

Evropeiskii potop: The Discourse of Apocalypse and Silence in Russian Press Coverage on the Issue of Refugees

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0. Introduction

In the fall and winter of 2015–2016, well over 5000 people fled across Russia’s north-western borders into Norway.¹ This so-called *Arctic route* for refugees became one of the main topics in Norwegian public debate, prolonging and even intensifying discourse on the refugee issue, having dominated not only Norwegian but global news media since the tremendous influx of migrants crossing the Mediterranean ocean in the preceding months. While the situation in these northern hinterlands might seem only a drop in the ocean of what the UNHCR calls “the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time [...],” referencing how over 60 million people are considered forcibly displaced globally,² the Arctic route became one of the core issues in Norwegian public debate, as well as a predominant theme in its relationship with Russia.³ Against this backdrop, exploring Russian discourse on the refugee situation of 2015–2016 is a pertinent task. The present attempt finds its theoretical and methodological basis in the *critical discourse analysis* and treatment of *news as discourse* as formulated by Teun A. van Dijk (1993 and 1988). Another concept vital to the study is Sergei Oushakine’s (2000) theory of *post-Soviet aphasia*. The data is gathered from four newspapers, selected to give a broad representation of Russian news discourse:⁴ the government’s

¹ Finland also saw an influx of refugees across the Finnish-Russian border. However, this route saw much less traffic than the route to Norway. For a summary of the refugee situation in the Far North, see i.a. Standish (2016) and Hohmann and Laruelle (2016).

² See UNHCR (2016a) and UNHCR (2016b).

³ To illustrate the highly intense Norwegian news discourse on the issue: Norway’s largest internet newspaper VG named the situation in the Far North a “Norwegian-Russian *asylum war*.” See Sæther (2015) (in Norwegian).

⁴ The choice of the newspaper as source is motivated both by the cultural significance assigned to the written word in Russia, the historical function of the Russian newspaper as ideological space, discussed by i.a. Ivan Zassoursky (2004) in *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia*, as well as the role of the press in constructing the public as formulated by i.a. Jürgen Habermas (2002) in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.



official publication *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, the tabloid *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, the regional *Murmanskii Vestnik*, and the the critical-minded *Novaia Gazeta*.

The paper is organized in the following sections: First, I give a brief overview of the study's theoretical and methodological framework. Second, I present my research material and questions. The main part of the article is dedicated to the data, sorted by the respective papers. Finally, I will present my conclusions.

1. Analytical framework

The appeal of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as method in the study of public debate, is that it establishes a link between concrete language use and the abstract notion of *the public mind*. Discourse, or rather, dominant discourse, influences *social cognition*, i.e. socially shared mental representations. Discursive power translates then, in keeping with CDA, to power over the public's perception of and attitude to current affairs (van Dijk 1993, 257). The specific case of news also lends itself to CDA.⁵ By using *persuasive content features*, i.e. discursive strategies to enhance the likelihood of the reader accepting the news text as truth, news discourse has unique potential power over the reader's social cognition (van Dijk 1988, 84–85). By uncovering the presence of discursive structures conducive to such *cognitive control* in Russian news discourse on the refugee issue, we will also be able to uncover probable predominant social cognition on the subject.

CDA concerns itself mainly with *positive* discourse phenomena, such as the presence of rhetorical figures and the organization of facts within specific narratives. Meanwhile, my biggest challenge while studying the Russian press' representation of the refugee situation, was the *absence* of any kind of discourse. This applied in particular to the case of the Arctic route. While this issue triggered thousands of news texts in the Norwegian press, relevant texts in the Russian material amounted to a mere handful. This discursive "black hole" can be illuminated by the concept of *post-Soviet aphasia*, formulated by Serguei Oushakine (2000).⁶ The premise for this theory is that social change brings about discursive change, and thus a change and expansion of the "sayable." In this new discursive field the subject is forced to establish a new *verbal consciousness*. However, according to Oushakine, in the societal and accompanying discursive upheaval since the fall of the Soviet Union, the semiotic development and expansion of the sayable has not been able to keep up. For the post-Soviet subject, therefore, the "new" reality is *unavailable* for discourse. The result is a state of discursive lacking, i.e. the inability to communicate, as well as a state of discursive

⁵ "[...] the production and understanding of news are processes that are fully determined by cognitive representations. The meaning of a news article is not objectively there in the text but rather arises from a reconstruction by the reader, to be made explicit in terms of memory processes and representations" (van Dijk 1988, 99).

⁶ Oushakine is greatly influenced by the theories on aphasia developed by Roman Jakobson, i.e. the regression and disintegration of individual speech. In his own conceptualization, however, aphasia signifies a collective discursive behaviour. Another important influence is found in Nina Naumova's (1999) and Ellen Carnaghan's (1996) analyses of contemporary Russia as a silent (*безмолвствующая*) culture, in which the social silence is an expression of a lacking sense of belonging to society, as well as an inability to formulate opinions due to both apathy and an information deficit.

compensation, i.e. a regression to the symbolic forms of previous social – and discursive – stages (Oushakine 2000, 993–95).⁷

2. Material and research questions

For the present study, all digitally accessible news texts involving refugees in the four newspapers, published between April 1st 2015 and April 1st 2016, were examined. My research questions were as follows:

What characterizes discourse on the refugee situation of 2015–16 in the Russian press? Specifically, *who* says *what*, *how*, in *which* newspapers? Which social cognitions are conveyed to the reader, and which of them dominate the discourse? And finally, are there any subjects lacking representation in the discourse, as the concept of post-Soviet aphasia might suggest?

