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Migrants' Perceptions of the Rejection of their Social Remittances: What Prevents Migrants from Combating Disinformation by Sharing their Perspective from Abroad?

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This research sets out to analyse which factors hinder the attempts of migrants from Russia to combat disinformation about living in Finland – which represents the 'West' – through social remittances. This was looked at from the perspective of a particular case, 'the child custody' disinformation dispute. The research finds that migrants do actively try to shape the ideas that their friends and family in Russia have of Finland; part of this happens through discussion of the child custody case. The migrant interviewees had tried to provide information that differed from that provided by the Russian media and officials. However, they had found it difficult to change the perspectives and opinions of their friends and family through social remittances because of the strong foothold that traditional media outlets have in Russia, the perception of a strong East vs West dichotomy and a perceived mistrust of migrants and the things which they report from abroad. The study offers insights into the various factors that constrain the transmission of social remittances.

Keywords: social remittances, migrants, disinformation, Russia, Finland, child custody

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Introduction

Individuals can receive information that influences their opinion on something from various sources. It is often education, the media and, more generally, the internet which are considered to be central channels for receiving information. However, in some countries, such as Russia, these traditional sources are increasingly controlled by the state and used to convey one-sided and/or erroneous misinformation (inaccurate information resulting from a mistake) and disinformation (a deliberate attempt to deceive or mislead) (Hernon 1995). In such contexts, in which information channels are highly restricted, alternative sources of information become especially interesting to consider. One such channel for outside information is that of social remittances transmitted through migrant social networks or 'diaspora knowledge networks' – as termed by Meyer (2007).

Social remittances are ideas, know-how, cultural practices, information, attitudes and values that are transmitted by migrants from one context to another (Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Suksomboon 2008). A substantial number of studies have established that, by transmitting such social remittances, migrants can provide their contacts living in the country of origin with outsider perspectives from abroad regarding issues such as work and employment (Grabowska 2017; Grabowska and Garapich 2016; Haynes and Galasińska 2016; Karolak 2016; Klagge and Klein-Hitpaß 2010), gender norms (Dannecker 2009; Main and Gózdziak 2020; Mukherjee and Rayaprol 2019; Vianello 2013) and migrating and living abroad (Mukherjee and Rayaprol 2019; Suksomboon 2008), to name but a few. However, the transmission of social remittances is not automatic and there are several studies that show how it can also be unsuccessful (Grabowska and Garapich 2016; Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017; Levitt 1998).

This article explores migrants' perceptions of the factors that hinder their agency in tackling disinformation through sharing their 'outsider' perspective and experiences through social remittances. This issue is looked at in a Finnish–Russian transnational context, which represents an interesting East–West migration setting in which social remittances have not before been studied. The article contributes to the scholarly discussion on the rejection of social remittances and the understanding of whether (or not) migrants can 'counteract Kremlin propaganda' (as defined by Fomina 2019), in the context of Russia's shift towards greater social conservatism under the authoritarian regime led by Putin. In this authoritarian regime, the state relies on a variety of methods to minimise political unrest and maintain its grip on power – for example, through the exertion of a large coercive apparatus, control over the key political institutions and the constraining of media freedom in order to control the narrative and the information that people receive (see Bunche, Koesel and Chen Weiss 2020 on authoritarian regimes). What makes the context even more interesting is Russia's centuries-long 'love–hate relationship' with the West and the implications that this relationship has for any attempts to counterbalance Russian state propaganda narratives (see Fomina 2021). Over the past several centuries, Russian politics and culture have been in a 'tug of war' between Westernising or Europhile tendencies and anti-Westernising or Eurosceptic tendencies (Kaempf 2010; Korosteleva and Paikin 2021). While, in the Russian narrative, the West is frequently depicted as an offensive opponent (Baumann 2020), the Western 'other', on the other hand, has also played an important role as a prism through which to build a self-understanding of what Russia is. As such, the question of Russian identity has been caught up in its relationship with the West (Kaempf 2010).

This study focuses on migrants' attempts to shape and challenge the perceptions that their family and friends have regarding Finland, which represents the West, particularly in relation to disinformation regarding child-custody arrangements – i.e., 'the child-custody case' – a Russian disinformation campaign against Finland according to which Russian children are being mistreated there. Through discussing this case, the article also contributes to the discussion of the role and effects of migration and transnationality on child rearing and parenting – a well-researched topic in migration studies (see, e.g., Brandhorst, Baldassar and Wilding 2020; Nedelcu and Wyss 2019; Pustułka 2012; White 2011). Previous research has shown that the ideas that are remitted regarding child care

and parenting do not always fit the perspectives of the recipients of remitters and that there might be clashes of norms, values and practices between senders and receivers (see Grabowska and Engbersen 2016; Grabowska and Garapich 2016; Levitt 2001; Main and Gózdziak 2020; Vlase 2013). The article explores: a) how migrants from Russia living in Finland perceive that their attempts to share their perceptions about the West and life in Finland and, through this, to combat disinformation, particularly relating to the 'child-custody case', are met by their friends and family in Russia; and b) the factors which make it difficult for migrants to provide an outsider perspective and combat disinformation through social remittances. 'Outsider' information refers here to information and perspectives that migrants have gained after their migration abroad and/or which diverge from information shared through the controlled information channels in Russia. The research is based on 35 interviews with migrants from Russia living in Finland.

