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# A voluntary-sector meeting place as a site for interpreting and 'doing' integration: a case of later-life Russian-speaking migrants

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## Abstract

While a great deal of research has been conducted on implications of integrative policies targeted at migrants, later-life migrants and their relational and spatial negotiations and enactments of the policy-driven discourse of integration, and the dynamics under which it is interpreted remains understudied. Older migrants are presented as 'special cases' in the Finnish integration policy and are discussed mainly in relation to their social and health care needs. Integration is the model and aim for migrant settlements in Finland, however the aim to integrate possesses intrinsic value. Therefore, they need to make sense of what integration is for them in their everyday lives. This paper focuses on the interpretations and mundane enactments of 'integration' in a voluntary sector-organised meeting place for later-life Russian-speaking migrants in Finland. By comparing the views of different actors within the meeting place (steering group, organisers and attendees), the paper presents a nuanced understanding of the dynamics under which the later-life migrants negotiate their positions in the Finnish community of value, vis-à-vis the expectations of integration. The paper argues that 'doing integration' as a category of practice is an emergent feature in places where it is possible to negotiate integration as a lived experience. Drawing from participant observations, interviews, and applications and reports gathered in a meeting in the capital region of Finland, the paper foregrounds the lived and contested experiences of finding a sense of belonging in dialogue with the omnipresent discourse of integration. The paper concludes that the interpretations of the policy-driven discourse of integration are context-bound and negotiated in a set of relationships.

## Introduction

Migration and ageing are current global phenomena, but their connections continue to be given less attention both in policy and in research (Brandhorst et al., 2021; Torres & Karl, 2015, see however Ciobanu et al., 2019, 2020). In Finland, the proportion of older migrants is increasing at an especially high rate compared to other European countries (Ciobanu et al., 2019) and the biggest language group created by migration are Russian-speaking migrants (Statistics Finland, 2020). This paper focuses on a specific group of older migrants, Russian-speaking migrants who have migrated later in life, often to connect with their families, and who attend a voluntary sector meeting place aimed at

the promotion of health and well-being. Research on older migrants often disregards whether the migrants are ageing in place or have migrated later in life (Torres, 2006), calling them all older/ageing migrants, which distorts the inequalities or privileges that are at play. Therefore, this paper uses the term later-life migrants to refer specifically to people who have migrated at a later stage in life.

In Finland, the policy goal for migrant inclusion is integration. The legal framework is multiculturalist (Saukkonen et al., 2013: pp. 290, 291), however there is a detectable neoliberal turn the integration policy that has brought about a political consensus 'to integrate migrants more efficiently' (Nordberg, 2015, p. 68). Moreover, the discourse of integration produced on the policy level unveils othering and neoliberal imaginaries (Bodström, 2020), which influence the positions available for migrants in the Finnish society. In Finnish policy documents, later-life/older migrants are referred to being at risk of 'not integrating' or as a 'special group of migrants' in relation to receiving assistance from social and health services (Government Integration Programme for 2016–2019 and Government Resolution on a Government Integration Programme 2016; Helsinki's Integration Programme 2017–2021). For older migrants, voluntary sector initiatives can become meaningful sites (Palmberger, 2017), however, the policy-level goals of integration can penetrate the voluntary-sector and push them to become extensions of official integration policies (Pirkkalainen et al., 2018). This paper analyses the intertwinements of the policy-level discourses of integration, complicated by funding mechanisms of the voluntary sector, and the lived experiences of later-life Russian-speaking migrants in dialogue with these expectations, as a subjective and spatial experience. By utilising a comparative approach to analyse the different actors affiliated with the meeting place (the steering group, the organisers and the attendees), the paper aims to capture the dynamics under which the attendees ultimately negotiate new and creative ways to make sense of their positions in the Finnish society, in dialogue with the discourse of integration.

This paper presents a case study of voluntary-sector meeting place for Russian-speaking migrants aged 65+ in the capital region of Finland. The paper acknowledges the ongoing discussions of the complex nature of the uses and approaches to 'integration' (Heckmann, 2005; Penninx, 2019; Rytter, 2019; Spencer & Charsley, 2016, 2021; Wieviorka, 2014) and drawing from these discussions suggests that the aim to become 'integrated' has become an intrinsic value for migrants and people working with them, however it is interpreted in competing, but also in creative ways. To avoid the pitfalls of reproducing existing power structures related to integration, integration is approached here as a concept that the later-life migrants, and people working with them in the voluntary sector need to make sense of, and by going so, they negotiate what integration could be as a lived experience for the attendees of the meeting place.