3. Analysis

3.1 Rossiiskaia Gazeta

A common denominator in the refugee discourse of all four newspapers, is what I will refer to as an *apocalyptic rhetoric*. Let us illustrate this first with some examples from *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*:

Европу ведут в джунгли [...] Жители европейских стран, что называется, «на своей шкуре», начинают ощущать то, насколько беспомощной перед лавиной беженцев, среди которых оказались преступники всех мастей, оказалась толерантная Европа (Makarychev, 19.01.2016).⁸

The use of inanimate metaphors puts the concept of refugees through a semantic shift: their signification is disentangled from the category of humans, and transferred to that of *natural disasters*. The images of the wild jungle and the devastating avalanche, before which the people of Europe are helpless, creates a strong sense of threat. The representation of the refugees as criminals, although closer to the category of humans, does nothing to mitigate the threatening rhetoric.

The representation of the refugee situation as a type of natural disaster has an extremely productive subcategory – the *water metaphor*. An article titled *Evropeiskii potop*⁹ places the influx of refugees within the narrative of the Great Flood:

Дамбы прорваны. Вчера беженцев было десятки тысяч, сегодня — сотни тысяч, а завтра — и миллионы, ведь дело идет к этому. Беженцы заполняют европейское

⁷ For an updated take on the concept of post-Soviet aphasia, showing its continued relevance in the study of modern-day Russian discourse, see Vakhtin and Firsov (2016). This study also serves as an inspiration to the present paper.

⁸ “Europe is led into a jungle. Inhabitants of European countries, so to speak, are starting to feel “on their skin” how helpless the tolerant Europe turned out to be before the avalanche of refugees, among whom there are all sorts of criminals.” All translations from Russian are my own.

⁹ “European deluge”

пространство. К чему приведет нынешнее практически неконтролируемое нашествие? (Prokof'ev, 08.09.2015).¹⁰

The refugees are transformed into a tidal wave no dams can stop. The wave hits Europe with an ever-stronger force. The image of the unstoppable tsunami is threatening enough in and of itself, but in the last sentence the wave is also given a *hostile will*. The stream of refugees is not only an uncontrollable natural disaster, but an *active invasion*. The Great Flood thus morphs into an army of enemies occupying and overtaking Europe. This antagonistic representation of the refugees is further corroborated by the newspaper's lexical style, where the terms беженец or мигрант are used intermittently with blatantly alienating designations, such as нелегал, чужак and пришелец.¹¹ The denominations also include far more explicitly negative wording, such as этнорелигиозная бомба, цветная мафия and нелегальный шторм – the latter once again showcasing the fertile motif of the natural disaster.¹²

Central to the social cognition conveyed in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, which is overwhelmingly uniform, is the idea that the refugee issue will bring Europe to its knees, illustrated by the following apocalyptic prophecies: [...] необратимые процессы, которые приведут к потере Европой ее идентичности» (Prokof'ev, 08.09.2015), [...] это грозит принимающим беженцев странам межгосударственными и внутренними расколами [...] это напряжение будет разрывать европейские общества» (*Rossiiskaia Gazeta/TASS*, 07.09.2015).¹³ In tune with the Great Flood myth, this doom is represented as a result of Europe's own actions, as illustrated by an article titled *Vladimir Putin nazval prichiny krizisov v mire*:¹⁴

«Мы активно возражали против того, что происходило, скажем, в Ираке, в Ливии, в некоторых других странах», - напомнил Путин. «Никто не слушал: наоборот, считали, что Москва занимает антизападную позицию. А сейчас, когда вы имеете сотни тысяч, уже миллион беженцев, как вы думаете, у нас позиция была антизападная или прозападная? (Putin in Latukhina, 11.01.2016)¹⁵

¹⁰ “The dams are breached. Yesterday, the refugees were tens of thousands, today – hundreds of thousands, and tomorrow – millions, as that’s the way things are going. The refugees are filling up the European space. What will this current practically uncontrollable invasion lead to?”

¹¹ Respectively “refugee,” “illegal,” “stranger” and “alien.”

¹² “Ethnoreligious bomb,” “coloured mafia” and “illegal storm.”

¹³ “Irreversible processes which will lead to Europe losing its identity,” “the countries receiving refugees are threatened by both intergovernmental and internal collapse,” “the pressure will rip the European society apart.”

¹⁴ “Putin named the reasons for the world’s crises”

¹⁵ “– We actively opposed what was going on in, say, Iraq, Libya, some other countries, reminded Putin. – Nobody listened: on the contrary, they thought that Moscow had an anti-western position. And now, when you have hundreds of thousands, even millions of refugees, what do you think, did we have an anti-western or pro-western position?”