Theoretical background: **migrants' social remittances and their rejection**

In Russia, because of the strict media control, it has become difficult for people to receive multisided information and perspectives which do not align with the goals of the government. One information channel which is more difficult for governing elites to control is facilitated by individuals who have left Russia and live abroad but who maintain social contacts with their family and friends living in Russia. Since migrants have gained experience and information from outside their community of origin, they can bring new information to their networks (Lindstrom and Muñoz-Franco 2005). In other words, migrants can 'exit with voice' (Waddell 2014), use their voice after exit (Fomina 2019) or leave open a door for the diffusion of ideas (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2009). The potential role of such insider–outsider agents (Grabowska and Garapich 2016) has increased due to improvements in communications and travel technology – such as smartphones – which have increased the density, multiplicity and importance of transnational interconnectedness. Migrants can easily and relatively cheaply stay in contact with their family and friends in their country of origin (Levitt 1998; Urinboyev 2021; Vertovec 2001).

Some researchers refer to the ideas, know-how, information, attitudes and values transmitted by migrants through transnational networks from the country of settlement to the societies of origin as 'social remittances' (Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Suksomboon 2008). When migrants are in contact with their non-migrant acquaintances, they share social remittances about their life and experiences in the country of settlement, such as how they choose places to live and work (Vertovec 2007), the education or welfare system in the country of settlement (Bontenbal 2022) and their progress and reception at the destination (Isaakyan 2015; Mukherjee and Rayaprol 2019). Unlike other forms of global cultural circulation, social remittances generally occur personally and directly between social peers who know each other or who are connected to one another by mutual social ties. The messages, transmitted and diffused through interpersonal relations and between group members based on personal preference or mutual ties, are potentially even more powerful agents of change than messages conveyed through impersonal channels of information, such as the mass media (Lindstrom and Muñoz-Franco 2005).

Both migrants and non-migrants are part of the social remitting process and they can both act as filters of what gets transmitted and accepted. However, being actively part of the social remitting process means that, if norms, values and behaviour can be passed on, they can also be resisted, changed, manipulated or blocked (Grabowska and Garapich 2016). When friends and family members living in the country of origin receive remittances, they interpret what the migrants are telling them and perceive what returnees and visitors are doing. Based on the remittances they receive, the non-migrants actively select what to try to make sense of and what to not (Mata-Codesal 2011, 2013.) Some new ideas and practices are adopted unchallenged, other new elements are grafted onto existing ones (Levitt 1998) and some new ideas are rejected (Grabowska and

Garapich 2016; Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017). In case of rejection, the migrant may become even more convinced about the norms and values that prevail in their country of origin (Fidrmuc and Doyle 2004).

Sometimes social remittances are rejected because migrants may want to remit ideas about change that are not always possible or desired by people in the country of origin (Levitt 1997; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Vari-Lavoisier 2014). This can be, for example, because the change in norms brought about by social remitting is likely to be imposed at the expense of other existing norms and on who might have been benefitting from the prevailing norm and its benefits previously (Levitt 1998; Vari-Lavoisier 2014, 2015). Migrants remit ideas and norms that fit with their own knowledge and support their own normative vision and this vision is not always shared by those who have not migrated (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Vari-Lavoisier 2015; Waddell 2014). Previous studies show that social remittances may be rejected, for example, because they are considered to represent foreign ideologies – such as consumerism (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves 2011) or the fear that they may set a bad example for youth (Levitt 2001) – or because the social remittances are considered misplaced or inappropriate (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Waddell 2014).

The child-custody case

Russia has, in recent years, escalated its disinformation campaigns against the United States and Europe (Lanoszka 2019; Tiido 2019). This escalation had already started before the beginning of Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. One example of such campaigns comes from Russia's neighbouring country, Finland: in 2010, a diplomatic dispute erupted between Finland and Russia, which was mainly covered by the media. The events started to enfold when disinformation was widely shared in Russian mainstream media according to which Russian children in Finland were being mistreated by the Finnish authorities.