The meeting place had attained funding for the promotion of health and well-being. Therefore, due to the divisions of responsibilities by funding bodies and municipalities, 'integration' should not be included in the scope of the place. However, as this paper aims to illustrate, the discourse of integration connected to the Russian-speaking migrants as 'citizens in the making' (Nordberg, 2015, 68) penetrates also venues directed for promotion of health and well-being. The paper aims to answer two research questions: What activities do the different actors associated with the meeting place (steering

group, organisers, attendees) connect to integration? How are these activities enacted and performed in the everyday by the attendees as a way of ‘doing integration’?

### **Studying integration as an omnipresent normative policy-level discourse interpreted and negotiated in the voluntary sector**

While it is by now widely accepted among critical migration scholars that integration is a problematic concept laden with meanings, this paper approaches it as a concept that the migrants, and people working with them in the voluntary sector need to make sense of in their everyday. However problematic the term is, it is used here in order to engage in current scholarly debates (Spencer & Charsley, 2021, p. 22). Previous literature theorising integration includes debates regarding integration as a policy objective, work that employs it as a theoretical construct (Ager & Strang, 2008), and attempts to ‘write against integration’ (Rytter, 2019). Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore (2018, p. 181) exhaustively note that there is simply not an agreed scholarly definition of ‘integration’ even though it remains a dominant concept in studies on migrant settlements (see Loch, 2014). Therefore, integration remains elusive both at the policy level and in research, or as (Rytter, 2019) put it, ‘loose on the streets’. In line with Ghorashi and van Tilburg (2006, p. 69) I propose that the only way to address integration is to embrace its complexity. I draw from Hadj Abdou’s (2019, p. 1) suggestion not to abandon integration as a field of research as such, but to strengthen critical approaches in studying it in relation to migrant settlements. Inspired by Muro’s (2016, p. 518, 527) term ‘symbolic integration’, which she uses to highlight patterns of interactions in diverse settings that are characterised as enjoyable, voluntary, but superficial and additive to those in dominant positions, I explore the notion of ‘doing integration’ as a perspective to nuance the understanding of integration as a lived experience. It is central to continue to pay attention to the mundane aspects of migrant settlements and approach integration as a lived category of practice (Brubaker, 2013), which I suggest from the perspective of later-life migrants is connected to finding a sense of belonging. Bringing in the notion of belonging emphasises the complex and dynamic link between the self and society (May, 2011), of which the aims to ‘integrate’ and its mundane manifestations are good examples of.

The policy-led discussions about integration intertwine with the conditionality of citizenship (Anthias, 2013, p. 331) therefore the logic of the nation state (Favell, 2003) is relevant to take into account. The demands of integration are at the heart of who constitutes a citizen, or moreover, what kinds of citizens are acceptable. Most of the later-life migrants included in this research had attained formal citizenship, but still faced an impermeable boundary between ‘us and them’ to what Anderson (2013, p. 93) calls ‘membership in the community of value’. The community of value consists of people who share common ideals and values, and of ‘good citizens’ who follow the law, work hard, and have respectable and stable families (Anderson, 2013, pp. 2, 3). I suggest that the conditionality of citizenship and membership in the community of value penetrate also health and well-being oriented voluntary sector activities for later-life migrants, and the policy discourse of integration is one manifestation of this. In order to make sense of their own positions in the Finnish society, the later-life migrants and people working with them in the voluntary sector cannot dismiss the prevalent expectations to integrate, however elusive they might be.

Anderson (2013, p. 5) argues that in contrast to the ‘good’ citizen, who is a member of the community of value, the ‘failed’ citizen lacks both value and (shared) values. Shared values refer to common ideals relating to behaviour shared through ethnicity, religion, culture, or language, whereas value is related to economic worth, independence, self-sufficiency, and hard work. (ibid. pp. 2, 3). Older migrants are often perceived as care receivers without economic value (Da & Garcia, 2015: 215), therefore, their *value* in the eyes of the mainstream is low, and to access the role of the ‘good citizen’ is to be realised more on the terrain of *values*. I propose that later-life migrants need to find new and creative ways to gain access to the community of value through shared *values*. As the aim to ‘integrate’ has become an intrinsic value in the Finnish society, interpreting the demands and enact them in creative ways can become a resource to make sense of one’s position in the community of value. I approach this as ‘doing integration’ whereby a person seeks a sense of belonging to the community of value in dialogue with the elusive policy-level discourse. Antonsich (2010) notes how belonging has both a personal and a social dimension, which are inevitably intertwined. Focusing on the personal makes belonging too individualistic, however focusing on the social ignores the personal (see also Yuval-Davis, 2006). Therefore, belonging happens under prevalent power relations, which he calls the politics of belonging (ibid.). A subjective feeling of ‘doing integration’ depends on a nuanced and creative understanding of what integration could be, which stems from efforts to find belonging in the everyday in one’s own terms, in dialogue with and strongly influenced by all the actors involved. The next section presents the case of Russian-speaking migrants in Finland, policy goals of integration and the particular case of the Finnish voluntary sector vis-a-vis the goals of integrating migrants.