Western intervention in the Middle East and Arab countries, which Russia opposed, triggered the current crisis. Europe brought this on itself by not listening to the “voice of reason” from Moscow. The extension of this assertion, interestingly, is the social cognition that Russia is alleviated of any kind of responsibilities in the issue: «–Приток беженцев – внутреннее дело Евросоюза и их острая проблема» (Peskov in Latukhina, 14.09.2015)¹⁶, or more explicitly: «– Расходы по приему и размещению беженцев должны нести те страны, которые причастны к дестабилизации ситуации на родине этих людей, считают в Кремле. Так что для России участие в программах помощи беженцам вряд ли актуальный вопрос» (Peskov in Latukhina, 10.09.2015).¹⁷ Helping the refugees is not Russia’s job.

Being the official publication of the Russian government, it is no surprise that the political elite dominate the discourse of *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*. In the case that alternative perspectives on the refugee situation gets representation in the newspaper, it is just to be rejected, or even ridiculed, as in the following quote: «[...] мне приходилось слышать от западных коллег суждения о том, что именно действия России спровоцировали мощный поток беженцев в Европу [...] Но это очевидное лукавство» (Shvydkoi 24.11.2015).¹⁸ The social cognition centred around the Great Flood motif, where Europe is being punished for its political “sins,” then, monopolizes the official discourse.

3.2 *Komsomolskaia Pravda*

Komsomolskaia Pravda gives discursive power to a drastically different group than the Kremlin elite. The voices dominating the newspaper’s discourse on refugees are “the men in the street,” ordinary people without any notable political or social power. What makes this group powerful is rather the newspaper’s representation of them as *witnesses of truth*. Part of the Russian diaspora in one of the receiving countries, they have personally witnessed something outrageous related to the refugees, and feel obligated to share their story. The following account from a bouncer at a club is a characteristic example:

Я и представить себе не мог, какой ад будет твориться на площади. Я 26 лет работаю в секьюрити, но такого не видел. С вокзала валила армия пьяных арабов, афганцев и африканцев. [...] затеяли драку и достали ножи [...] к женщинам в вечерних туалетах стали приставать [...] подошел полуголый араб с окровавленной грудью (кто-то его порезал) и с бутылкой шнапса в руках. Он стал орать на гостей: “FUCK YOU ALL”! (Iurchevich in Aslamova, 15.01.2016)¹⁹

¹⁶ “The influx of refugees is an internal issue for the EU, and their acute problem.”

¹⁷ “The Kremlin considers that the costs for the reception and allocation of the refugees should be carried by those countries which were involved in the destabilization of the situation in the countries of these people. Participating in programs to help the refugees, then, is hardly a relevant question for Russia.”

¹⁸ “I had to hear judgments from western colleagues, that it was Russia’s actions which provoked the powerful stream of refugees to Europe. But that is obvious trickery.”

¹⁹ “I could not have imagined the kind of hell that would unfold on the square. I’ve worked in security for 26 years, but have not seen anything like this. An army of drunk Arabs, Afghans and Africans came flocking from the station. They started fights and pulled knives. They began pestering women in evening dresses. A half-

The theme of the apocalypse, a bit of an abstract and theoretical discussion on the major political level in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, is here represented through *concrete empirical observation* by an ordinary working man. The model of the influx of refugees as a great wave with a hostile will, already well established in official discourse, is brought to life in this account: the image of the drunken, belligerent army overturning the square, gives a strong sense of threat. The idea that the refugees represent a great peril is even verbalized in the hateful screams of the blood-drenched Arab.

A vital part in the model of these Russian witnesses is the concept that only *they* speak the truth. Their central criticism is not necessarily directed at the refugees themselves, but at the *public debate* on them. See how the bouncer from that hell-like night on the square portrays German discourse on the issue:

Но в газетах ничего не было! Тишина! Пятница, суббота, воскресенье. Ничего! Я разозлился. Что это значит? Кто-то хочет замести всю историю под ковер? Не выйдет! Я свидетель, и я не буду молчать. [...] «–Но ведь ты пострадал из-за своего правдолюбия? Тебя называют нацистом?» «–А знаешь, почему? Потому что я не молчал и открыто высказывал свое мнение о беженцах». (Iurchevich in Aslamova, 15.01.2016)²⁰

The public silence on the havoc wreaked by the refugees is represented as, perhaps, even more outrageous than the havoc itself. In contrast to the German newspaper, shying away from speaking about the events and sweeping them under the carpet, the Russian witness refuses to keep silent. A fitting analogy in this regard, is the *whistleblower*: *Komsomolskaia Pravda* gives this group of voices an aura of heroism. They are driven by a moral imperative to *speak out*, and let the public know about some form of wrongdoing or *great threat*. The narrative of the hero, of course, gives the “witnesses” significant ethos.

An extremely interesting sub-section of the paper’s discourse on refugees, or rather, *meta discourse*, is the article series called *Хроника гибели Германии*.²¹ The series revolves around the diary entries of another *witness of truth*, the character Galina²², who, like the bouncer mentioned above, is both *Russian* (“наша соотечественница из Казани”²³) and a naturalized *German* citizen. Her “reports” on the refugee situation are thus presented as doubly relevant: she is represented to the reader both with a deep understanding of German society, as well as a genuine connection to the Russian reader. Her premise, that Germany and Europe’s willingness to receive refugees is both *ridiculous and suicidal* («Даже

naked Arab with a bloody chest (somebody had cut him) and a bottle of schnaps in his hands came over. He started yelling at the guests: Fuck you all.”

