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Abstract
Russia is one of the world's largest migrant-receiving countries. The recession of recent years, changes in labor market and immigration policies, and an increase in anti-foreign sentiment have directly affected immigrants' lives in Russia. This has been reflected not only in how immigrants find employment and housing in the country but also in how they perceive Russia as a country in which to work and live. This article analyzes remigration as a coping strategy of Afghan immigrants in Russia. These immigrants face severe everyday difficulties as irregular migrants and suffer discrimination and uncertainty. Despite their low status and vulnerability, we argue that Afghan immigrants still have agency, evident in how they interpret and live in the Russian anti-immigrant atmosphere. The article is based on stories narrated by Afghan immigrants in Russia and a qualitative content analysis of the asylum application protocols of Afghan asylum seekers in Finland that was produced by the Finnish Border Guard, Police, and the Finnish Immigration Service. A total of 632 Afghan citizens applied for asylum after entering Finland from the Russian Federation along the “Arctic route” between 2015 and 2016.

Keywords: Afghan immigrants; agency; remigration; vulnerability; Russia

Introduction

Russia is one of the world's largest migrant-receiving countries. The over 10 million migrants in the country are predominantly labour migrants from the former Soviet space. In addition, there are other groups such as students, diasporas, transit migrants and refugees from different parts of the world. The recession of recent years, changes in labor market and immigration policies, and an increase in anti-foreign sentiment have directly affected migrants' lives in Russia. These impacts have been reflected not only in how migrants find employment and housing in the country but also in how they perceive Russia as a country in which to work and live.

Most studies of Russian migration explore various aspects of labor migration to Russia, especially from Central Asia and other former Soviet republics. Most attention is paid to migratory ties with Central Asian and other former Soviet states (the CIS and the Eurasian Economic Union) that are key players in Russian migration processes (e.g., Ryazantsev 2016; Kuznetsova and Round 2018; Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018). With the exception of a few studies of Chinese, Vietnamese, and other non-CIS immigration to Russia (e.g., Horie and Grigoriev 2015; Pismennaya et al. 2015; Ryazantsev 2014; Ryazantsev, Man'shin, and Nguyen 2013; Dixon 2010; Ryazantsev and Hunmei 2010), the literature is scarce on immigration from outside the
This article explores Afghan citizens’ immigration, life experiences, and remigration in Russia. It focuses on these different aspects of migration that may have long durée histories as well as rapidly changing movements. This relatively silent, invisible, and large group of immigrants reveals some important aspects of Russia as a country of immigration: racism, discrimination, abuse of power, and the severe impact of everyday struggles as irregular migrants. The study contributes to the growing scholarship on the European “migration crisis” or “refugee crisis” (e.g., Braghiroli and Makarychev 2018; Crawley et al. 2018; Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2018; Virkkunen 2018; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017) and claims that Russia, including its Arctic areas, functions as an alternative route for Asian, African, and Middle Eastern migrants to Europe (Iivari 2018; Piipponen and Virkkunen 2017; Moe and Rowe 2016).

The focus on Afghan immigrants illustrates the everyday roots of migration. While much of the media and policy discourses are based on transit migration descriptions of the EU as the ultimate destination, empirical studies demonstrate the mixed and fragmented character of migration (e.g., Crawley et al. 2018; Kubal 2016; Collyer, Düvell and de Haas 2012; Collyer and de Haas 2012; Düvell 2012; Collyer 2007). On the “Arctic route” there were indeed transit migrants heading to the EU. However, a considerable proportion were labor migrants, refugees, and others in Russia who had decided to remigrate.

Based on the interview protocols of Afghan asylum seekers in Finland and the interviewees’ narrated stories, we argue that Afghan immigrants had agency despite their vulnerable status in Russia. They found a way to transform their acute vulnerability into coping strategies that became crucial, especially in situations where gaining legal status to remain, registration, access to basic services, and regular income seemed impossible in the short and long term. Afghans, like other Asian and African immigrants, were also subjected to frequent (often illegal) arrest and the constant fear of deportation. At the same time, media publicity around the “open” Norwegian and Finnish borders in the Russian Arctic created images and expectations of a “normal life” in countries regarded as safe, having a high quality of life, and, open and welcoming society.

We examine the vulnerability and coping of these Afghan asylum seekers, examining how media-created expectations and images provided an impetus for agency and remigration in everyday local, yet transnational, contexts. What kind of vulnerability, socio-ethnic hierarchies, and inequality lie behind Afghan immigrants’ remigration from the Russian Federation? How is the lack of future perspectives they experience transformed into the agency of migrants who are usually seen only as victims of social hierarchies, abuse, and corruption? We scrutinize this in the narrated stories, interpretations, and expectations of the Afghan immigrants in Russia who remigrated to Finland through the Russian Arctic during the “Arctic migration episode” in 2015 and 2016.