According to the reports, Finnish social-service officials were systematically seizing Russian children from their parents on wrongful grounds, taking them into custody and placing them in social care or giving them up for adoption. In some cases, the wrongfulness of this was emphasised by the fact that the children were supposedly being given to same-sex couples in Western countries (Bjola and Papadakis 2021). Disinformation about child-custody arrangements in Finland has since been widely disseminated in the Russian media. The message has been that Russians living in Finland are being poorly treated and Russia has called for action from its citizens to correct the situation. The purpose has been to undermine trust in the Finnish authorities (Tiido 2019) and to use Russian citizens abroad as a tool of influence (Luukkanen 2016).

According to Luukkanen (2016), however, the disinformation campaign has not been particularly successful among migrants from Russia in Finland, due to people remaining calm, the welfare institution enduring and successful integration. According to Tiido (2019), the fact that Finland's Russian-speaking community is, in general, reluctant to get involved in political disputes and tries to go unnoticed instead of drawing attention to itself and that, as a minority group, lacks a common ground, has also led to the campaign not being successful among Russian citizens abroad.

Even though the campaign did not gain significant international coverage (Bjola and Papadakis 2021), it did have a long-lasting impact on the perceptions of Russians. According to survey results from 2021, even 10 years after the start of the campaign, some 7 per cent of Russians living in Russia remember reading or frequently seeing news in the Russian media about families of Russian origin facing problems in Finland, while 22 per cent report having read or heard something but have no specific recollection of it (Finnish Foreign Ministry 2021). Among the interviewees, the child-custody case was considered common knowledge (in line with Bjola and Papadakis 2021) and something that most of the interviewees had discussed with their acquaintances living in Russia. Although the main uproar around the child-custody case occurred around 2010, during the time in which the interviews were conducted in 2018–2019 this still seemed to be something that

the interviewees wanted to discuss and bring up as an example of their communication with friends and family in Russia.

Most recently, in 2023, the use of child-custody cases as propaganda escalated again in the Russian media in relation to Russia's war in Ukraine. This time, the Finnish authorities were supposedly stealing Ukrainian refugee children in Finland. The message was the same as before: the Finnish authorities, as representatives of European authorities, cannot be trusted. As part of this the hashtag #EuropeStealsChildren was deployed (Stolzmann, Mattila, Roslund, Kurki, Ritonummi, Pehkonen 2023).

Data and method

In Finland, Russian-speakers (also including, for example, a large number of individuals who have migrated from the former Soviet Union) form the largest migrant group and constitute about 1.5 per cent of the 5.5 million inhabitants (Official Statistics of Finland, 2022). The number of migrants from Russia living in Finland has grown particularly rapidly since the 1990s. The most common reasons for migration to Finland are marriage to a Finnish citizen, the return migration of individuals considered as Finnish descendants, work and studies (Lehtonen 2016).

As mentioned above, the fieldwork for this research was carried out between January 2018 and May 2019. Altogether, 35 individuals were interviewed. Each interviewee was interviewed once. During the interviews, the migrants were asked to recount what kind of things, regarding Finland and living in Finland, they had discussed with their family, friends and acquaintances living in Russia. The interviewees brought up several topics, one of which was the 'child-custody case'. The focus is on direct interpersonal contact and thus excludes the sharing of information through, for example, social media posts, which are not targeted at a specific acquaintance.

The interviewees had migrated to Finland between 1993 and 2018. All of them had Russian citizenship before their migration and, at the time of the interviews, 13 had Finnish nationality. Instead of using the concept of Russian migrants, the concept of migrants from Russia is used because not all migrants from Russia are and/or consider themselves to be ethnically Russian. The primary commonality of the interviewees is thus their lived experience in what they consider the entity of Russia and their embeddedness in the Finnish–Russian transnational field, rather than their Russian ethnicity. Russian-speakers from other countries, such as other former Soviet republics, as well as transit migrants who move to Europe via Russia, are excluded.

Of the interviewees, 12 had come to Finland to study, 12 for family reasons, 9 due to having Finnish 'roots' and 2 for work-related reasons. Almost all of the interviewees came from areas of Russia close to Finland. Although there were some exceptions, most of the interviewees thus came from the European part of Russia – the Karelian area of Russia was particularly over-represented as an area of origin of the interviewees. Altogether, 26 women and 9 men were interviewed. Overall, there are more female (*circa* 65 per cent) than male (*circa* 35 per cent) individuals from Russia or the former Soviet Union living in Finland (Official Statistics of Finland, n.d.). In particular, the number of Russian-speaking women aged over 20 years is much higher than that of men (Varjonen, Zamiatin and Rinas 2017). The youngest interviewee was 21 years old and the oldest 85; 14 were employed at the time of the interview, 2 were unemployed, 5 were retired, one was on maternity leave and 12 were currently studying at a higher education institute in Finland. This reflects not only the fact that many Russians come to Finland to study but also the phenomenon that Finnish integration policy tends to steer migrants towards re-education and low-skilled sectors, rather than capitalising on qualifications already acquired in the country of origin (Bontenbal 2021; Krivonos 2015). Of the 35 interviewees, 30 either have tertiary education or are currently studying at a higher education institution in Finland.