### **Later-life Russian-speaking migrants, integration policies and the roles of voluntary associations in ‘integration’ in Finland**

Russian-speakers are the largest language group of migrants in Finland, with approx. 84,000 inhabitants in total population of 5,530,000 people (Statistics Finland, 2020). They are heterogeneous, representing different nationalities, religions, and other backgrounds (Leitzinger, 2016, pp. 41, 70). Due to Finland being a part of the Russian Empire, there have always been Russians in Finland (Krivonos & Näre, 2019). However, wars between Finland and Russia, and Finnish national identity being partly built on ‘not being Russian’ (Puuronen, 2011), influence how Russians face prejudice and othering. Therefore, they are not a neutral category of migrants, and there are prevalent prejudice towards them in the Finnish society (Mähönen and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013).

Integration is always embedded in specific national social imaginaries (Rytter, 2019, p. 680). Societies are becoming more diverse, or super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007), however the roles given to migrants seem surprisingly static and bound by national fantasies that receiving societies reproduce on the policy level (Blankvoort et al. 2021; Bodström, 2020). Saukkonen et al. (2013, pp. 290, 291) argues that in Finland, nationalism and multiculturalism are paradoxically intertwined, meaning that the legal framework in Finland is very multiculturalist, but the ‘mainstream’ understandings of national identity reproduce traditional ideas of a homogeneous nation based on language and historical traditions. The terms used for integration in Finnish language are *kotouttaminen* and *kotoutuminen*, the former referring to the policy and the services provided by the state,

and the latter to the acts of integration by the migrant (Bodström, ). The Finnish integration legislation places the responsibility to provide migrants with integration services on the state, from where they are delegated to specific responsible bodies on the municipal level.

In Western countries, the policy term integration primarily concerns working-age migrant populations, whereas policies seldom recognise or oblige older migrants (Jurt & Sperisen, 2020). The official integration programme refers to older migrants as a special group of migrants along with stay-at-home mothers (see Nordberg, 2015) and people who have migrated as spouses or students, who are at risk of being neglected by the integration services in Finland (Government Integration Programme for 2016–2019 and Government Resolution on a Government Integration Programme 2016: 32). Moreover, voluntary organisations are mentioned in the programme as important collaborators (ibid. p. 15, 84). On the municipal level, older migrants are mentioned under the objectives of the prevention of inequality as a group in need of special support in social and health services (Helsinki's Integration Programme 2017–2021, p. 24). However, written policy measures are not sufficient to understand what matters in integration, more emphasis should be paid to the policies in practice (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016), and how the policy measures are interpreted.

The role of the voluntary sector in relation to integration is complex. Attending voluntary-sector activities has been found to produce many positive effects on the lives of older migrants (Palmberger, 2017), however, participating in voluntary sector activities alone does not qualify migrants as 'integrated' at the policy level. According to Saukkonen et al. (2013, p. 285) success in integration is measured by aspects such as employment, language skills in Finnish or Swedish, not being dependant on social security services, and social interaction with mainstream Finns. For the later-life migrants due to age at the time of move, finding employment or becoming fluent in Finnish or Swedish is more difficult. Moreover, migrant organisations play different roles in different societies, as seen in a study by Brandhorst et al. (2021). In Australia, migrant organisations are seen as part of the Australian multicultural endeavour, whereas in Germany, migrant organisations have not been encouraged, but rather seen as a threat leading to segregation (ibid. p. 253, 256). In Finland, a rather exclusive form of nationalism has been important in nation-building, and cultural homogeneity rather than diversity of the state has been widely emphasised by various actors (Saukkonen et al., 2013, p. 270). Moreover, the third sector in Finland has traditionally been strong, however experiencing increasing public service collaboration, which can potentially make the organisations extensions of official integration policies (Pirkkalainen et al., 2018, pp. 24, 31). The voluntary sector is acknowledged in the Finnish integration programme as an important collaborator, however the practical implications remain elusive. This elusiveness leaves room for interpretation in the voluntary sector for the different actors to negotiate what the policy goals of integration mean regarding older migrants. Furthermore, different funding mechanisms and bodies in Finland complicate the dynamics.

Different voluntary associations define what the policy goal of integration means for them from their own standpoints and contexts (Pyykkönen, 2007). However, it is ultimately the state, through its funding bodies and policies, as well as 'mainstream society', not migrants themselves, that have the power to determine what kind of integration

is acceptable (*ibid.*). For voluntary organisations whose activities promote health and wellbeing, the largest funder in Finland, Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organizations (STEA), distributed 385 million euros for various activities in 2020. STEA is a 'state-aid authority operating in connection with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health' and STEA's aim is that 'organisations receive grants for general or targeted activities, investments, development projects, introductory projects and other projects with a defined purpose' as was the goal of its predecessor RAY (STEA, 2021; Laki raha-automaattivastuudesta, 1056/2001). Importantly, the aim of STEA is not to fund projects that aim at integration, because it is the responsibility of municipalities and their funding mechanisms (*ibid.* 2022). In sum, the policy driven goals of migrant integration, various funding systems and their interpretations, and mundane realities interact within the meeting place under specific dynamics, which I bring forward in the analysis below.

