Brothers and Barbarians: The social construction of ‘refugees’ in Russian newspapers, 2014–2015

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Summary
How were ‘refugees’ socially constructed in Russian newspapers in 2014–2015? This dissertation analyses 1,146 newspaper articles published in three Russian newspapers with nationwide circulation – pro-government Izvestiya, government-critical Novaya gazeta and the government’s official daily, Rossiiskaya gazeta. The findings contribute to filling the knowledge gap on refugee representations in Russian media, on representations of refugees from Ukraine and on Russian interpretations of the European ‘refugee crisis’.

Viewing ‘refugee’ as an initially empty signifier that gains meaning through discourses, I apply discourse theory to illustrate how micro links to macro: how ‘refugee’ is filled with meaning by competing discourses on the micro-level, and how these discourses are linked to antagonistic representations of Russia’s identity on the macro-level. Using discourse theory as my entry point to the study of refugees, I introduce a novel framework, combining concepts from discourse theory (articulation, subject position, discourse, myth) and other theoretical approaches (boundary-work, narrative, character). This conceptual framework forms the basis for my analysis of the social construction of refugees in Russian newspapers. I contribute to the literature on the social construction of meaning by showing how taking a starting point in one word ‘refugee’ leads to a wide range of culturally specific meanings. Depending on the context, the narrative, or the discourse, the three Russian newspapers selected for examination represent a refugee as an ‘alien’, ‘barbarian’, ‘brother’, ‘colleague’, ‘employee’, ‘an illegal’, ‘pupil’, ‘student’, ‘terrorist’, ‘victim of interventionism and democratization’ or ‘victim of war’.
This dissertation consists of an introductory section and three journal articles.

In ‘Brothers and barbarians: Discursive constructions of “refugees” in Russian media’ (published in *Acta Sociologica*) I map the hitherto unexplored terrain of representations of refugees in Russian newspapers, applying discourse theory and the concepts of ‘subject positions’ and ‘symbolic boundaries’ to analyse these representations. I find two main discourse contexts that feature the subject-position ‘refugee’ – the war in Ukraine and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe – and two main refugee representations – ‘refugee from Ukraine’ and ‘refugee from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)’. Drawing on in-depth examination of the data, I identify four main discourses: humanitarian, security, integration and nationalist. Analysis of subject-positions in these four discourses reveals contrasting representations of refugees from Ukraine and MENA refugees, with the latter represented as threatening, and the former as similar to Russians. I argue that nationalist discourse merges with humanitarian, security and integration discourses, creating contrasting symbolic boundaries between these two groups of refugees and Russians. This indicates a discursive mechanism through which refugees are classified as ‘preferred’ or ‘non-preferred’ migrants on the basis of their ethnic and cultural proximity to Russians.

In ‘“Suitcase – shelling – Russia”: narratives about refugees from Ukraine in Russian media’ (published in *East European Politics*), I examine the meaning-making process surrounding the arrival of refugees from Ukraine in Russia in the summer and autumn of 2014. Narrative analysis reveals three main thematic groups of narratives in my data: narratives about war, narratives about refugee reception and aid, and narratives about international relations. Taken together, they articulate the subject position ‘refugee from Ukraine’ as a ‘victim’ and ‘recipient of aid’, serving as arguments in support of receiving refugees from Ukraine in Russia and allocating funds to them. The accounts of war, death and destruction act to legitimize the presence of these refugees in Russia. Narratives about refugee reception and aid serve to position Russians as aid providers – the message being that it is morally correct to help these refugees. Finally, Russian narratives about international relations assign blame for the war in Ukraine to ‘Others’ – specifically, the West as being to blame for why people from Donbas had to leave their homes and flee to Russia.
In ““Victims of democracy” or “enemies at the gates?” Russian discourses on the European “refugee crisis”” (forthcoming in Nationalities Papers) I explore the representation of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ in Russian opinion pieces and interview articles. Also here I employ discourse theory and the concept of ‘subject positions’. In addition, I discuss the myths about Russia, Europe and the West that are (re)produced in my empirical material. I find three main discourses that have shaped the debate on the European ‘refugee crisis’ in Russian newspapers: the security, humanitarian and geopolitical discourses. Whereas also other studies of European and US media representations of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ have identified security and humanitarian discourses, the geopolitical discourse appears particular to Russian media. Thus, this article unpacks a refugee representation not previously addressed by research on the 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’ – the refugees as victims of interventionism and democratization processes promoted by the West in the Middle East and North Africa. This discursive construction (re)articulates a centuries-old myth of the antagonistic relationship between Russia and the West, and forms part of the ongoing discussions on Russia’s identity vis-à-vis Europe and the West.