

STORIES AT THE WELL BLOG 24.05.2024

Russian-Speaking Organisations in Finland Amidst Geopolitical Sensitivities

'Russian World' Next Door



Image: Dr Vera Zvereva

Text: Tatiana Romashko

Tatiana Romashko is a PhD candidate in Cultural Policy at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä. She works in the project "Russian World" Next Door: discourses of the Russian political communication and cultural diplomacy in Finland, funded by Kone Foundation.

TAGS

GEOPOLITICS, NGOS, RESEARCH, RUSSIA

Share:   

In this entry, I aim to discuss issues raised by a recent [Yle article](#)¹ on the distribution of grants by the [Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations \(STEA\)](#) to Ukrainian and Russian-speaking organisations. This report continues to fuel public debate and exacerbate the challenges faced by Russian speaking support groups. To respond to Yle's approach, I will offer a researcher's perspective, drawing on preliminary findings from the ongoing [Russian World Next Door project](#)².

The Yle article alleged potential unfairness in the selection of STEA grantees, pointing to a disproportionate amount of public funding going to Russian-speaking organisations compared to Ukrainian-speaking ones. The controversy was exacerbated by the headline, which implied that the Russian-speaking NGOs might support the Kremlin's positions and were not particularly transparent about Russia's war in Ukraine, thereby questioning their eligibility for funding. This framing not only raised concerns about transparency in the funding process, but also cast a shadow over Finnish organisations working with the Russian-speaking population. To their credit, Yle acted quickly to amend the article.

Advocating Constructive Approach

From the outset, I want to acknowledge the significance of the Ukrainian language and the services provided in this language throughout Finland. It should also be noted that many Finnish organisations also provide services in Ukrainian, which indicates that such services are not exclusively provided by entities run by Ukrainians. This broad participation underlines the need to steer the discussion on the redistribution of public funds in a more constructive direction.

Given the fierce competition among non-profit organisations in Finland, it is crucial to support all organisations with training in application writing. This is particularly important when an organisation needs to rapidly increase its capacity in response to urgent situations, such as a growing influx of the immigrants whom it serves, leaving little manpower for administrative tasks. Typically, cultural organisations operate as one-person projects, meaning that their success heavily depends on the charisma and efforts of the individual leader who runs the enterprise. Third sector actors could help set up peer support platforms or networking opportunities to assist these one-person projects that are primarily focused on service delivery. This approach shifts the focus from who receives funding to how support is delivered.

While STEA's decisions have sparked debate, there has been no official criticism of its procedures or transparency. Therefore, the issue

discussed in the article primarily reflects the expectations and perceptions of specific applicants and should not be generalised to reflect the views of the entire Finnish population. Finland's commitment to equality and non-discrimination ensures that the competition for funding is fair and that applications are judged solely on their merits, operational effectiveness and compliance with established criteria. In this context, the significant support given to Russian-speaking organisations reflects their recognised expertise, competence and ethical integrity within Finnish society.