Empirical Framework

The analysis is based on a qualitative content analysis of 120 asylum application protocols of Afghan citizens conducted by the Finnish Border Guard, Police of Finland, and Finnish Immigration Service.1 This is about 29 percent of all Afghan protocols in the material (421 protocols) and consists only of those who had stayed and lived in Russia prior to remigration to Finland.2 The remaining 301 Afghan applicants used Russia as a transit country. We analyzed this division between migrants and transit migrants based on several aspects of an applicant’s story: length of stay; initial intentions and plans, if available; and what was said about work, renewing visas, residence permits, asylum in Russia, and their reasons for remigrating. A short stay did not automatically indicate transiting or a long stay immigration. In addition to the protocols as this article's...
basic empirical material, research literature and reports, seminar discussions, and information from other publications (news, statistics, etc.) are used to contextualize Afghan migration in Russia and to understand the migrants’ interpretations.

Asylum Interviews as Narrated Stories

The asylum interview protocols are confidential and sensitive. The authors read and collected them as qualitative and quantitative notes in an extensive Excel file at the Finnish Immigration Service’s premises in Helsinki. The qualitative content analysis of the material was conducted later. Our research interest and analysis focuses on asylum seekers’ experiences and interpretations of their motives for migration and asylum, residence and daily lives in Russia, stories about their travel experiences, border crossings, and organization of their journeys. We were also interested in migrants’ images of Russia, Europe, and Finland. Despite the character of this material, we did not engage with Finnish asylum policy, the asylum process, or the grounds on which asylum seekers were granted or refused asylum in Finland.

Asylum interview protocols are official documents that indicate the specific context of these stories. They are conducted in a formal institutional setting, in an interaction between an interviewer (a representative of the authorities), asylum seeker, and translator. The material can therefore be characterized by various asymmetries (Tanttu 2017). The applicants are in very vulnerable situations with immense expectations and uncertainties about the future, while the interviewer’s task is to determine their travel details and motives for asylum. In theory, all this is conducted in asylum seekers’ native language through an interpreter who also functions as a cultural mediator.

The very sensitive issues in the interviews, conducted within a formal institutional setting, mean that the generation of trust in the process does not lie exclusively in the hands of the interviewer: the applicant’s background and previous encounters with the authorities, for example, influence their capacity and willingness to talk. As it is entirely possible that the applicant, despite the encouragement of the interviewer, conceals or adds details with the expectation of a positive asylum decision, we cannot interpret the information in the protocols as “facts” but rather as a particular type of story that reveals some important aspects of asylum seekers’ experiences. Our material’s large sample may also reveal something about the broader migratory processes within which migration occurred.

We analyze the protocols as narrated stories in which asylum seekers reconstruct their migratory journeys, experiences, and interpretations in relation to their social and cultural contexts. According to Patterson and Monroe (1998, 330) narrated stories are a source of information in which people make sense of their lives, assemble information, conceive of themselves, and interpret the world. Such stories include both the experiences and the means of interpreting them available to the tellers in a given culture. In this case, it is better to speak of cultures. Although the Afghan immigrants remigrating from Russia to Finland have their backgrounds in Afghanistan, their stories afford an insight into how they interpret and imagine Russia as a country of residence but “Afghanistan as home” and “abroad”—in some cases—decades in Russia as immigrants.

In practice, the asylum protocols conducted during the (occasionally) complicated moments of the interview include different narrators. Some parts of the stories are written verbatim as the translator conveyed the applicant’s words; however, large parts of the documents are the words used by the interviewing authority to tell the applicant’s story. In the empirical part of this article, the narrated stories may therefore seem disorganized and disoriented. Yet the stories’ forms help us to organize information about applicants’ migratory
contexts and motives. In addition to “real experiences,” contexts and motives include values, assumptions, and imaginaries that guide migrants’ hopes, intentions, plans for the future, and perspectives of agency.

The Arctic Route from Russia to Finland

The Arctic route was one of the European migratory routes asylum seekers used to enter Schengen during the 2015–2016 “migration crisis” (Figure 1). The route went through Moscow and the northernmost border crossing stations between the Russian Federation, Norway, and Finland. Asylum seekers arrived in Finland through the border crossing stations at Raja-Jooseppi and Salla between September 2015 and February 2016 (Finnish Border Guard, January 8, 2016, through March 4, 2016). Existing immigrant networks in Norway and its reputation as a wealthy, tolerant, and open society meant that Norway was the northern destination to which asylum seekers headed first. Neighbouring Finland was much less known and became of interest especially after Norwegian and Russian border guards stopped accepting incomers to Norway without valid Schengen visas in November 2015 (Moe and Rowe 2016, 88–89). Rumors about the “open borders” in Northern Finland spread in the news and on websites. So, migration changed its course to the Russian-Finnish border. The “episode” lasted until the end of February 2016.

Figure 1. The Arctic route through Moscow to the North, 2015–2016.

Diverse Irregular Movements and Rule-of-Law Security Concerns
Russia and the Arctic route became an alternative to the crowded Mediterranean and Balkan routes that were expensive and hazardous because of the extreme maritime dangers and the bordering practice of East and Central European states like Serbia and Hungary. A total of approximately 38,100 persons applied for asylum in Finland in 2015 and 2016, of whom only 1,756 (4.6%) entered Finland from Russia (Finnish Immigration Service 2017; Finnish Border Guard, January 8, 2016, through March 4, 2016).