### Site of research, data and methods

The empirical research was conducted at a meeting place in Helsinki where Russian-speaking migrants aged 65 and over can meet five days a week and take part in various activities such as arts and crafts, choral singing, excursions, light exercise, Finnish and English language courses, as well as receive assistance with using a smartphone or accessing various healthcare and social services. This place is one of a kind in the Helsinki area, and there are few like it in Finland as a whole. There are places where one can visit to receive assistance with specific issues, or attend clubs on certain days of the week. Here people could also simply spend time drinking tea and chatting, or playing board games without attending an activity. The meeting place was initiated by a non-profit foundation, and when the funding was secured, the meeting place was set up as an autonomous entity with its own steering group. At the time of the fieldwork (2018–2019), the place had been active for four years and had received around 200 visitors altogether, with 30–60 people visiting daily.

The data gathered from the meeting place consisted of funding applications ( $N=2$ ), a final report ( $N=1$ ), interviews with the organisers ( $N=2$ ), a field diary collected at the meeting place (over a period of one year, 2018–2019, approx. 150 h of observations), and interviews with the attendees ( $N=12+10$ , 12 interviewees and 10 follow-up interviews prompted with the help of an interaction diary). The interviewees were asked their preferred language, and most of the interviews were conducted in Russian. The applications were written in Finnish, and the extracts from the interviews were originally in Russian, however translated into English.

The attendees I interviewed had a median age of 70 years, and the median age of moving to Finland was 56. The median age and time of moving of the attendees interviewed, was similar to those of all the attendees in the meeting place. Age at time of migration, as well as duration of stay affects how people adapt to their new home-country (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2011): some migrants who migrated at working age have aged in place as 'others', and some have become othered after moving due to their age and background (Torres, 2006, p. 1352). The people who gather at the meeting place had migrated to



Finland for a variety of reasons. The most common reasons for migration were marriage to a Finnish person, returnee status,<sup>1</sup> connecting with family living in Finland, work and a combination of these factors. What the attendees shared was that they had reached retirement age in Russia<sup>2</sup> before moving to Finland, and most had family members living in Finland.

In the analysis, I had various types of data to work with: official accounts in the form of funding applications and reports to funders, data from the interviews, and observations of everyday interactions. The data were analysed using directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to find parts where integration was enacted. Therefore, the first step was to identify talk of integration in the data, and which dimensions were connected to it, and by whom. This was done by going through the data and finding parts where the actors explicitly talked about integration, or related terminology, such as assimilation. It is worth noting that the interviewees were not prompted to talk about integration. Instead, integration and discussions about what it entails were brought up spontaneously by the steering group, organisers and attendees.

In the analysis, I first compare these different ways of talking about integration to identify activities that were understood by different actors as related to integration in the meeting place. Then, the second part of the analysis moves on to scrutinize activities I identified as connected with integration, and what meanings they gained in the everyday. Applying the concept of integration brings methodological challenges due to its complexity, thus the application requires reflection and transparency on the data and its limits (Spencer & Charsley, 2021, p. 19). In the analysis, integration is used as a heuristic tool to tease out the interpretations by different actors in the meeting place.

It was crucial to keep in mind that the accounts on the need to integrate were directed to me as a researcher, and the accounts presented in the applications and reports were directed towards the funders. As people seek approval from their respective audiences (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the statements about what integration is and how it should be conducted could have been influenced by my position as a researcher with a Finnish background. Heino and Veistilä (2016, p. 174) found that the Russian-speaking families they interviewed were aware of the societal expectations imposed upon them, and tried to make their stories fit into what they saw as ‘a model story of integration’, connected to integration policy and law. These expectations and interpretations are reflected in the analysis, albeit given differing meanings and interpretations by different actors, and are given new and creative interpretations as lived experiences by the attendees. (2019, p. 690). The steering group assists the organisers in writing grant applications and final reports, and in other administrative issues. The members of the steering group are the only people affiliated with the meeting place who are native Finnish speakers. The organisers are Russian-speaking migrants, and their knowledge of Finnish language or of the Finnish funding mechanisms for the voluntary sector is not as extensive as that of the people in the steering group, who are Finnish experts in the field of ageing. In the application for funding in 2017, it was stated that: (2018, p. 121); moreover, it is the

<sup>1</sup> Ingrian Finns are ‘native Finns’ who were granted a returnee status from the 10th of April 1990, and the last applications for a returnee status were taken to be processed in July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Retirement age in Russia is 55 years for women and 60 years for men.

