Lubchenco et al., 2016](#)).

3. Discussion

3.1. The position of Russian-speakers in Finland

Inquiries into the issues of majority-minority relationships and social cohesion are important for Finland, where interethnic relations are characterised by a lower degree of cultural diversity. On the one hand, foreign language speakers make up 7.7 % of the total population ([Statistics Finland, 2019](#)), and, on the other hand, there is an increasing emphasis on labour migration ([National report by Finland to the OECD, 2019](#)). Currently, Russian-speakers are the greatest foreign language speaking group in Finland. With regard to the level of integration, the Russian-speakers of Finland can be considered a heterogeneous group ([Varjonen, 2018](#)). Despite – or because of – the geographical proximity and the intertwined histories of Finland and Russia, the intergroup relations between the Finnish majority and the Russian-speaking minority were characterised a decade ago by prejudice and discrimination towards the minority group ([Renvik et al., 2020](#)). In a 2009 European survey on minorities and discrimination, one quarter of Russians in Finland reported perceived discrimination, scoring highest among the four EU member states with considerable Russian minorities. The most recent 2017 European survey already demonstrates progress achieved in alleviating or reducing discrimination: “compared to all other groups, respondents from the Russian minority target group “indicate the lowest discrimination rates” ([EU-MIDIS, 2017: 29](#)). These changes might be a result of a stronger effort in achieving the ideal of diversity in Finland. Yet the recent recommendations of the FCNM Committee to Finland still regard the need to provide an “effective and inclusive channel of communication, consultation and influence on the decision-making process by all minority groups, in particular Russian and Karelian speakers” ([FCNM Report of Finland](#)).

3.2. Anti-COVID-10 governmental recommendations as distinct social norms

As mentioned earlier, governmental recommendations in Finland evolved into a distinct social norm where “social” – in a situation of emergency – applied to society as a whole. Emergency situations hardly reflect the diversity of cultures. Consequently, in both majority and minority communities, individual emotional responses to the COVID-19 crisis may well “fluctuate from straightforward panic and fear to disbelief and anguish born out of helplessness and

uncertainty” (Djolai, 2020). Following the Finnish mainstream media and the Facebook discussions among the Russian-speakers, it was possible to find those who strongly disagree with governmental anti-COVID-19 recommendations. Finnish-speaking forums showed that the supporters of the Social-Democrats which is the governmental majority party, mostly agreed with the Government’s course, whereas the supporters of the opposition remained skeptical about anti-COVID-19 recommendations. In Russian-speaking internet forums, this disagreement was mostly associated with downplaying the threat and the consequent willingness to maintain social contacts (based on the author’s personal experience).

3.3. Special vulnerability of minority groups vis-à-vis the COVID-19 media discourse

Members of minorities often find themselves in situations of special vulnerability, resulting from the negative consequences of self-isolation, i.e. possible inability to join discussions in social media due to language limitations, economic hardships, reliance on public transportation or a lack of possibilities to work at home. Moreover, a lack of access to effective information about COVID-19 can reduce the efficacy of the reputational element in governmental campaigns thus potentially discouraging members of minority groups following governmental recommendations. Accordingly, the FCNM Committee concluded that at their worst anti-pandemic measures can “endanger the enjoyment of some rights and freedoms of national minorities such as the freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of religion” (FCNM Committee, 2020). With respect to self-isolation, the WHO delivered a more nuanced recommendation, i.e. “to take into account people’s capacity to act on the advice being given” [individual motivational element – the author] since the recommended behaviour must be “doable and be adapted to people’s lifestyle; otherwise, it will not be widely adopted” (WHO, 2020).

During Spring 2020 minority rights violations unfortunately took place in during the reporting of news about the pandemic in Finland. It was *inter alia* reported that the Somalis had high rate of COVID-19 infections and that special efforts were made to inform Somali-speakers of the risks. Reports condemning those groups who ignored recommendations on self-isolation pointed out the customs of Somali-speakers to meet relatives and friends while not observing social distancing (News Finland, 2020). Yet suddenly the news feeds and fact-spreads on the topic “COVID-19 and Somali-speakers in Finland” disappeared soon after the Equality Ombudsman released her special blog (Equality Ombudsman, 2020), claiming that authorities “racialized” the spread of the infection by targeting specific group in terms of their ethnicity. After this blog appeared - Helsinki authorities ceased to talk publicly about infection rates among Somali-speakers, instead providing general information webpages about social distancing.

Although this example refers to a different minority group than Russian-speakers, it proves the need for refining recommendations for authorities on minority protection during crisis situations. When it comes to concrete vulnerability factors related to protecting Russian-speakers in Finland and applying these impediments to the COVID-19 crisis, we address the findings of the previous research. In particular, cultural habits as impediments are critical for understanding Russian speakers’ attitudes to self-isolation as that the latter experiences less loneliness than the native population (Varjonen, 2018). This can be traced to social habits, i.e. to communicating regularly with friends, relatives, and other associates. Employment in essential jobs as a vulnerability factor is precluding distance work. Yet research indicates that although the Russian-speaking minority is generally well educated, the employment rate is lower than that of the native population and the level of earnings is also often lower, compared to the native population (Varjonen, 2018).