In our material, 281 of 1,164 asylum applicants reported residence in Russia prior to arriving in Finland. The 120 Afghans and 117 immigrants from thirteen different African countries amounted to 84 percent of these 281 applicants. The Arctic route applicants were a heterogeneous group with a variety of origins: transit migrants; remigrating immigrants from Russia; families with children; and those travelling alone with different backgrounds in Russia. African immigrants, unlike the Afghans, were seldom accompanied by children.

Occurring as it did in the aftermath of the occupation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, both the Finnish and Norwegian media presented the migration episode as an aspect of Russian international policy and a manoeuvre of the Russian state. Especially peculiar and puzzling were questions related to border management: why did cooperation with the Russian border guards suddenly fail, and why were migrants without Schengen visas allowed into and through the Russian border zone (Skön 2017; Moe and Rowe 2016)? This phenomenon ceased in Finland at the end of February 2016, after Finnish and Russian politicians and authorities negotiated on various occasions, especially in January and February (Huhta 2016a, 2016b; Koivuranta 2016), and after President Putin publicly addressed the issue at an FSB (Federal’naia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti [Security Service of the Russian Federation]) event at which he stressed the “necessity to strengthen the control of refugee flows to Russia and through Russia to Europe” (Putin 2016). Meanwhile, the Finnish Ministries of the Interior and Foreign Affairs and the Finnish Border Guard negotiated with their Russian counterparts, preparing for a top-level meeting between Finnish President Sauli Niinistö and Vladimir Putin in March 2016. The countries agreed to restrict border traffic at the two northern border stations for third-country nationals for 180 days (Finnish Border Guard, April 8, 2016).

The general stance, both in the Finnish government and media, was that “the problem” was primarily a matter of border security—at least partly related to Russian geopolitics—rather than an issue related to broader European migratory processes or restrictive immigration, asylum, and labor market policies in Russia. Furthermore, a strictly formal rule-of-law approach was emphasized in statements that asylum seekers should not have the right to choose asylum between Finland and Russia, as both countries were considered safe (Lindroos and Hamunen 2016).

**Afghans on the Arctic Route (2015–2016)**

We focus in this section on the Arctic route Afghan immigrants took and discuss how they viewed Russia as a country for immigration. In general, Afghans in Russia consist of two main groups. First, the “old” Afghan diaspora is comprised of individuals with historical Soviet connections and Afghan-Soviet relations. They are usually from the educated elite and are highly skilled professionals. Many, who studied at Soviet universities, were teachers, lawyers, economists, and university professors or military, engineering, and technical workers and specialists. They were in Russia with their families and had close relations with the Soviet-installed Afghan regime (Ivakhnyuk 2009; Ivanova 2004). In the early 1990s, they were unable or unwilling to return home when the Islamic regimes replaced the Soviet-friendly Afghan government.

The second group includes Afghan asylum seekers and refugees who flee the country due to military conflict and continuing everyday struggles in a society controlled by a very conservative Islamic culture.
Groups like the Taliban have had an immense impact on society, evident in the strong social pressure on and among ordinary families. Because of its close ties with its neighbours and former allies, Russia has become one of the target countries for labor migrants and refugees from surrounding regions, including Afghanistan (Malinkin 2015).

Afghans who used the Arctic route to Finland do not fit the general public’s perception of refugees as single young men. The 120 asylum protocols include the documents of 75 men and 45 women. As many as 96 (80%) of these applicants were accompanied by a family member. The protocols also listed seventy accompanying children who lacked their own protocols because of their age. The Afghans in our material had stayed in Russia between one and 30 years. The group was also ethnically and religiously diverse: half the applicants were Tajik, mostly Sunni, but there were also some Shia. The other ethnic groups were Sunni Pashtun, Shia Hazara, and a few Shia Qizilbash.

The asylum interview protocols serve as a good indication of the different aspects of migrant vulnerability in contemporary Russia. The state authorities, immigration policy and governance, and discrimination are some of the biggest sources of insecurity among immigrants. Apart from external reasons, discussed in the latter part of this article, everyday insecurities were the main contextual reasons for Afghan remigration from the country.

**Who Were the Afghans?**

Our material indicates the different groups of and reasons for Afghan migration, including a range of insecurities caused by political conflict, poverty, extreme conservative Islamic social and political control, and everyday safety. These reasons were, therefore, related to matters of political or security concern not only at the state level but also to the very strong social control and pressure on families and local communities. For example, Afghans who had previously worked for the Soviet-backed government or international employers—including foreign troops or the United Nations—were often considered traitors. So were those who had previously lived or visited abroad, wanted education, desired “free” (not arranged) marriage, or refused to join the organization or action of extremist groups like the Taliban. The following man, who had lived in Russia since 1993, escaped Afghanistan when the Soviet-backed government collapsed and Islamist fundamentalists seized power:

> I participated in Najibullah’s army, and that is why the radical Muslims threatened to kill me. I fled to Russia.

(53-year-old Afghan man, row 205)

He felt Russia offered him the opportunity of life and work without the fear of violence. The Afghan diaspora in the country offered him a basis for social networks and a sense of community with his compatriots.