‘mainstream’ that has the power to make legitimate claims. Despite being critical, by bringing the concept of integration to the meeting place through the applications, the steering group enables the [2010](#)

### **Integration interpreted by the steering group**

The actors that are analytically fruitful to separate in the analysis are the steering group, the organisers, and the attendees, as it is empirically relevant to analyse who uses integration, in what context, and to what purpose (Rytter,

*The aim for the year 2018 is to support the integration process [integraatioprosessi] of the attendees. This is done through language courses and by encouraging the attendees to participate in the society around them. The aim is that the attendee feels like s/he is a part of the Finnish society [Application for funding 2017].*

As the goal of STEA is to support projects aimed at the ‘promotion of health and well-being,’ there is no need to include integration in the scope of the place, especially as STEA does not fund activities directed at integration which overlap with the responsibilities of municipalities. Therefore, it can be even a risky strategy to include integration in the application. Yet the application puts forward goals and labels them as integration: learning Finnish language and participation in Finnish society. Adding the notion of integration to the applications can be seen as a strategy to show conformity with the prevalent aim of integrating migrants more efficiently. The inclusion of integration even in applications where it can be counterproductive for the receiving of funding illustrates how omnipresent the policy discourse of integration is.

Based on my observations and discussions with the members of the steering group, I deduced that they have influenced the inclusion of integration in the remit of the meeting place:

*One member of the steering group has criticised the meeting place, as it does not help the attendees ‘to integrate’ [integroitumaan]. They do not integrate because they only go to the meeting place. [The steering group member] tells me how the activities of the meeting place are designed to help the attendees outside the meeting place. For example, skills taught in arts and crafts are something you can share with your neighbours. ‘After all, they [the attendees] are in Finland’ [Field diary 20.5.2019.]*

This discussion occurred in the presence of another member of the steering group, who did not disagree with this statement. The members do not portray the meeting place as valuable on its own, but only as a medium to integrate the attendees into Finnish society. From this perspective, the aims of successful integration are achieved by establishing contacts with people regarded as ‘Finns’. These types of statements on integration unveil power relations about who gets to define what kind of participation is desirable. These ‘common-sense understandings’ related to integration have power, as they do not necessarily need to be justified (Sotkasiira, *possibility* for the attendees to understand the place as one where one can gain skills



needed for ‘integration.’ The organisers also take part in planning the activities and writing applications, therefore this understanding is transferred to them as well.

### **Integration interpreted by the organisers**

Two organisers were responsible for the main coordination of the meeting place and planning of the daily activities. They were both Russian-speaking by background, of similar age as the attendees, and both women, as were the majority of the attendees. The organisers were a strong driving force in the daily activities of the meeting place, and I noted that the attendees also saw them as friends. The organisers played a central role in making the meeting place a comfortable place for the attendees. Atmospheric aspects can have a major impact in making certain places important (Asikainen, 2021) and the organisers contributed to making the meeting place a safe and welcoming place.

The other organiser answers to the questions about difficulties the meeting place has encountered:

*I understand that the Finns want [them to] adapt and assimilate [adaptirovat i assimilirovat], right? But this is an age category, it can no longer assimilate. They cannot, the young can, they cannot [Interview with organiser 2\_1].*

The statement shows how the organiser identifies, but also interprets the expectations connected to the attendees, as she herself might face the same expectations as a Russian-speaking migrant. She also distances herself from this expectation, which could indicate that the focus on integration is not something she has suggested to be added in the written documents. She uses the word ‘assimilate’ [assimilirovat] to describe how she sees the expectations of the Finnish society towards the attendees. Assimilation differs from integration (see Sam & Berry, ) in the sense that the migrants do not uphold their own culture, but merely dissolve into the dominant culture. As Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore (2018, p. 187) note, integration can overlap in practise with assimilation, and in this statement, the organisers interpret the societal expectations as assimilation. She uses the age of the attendees as the rationale for not being able to assimilate to the Finnish society, which can relate to moving later in life and having problems attaining fluency in Finnish language.

The other organiser identified language and knowledge of Finland as central factors for integration:

*Knowing Finnish language is important for integration. The attendees are like Finns, they know much about Finland, and we provide lectures about the history of Finland and Russia. [Organiser 1, field diary 27.11.2018].*

She points out how the attendees ‘are like Finns,’ connecting this statement to their knowledge of Finland. The attendees might know more about the history of Finland and Russia than the average ‘Finn,’ but the Russian-speaking migrants would not be considered ‘more integrated’ than Finns. Rytter (2019, p. 681) has pointed out this absurd side of how integration, as a category of analysis, fails to capture various phenomena, as the measuring stick is always the (imagined) ‘mainstream.’ Moreover, Carlsson et al., (2020, p. 16) found that the staff of a multicultural day care centre for older people had room to transform practices to better suit the needs of the clients, but they also felt the need to

conform to dominant practices to prove their professionalism. I observed that the organisers played a role in mediating between the policy level discourse of integration and its mundane interpretations and realities. The steering group talked about integration in the sense Saukkonen et al. (2013, p. 286) described it to be in the Finnish society, however, the organisers were able to question those demands in the case of later-life migrants. I also observed that the organisers were making interpretations of the demands of the discourse of integration, as well as providing the attendees the space for them to interpret and translate the integrative activities.