²⁰ “But there was nothing in the newspapers! Silence! Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Nothing! I got angry. What does this mean? Does someone want to put the whole story under a cover? No way! I am a witness, I will not stay silent. – But you have suffered because of your righteousness, yes? You are being called a Nazi? – And do you know why? Because I didn’t keep quiet and openly expressed my opinion on refugees.”

²¹ “The chronicle of the doom of Germany”

²² I use the denomination *character* to emphasize that whether or not Galina is indeed a ‘real’ person is irrelevant – what makes her interesting to the analysis is her function within the narrative.

²³ “Our compatriot from Kazan”

забавно наблюдать, как и с какой скоростью Европа сама себя губит»²⁴), gains great discursive power. Galina's main critique, however, concerns the refugee *debate itself*:

«Германия должна быть цветной!», скандируют демонстранты и требуют принимать больше исламских беженцев. Требуют больше сажать себе на шею. [...] Кто эти протестанты? Много самих беженцев с профессионально несчастными лицами и уродливых теток 50 плюс, которые, это не тайна, активно пользуются молодых африканцев. Есть гомосексуалисты, среди которых модны черные партнеры. (Ivanova and Skoibeda, 02.09.2015)²⁵

The voices calling for multiculturalism and acceptance of refugees are utterly undermined as illegitimate participants of the discourse in Galina's account: they are represented through the image of the “professionally unhappy” refugees themselves, the desperate “ugly aunties” lusting after them, and the *gays*, who apparently prefer black sexual partners. Hardly this dubious group should be included as rational voices in the refugee debate. Regardless of this, Galina says, it is the *anti-immigration* camp that is excluded from the discourse:

«КП» мои заметки опубликовала, и меня накрыл девятый вал обвинений во лжи. Странное дело: если кто-то чего не знает, то это что-то тотчас же объявляется несуществующим. [...] Руководства городов и поселков будто состязаются в том, чья инициатива ЗА беженцев будет более придурочной и замысловатой. Привел доводы против? Да ты фашист, милдруг... (Ivanova and Skoibeda, 05.09.2015)²⁶

Galina's first claim is that her representation is “new” to the discourse on refugees, i.e. she is verbalizing something that has not previously been *sayable* in the debate. Because she is “breaking new ground” on the discursive field, speaking about something that lays outside the reader's established verbal consciousness, Galina is accused of lying. Her representation is rejected as *fascist*. Only statements *positive* to the refugees are allowed in the discourse. The claim that any negative representations of the refugee issue are denied access to the German public debate, is a predominant social cognition in *Komsomolskaia Pravda's* discourse. A central premise in the narrative of the witnesses of truth is that Europe is threatened not only by the refugees, but by the downfall of free speech – interestingly, *placing the concept of public aphasia in the very centre of the debate*: «В Германии: нет слова, а

²⁴ “It's actually funny to watch how and how quickly Europe is ruining itself”

²⁵ “Germany should be colourful!” chant the demonstrators, demanding to accept more Muslim refugees. Demanding to tighten the grip around their own necks. Who are these protestors? Many are refugees themselves, with professionally unhappy faces, monstrous-looking aunts over 50, who, it's no secret, actively use young Africans. There are homosexualists, among whom black partners are fashionable.”

²⁶ “Komsomolskaia Pravda published my notes, and I was covered by the ninth wave of accusations of lying. It's a strange thing: if someone doesn't know something, that thing will immediately be declared as non-existent. The leaderships in [German] towns and villages will compete on who can make the most stupid and intricate initiative FOR refugees. Did you draw conclusions to the contrary? Then you are a fascist, milord...”

значит, нет проблемы» (Aslamova, 17.01.2016).²⁷ There are no words available – or allowed – to describe the refugee issue, hence the issue doesn't exist.

A final finding from the refugee discourse in *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, is the use of a much rougher rhetoric compared to that of the official discourse. The inclusion of “ordinary people” seems to legitimize publication of a kind of harsh language that might traditionally be limited to the private sphere: «Один сириец выступал по ТВ, давил на жалость: «У меня восемь братьев, у моей жены тоже. Нас всего шестьдесят (!!! - Авт.) человек, они все там, на войне, под бомбами, хнык-хнык... Их надо сюда перевезти, плак-плак...» (Ivanova in Skoibeda, 10.09.2015).²⁸ The Syrian refugee is degraded and ridiculed. The language use represents him as utterly pathetic and whiny, i.e. *not worth listening to*. While such oppressive remarks might not be unheard of in some of *Komsomolskaia Pravda*-readers' private conversations, having them publicized in the newspaper lifts them from the personal to the public domain. The social cognition implicit in the quote, then, that we shouldn't bother listening to the refugees, is legitimized and further established in the public mind.