The interviewees in this study were found through various channels, such as the mailing lists of Russian cultural organisations in Finland, national and local migrant organisations, Finnish language classes targeted at Russian speakers and snowballing. It is possible that this method meant that mainly individuals who participate actively in society and are also more integrated in Finnish society were reached – whereas, for example, individuals who are unemployed or not studying or participating in the third sector were not. The recruitment channels probably also had an impact on the sampling of the research participants, since the interviewees for this research in general believed that stories about children in Finland being taken away without sufficient reason were wrongful information. There were two interviewees who had, at first, been unsure what to believe but none expressed a firm belief that Russian children are mistreated in Finland. Thus, my research focuses on those who trust the child-custody authorities and try to convince their interlocutors in Russia and counteract the propaganda, rather than on the opinions of those who share the perception of the Russian state propaganda. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded. Interviewees were asked to sign a consent form and given the opportunity to ask questions and make comments. This ensured that interviewees were giving informed consent. When the project started, no independent ethics approval was required in the country context in which the research was conducted. The interviewees were ensured full anonymity, and no real names or places are used in the article. Ethically speaking, anonymity is especially important since, although the migration of educated, critically thinking and opposition-minded individuals might not be a problem for the authoritarian regime in a political sense (Lassila 2019), it may become a problem if these people not only stop using their voice upon exit but exit with a voice and keep influencing their country of origin. The interviews lasted on average one hour and were conducted in Finnish, English or Russian, depending on the interviewees' preferences. In the case of interviews conducted in Russian, help was provided by a Russian-speaking research assistant.

After interviewing, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. To analyse the research material, thematic content analysis was used as the main analytic strategy, whereby the data were systematically organised into increasingly abstract units of information (Creswell 2007). The data were first coded with the research questions in mind. The coded interview segments were then organised into thematic subcategories. Based on the initial thematic categories, the first segments of analysis were written and these texts were then organised under the main categories – which all focus on the reasons for the rejection of social remittances. These main categories are: 1) the strong foothold of traditional media; 2) the East vs West dichotomy; and 3) the status of migrant. Each main category forms a sub-chapter in the analysis part of the article. The quotations used in the text are word-for-word recounts and function as examples of analyses and to illustrate the validity of the observations. The quotations have been chosen to represent the most common and typical themes in the research material. They also bring the participants' voice into the study (Creswell 2007).

Results: reasons for the rejection of migrants' social remittances related to the 'child-custody case'

The analysis will explore how migrants perceive that their attempts to shape and challenge their acquaintances' perceptions about Finland – particularly in relation to the 'child-custody case' – through social remittances, have succeeded and what factors have hindered their attempts.

There was a consensus among the interviewees that their friends and family in Russia often have misconceptions, based on exaggerations and disinformation, about life in Finland. This was particularly underlined by their perception of the child-custody case, which was described by most of the interviewees as something which they have actively discussed with their friends and family living in Russia and which has evoked great interest and many questions: 'Everyone [Russian acquaintances] kept asking me whether my children were with me and I told them that: "Yes and it's not true [what they're saying in the Russian media]"'

(F, 36). The interviewees spoke of how they had gained knowledge on the topic through their employment, their social contacts – such as neighbours and family members – and their own experiences: 'This child protection case interests them enormously, because it annoys them but, because I have some work experience in this field [in Finland], I can explain how things are actually done and so on' (F, 28).

The interviewees had tried but had often found it difficult to shape the perception that their friends and family have of the 'West' and Finland – and the child-custody case in particular. There are three main factors which, according to the interviewees, made changing the opinion of non-migrant acquaintances concerning the child-custody case and, more broadly, 'living in the West', difficult. These are: a) the influential foothold of information provided by the mainstream Russian media; b) a perceived strong East vs West dichotomy; and c) emigrants not being trusted. In the following sub-chapters, each of these factors will be analysed in more depth.

Rejection resulting from the strong foothold of the traditional Russian media

The interviewees perceived that one of the main reasons why they have had difficulty changing their acquaintances' opinions and perceptions is that the Russian mainstream media has such a strong foothold in determining people's thinking.