### **Integration interpreted by the attendees**

I now move on to explore how the attendees explicitly brought up integration in the interviews. The meeting place is only one arena in their lives, and it is not only there where integration is discussed: the attendees cannot avoid ‘integration talk’ outside the place either. The meeting place is organised for the attendees, and it is through their participation that the place becomes meaningful, or fails in its purpose.

*It [the meeting place] is important, because people who want to live here [in Finland] and want to integrate into this society gather here, and here they are helped to do this. Here are language, culture and various events related to Finnish culture. They need to know this. [Interview with attendee 6\_1]*

The attendee reiterates familiar aspects connected to the policy-level goals of integration. By emphasising that people who want to integrate into Finnish society gather in the meeting place implies that she depicts the activities of the place to promote integration. This view is contradictory to the steering group member’s comment about how the attendees do not integrate, as they are only in the meeting place. She also emphasises that ‘they need to know this’ to show that she acknowledges the expectations and portrays it as important to conform to them. By ‘they’, she could be referring to the attendees of the meeting place, or Russian-speaking migrants in Finland in general. As Anderson (2013, p. 6) notes, those who are not established members of the community of value must prove that they possess the ‘right’ values, and Cederberg (2014, p. 142) found that migrants reproduced discourses that made themselves responsible for ethnic divisions, and their lack of integration into society. Jurt and Sperisen (2020) argue that there is a persistent idea that older migrants are prone to retreat into their own ‘ethnic contexts’, but it is often structural factors that push them there, and their alternative strategies of inclusion are underestimated. In the case of the later-life migrants, the reason to attend the meeting place was often the lack of Finnish language skills, that reduces the number of places available, as well as the basic need to find meaningful activities.

In the next excerpt, another attendee connects integration to learning Finnish language and the ‘culture’ of Finland:

*I have some Finnish customs and roots... and some language skills and cultural skills [before moving to Finland]. Therefore, it was not a discovery for me in general, life in Finland and its peculiarity, the character of people... Because I was brought up in this way in Russia, it was easy for me to integrate. [Interview with attendee 3\_1]*

The interviewee is an Ingrian Finn who are 'ethnic Finns' who were given the opportunity to apply for returnee status in the 1990s. In Finland, they face discrimination similar to that encountered by other Russian-speaking migrants (Varjonen et al., 2013, p. 129). The interviewee points to Finnish language and 'cultural skills' as the main factors that helped her to become 'integrated' in the Finnish society.

I observed that the attendees were not trying to access the category of being 'Finnish', but to be accepted members in the Finnish community on their own terms, in dialogue with the prevalent discourses, integration being one of the central ones. In sum, I have found so far that some activities were seen as being more connected to promoting integration in the meeting place than others, and these practices were learning Finnish language, knowledge of 'culture' in Finland and being active in Finnish society. I now move on to illustrate how these (overlapping) activities were practiced in everyday interactions. The second analysis section will aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the dimensions that can be portrayed in the framework of integration were enacted by the attendees in the everyday.

### **Learning Finnish language**

Most of the attendees did not speak other languages fluently besides Russian, and having only knowledge of Russian limits the places available to them. Finnish language lessons were popular in the meeting place, but in the everyday, this central indicator of integration gained meanings beyond being means to an end:

*Studying Finnish often seems more like a formality than a goal-oriented activity. People talk about the importance of keeping their minds active, practicing their memory, learning something new, having a sense of rhythm to their day, and seeing friends in the activities. [Field diary 26.2.2019].*

There was often chatter in Russian during the Finnish lessons, Finnish words were often curiosities that sparked discussions in Russian, and people shared their stories in Russian when inspired by the contents of the lesson. Going to the lessons seemed to possess intrinsic value and studying was important, albeit competing in importance with other perceived benefits, such as the social aspects of the lessons, the routine and rhythm that the lessons provided, and keeping one's mind active.