Conservative Afghan social practices led most of our Afghan immigrants to fear discrimination, violence, and possible death if they had to return or face deportation from Russia. Extremist groups, political leaders, and, relatives were apparently likely to consider them unreliable foreign enemies and traitors. One Afghan man—who studied and married in Uzbekistan in the late 1980s and fought during the Afghan war in the Soviet-backed government’s army—spoke of his high hopes when he had returned to Afghanistan in 1993. However, the reality was different:
I’m called a child of Lenin. I studied under communism abroad. I’m a communist. I don’t have a religion. That’s why I can’t return to my home country. And I have a wife who is called an infidel because she doesn’t believe in Islam. Even ordinary people think I am a traitor without a religion… The door to Afghanistan is closed to me.

(55-year-old Afghan man, row 849)

His life did not go as expected. Islamists harassed and persecuted him and his relatives. They killed one of his sisters, causing his other siblings to flee. He also lost his Uzbek wife and their son when he escaped from Afghanistan. He lived in Russia for three years before coming to Finland in 2016.

Many Afghans lived in Russia for years and thus lost their connection to their home culture and society. Many Afghan children were born in Russia and had no contact with Afghanistan. A comment by a thirteen-year-old Afghan girl—who grew up and went to school in Russia—exemplifies the social, political, and cultural dilemma of second-generation Afghan immigrants. While Afghanistan represents religious pressure and gendered subordination for her, Russia embodies a certain freedom and familiarity:

I grew up in a free country and I do not want to end up in a place where I should be subordinate to men. I want to live safely in a free country. I don’t know anything about Islam, I don’t pray, and I don’t wear a scarf, and if they noticed this there, they would kill me.

(13-year-old Afghan girl, row 163)

Stories of Islamic pressure recur in our material. Statements about customs and traditions often concretize this pressure. They are used to justify all kinds of pervasive and violent acts related to certain moral codes, (mis)behaviour, and jealousy and greed within and between families, neighbourhoods, and workplaces. A 53-year-old man expresses a similar worry on behalf of his family and, especially, his daughters.

I cannot return to Afghanistan because I have three daughters. They would be in danger. They have been growing up in Russian culture and traditions.

(53-year-old Afghan man, row 209)

Many stories also describe the in-between state of life in Russia. Afghanistan seems dangerous, distant, and unfamiliar, yet it also seems to be difficult to establish life in Russia.

If it had been safe in Afghanistan, I wouldn’t have stayed in Russia any longer… It wasn’t worth living there, but I had to. I didn’t have a choice. In Afghanistan, I had a farm and a house—everything I needed. I could have easily lived there.

(53-year-old Afghan man, row 209)

Irregular Status in Russia

Although the “Afghan problem” has been publicly acknowledged and discussed, even presented to the President Putin in the early 2000s, the Russian Afghan community’s lack of legal status remains its biggest problem. Only some Afghans have been able to receive some form of residence permit, asylum, or citizenship. Some long-term studies (e.g., Ivanova 2004) suggest the number of Afghan immigrants in Russia is somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000. This differs markedly from the current official figures, according to which only 305 Afghans held refugee status in Russia (of a total of 572 individuals) at the beginning of 2019 (Rosstat 2019). Similarly, only 484 Afghans have temporary asylum3 (of a total of 76,825 individuals), while up to 98 percent (75,006) of the holders of this status are Ukrainian. The number of Syrians is 826.
The main problems lie in the restrictive Russian immigration and asylum policy, and the discrepancy between regulations and the authorities’ actual enforcement practice. Several scholars and NGOs (e.g., Ivanova 2004; Litvinova 2016; Burtina, Korosteleva, and Simonov 2015) note that Russian legislation on refugees and temporary asylum is relatively good. It conforms on paper with international conventions and agreements—including the UN refugee convention. Yet, there are severe problems in its implementation. As the above example of Afghan and Syrian refugees indicates, it is unlikely that a positive decision on an asylum request will be received, even if the prerequisites for refugee status or temporary asylum are met. Processing times are also long, and it is difficult to find information about procedures. Those who work with immigrants do not necessarily consider Russia a possible place for asylum because of a lack of trust in the Russian asylum policy and struggles with corruption and racism (e.g., Litvinova 2016).

These struggles and negative experiences with the immigration authorities are strongly present in our material. Repeated attempts to legalize status—and disappointment at failing to do so—or continue a temporary status lead many to conclude it is not worth trying. As an Afghan describes his attempts to legalize the status of his family (interviewer as the narrator):

He had a residence permit in Russia for one year in 2011–2012. He applied for international protection several times but always received a negative decision and does not know why. He lived in Moscow for six years.

(33-year-old Afghan man, row 338)

Many Afghans also complain about the lack of information concerning complicated rules, long waiting times, and the authorities’ unhelpful or hostile attitudes and veiled demands for money. After complaining about police corruption and bad behaviour, a middle-aged Afghan man also describes his failed attempts to legalize his status during his thirteen-year irregular stay in Russia (applicant and interviewer as narrators):

I wasn’t able to rent myself a store as I was in the country without papers. [...] I have applied for protection and a residence permit in Russia, but I haven’t got them. I was threatened in Russia. The applicant says that sometimes his application was ripped apart in front of his face, and it was not even taken for processing.