3.3 Murmanskii Vestnik

Approaching the material from *Murmanskii Vestnik*, one would expect that this discourse would stand out both in terms of quantity and quality: placed right in the hotspot of the Arctic route for refugees, the newspaper had unique access to and interest in the events. In other words, the refugee issue might be expected to occupy a larger part of the news discourse relative to the other papers in the study. This proved to *not* be the case. The relevant text material amounted to only a couple thousand words, of which only a few hundred discuss the Arctic route specifically. The most notable finding when reviewing the paper, then, is the *lack* of discourse on the Northern refugee situation. *Murmanskii Vestnik*, in this regard, serves as perhaps this analysis' most striking example of Oushakine's post-soviet aphasia: there is a chasm between the “new reality” unfolding in Russia's borderlands and actual news discourse. The refugee situation, to an extent, seems to fall outside of what is *sayable* for the journalists closest to it.

Regarding what *is*, actually, said about the refugees in *Murmanskii Vestnik*, one characteristic stands out: a kind of *exoticism*. The representation of the refugees as *others*, fundamentally different, permeates the discourse. This exoticizing depiction is especially clear in the following account from the village of Kandalshka:

Расположенная в сотне метров от здания районной администрации гостиница сама по себе не сильно привлекала бы внимание. Если бы вокруг не было людей всех темных оттенков кожи - от светло-коричневого до иссиня-черного. Одни сидят в старых автомобилях с ржавчиной на крыльях и трещинами на окнах, другие курят у заднего входа, топча снег надетыми на босые черные ноги

²⁷ “In Germany, there are no words, meaning, there are no problems.”

²⁸ “One Syrian did his act on TV, pressuring for pity: ‘I have eight brothers, and a wife as well. All in all, we are 60 (!!! – author) people, and they are all there, in the war, under the bombs, sob-sob. They need to be brought here, boo-hoo’.”

шлепанцами, третьи несут пузатые пакеты с логотипами ближайших супермаркетов. Кто-то, пардон за подробности, бегают справлять нужду за угол ближайшего сарая, видимо, еще не успев заселиться в номер с удобствами. И все это происходит на фоне сугробов, заиндеветых берез и свисающих с крыш пятиэтажных хрущевок огромных сосуллек. (I'in, 13.02.2016)²⁹

Central to the depiction is the outside-perspective, emphasizing the distinction between us, the observing subjects, and *them*, the observed objects. The refugees are represented in terms of their “fascinating foreignness.” The striking contrast of black skin against white snow corroborates the sense of witnessing something truly exotic. The focus on this startling contrast, however, also conveys the social cognition that Murmansk is hardly a natural habitat for this group. They are alien elements.

The newspaper’s representation of the refugees does not limit itself to exoticism – it also seamlessly continues the apocalyptic discourse that we have observed in the other newspapers. The effect of the refugees in the Arctic, which is absolutely *not* Russia’s issue («Что пригнало их на самый север Европы? Действительно ли опасение за собственную жизнь или же стремление к беззаботной жизни на халяву? [...] К счастью, искать ответ на эти вопросы придется не нам, не россиянам». (Van’ko, 10.09.2015),³⁰ are illustrated by observations from the journalists’ visits to Northern Norway: «И хорошо помню, как чистенький, точно с рождественской открытки, городок Вадсё постепенно обрастал арабскими кварталами, похожими на гетто, где не работал никто, а наркотики употребляли через одного» (Britskaia, 07.10.2015).³¹ The picture of Vadsoe, having been turned from a pleasant, picture-perfect little place into a drug-plagued ghetto by Arab refugees,³² is perfectly in line with the central discourse of threat.

The central characteristics in *Murmanskii Vestnik*, i.e. the remarkable exclusion of the subject of refugees from news discourse and, when including it, discussing it solely from the perspective of the disentangled *outsider*,³³ seems to further corroborate the theme of public

²⁹ “The hotel, placed within a hundred meters from the regional administration building, would not attract any attention by itself. If it were not surrounded by people with all shades of black skin – from light-brown to blue-black. Some sit in old cars with rusty fenders and cracked windows, others are smoking by the rear entrance, treading the snow with bare feet in flip-flops, the third group are carrying bulky bags with the logos of local supermarkets. Someone, excuse the details, are running to relieve themselves behind the corner of the nearest shed, apparently not being able to settle in a room with facilities. And all this is taking place on the background of snowdrifts, frozen birch trees, and huge icicles hanging from the roof of five-story Khrushchyovka-buildings.”

³⁰ “What drove [the refugees] to the Far North of Europe? Is it truly danger to their own life, or the search for a carefree life on freebies? Luckily, finding the answer to these questions is not for us, the Russians, to do.”

³¹ “I remember well how the neat little town of Vadsoe, as if straight out of a Christmas card, gradually grew over with Arab quarters, like ghettos, where nobody worked, and every other person used drugs.”

³² Vadsoe is indeed one of the Norwegian municipalities with the largest number of refugees per capita, but the dystopia described in *Murmanskii Vestnik* is very far from reality. See i.a. Horn (2015) (Norwegian).