People's language proficiency in Europe is defined by CEFR levels, but there are aspects that go beyond the measurable knowledge of the language. Learning specific and targeted phrases can have major impacts on the everyday:

*Sometimes someone would say in the back [of a bus] 'speak Finnish in Finland.' So during the language course I asked the teacher to teach me the phrase "Finland is a European democratic country, many languages are spoken here," I said this a couple of times, [people] immediately fell silent. [Interview with attendee 10\_1]*

With one phrase, she is able to call out xenophobic attitudes and claim her right to belong to the Finnish society. Various groups can slip in and out of the community of value (Anderson, 2013, p. 6), and being in or out can have temporal and spatial dimensions. Being able to enact one's own interpretations of one's position in the community of value can be a major source of belonging, although experiencing discrimination can

change the situation quickly. Therefore, trying to measure whether a person is ‘integrated’ by the level of language skills for example, falls short in understanding the lived experience, which is dynamic, situational, temporal and fluid.

### **Making sense of and showcasing understanding of Finnish ‘culture’**

Anderson (2013, p. 2) notes how culture, along with ethnicity, religion, and language, comprises a medium for expressing (exemplary) behaviour in relation to the community of value. Carlsson et al., (2020, p. 14) found that in multi-cultural day care venues, there was pressure to showcase older migrants’ integration into Dutch society. The meeting place held annual Christmas celebrations where the various groups showed what they had been practising over the previous year. In the celebrations cultural elements of Russia and other post-Soviet countries and Finland were brought together on stage in creative ways. The attendees’ families, friends, the stakeholders and funders of the meeting place were also invited to attend the celebration. The celebration was important as such, however elements of showcasing integration and understandings of ‘culture’ could also be detected: 2013, p. 326). The specific kind of diversity that the attendees showed on stage showed respect towards the (interpreted) Finnish culture, and was a way to show willingness to conform, however in a creative and playful way. 2016, p. 12), but it also enabled the attendees to build affective relations and settle in the city in a broader sense. These activities were not only about interactions with mainstream Finns, which is often emphasised in policy goals (Pyykkönen, 2007

*The Finnish language club was on stage to portray a ‘typical Finnish family’ and they were introducing the different members of the family in Finnish and reinforcing stereotypes and the choir was singing Christmas songs in Finnish [Field diary 24.11.2018.]*

The celebration was not only about showcasing interpretations of cultural elements, but a way to create inventive hybrids between stereotypes of Finnish culture and Russian culture, through music, dance, and theatre, which were present in the everyday of the meeting place as well. The performances were almost a way of showing: we are here, we understand what Finnish culture is about, and we want to participate in it in our own way. On stage, ‘they’ were more like ‘us’, or at least showed that they understand what it is to be ‘us’. The attendees were showing how Finnish and Russian or other post-Soviet ‘cultures’ can come together in a harmonious way, supporting and enriching each other. Integration allows some room for diversity, albeit only a particular kind of diversity that relates to ideas about what is the national or the social good (Anthias,

### **Being active in the meeting place and in society**

One central aspect the different actors understood as related to integration was being active in Finnish society. The meeting place was in itself a ‘site of sociability’ (Glick Schiller & Schmidt, ), but with other minorities, buildings, and urban spaces. This holistic view of participation is often lacking at the policy level, but on the everyday

level, the interpretations of spatial integration intertwine strongly with mundane activities.

*It's [the meeting place] just filled with life, you feel like a human being, that you live in a society, they talk to you, they offer you some interesting things, you communicate here, get help [Interview with attendee 2\_1]*

The attendee states that the meeting place makes her feel 'like a human being.' It is a strong statement, indicating that there might be something missing outside the meeting place that either hinders this, or that there are not enough opportunities to fulfil what she sees as sufficient to feel human. She also talks about living in a society, which in this case can mean the society in the meeting place or Finnish society in general. In sum, the meeting place is a strong positive resource to connect to a society of some sort.

Due to the interconnected histories of Finland and Russia,<sup>3</sup> connecting one's background to the urban spaces in Helsinki can be a way to participate and find ways to belong:

*Organised walks in the city are very popular among the attendees. They often discuss history from the period when Finland was a part of the Russian Empire. [Field diary 7.11.2018]*

Castañeda (2018, p. 2) notes that different cities can mitigate or suppress the feelings of belonging which happens as a dynamic interaction between the cultural context of the country of origin and the new country. Russian speakers in Finland are a specific minority as it is possible for many of them to make these historical connections with Finland. As in the context of the nation, community of value is understood within a historical trajectory, claims of heritage can be claims to the community of value (Anderson, 2013, p. 178). Connecting one's history to the cityscape of Helsinki can work as something that deeply influences a person's feelings of belonging.