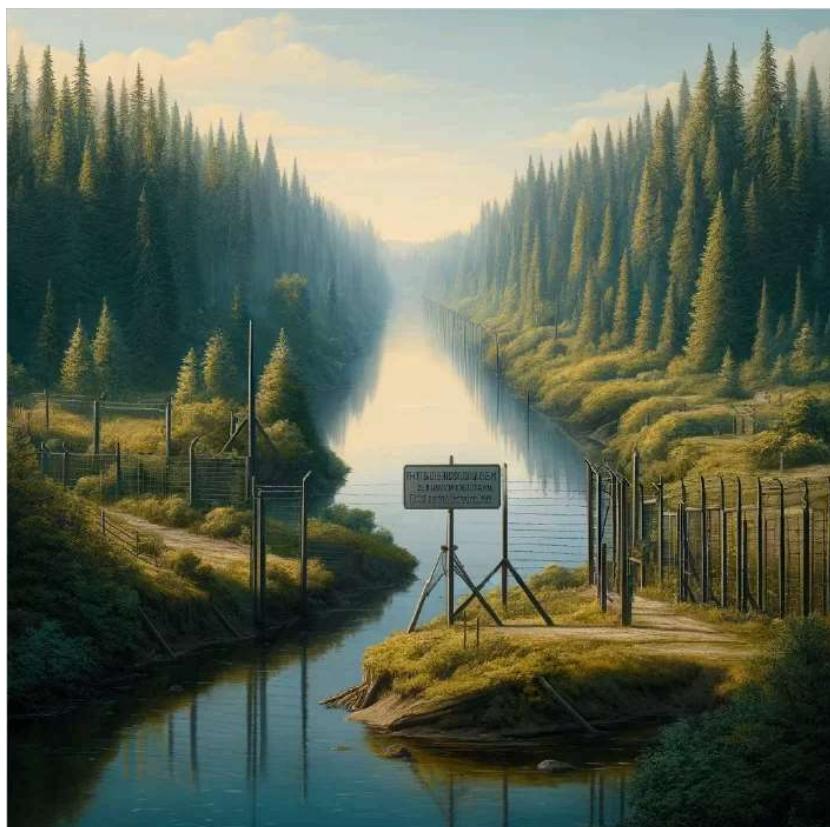


Image created with OpenAI DALL-E by Tatiana Romashko

Research Insights and Observations

Picking up from this point, I would like to broaden the discussion on the characteristics of Russian-speaking organisations, their precarious state in the midst of economic or socio-political changes, and their reasons for potentially withholding their political views. Our research project examines non-governmental organisations working in the socio-cultural sphere for Russian speakers in Finland. We conducted interviews with representatives of more than twenty organisations across Finland to gain insights into their characteristics, activities, visions, and attitudes towards Russian culture and language. These interviews revealed the unique role that these organisations play within Finnish society.

Our findings indicate that these organisations predominantly adopt a 'person-centred approach' to cultural work, focusing on meeting the

diverse socio-cultural needs of Russian speakers. In contrast to the emphasis on nationalistic and linguistic purity prevalent in Russia, these Finnish organisations prioritise psychological, social and cultural support, thereby improving communication and fostering a sense of belonging within Finnish society. They use Russian cultural heritage and language as inclusive tools, bridging community divides and deliberately avoiding politically charged narratives to focus on the demands and needs of their clients. This includes offering a repertoire of activities that transcend national or religious boundaries and cater to the interests of different demographic groups.

In this respect, these organisations make pragmatic use of Russian heritage and language, serving everyone regardless of their background or political views. The utilitarian approach to Russian language and culture highlights their tendency to avoid politically charged narratives. All interviewees emphasise maintaining a neutral stance, positioning their organisations as community bridges rather than political entities. They avoid engaging in political debates in order to focus on their socio-cultural missions, thus avoiding conflicts that could alienate them from their diverse clientele.

This approach also helps them to mitigate social fragmentation among immigrants and to foster inter-community ties, creating a buffer zone where individuals can freely express themselves and receive support regardless of their political leanings. In other words, these NGOs explicitly state that they do not wish to discourage anyone from seeking support, regardless of their political perspective. Their aim is to prevent isolation, which could lead to radicalisation if individuals have only television for company. This approach ensures that Finnish society maintains a plurality of opinions without restricting opportunities for open expression.

Furthermore, all the organisations we spoke to are unequivocally opposed to Russia's war in Ukraine. But they prefer not to get involved in political discussions. 'We are an apolitical association' is the most common answer we received. According to the organisations' representatives, they refrain from expressing their opinions because they are tired of constantly defending themselves against scapegoating. It may seem that they hide their position to avoid conflict during interviews, but this is not the case. Direct questions about their political positions tend to alienate these organisations from Finnish society by focusing solely on their political correctness rather than their broader social contributions.



Image created with OpenAI DALL-E by Tatiana Romashko

Some Take-Aways

Our preliminary findings challenge the assumption that Russian-speaking organisations in Finland are merely extensions of Kremlin influence. Instead, we argue for a nuanced understanding that recognises the diverse functions and contributions of these entities to Finnish society. Our research seeks to counter oversimplification and encourage open, constructive discussion without resorting to finger-pointing. We aim to accurately represent Russian-speaking organisations by clarifying their functions, activities and roles. Ultimately, we strive to broaden the understanding of what it means to be ‘Russian-speaking’ in Finland.

Upon reevaluating the journalistic approach taken to Russian-speaking organisations in Finland, it is clear that direct inquiries into the political stance of these organisations have significant repercussions. Such inquiries may inadvertently discourage these organisations from being open to future external interactions, potentially reducing their willingness to share insights and hindering the research community’s ability to establish meaningful collaborations.

Furthermore, the pressure to make all political positions explicit, particularly on politicised issues, carries an ethical risk. This requires careful consideration of the balance between journalistic aims and the preservation of an organisation’s complex social role. According to journalists, does the role or quality of an organisation really depend on how vocal it is in its opposition to the war? Should funding be withheld from organisations that choose to remain completely apolitical?

I think the situation is more complex than that. Thus, a more nuanced approach is needed – one that respects the fine ethical line between journalistic pursuit and restraint, and promotes an environment in which colingual organisations can operate safely, thereby enhancing societal cohesion and well-being.

¹ The article was published on the Yle News website in Finnish, Ukrainian, and Russian. It underwent numerous changes after publication. For more, see: Sergeyeva, G. (2024) "Ministeriö hylkäsi lähes kaikki Suomen ukrainalaisten järjestöjen hakemuksista – venäjänkieliset saivat yli miljoona euroa", Yle Uutiset, 14.03.2024. <https://yle.fi/a/74-20078543>

² The research project "Russian World" Next Door examines the discourses of Russian political communication and cultural diplomacy in Finland
<https://www.jyu.fi/en/projects/russian-world-next-door>.