3.4. On the media use of Russian-speakers in Finland

Previous research on the media use of Russian-speakers in Finland reveals certain ambiguities. In particular, the 2016 report of a project led by Davydova-Minguet, et al., entitled “Finland’s Russian Speakers as Media Users,” launched by the Finnish government, found that the use of Russian language media by the target audience is “rather extensive, albeit scattered” (Davydova-Minguet et al., 2016). In contrast, the 2020 Report by Culturas Foundation suggests that during the COVID-19 pandemic Russian-speakers seek information mainly from national Finnish media channels (both in Finnish and in Russian), while only 22 % of respondents consider Russian TV channels as main sources of information (Culturas Foundation, the 2020 Report). According to this 2020 study, the role of the Russian-language section of the national news media

corporation “YLE” in crisis communication was important, not only for those who understand only Russian. The Culturas Foundation’s report, nevertheless, acknowledges its major limitation, i.e. “failing to reach a significant portion of those Russian-speaking immigrants who, for one reason or another, are alienated from Finnish society” (Culturas Foundation, the 2020 Report).

According to the report by Davydova-Minguet et al., Russian television “produces an image of the world and different events that serves the objectives of the rulers as media users” (Davydova-Minguet, Sotkasiir, Oivo & Riihiläinen, 2016). As a reminder, the introduction of antiCOVID-19 measures in Russia took place two weeks later than in the Nordic states. At the same time, the study by the Cultural Foundation demonstrates that during the COVID-19 crisis, the respondents placed more trust in the actions of the Finnish authorities: on average, the respondents were satisfied with the decisions by Finnish authorities during the crisis, with Russian-speakers in particular satisfied with the information provided to them. Thus, a question to pursue by making our future inquiries would be whether exposure to Russian media-outlets reporting the negative consequences due to the late adoption of antiCOVID-19 measures in Russia, even by those minority members who wouldn’t have otherwise supported the course of the Finnish government, convinced these groups to follow the antiCOVID-19 recommendations in the name of slowing down the spread of the virus?

4. Results

An internet survey of attitudes of Russian-speakers towards restriction measures in Finland was launched by the author of this review during the period of 1-8 April 2020. It aimed to study the attitudes of Russian-speakers towards COVID-19 limitations with respect to observing self-isolation measures.

In response to the pandemic, the WHO proposed *inter alia* non-pharmaceutical anti-pandemic measures: social distancing, various movement restrictions, etc. (WHO 2020). In Finland, restrictions of basic rights during the Spring, 2020 pandemic remained at a minimum: the Governments limited public gatherings, as well as closed down educational institutions and public cultural, sport and recreational centers. Yet strict home-quarantine measures were precluded and no GPS tracking was employed. The authorities thus relied on citizens’ own judgment in respect of complying with recommendations to slow down the spread of the virus, i.e. social norms or recommendations on how to behave in a certain societal context. Such a social norms approach can be used as an “intervention strategy for promoting positive health-related behaviors” (Dempsey et al., 2018). Governmental recommendations in Finland evolved into a distinct social norm where “social” – in a situation of emergency – applied to society as a whole.

Emergency situations hardly reflect the diversity of cultures. Consequently, in both majority and minority communities, individual emotional responses to the COVID-19 crisis may well “fluctuate from straightforward panic and fear to disbelief and anguish born out of helplessness and uncertainty” (Djolai, 2020). Following the Finnish mainstream media and the Facebook discussions among the Russian-speakers, it was possible to find those who strongly disagree with governmental anti-COVID-19 recommendations. Finnish-speaking forums showed that the supporters of the Social-Democrats which is the governmental majority party, mostly agreed with the Government’s course, whereas the supporters of the opposition remained skeptical about anti-COVID19 recommendations. In Russian-speaking internet forums, this disagreement was mostly associated with downplaying the threat and the consequent willingness to maintain social contacts.

Thus, our survey questions were formulated in such a way that would elucidate the following components: *affective* element or feelings, e.g., I am afraid of COVID-19 (corresponding to the **individual motivational element** in the social norms approach); *behavioral* element indicating what I am going to do about it, e.g., I will follow governmental COVID-19 recommendations as well as the *cognitive* element showing what I understand and know, e.g., I read and understand the following things about COVID-19 (corresponding to **the reputational element** in the social norms approach).

In total 243 responses were obtained in Finland and 71 in Norway. The overwhelming majority, except 1,2 % in Finland and none in Norway, knew what the Coronavirus was 73,3 % respondents in Finland and 70,4 % in Norway considered coronavirus a serious threat. Again, the majority were updated on the restrictions introduced by the governments, except 0,4 % of the respondents in Finland and 2 % in Norway. Only 7.8 % of respondents in Finland and 9,9 % in

Norway reported a lack of support for the restrictions. Concerning the focal points of our inquiry, i.e., the attitude to social norms related to self-isolation, 7,8 % in Finland and 12,7 % in Norway have not complied with social distancing. However, when the question was posed differently, i.e., instead of asking if someone is going to comply with social distancing, we asked which measures are you going to use as a means of slowing down the spread of the virus, the figures were different: 53,5 % respondents in Finland and 57 % in Norway mentioned minimizing social contacts (abstaining from inviting friends for tea, shopping less, abstaining from not-urgent trips, observing social distancing, etc.).

5. Conclusion

As for our main hypothesis regarding the impact of strong antiCOVID-19 governmental campaigns on practicing self-isolation, our background inquiries demonstrate a high level of adherence to recommendations by Russian-speakers in Finland. The results of our survey showed that, albeit the individuals demonstrated good intentions of complying with self-isolation, not all the respondents fully grasped the meaning of self-isolation and social distancing. This again proves the need for more rigorous information campaigns in times of crisis. As for our main hypothesis regarding the impact of strong antiCOVID-19 governmental campaigns on the positive response of the Russian speakers in Finland in the crisis situations, these inquiries demonstrate a high level of adherence to governmental recommendations by Russian-speakers in Finland. Nevertheless, COVID-19 pandemic, like any other crisis, revealed an unclear vision of how to pursue information campaigns reveals incongruities between individual and group identities and a new emergency social order.

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