*We do various flash mobs... we took to the streets of the city, we danced, we did exercises, for everyone. We were doing exercises on chairs sitting on the steps [of one of the main cathedrals in Helsinki], and everyone was invited. [Interview with organiser 1]*

Buhr (2017, p. 317) suggests how migrants 'becoming local' is beyond mere everyday mobility, it is about carving your own meanings about urban spaces and the experiences connected to them. For the attendees, going out to urban spaces to dance or do exercise can be a way to show one's activity in the cityscape, but also take over the spaces in the city and make them meaningful. These kinds of activities can have a strong impact on the lived experiences of 'doing integration,' but can easily go unnoticed on the policy level (2015, p. 34), and as noted earlier, older Russian-speaking migrants face prejudice in the Finnish society. Through this case study, I argue that the discourse of integration is there to be mobilised by the migrants themselves, given certain preconditions. The perspectives by different actors in the meeting place on what integration is, or should be, set

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<sup>3</sup> Finland was a part of the Russian Empire from 1809 until 1917, when it gained independence.

the limits for what the attendees can ultimately interpret as ‘integration’ (2017; Carlsson et al., 2020; Glick Schiller & Schmidt, 2016; Palmberger, 2017)

## Conclusions and discussion

Integration has become an omnipresent discourse difficult to avoid even in places directed at the promotion of health and well-being. In this paper, I have argued that the meeting place for older migrants is a contested site where integration is interpreted in contradictory ways by different actors, however performed in a playful manner by the attendees as one strategy to make sense of one’s position in the Finnish community of value. Comparing the interpretations of activities related to integration of the steering group, organisers and the attendees opened a more nuanced understanding on the one hand of the dynamics under which the lived experience of integration is negotiated, and on the other, the power dynamics it can reproduce. Through this comparison, I was able to pinpoint the activities different actors see as connected to the notion of integration, but also highlight the complexity of meaning-making around the concept of integration. I have also suggested that from the attendees’ perspective, ‘doing integration’ can be conceptualised as a way to make sense of one’s position in the Finnish community of value, in dialogue with different activities that are connected to ‘integration’.

The steering group, who represented mainstream Finns, brought the policy language of integration to the meeting place through funding applications, as well as by making statements on integration; however, this also made way for the possibility to frame some activities as related to integration. The organisers, by acknowledging and interpreting the demands of the policy goals of integration, played a key role in translating some of the activities (mainly learning Finnish language and activities related ‘culture’ and participation in the society) into something that fits in the (imagined) framework of integration, but also into something the attendees can use to make sense of their own positions in the Finnish society. For the attendees this opened up the possibility to understand some of the activities as ‘doing integration’ as a way of finding belonging in the Finnish society, even if on the policy level it would not be recognize it as such.

The analysis indicates that for the attendees ‘doing integration’ can be a positive resource to make sense of their own positions. Therefore, places where one can ‘do integration’, such as the meeting place, can emerge as a source of well-being if there is room for people to develop their own meanings of what integration could be for them. Doing integration from the attendees’ point of view can be about learning Finnish language by dancing to Finnish songs or learning a particularly useful phrase; Finnish ‘culture’ can be something to become familiar with and approached as a source of meaning; and participating in society can be much more than interactions with mainstream Finns. Moreover, it can be something to ‘play around’ with and create new ‘hybrids’ that make sense, create positive memories and become meaningful. However, it is important to continue to theorise how different forms and strategies emerge. Ultimately, attempts to implement integration in contexts of inequalities is deeply challenging (Lewis et al.,

This paper resonates with previous research (Buhr, ) stating processual, spatial, and temporal aspects are important to take into consideration when studying the lived experiences of older migrants. The paper has focused only on one setting and a category of migrants, which limits the generalisability of the findings. However, their case illustrates



how a micro-level comparative view enables to observe how even in one place different agendas of integration become visible and negotiated. This highlights how the meaning-making around the concept of integration is highly complex. I wish to emphasise that for the later-life migrants learning Finnish language, knowledge of Finnish culture and being active in the Finnish society has intrinsic value, and is not to be understood solely in the framework of integration. However, I have proposed throughout this paper that taking part in these activities, and having the space to understand them as related to integration can enable making sense of one's position in the community of value. This aspect should be taken into consideration when exploring integration as a lived experience for migrants.

For further research, it would be fruitful to analyse whether a sense of 'doing integration' is present in other places directed for older migrants, and possibly other categories of migrants as well, and to compare findings from different countries. In Finland integration has become the underpinning goal for migrant settlements, and there is a need to acknowledge that there are categories of migrants such as the later-life Russian-speaking migrants who will not meet the policy-driven criteria of being 'fully integrated'. Even so, they are actively making sense of what these demands are for them, and creating meanings in their everyday in dialogue with these demands. Meeting places such as the one presented here can cater for multiple lived experiences of 'integration', as a personal and even a playful experience, however for the migrant always under potentially precarious power dynamics.

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#### **Author contributions**

AA collected, analysed and interpreted the data.

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#### **Availability of data and materials**

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

#### **Declarations**

##### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

This study has been reviewed and found ethically acceptable by the University of Helsinki Ethical review board in humanities and social and behavioural sciences, statement number 42/2018.

##### **Competing interests**

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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