³³ Even in the example from Kandalashka, where the refugees are “right next to us,” they are represented as “outside” and “other than us.”

aphasia in Russian refugee discourse. Despite being enveloped by and entangled in the events, the newspaper is not able to discuss them in any meaningful way. The refugee issue isn't given a place in the discursive field, despite – or because of?³⁴ – the societal upheaval accompanying it. The solution for this discursive deadlock, which might also, in a way, be its prerequisite, is to disclaim any responsibility for the refugee situation. Thus, the refugees are represented as Europe's (and the neighbouring northern village of Vadsoe's) domain.

3.4 *Novaia Gazeta*

What sets *Novaia Gazeta* apart from the other newspapers in this study, is its explicit representation of *refugees in Russia*. While, as just seen in *Murmanskii Vestnik*, the other papers might speak *about* this group (even if such cases make up a negligible part of the discourse), speaking *with* the refugees, i.e. including them as active participants in the debate rather than just its subject, makes *Novaia Gazeta* unique. The most notable example of this representation is an article series about a Kurdish-Syrian refugee family held at the airport in Moscow: «Два месяца семья с четырьмя детьми живет за стеклом курилки транзитной зоны «Шереметьево». Их подкармливают прохожие, а Россия никак не понимает, зачем они бежали из своей воюющей страны. В четверг их начинают судить» (Fomina, 17.11.2015).³⁵ The depiction of four children and their parents, trapped in a limbo of glass for months and surviving on the mercy of random people passing by, being prosecuted for having fled the war, appeals strongly to the readers' sense of compassion. The refugees are represented not only as victims of the violence in the Middle East, but of Russia's apparently inhumane treatment of asylum seekers. The motif of this *inhumanity* is made explicitly clear through the family mother's words in court: «Я приехала в Россию по-человечески жить [sic.], прошу, не лишайте меня этой возможности. Я прошу, если не жалеете меня, пожалейте хоть моих детей», — сказала Гулистан в своём последнем слове, плача» (Fomina, 19.11.2015).³⁶ This appeal to be treated like a *human being* by the authorities implicitly gives the discourse on Russia's attitude to refugees a deeper dimension – concerning Russia's attitude to human dignity as such. *Novaia Gazeta*, in this regard, can be read as a metacritic on the *dehumanizing* language used in the refugee discourse of the other newspapers in the study, as supported by the following remark: «Они прежде всего люди» (Mineev, 09.09.2015).³⁷

Another discursive property setting *Novaia Gazeta* apart, is the thematization of *Russia's role* in the refugee situation: «Действия России в Сирии усугубили и без того плохую ситуацию. Прямым последствием российской военной кампании стали [...]

³⁴ The latter perspective might be most fruitful in this regard, as, according to Oushakine, the social turmoil of contemporary Russia goes a long way in explaining post-Soviet discursive issues.

³⁵ “For two months, the family with four children have been living behind the glass of the smoking area in the transit zone at Sheremet’evo. They are fed by passers-by, while Russia in no way can understand why they have fled their warring country. On Thursday, the prosecution against them will start.”

³⁶ “I came to Russia to live like a human, I’m begging you, don’t take that opportunity away from me. I beg you, if you don’t have pity with me, at least have pity with my children,” – said Gulistan in her final words, crying.”

³⁷ “They are, first and foremost, people”

увеличение числа беженцев в Турцию и Европу» (Tusk in *Novaia Gazeta* and Reuters, 09.02.2016).³⁸ Contrary to the social cognition fundamental to all other newspapers in the study, Russia is represented as indeed being part of the crisis. The discrepancy between the country's actions in Syria and its attitude to the people forced to flee from the violence, is verbalized by one of the refugees on the Arctic route: «Я знаете, чего не пойму: вот Россия воюет в Сирии, говорит, что за нас. Бомбит. А вот почему убежища нам не дает? Почему в Норвегии есть такие лагеря, а в России нет? Почему мы ей не нужны?» (*Britskaia*, 10.03.2016).³⁹ Russia claims to fight for the Syrian people, yet will not grant them protection. Implicit in the quote is also an explanation for at least this one refugee's decision to flee across the Norwegian border: there is *no place* for him in Russia.

A final remark on the refugee discourse in *Novaia Gazeta*, concerns the apocalyptic theme running through the entire study. Like the newspapers already reviewed, *Novaia Gazeta* also engages in what can be labelled as dystopian rhetoric when discussing the refugee situation. In the present case however, the discourse of threat concerns not Europe, as is the case in our other papers, but *Russia*. To *Novaia Gazeta*, the refugee crisis serves to uncover the corrupted state of Russia: «Каждая трагедия в Европе служит для российского истеблишмента доказательством: без нас им там никак не справиться. Следовательно, Москва может навязывать этим изнеженным европейцам свои условия. Чем хуже в Европе, тем лучше нам» (Martynov, 28.03.2016).⁴⁰ Russian authorities are here represented as a hostile force, consumed with the idea of conquering Europe. There is, interestingly, a strong parallel to the depiction of belligerent refugees in our other newspapers. The narrative of the pending threat and the imminent downfall of society and its public debate⁴¹ (whether it be European or Russian), then, persists also in *Novaia Gazeta*'s refugee discourse.