(43-year-old Afghan man, row 299)

The statement of a 30-year-old Afghan man—“Russia does not take refugees” (row 998)—and the personal experiences of a young construction engineer—who decided to come to Finland despite his six one-year student visas in the country—indicate the general lack of trust and the role of rumor in Russian immigration and asylum policy:

We didn’t apply for a residence permit [in Russia] as we’ve heard that only a very small percentage is granted a temporary residence permit of about half a year. Afghans are not granted permanent residence permits, so we applied for asylum.

(25-year-old Afghan man, row 959)

Registration and Everyday Struggles

Residential registration is one of the most problematic sources of insecurity for immigrants in Russia. Everyone in Russia needs a residential registration. It is an important entry point to legal status and social benefits, such as education, health services, and the Russian housing market. It has become a commodity of illegal practices and the black market (Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018; Reeves 2013). Some property owners
and employers provide counterfeit registrations, thereby causing immigrants to break the law unintentionally (Muller 2018).

Afghans’ position at the lower end of the ethnic hierarchy and their many attempts to organize registration were evident in our material. So were the registration-related everyday concerns that troubled entire families, especially families with children. A young Afghan man, who was unable to renew his residence permit after staying in Moscow for five years with short-term permits, explains:

With a temporary permit we were not entitled to go to school or get medical treatment. […] I was unable to work; I wasn't working. […] With my siblings we were only at home. Sometimes we went outside for a while. I was however afraid that I would be caught by the police. In Russia, I was unable to move around safely in any neighbourhood. In Russia you need to get registered officially at an address.

(23-year-old Afghan man, row 103)

The man feels he cannot continue living in Russia because of the lack of opportunities, the constant fear of the police, and the hostile environment. An older man with a wife and four daughters shares his feelings too. Neither he nor his children will have any opportunities in Russia when their residence permit runs out, even though the children were born there:

When the residence permit runs out in Russia, and it's no longer possible to renew it, I won't have any rights there as an immigrant. My children and I won't have a right to study and live there like other people who have rights. This means that if I don't have a Russian passport, my children—even though they were born there—will have none of the rights Russians have.

(53-year-old Afghan man, row 209)

A story of another Afghan father, who lived in Moscow for six years, supports the above concerns about children’s access to education and health. He adds his very concrete fear of deportation and the possible separation of his family:

As we have no papers, our children can enter neither day care nor school. Our children have not received their vaccinations in Russia as we are in the country with no permits. I’m afraid that I will be deported, and the children will stay in Russia. We haven’t received a residence permit in Russia.

(23-year-old Afghan man, row 338)

Many problems in access to services overlap with a meagre livelihood because of unregulated, precarious work in bazaars, petty trade, warehouses, households, transportation, construction, and the distribution of advertising leaflets. The possibilities to pay for housing and services are also very limited. Furthermore, in addition to expensive housing prices, property owners are looking for reliable “Slavic” tenants, meaning immigrants rely on black-market housing, where rooms are of bad quality, crowded, and often unregistered (e.g., Ryumin 2018).

Discrimination and the Police

Discrimination and racist attitudes are associated with the arbitrary conduct and space for corruption in the practices of the authorities. In her study on labor migrants from the former Central Asian Soviet republics, Turaeva (2018) has described how the Russian judicial and law enforcement system operates to deprive people of documents, and then, the same state treats them as if they have no rights. This has a direct impact on migrants’ sense of safety and security. A middle-aged man with a wife and three children said this in the context of his complicated migration story:
I’m afraid of all the authorities because I’m in the country illegally. I’m very nervous. I even have high blood pressure.

(43-year-old Afghan man, row 375)

His fear of the authorities has several interrelated features. The arbitrary conduct of the immigration authorities and the extremely corrupt practices of the police are clear in our material. Police officers demand bribes during frequent document checks on the streets and in metro stations, make arrests (often illegal), and take migrants to a police station for further investigation. There were also reports of police taking migrants to an unknown place—a distant metro station, for example—from which they had to make their way back home, usually with no money. Thus, the police do not represent safety or the rule of law to migrants but an extremely corrupt institution with significant power over their everyday life and future. A 39-year-old handyman explains how he lived for twenty years in Russia with different statuses—including several short-term residence permits and UN registration certificates—and how these were supposed to protect him from illegal raids by the police.

It was a two-page paper that could be folded. It had some text in English and in Russian. It was to prevent the police arresting these people. I carried this paper for some time but threw it away because it had no value. Even though I showed this paper to the police, they still took money from people’s pockets and didn’t care about the paper.

(39-year-old Afghan man, row 300)

There were many stories about the police in our material, and they often involved a demand for a bribe. Such conduct was experienced as extremely frustrating and, more broadly, representing the state’s racist practices. A short comment from a 30-year-old Afghan man’s protocol illustrates the general distrust toward the authorities. He had lived in Russia since 2010 and thought his life was in danger when relatives of his Russian partner attacked him. He went to the police to attempt to report the offence but received a rude reception: “Russia is a Russian country: you cannot report any offence” (30-year-old Afghan man, row 35).