According to the interviewees, people tend to form strong opinions based on information provided by the media – especially TV news – and these opinions are difficult to change. This applies to both the child-custody case and to Finland in general. The interviewees themselves had also initially heard about the child-custody case from the Russian media and two of them mentioned that, when they first moved to Finland, they were afraid of this and did not know what to believe. For example, one interviewee, who had a child living with her in Finland, noted:

> *I also watched those Russian news stories – and almost believed them– but then I was like, no, no. Because I know for myself and I told them* [family in Russia] *that, in Finland, children are not taken away without checking several times that the family does not take care of them* (F, 42).

After migrating to Finland, some of the interviewees had discussed the child-custody case with their Finnish acquaintances and co-workers, which had helped to build trust in the Finnish children's service authorities. This is in line with previous findings that migrants from Russia tend to gain a sense of trust in the Finnish state (Saarinen 2007) and, particularly, Finnish public health care, public social care, the judiciary and the police (Castaneda and Koskinen 2014).

However, mainly because the information provided by the media is seen as one-sided and often erroneous, the interviewed migrants felt a need to transmit 'rightful' information based on their own experiences. They pointed out that it is mainly through the media that their acquaintances have been fed stereotypical and misleading information about Finland which they (the migrants) then have to dismantle. In particular, people who had not been to Finland themselves were seen as being strongly influenced by the image provided by the media in their home country. One interviewee, for example, noted: '… they [her friends and family in Russia] ask me about it all the time and they usually believe those media, those news stories. They think that social workers in Finland take Russian children. It is a popular issue' (F, 29).

Because of the lack of truthful information in the Russian media, the role of providing rational and impartial information regarding Finland and/or Russia was, according to the interviewees, left to them. One interviewee noted in this regard: 'I do it very actively [correct any misinformation], because it [media coverage] is very politicised and tendentious; they result in very concise viewpoints and so I have shared more objective

information and shown them the other side of the coin' (M, 28). Interviewees felt that the fact that the migrants had their own experiences of Finland and, in some cases, of also raising children or working in social care in Finland, gave them a more comprehensive understanding which they were then able to share. One interviewee, for example, described trying to provide friends and family back in Russia with information 'which is difficult to obtain from newspapers or other sources' (F, 45).

The interviewees noted that the way in which Finland is described in the Russian media also influences how migrants living in Finland are seen by those who remain in the origin country. Since the West is, according to the interviewees, often described in negative terms, this also reflects negatively on how migrants are viewed. If the Western lifestyle is seen as morally corrupt, as exemplified, for example, by children being taken away from their parents/families without proper reason, migrants living in Finland may also become disapproved of. This was another reason why the interviewed migrants tried to change, through social remittances, how their acquaintances in Russia view Finland. Moreover, for some, discussing the child-custody case also had a personal dimension. Three of the interviewees noted that their relatives living in Russia had been worried that the interviewees' children might be taken away from them. By telling their relatives that the stories were false, the migrants were reassuring them that their children were safe in Finland.

However, although the interviewees reported that they try to change the understanding that their acquaintances have formed regarding Finland from the Russian media, many find it very difficult. They noted that, even though they had tried to explain that, in Finland, social services do not take children away for no reason, their acquaintances had not wanted to believe them, indicating a rejection of social remittances (Grabowska and Garapich 2016; White 2019). One interviewee, for example, noted:

> *Well, my mother and grandmother were quite worried and they watch everything and believe everything that they see on the news in Russia... Even though we give them totally contrary information, they just think that we are trying to calm them down and are not telling them the truth, and that the TV and news are actually telling them the truth, ha ha!* (F, 42).

The failed transmission of social remittances can have various implications. When friends and family do not want to believe what they are told, this may cause a strain on the transnational relationship and lead to the migrant not wanting to share things again. One interviewee described how, despite her efforts, she had been unable to convince some of her acquaintances living in Russia that it is safe to travel to Finland with their children. As a result, one of her friends, who had been planning to do just that, ended up cancelling the trip. The interviewee noted: 'They went to other countries and they spend a lot of time with friends in the Czech Republic but they never made it to Finland – because they were afraid that someone would take their kids away' (F, 30).

Rejection resulting from an East vs West dichotomy

The second aspect which, according to the interviewees, had led to the failure of their social remittances related to a perceived East vs West dichotomy in people's thinking. Interviewees described how Finland is perceived in Russia as part of the 'West', whereas Russia is considered to be part of the 'East'. Providing an understanding of what life is like in Finland thus means communicating a broader vision of Europe and an understanding of what life is like in the 'West' (see similar findings in the Moldovan context by Mahmoud, Rapoport, Steinmayr and Trebesch 2014 and in the Ukrainian context by Solari 2019). Therefore, migrants explaining to their family and friends about the child-custody case is just one part of explaining what life is like in Finland in general – and the two cannot be completely separated. One interviewee, for example, noted:

'I have spoken about how things are done in Europe. And I use this notion of Europe because Finland is not understood as separate but, in a way, as part of Europe and the West' (M, 28).