Concerning the subject of public aphasia, it could be argued that *Novaia Gazeta* represents a breaking point. Through the thematization of refugees in Russia as well the inclusion of them as actual participants in the discourse, the newspaper engages in an expansion both of *what is sayable*, and *by whom*. In a way, this serves to close the gap between what is lived and what is verbalized in present-day Russia. There is, however, an important caveat to this argument: *Novaia Gazeta* represents the increasingly marginalized dissenting voices in Russia's public debate. The national news discourse is remarkably uniform, and *Novaia Gazeta* is in every sense an *outlier*. While its alternative representation of the refugees and

³⁸ "Russia's actions in Syria aggravated an already bad situation. A direct consequence of the Russian military campaign was the increase of refugees to Turkey and Europe."

³⁹ "You know, here's what I will never understand: see, Russia is fighting in Syria, saying it's for us. They are bombing. Then, why are they not giving us asylum? Why are there these kinds of [reception centres] in Norway, and not in Russia? Why won't they have us?"

⁴⁰ "Every tragedy in Europe serves as a proof to the Russian establishment, that without us they are lost. Accordingly, Moscow can subdue these effeminate Europeans under its own conditions. The worse Europe is doing, the better we are."

⁴¹ In *Novaia Gazeta*, the Russian news coverage of the refugee situation is labelled as "propagandistic fakes," a "war on Western interpretations," and "PR instead of information." See i.a. Khachatryan (2016) and Taroshchina (2016). This dystopic representation of public debate on refugees, then, links the present paper to the other three: there is a shared sense that the news discourse is *fraudulent* and corrupt.

other issues might be tolerated, it can hardly be said to have any significant influence on the broad majority of Russian news consumers.⁴²

4. Conclusion

Let us now review the findings in light of the theoretical framework:

4.1 Discursive structures and strategies

According to CDA, the discursive structures contributing to cognitive control (i.e. successful dissemination of social cognition) include the following: rhetorical figures, lexical style implying negative evaluation, storytelling, accounts from eyewitnesses, quotes from authorities, strong relational structuring of the events (i.e. conditions, causes and consequences), placing them within a specific narrative, and arousing strong emotions (van Dijk 1988, 84–85, van Dijk 1993, 264). All these strategies are actively used in the Russian news discourse on refugees: the metaphor of the natural disaster, especially that of the tidal wave, is a highly productive rhetorical figure. The choice of words, particularly in referencing the refugees themselves, is also in line with the bleak metaphors. The lexical mixing of highly antagonizing denominations with more “neutral” terms, also seems to transfer the negative connotations of the first group to the second. The designation of refugee, then, being semantically intertwined with illegals and criminals, is likely to be negatively evaluated by the reader. These “muddy semantics” are especially characteristic of the official discourse.

The strategy of using storytelling and eyewitnesses is especially clear in *Komsomolskaia Pravda*. There are also interesting examples of this in *Murmanskii Vestnik*. The effect of these first hand-accounts, interestingly, is *not* that the discussed subjects are brought closer to the reader. Rather, being represented as so unfamiliar and incomprehensible, the radically different *other*, the refugee is pushed further away from the discursively constructed *us*.

Finally, the dystopian narrative of Europe’s doom, where the causes and effects appear clearly connected, fits conveniently around the complex of news stories in all three newspapers. The emotional aspect of the discourse, especially poignant in the personal tales from *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, amplifies the impression made on the reader.

An outlier to the generalizations made above, of course, is *Novaia Gazeta*. Although the paper undoubtedly uses the abovementioned strategies (e.g. the rhetorical figure of the “glass cage” at Sheremet’evo, a pathos-filled appeal on behalf of the detained family, the narrative of a dichotomous relationship between East (Russia) and West (Europe) etc.), its discourse stands out due to a difference in underlying social cognition.

⁴² In its report on freedom of the press in Russia, Freedom House (2015) has this to say: “The main national news agenda is firmly controlled by the Kremlin. [...] The country’s more than 400 daily newspapers offer content on a wide range of topics but rarely challenge the official line on important issues such as corruption or foreign policy. Meaningful political debate is mostly limited to weekly magazines, news websites, some radio programs, and a handful of newspapers such as *Novaya Gazeta* or the business daily *Vedomosti*, which generally reach a limited audience among urban, educated Russians. These outlets operate with the understanding that the government has the means to close them at any time.”

4.2 Social cognition

The social cognition conveyed in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, *Komsomolskaia Pravda* and *Murmanskiy Vestnik* is uniform on many levels. First, the refugee issue is not a Russian issue. It concerns Europe. Even when the refugees are filling up the small towns of Murmansk, the region's biggest newspaper represent them as "not our problem." Second, the respective discourses are permeated by the idea that the refugees are radically different from us. They are by and large portrayed as non-human. Any kind of humanitarian views, then, is all but absent from the discourse. Third, and in my view perhaps the most interesting social cognition uncovered in this study, is the perception that the biggest issue following from the refugees is the way they are – or rather, *are not* – debated. The metacritique is one of the main characteristics of the debate and, remarkably, in many ways echoes Oushakine's conceptualization of public aphasia: the discourse is represented as severely restricted in terms of what is sayable, and by whom. The conversation is first and foremost marked by a restraining silence. Any voices trying to break this state of aphasia, like Galina from *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, are excluded from the debate. It is interesting to observe, then, that the concept of public aphasia has a double role in the Russian discourse on refugees: both as overarching characteristic and an explicitly verbalized theme.