The police’s racist behaviour reflects a broader situation in contemporary Russia. Overtly racist incidents on the streets, in the metro, at schools, or in other public places were common in our material. It is impossible to remain immune to repeated attacks ranging from hate speech to verbal bullying, and from spitting and physical violence to comments such as “go home” and “go away.” This 13-year-old Afghan girl, who was born in Moscow and grew up in Krasnodar, tells a paradoxical story in which Russia is simultaneously portrayed as a country of freedom and familiarity, and a racist place (both the interviewer and the applicant as narrators):

“At school we were bullied, hit, and spat on in the face, and they asked what we were doing here.” Her siblings were also violated and harassed in Russia. “I couldn’t do anything in Russia, I couldn’t continue with school or do anything. […] They don’t consider us human. We were despised and called names. Why did we have black faces and why had we come to their country? We were treated very badly.”

(13-year-old Afghan girl, row 163)

Migrant Agency and Remigration

The struggles described above relate to Afghans’ personal histories “at home” in Russia. The fear of deportation, everyday troubles related to irregular status, lack of future opportunities, and experiences of discrimination and mistreatment by the authorities are key issues behind migrants’ remigration from Russia. Many of the Afghans had lived in the country for more than twenty years—sometimes legally with a temporary
asylum or residence permit—during which they married, had children, and made numerous unsuccessful efforts to permanently legalize their status as refugees or labor migrants. However, some Afghans continued their journey from Russia soon after they had arrived. The diverse and periodical character of contemporary international migratory movements (e.g., Crawley et al. 2018) is also present in our material. Stays, stops, and detours, as well as remigration and new journeys, contribute to the transforming and mixed statuses of migrants, revealing agency in existing and constantly changing circumstances.

Characterizations of migrants are often extremely polarized: they are viewed either as victims with no agency or as criminals, terrorists, fraudsters, or welfare scroungers. This easily casts a shadow on discussions of migrant agency (Mainwaring 2016). Recent years’ experience of immigration discourses both in Europe and the Americas clearly reveal that discussions of immigration vary not only in terms of political ideology but in perspectives. Thus, these set the basis for the underlying ontological assumptions and terminology. A binary frame, for example, aids in the construction of the “good” versus the “bad” migrant (Anderson 2008), and many developed countries prefer refugees from areas of conflict to those who arrive “spontaneously” (Mountz 2010). Mainwaring (2016) maintains that polarized considerations misconceive the agency, however limited, which migrants demonstrate and evidence in their own accounts of border crossings and experiences in host states. We wish also to consider this in our article. We are aware of and consider the structural inequalities, constraints, and barriers to rights that challenge migrants and their coping with their daily lives in Russia, as well as the migrants’ imaginaries, opportunity structures, and remigration.

In Russia, Afghan immigrants’ agency is mainly related to coping by minimizing the risks of deportation, avoiding abuse by the police and other people, and trying to make daily life possible, despite the fact that difficult incidents could scarcely be avoided. Minimizing daily movement outside the apartment and adapting to difficult incidents by trying to reduce harm—for example, carrying as little money as possible on the streets and living together in crowded apartments with other immigrants to make ends meet—were common. This Afghan woman moved to Moscow two and a half years before coming to Finland to join her Afghan husband, who had already lived in Russia for more than ten years. She did not like to go out very often.

In Moscow, I did not leave home often. Every now and then I went to buy food and milk for the children. Sometimes I bumped into drunks, who hit us […] I didn’t know any Russian.

(31-year-old Afghan woman, row 567)

This and the previous stories in our material suggest we need to consider migrants’ agency. Migrants are not merely the victims of twisted enforcement practices and the victims of deprivation of their rights by the rule of law. On the one hand, agency, however mundane and limited, develops from complicated interactions between the state’s formal and informal re- and de-bordering practices. On the other hand, agency develops from interactions between migrants’ capacities and anticipated future trajectories.

As soon as the first asylum seekers were able to cross the border into Norway and Finland, word of the “open borders” in the Arctic spread rapidly in domestic and international media, which simultaneously spread images to the world of wealthy, refugee-friendly countries in the North. Our material demonstrates that these images were quickly picked up by international and local smuggling networks, which then reinforced the images by informing their “clients” about the distant route in the North. This informative and practical support also created a setting that reinforced (or degraded) the migrant agency and made both the route and migration across the border possible. We shall examine these issues in more detail in the following sections of this article.
Media and Rumors

The asylum seekers’ stories of their lives in Russia show that irregularity contributes significantly to a variety of secondary drivers of migration from Russia. Russia is not just a country of transit migration and a gateway to Europe. A range of uncertainties and opportunities connected with immigration and border policies can also lead migrants to consider relocating from Russia.

With their fear of deportation and only an irregular future life in Russia, these immigrants and their families found themselves in a limbo between their past, present, and anticipated future—between Afghanistan and Russia. Neither an Afghan passport nor decades of life in Russia meant they could return to Afghanistan or obtain legal status in Russia.