The perception of such a division between East and West has had consequences insofar as migrants are hopeful that they have been able to influence perceptions. Because the West is frequently depicted as an offensive immoral opponent (Baumann 2020), then ideas, values and information transmitted from Finland may also be rejected. According to the interviewees, the association of the European lifestyle – with its disapproved-of liberal values in particular – can lead to the rejection of social remittances from migrants. As noted by Kulmala and Tšernova (2015), in Putin's Russia, a strong family-centred ideology has dominated, emphasising the protection of so-called traditional conservative family values. According to this ideology, fostered by Russian leaders, Russia is a mainstay of the conservative world against the values of the West (Davydova-Minguet 2014; Krivonos 2018). One interviewee, for example, noted that '… some of them [acquaintances in Russia] very, very strongly believe that Mother Russia should be, like, the only homeland and that Western countries are, like, rotten' (F, 23). Europe being considered too liberal has led, according to the interviewees, to some of their acquaintances stigmatising everything related to Europe and thus also to Finland. Consequently, no ideas or information are welcome and disinformation regarding the child-custody case can be difficult to challenge.

According to the interviewees, whether a person's acquaintances are pro-West or pro-East greatly influences the likelihood that the things which migrants tell their acquaintances in Russia are believed, valued and accepted. A number of interviewees noted that some of their acquaintances or people whom they know are liberal, pro-West, pro-Finland or 'fans of the West' and are thus interested in how things are done abroad and especially in Europe. Being pro-Western had, according to the interviewees, made their acquaintances more receptive to social remittances transmitted from Finland, including perceptions regarding the child-custody case. Correspondingly, acquaintances in Russia whom the interviewees described as patriotic and conservative were less willing to accept social remittances from Finland. Interviewees said that older people, in particular, often belong to the group holding a negative view of Europe. One interviewee, for example, noted: 'My father is a little bit more critical about it, about Europe, because he is an old-fashioned Russian guy. I can't really change him in this case because, like, my parents are quite old' (F, 19).

While surface-level cultural practices transmitted from the West may be easier to pass on, it is particularly issues that are more deeply rooted in the mentality of people and society which, according to the interviewees, are more difficult to challenge. For example, interviewees described how business ideas from the West have been more accepted than ideas about democracy or liberalism. One interviewee noted regarding this:

> *It depends on the ideas. If we're talking about business ideas, trade and technology, it's certainly open because these are surface-level things but, if we're talking about large ideologies, it's closed. The conservatism and a thousand-year-old tradition in this kind of communitarianism system, which emphasises community and traditions, makes it closed* (M, 28).

As noted by Portes (2010), the various elements that compose culture and social structure can be hierarchically arranged into 'deeper' factors – which are fundamental but often concealed within everyday social life – and 'surface' phenomena, which are more easily adapted and readily evident. Value and norm systems that are part of 'deep' culture are difficult and slow to change (Dzięglewski 2016; Järvinen-Alenius, Pitkänen and Virkama 2010; Karolak 2016). According to Cingolani and Vietti (2019), this may be because there might, for example, be a fear of cultural and economic neo-colonialism from European countries.

What should also be noted, however, is that, although it is considered part of the 'West', many of the interviewees said that Finland, in general, has had a strong country brand in Russia. One interviewee, for example, noted that:

> *In general, people have a more positive feeling about Finland as a country where people live and how this life is structured. So, I think these ideas would be welcomed if they are branded under Finland* (F, 30).

However, according to the interviewees, openness towards Finland has been changing lately, particularly in relation to the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by European countries, including Finland. These sanctions have, according to the interviewees, weakened the relationship between the countries, which in turn has influenced the acceptance of social remittances. In relation to this, it should be noted that our interviews were conducted before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the impact that this war has had on Russian–European relations. However, at the time of the interviews, the annexation of Crimea had already occurred and hostility towards Western and liberal values was strongly present among Russian political leaders and visible, for example, in the Russian mainstream media. The situation was thus not completely different to what it is now although, since then, relations have further deteriorated. It can therefore be assumed that this further deterioration now has an even more impeditive impact on the transmission of any social remittances from Finland, as part of the West, to Russia. In practical terms, the closing of the Russian–Finnish border in 2023, in particular, has hindered this process (Mata-Codesal 2011).

Rejection resulting from the remitters' emigrant status

A third aspect which, according to the interviewees, makes changing the opinions of non-migrants – both about the child-custody case and, more broadly, about 'life in the West' – difficult, was related to them being emigrants. They pointed out that, in the Russian context, emigrants are often not trusted and the outsider information provided by them is therefore not valued (see contrary findings from Gawlewicz 2015, in a Polish–UK transnational context). The findings indicate that the way in which migration is perceived among friends and family has a role in how the things that emigrants report from abroad are accepted and valued.