Apart from sharing the metacritic approach to the refugee discourse, *Novaia Gazeta* conveys a radically different set of social cognitions, in a way simply an *inversion* of the ones above: First, the refugee issue is indeed a Russian issue. Not only because of Russia's involvement in the Syrian war, but because respect for humanity demands it. The second principle is implicit in the first – the refugees are first and foremost human beings. This social cognition makes the discourse of *Novaia Gazeta* very different from the other newspapers.

4.3 Silence and challenging the sayable

Novaia Gazeta, in a way, is the exception confirming the rule in this study: the Russian news discourse on refugees is, to a large extent, characterized by silence on what might be considered key issues. The study has uncovered a fundamental discursive deficit on the following areas: First, the lack of representation regarding Russia's affiliation with the refugee situation. The discourse unfolds chiefly from the perspective of the (allegedly) disinterested third-person, making the us-them distinction the central premise for debate. The idea that Russia has any kind of involvement and responsibility in the issue, seems to not be part of the "sayable." Second, the the third-person-perspective is apparent also in how the Russian newspapers relate to the refugees – they are spoken *about*, not spoken *with*. These voices, then, are kept silent. Third, in line with the narrative of Russia as a pristine contrast to the contaminated Europa, the representation of refugees *on Russian territory* is missing from the coverage. If the reader were only exposed to official discourse, he would hardly know that there exists Syrian refugees in Russia. This silence includes issues ranging from illegal deportations and corruption in the asylum procedure,⁴³ to the entire complex of events unfolding in the Far North during the winter of 2015–16. The lack of discourse on these areas, then, translates to "blank spots" in the public mind. Predominating social

⁴³ For an extensive report on the issues of Russia's asylum system, see Grazhdanskoe sodeistvie (2015).

cognition on the refugee issue would not have any place for the Kurdish-Syrian children stuck at Sheremet'evo. Excluded from discourse, they can have no influence on the Russian public opinion on the refugee situation.

The position of *Novaia Gazeta* in the present discourse can be illustrated through the analogy of Galina's account. Just as she claimed to face accusations of lying after verbalizing ideas that lay outside of the predominating discourse on refugees, i.e. *challenging the limits of the sayable*, so *Novaia Gazeta*, as an obvious outlier in the debate, is vulnerable to being pushed out of it. The continued focus on *discourse ethics*⁴⁴ in the material, however, even if this metacriticism mainly concerns "their" (i.e. the European) rather than "our" (i.e. the Russian) discourse, spreads social cognition on how the public debate *should* be. If – and how – this central positioning of the subject of public silence in the discourse effects the phenomenon of post-Soviet aphasia itself, however, demands further research.

4.4 *The need for nuance: refugees in non-Russian news discourse*

To fully consider the conclusions made above, a general remark on refugees in news discourse is in order. How has this issue been represented in non-Russian media, and how does the Russian news discourse relate to that of other countries?

Although research on the present subject is still scarce, there are a few studies that can provide a more nuanced understanding of the above findings. For instance, in a report based on over 600 migrant-related British news stories in 2015, Crawley, McMahon and Jones (2016) found that migrants' voices and perspectives are rarely included.⁴⁵ The migrants are, as a rule, *not* participants in the news discourse about them. They are also predominately framed as either *villains* or *victims*.⁴⁶ While in Russian discourse the narrative of the villain is far more prominent than that of the victim, it would not be a far stretch to label some of the findings from *Novaia Gazeta* as examples of the latter.⁴⁷ In an extensive report prepared for the UNHCR (2015) on the EU-countries' press coverage of the refugee crisis, it was found that the refugees tended to be "[...] framed negatively, as a problem."⁴⁸ The report also found that the EU's handling of the crisis, as a rule, was portrayed as "inadequate."⁴⁹ In this respect, it could be argued that the Russian news discourse on refugees does not stand out in any radical way from that of the European countries.

What is, however, quite remarkable in the Russian case, is the almost complete public silence surrounding *refugees in Russia*. Excluding the exceptional case of *Novaia Gazeta*, these people have no representation in the present discourse. The public aphasia on Russia's

⁴⁴ For an elaboration on the concept, see Habermas 1990, 120–22.

⁴⁵ "[Our research] found that just 15% of the newspaper articles which were published on the topic of migration in the run-up to the 2015 General Election included a migrant voice or perspective" (Crawley, McMahon and Jones 2016, 25).

⁴⁶ Crawley et al. (2016), 26–34)

⁴⁷ The concept presented in the report by Crawley et al. (2016, 26) of «giving voice to the migrant as 'victim',» most often presented in a frame of humanitarianism, seems especially relevant in *Novaia Gazeta's* coverage of the refugee family stuck at Sheremet'evo.

⁴⁸ Berry, Garcia-Blanco, Moore (2015), 5. Available from: <http://www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.pdf> [accessed 30.10.2017]

⁴⁹ Berry et al. (2015), 10)

refugees, then, stands out as this article's most notable result.

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