Meanwhile, restrictive and arbitrary immigration policies are broadly discussed in relation to other immigrant groups in Russia. Discussions on the hundreds of thousands of re-entry bans on Central Asian labor migrants since 2014 are part of the frame in which Afghans also interpret their scant possibilities to deal with their vulnerability and future in the country.

In this context, globalization—especially the increased use of transnational media and the internet—was a principal element in remigration decisions. Many Afghan and other migrants using the Arctic route learned about it from various media sources. For example, British, German, Russian, and Finnish news programmes reported and showed routes, with asylum seekers crossing borders and being granted asylum from other European countries.

On TV there was always news about the routes and asylum seekers reaching Finland. That’s how I got the idea to come to Finland, and especially through Murmansk.

(52-year-old Afghan man, row 148)

News and media sources were quickly spread through acquaintance networks, compatriots, relatives, friends, and social media. News about the route spread quickly not only in Russia but around the world. Rumors and advice concerning “open borders” in the North were conveyed to many by smugglers and fellow migrants, relatives, and acquaintances. All this news and (dis)information began to live a life of its own, creating an information landscape which third country citizens—like the Afghans—used in making strategic life choices in Russia. Whether this information was accurate or a rumor, the open border was seen as offering an opportunity to relocate to a context where a “normal” life, characterized by safety, employment, and access to basic services such as education and healthcare, was felt to be finally possible. Only a few had any prior knowledge of Finland; some researched the country on the internet after they had heard about the route.

Smuggling and Deportations

Moscow became the migrants’ stopover place from which most flew to the northern hub of Murmansk. Only a few travelled through other cities like Saint Petersburg or by train to Murmansk. Another way to reach Moscow was car transportation from Afghanistan through Central Asian states to Russia and Moscow. In several cases the original goal had been East Central Europe, but changing circumstances converted the route to Russia, Moscow, and the North. Even many of the Afghans who used Russia as a transit country did not travel through Moscow to Murmansk and to the Finnish border within a few days, as the fastest transit migrants did. They stayed in Russia for several weeks or even months to prepare or wait for the trip to continue.
Ways of organizing the journeys also varied. Many were assisted by smugglers, local businesses, and “assistants” who organized documents, accommodation, and travel, as well as bicycles and cars for the final crossing of the Russian-Finnish border. Some were assisted by local Afghans, and some got “such a good service” during the long car journey that they were not stopped by the authorities during the trip from Afghanistan to the Arctic. Arranging journeys independently through websites and travel agencies was also possible, especially for those who knew Russia and spoke Russian. Inevitably, several were cheated or mistreated on the way, and their travel plans changed, or new smugglers stepped in.

In the North especially, everybody needed assistance: a driver to the Russian-Finnish border; a vehicle for the final border crossing; and accommodation. When the number of asylum seekers increased, many waited in Murmansk, Kandalaksha, Alakurtti, or Nikel for their turn to cross the border. The waiting time and need for accommodation varied from days to weeks. Some also spent five to eleven days in their car at the border (in many cases without food) in the harsh winter weather of the North.

The agency of those on the move also demonstrated that deportation orders barring re-entry played multiple roles in the Arctic route. The Russian state’s stricter immigration regime has revealed that the increased issue of re-entry bans has especially influenced Central Asian labor migrants in recent years. In our research material, many Afghans who lacked valid documents to stay in Russia had received a deportation order after being caught by the police or after they had tried to renew their documents. This was one of the greatest fears among the Afghans.

However, deportation orders—often called ‘exit visas’ or ‘exit permits’ by the asylum seekers—were used as tools to secure departure.

Some friends who were sellers at the same marketplace had acquired deportation orders, with which you can go and apply for asylum in Finland. I went to get it in Moscow too and payed the 5,000-rouble fine. We tried to get to the Finnish border from Murmansk with a driver. The Russian border guards turned us back a hundred kilometres from the border. We tried again on December 3, and again the border was closed. We stayed in a hotel in Murmansk. On December 9 we tried a third time, and we got to the border. We said we were going to Finland to apply for asylum. The deportation order was taken away and our passports were stamped. We were told we could not return to Russia for five years.

(43-year-old Afghan man, row 269)

According to the narrated stories, this was required by the Russian border guards and, Interestingly, used by asylum seekers to guarantee that they would not be returned to Russia. Fellow migrants, smugglers, and facilitators advised migrants to register with the police and get the order from the local courts in either Moscow or Murmansk. Some smugglers included these documents in their service and price. Recipients of such decisions were usually required to leave Russia in ten to fifteen days.