Another aspect revealed in the interviews was that there are significant differences between Russians in how emigration is seen: some noted that their acquaintances had reacted positively to their migration, with two interviewees particularly mentioning that emigration is a common dream among Russians. However, others noted that they had received mainly negative feedback on their decision to move to Finland. According to the interviewees, emigration is often seen as something that has a negative influence on Russian society and its economy (see a similar finding by Dzięglewski 2016 in the Polish context). In particular, the loss of highly educated individuals is seen as a problem and thus their migration is, according to the interviewees, disapproved of. Interestingly, the idea that migration is a betrayal was mentioned in relation to how acquaintances in Russia have perceived emigration abroad. Thus, as noted by Teferra (2005), those who have left the country are not always seen in a positive light and sometimes a stigma hangs over them. The analysis indicates that this stigma can hamper the acceptance of social remittances.

Attitudes towards emigration seem to be an issue particularly related to the East vs West setting, and migration to the West, to Finland, is especially seen as unpatriotic and even selfish. One interviewee, who went to Finland to study, recounted that her tutor in Russia told her: 'Okay, you can go to China or countries which are closer to us economically but Finns, they are closer to the US and the US is our enemy. It's like you're going to our enemy'. The interviewee commented that it is 'ridiculous but, unfortunately, it's true' (F, 23). It thus seems to matter where you move to, with some places being more acceptable than others. The

interviewee further noted that many of her acquaintances 'were very unhappy that I was moving to a Western country because they think that Russian people should stay in Russia and invest in Russia and not go away and work for someone else' (F, 23). This quote again illustrates the pronounced East vs West worldview.

These opinions of the interviewees' acquaintances about migration influence the acceptance of ideas and information that the emigrants transmit from abroad. Several interviewees perceived that the things which they tell their acquaintances regarding the child-custody case and life in Finland are not accepted and valued because their initial migration to Finland is criticised. Furthermore, some of them noted that, if they were to migrate back to Russia, it is unlikely that, for example, any professional skills which they acquired in Finland would be valued and accommodated in Russia. Instead, they would have to go back to the way things are done in Russia (in line with Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2009). Having gained a European perspective is, according to the interviewees, not always appreciated – for example, in the labour market. One interviewee (F, 21), for example, said that, when she was doing an internship in Russia, her boss did not appreciate her 'European' understanding of the duration of a working day. She says that her boss was surprised when she wanted to leave work after eight hours and said in a demeaning way: 'Oh, this is the European style'. As Brinkerhoff (2006) notes, for diaspora contributions to be effective, the homeland society needs to be welcoming and not, for example, to criticise the diaspora. In this research, this manifests itself in such a way that, when emigration is not valued, migrants' opinions on issues such as the child-custody case are also not appreciated.

What further affects how acquaintances see migration is related to whether migrants are still seen as part of the homeland society group or not. One interviewee, for example, noted that acquaintances have told her that she is '… a different person now that she has moved away' and that she is no longer Russian (F, 31, nurse). However, to be able to positively engage, there ought to be a level of mutual recognition and migrants need to be recognised as 'us' and not as outsiders (Abdile and Pirkkalainen 2011). Furthermore, individuals are only effective influencers if they understand the sociocultural environment of both their country of origin and their country of settlement and are thus attuned to contextual information on both sides of the boundary (Tushman and Scanlan 1981). This enables them to seek out relevant information in one context and disseminate it in the other. Some said that, since they are out of touch with how things are in Russia, they are no longer considered part of the in-group and thus their perceptions from abroad are also unwelcome.

However, contrary experiences also emerged from the interviews, with some interviewees mentioning that, although certain of their acquaintances are no longer interested in their opinion, others appreciate them even more now that they have lived abroad. It seems that acquaintances who have a positive perspective on moving and living abroad are often also more appreciative of information and news shared from abroad. As one interviewee, who originally moved to Finland to study, stated: 'I'm a star there, you know, I've escaped. Ha ha!' (F, 21, employed in logistics). The interviewees' status as people who have moved abroad can make them appear worth listening to.

Discussion and conclusion

This study provides insights into why the attempts of migrants to share information and shape the perceptions that their non-migrant friends and family have about life in Finland – and, more generally, the West – sometimes fails. On a theoretical level, the research adds to the understanding of the acceptance and rejection of migrants' social remittances and the limits to the role that migrants can have as agents of change (Grabowska and Garapich 2016; Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017; White 2019). The transferring of social remittances is facilitated by close contacts with friends and family, visits to the country of origin and individualised and tailor-made stories about life in the host society (see Bontenbal 2022). However, the findings illustrate that, although migrants can have agency in deciding what kind of information and narrative they transmit to their

society of origin, the impact of these narratives remains limited due to various factors that limit receptivity and absorptive capacity (Nevinskaitė 2016; Siar 2014). Therefore, social remittances are not always a powerful tool for bringing about change in attitudes or perceptions. Contextually, the study offers a new perspective on the Finnish–Russian transnational field, which has not been analysed before in the scholarly discussion of social remittances.

The findings illustrate that, besides 'activists' who try to counteract Kremlin propaganda (as found in Fomina 2019), so-called 'ordinary people' also take on the role of correcting disinformation (see also Grabowska and Garapich 2016; Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2009 on ordinary people remitting). Migrants may feel a need to influence what their friends and family think about their host society, since this can also impact on how they view migrants and their life in the host society. Migrants therefore try to exercise agency to influence their acquaintances' perceptions and correct mis- and disinformation. In terms of the child-custody case, in particular, the interviewees had gained a level of trust in the Finnish child-welfare authorities and did not believe the narratives repeated in the Russian media about families being treated wrongly – this is also what they shared with their acquaintances in Russia. In this regard, the study contributes to the understanding of migrants' trust in the host-society authorities (see Korzeniewska, Erdal, Kosakowska-Berezecka and Żadkowska 2019).

Concerning contributions to the research field and, particularly, the discussion on barriers to the transmission of social remittances, this research finds that the transmission of social remittances can be hindered by several factors, some of which are probably more context-dependent than others. The three factors identified as hindering the transmission of those social remittances that are the most prominent in the interviewees' narratives are the significant role of the mainstream Russian media, a perceived East vs West setting and a perception – by those who have remained in the origin country – of those who have migrated as outsiders. What is interesting is that all these factors are also strongly interlinked and that it is particularly the geopolitical East vs West positioning that seems to also underline the other hindrances: it is, above all, migration to the West that is disapproved of – and it is the Russian media's portrayal of the West that is difficult to change through social remittances.

This study has found that, besides looking at individual- or micro-level factors related to the remitter or recipient – such as socioeconomic position, professional status, education level or legal status (Boccagni and Decimo 2013; Kapur 2004; Levitt 2001; Spilimbergo 2009; Vari-Lavoisier 2014) – on which previous studies have largely focused, it is also important to look at macro-level aspects related to the recipients' and host countries' geopolitical stances and existing cultural and political rifts. The findings exemplify that the relationships between countries and the international geopolitical situation can influence the acceptance of social remittances (see also Isaakyan 2015). Perceived ideological rifts can make the transmission of social remittances more difficult, in that they thus cannot be separated from other influences in society, which is why they are also not unattached from the international relations of states. It would be worthwhile, in future research, studying further how power relations, political rifts and geopolitical positions impact on social remittances. When researching remittances to or from Russia, it is particularly important to take into account the existing dichotomies between the West and the East. The image of the 'West' conveyed by the Russian media is not easily changed, even by personal accounts. The role of this East vs West dichotomy in post-Soviet countries would also be interesting to consider.

In terms of limitations, it should be noted that the research can only capture the perception of the remitters, so more research is needed to capture the perception of the recipients of remittances. Furthermore, as mentioned in the data-collection description, it is possible that the selection of interviewees is skewed towards those who are more active in society, more integrated and more trusting of the Finnish authorities concerning the child-custody case. It should thus be noted that the findings do not attempt to represent the perceptions of

all migrants from Russia in Finland nor of all Russian speakers in Finland. Although the interviewees in this study said that they believe the Russian version of child-custody arrangements in Finland to be based on disinformation, this is not to say that all migrants from Russia in Finland think in this way or trust the Finnish authorities. On the contrary, previous studies have shown child-custody arrangements to be a particularly sensitive issue that can cause tensions and mistrust between migrants and representatives of the state, such as social workers (e.g. Aure and Daukšas 2020; Korzeniewska *et al*. 2019).

As a final note, it is worth pointing out that, although the interviews were conducted some years ago, the research findings derive new relevance from the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine. News media have recently reported stories about families separated by different understandings of the war: many individuals who have emigrated from Russia and are living in Ukraine or other European countries condemn the invasion, while family members who have not migrated and are living in Russia have been exposed to Russian disinformation and thus believe the war to be justified. It seems that, despite the efforts of family members living abroad to explain how things are in Ukraine, many in Russia have been unwilling to believe it (see, for example, Miridzhanian 2022; Viner 2022). This research similarly illustrates how disinformation is difficult to combat and explains some of the reasons why this is so. Although the data collection for this research was carried out before the Russian war in Ukraine, at the time of the interviews, the findings were also able to shed light on current events and especially on why it can be difficult for migrants to provide outsider information and perspectives from abroad.

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