Conclusion
This article examined Russian migratory processes through the Arctic route episode in 2015 and 2016. We argued that an in-depth assessment of the episode requires an understanding of Russian migration policy and its enforcement, the broader societal changes producing (im)migration irregularities, and the stories of the (im)migrants who actually used the route. Despite their varying and overlapping vulnerability, we argue that Afghan immigrants have an agency that is evident in the ways they interpret and, importantly, play out their lives in the current Russian anti-immigrant climate.
The Arctic route to Finland/EU/Schengen was used both by immigrants who had been in Russia for years (including the Afghans in this article) and by those who used Russia as a transit country. Although only a handful of citizens from the former Soviet space used the route, the geographical context of processes included neighbouring regions of the former Soviet Union—Central Asia, Ukraine, and Belarus in particular—and the broader context of international relations. The diverse composition of the migrants on the route clearly shows the multiplex role of Russia in international migratory processes.

The interpretations of Afghan immigrants in Russia concretize this context in many ways. This reveals immigrants’ constant mundane agency and coping practices in Russia, with many daily struggles that can continue for decades. However, the constant building of coping mechanisms around the multitude of overlapping vulnerabilities, hierarchies, and inequalities as consequences of irregular status is a notable driver for remigration from Russia. The Arctic route concretized this possibility.

Furthermore, the context within which immigrants and transit migrants interpret and make sense of their possibilities and create hopes for their everyday lives, (re)migration, and routes is diverse. It is also guided by rumors, traditional and social media sources, and, increasingly, transnational media landscapes that constantly produce images of Russia, Europe, and, in this case, Finland. In today’s political and volatile media—characterized by great confusion between “real” and “fake” news content—these representations and images can be guided and sometimes manipulated.

Various smugglers quickly responded to these profitable images and reinforced them by providing information about the route. Their informative and practical support also created a setting that reinforced or degraded migrant agency and made both the route and migration across the border possible. The interdependence and dependence of migrant agency in relation to this support varied, but the Russian Arctic in general was quickly transformed into a functioning migratory route.

Migratory processes in the Arctic and in today’s globalized world are mixed in terms of routes, migrant groups, and regional scope. Migratory movements from or through Russia and the nature of the Arctic route cannot be explained by economic or geopolitical factors alone. They are results of more complex sets of fragmented journeys which also receive their impetus in migrants’ daily lives and agency, opening opportunity structures and support (e.g., Crawley et al. 2018). Understanding this requires a more nuanced consideration of security and the security environment that recognizes various layers of security from state and border security to migrants’ everyday security.

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Notes

1 The asylum application protocols consist of asylum investigation protocols turvapaikkakuulustelupöytäkirja and asylum hearing protocols (turvapaikkapuhuttelupöytäkirja). The former, conducted by the Finnish Border Guard or the Police of Finland, is a fixed form that determines applicants’ travel documents, identificatio
n, travelled route and journey, border crossings, accompanying and other family members, and former stays, including possible asylum applications in other countries. The latter, conducted by the Finnish Immigration Service, determines the grounds for each applicant's asylum application. Questions for applicants are based on each case. Children younger than twelve do not have their own protocols; they are listed in the protocols of the parents or relatives with whom they entered Finland. In this article we use the term “asylum interview/protocol” in referring to this empirical material as a whole. The entire material consists of the asylum protocols of 1,164 asylum seekers, representing 32 different nationalities and countries of origin. Afghans constituted by far the largest group in this material.

2 Including the children listed in the 421 Afghan protocols, the number of persons is 632.

3 For Norway, see Moe and Rowe (2016) and Mikhailova (2018).

4 Najibullah Ahmadzai was the President of Afghanistan when Soviet troops withdrew from the country. His time in power ended in the spring of 1992, when the Islamic State of Afghanistan was formed. It ruled until the Taliban formed their own Islamic state in 1996.

5 The row numbers of the quotations refer to the collected Excel dataset of the original asylum application protocols. The 1,164 protocols are organized by rows in the data. We avoided collection of applicants’ names and other personal information unnecessary for the research.

6 There are two categories of refugee in Russian legislation: refugees and temporary refugees (“Law on Refugees” No. 4528-I, 1993). Temporary asylum may be granted to persons who cannot be recognized as refugees according to Russian legislation, but who on humanitarian grounds cannot be deported or returned to their countries of origin either. Status can also be granted to persons who would be eligible for refugee status but who, for some reason, wish to avail themselves of temporary protection instead. Temporary asylum status is often granted for up to one year, and it can be renewed (“Law on Refugees” No. 4528-I, 1993; Government Resolution No. 274).

7 The procedure for residence registration goes back to the Soviet-era residence permit system and the infamous institution of “residence registration (propiska)” (Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018; Reeves 2013; Nozh enko 2010). The propiska anchored individuals to a particular place, usually a city or town, allowing them access to the labor market and social services in that location. Formally, the propiska was abolished after 1993 but it was essentially reintroduced as the “residence registration system (registratsia).”

8 Like the Russian-Norwegian border, the Russian-Finnish border can only be crossed with a vehicle. Bicycles were used first (Moe and Rowe 2016). In December, 2015, the Finnish Border Guard published a decision that bicycles would no longer be accepted because of the unsafe winter conditions for cycling (Finnish Border Guard, December 23, 2015). After this asylum seekers bought cars in groups to drive over the Russian-Finnish border. In addition, the Finnish Border Guard published a decision that it was ready to regulate the daily traffic to take care of its statutory duties at the border (Finnish Border Guard, December 4, 2015).

References


