**"I'm Russian, but I'm a Volunteer":**

**Self-Image and Collective Identity Among Anti-war Russian Volunteers**

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**Abstract**

This thesis investigates the impact that a newly-acquired, meaningful stigma related to one's national group has on their self-image and collective identity. I focus specifically on anti-war Russians who volunteer to assist refugees from Ukraine, taking the NGO *Russians for Ukraine* (RFU) in Poland as my case study. Through qualitative content analysis of narrative interviews and participant observation, I find that all of the volunteers perceived a stigma toward Russians from a generalized "Other" but draw on various cognitive and behavioral strategies to maintain a positive social identity; these strategies correspond with levels of identification with the category "Russian" and personal encounters with prejudice. This research demonstrates that highly identified individuals seek to reconstruct their collective identity in relation to a narrower subsection of their national group, and volunteering is a key strategy for seeking positive distinctiveness for this group. On the other hand, low identification is found to be correlated with efforts to deconstruct national identity as a defining aspect of social identity, and volunteering allows these individuals to seek positive personal distinctiveness. Nevertheless, nationality is found to exhibit an enduring influence on self-image and collective identity, illustrated by inconsistent attitudes toward national identity among those seeking to reject its importance.

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**Introduction**

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, large numbers of Russians have joined humanitarian organizations or independently volunteered to help Ukrainian refugees. A paradigmatic example of this is the NGO *Russians for Ukraine* (RFU), which was established on February 26, 2022 to assist Ukrainian refugees at various border crossing points around Poland. Despite being among the first and most active organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees at the Polish border, RFU volunteers have faced suspicion and stigmatization due to their Russian citizenship/nationality.

The objective of this thesis is to investigate how the nationally-framed experience of Russian volunteers assisting Ukrainian refugees has impacted their self-understanding. This project aims to contribute to the study of (de-/re-)construction of collective identity among individuals faced with a recent, meaningful stigma connected to their nationality and the role that volunteering and political activism play in the process of social identity maintenance. The guiding question of this research is: How do anti-war Russians volunteering to assist Ukrainian refugees understand and express what "Russianness" means to them after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and how do they maintain a positive self-image when confronted with powerfully negative external categorization?

Through qualitative content analysis of narrative interviews with and participant observation of volunteers from the organization Russians for Ukraine, supplemented by previous interviews conducted with Russian volunteers, I explore the cognitive and behavioral strategies by which Russian volunteers maintain a positive social identity in stigmatizing circumstances. I draw on Jenkins' (1994, 2000, 2014) conceptualization of identity; Tajfel's (1978) and Tajfel and Turner's (1979, 2004) theory of social identity maintenance and intergroup behavior; and

Goffman's (1963) framework of stigma management to examine from which perspective volunteers consider stigmatization of the national group "Russians", to which reference group they most closely identify, and with which types of social comparisons they are able to achieve positive distinctiveness for themselves and their group.

This research demonstrates that individuals faced with a new, enduring, and meaningful group-based stigma draw on a range of social identity maintenance strategies. High levels of identification with the stigma category are found to be correlated with personal experiences of discrimination/prejudice, a tendency to make discrimination attributions, intergroup social comparisons, self-disclosure of the stigma category, and activism on behalf of the in-group. On the other hand, low levels of identification appear to be linked to the absence of personal encounters with prejudice, reluctance to make discrimination attributions, intragroup social comparisons, covering of the stigmatized attributes, and normification to present oneself as, above all, a "normal person".

Volunteering is found to be a critical strategy for social identity maintenance among individuals faced with a tribal stigma. For the highly identified individuals, volunteering and political activism present an opportunity to reconstruct their collective identity in relation to positively-viewed members of their national group with shared values. Conversely, individuals seeking to disidentify from their stigma category conceptualize volunteering in universalistic moral terms, which allows them to deconstruct their nationality as an identity marker and construct a cosmopolitan social identity. Nevertheless, the difficulties of genuine disidentification with national identity demonstrated by these individuals reveals the meaningfulness of tribal stigmas and their impact on self-image. This research suggests that nationality continues to be highly influential on one's identity and sense of ontological security.

**Background**

The Map of Peace project visualizes the location of over 200 anti-war initiatives ("communities") of Russians/Russian-speakers across the world (Free Russia Foundation Project, 2024b). Many of these initiatives are located in Poland, Germany, and Georgia—the countries that the majority of Ukrainian refugees have traveled to/through since the start of the war—where Russian volunteers and activists have faced a range of negative experiences and anti-Russian sentiment. Numerous Russian volunteers recount such experiences in the documentary "Russophobia, guilt, and self-help: How do volunteers around the world work now?," which was published in November 2022 by the independent Russian journalist Alexey Pivovarov on his YouTube channel *Redactsiya* and focuses on Russian volunteers in Poland (specifically RFU volunteers) as well as Germany and Georgia.

Many of the volunteers in this documentary describe feeling anxiety about their nationality becoming known, as well as feelings of stigma and shame surrounding their "Russianness". At the same time, several volunteers expressed a sense of wanting to show the world what a "good" Russian looks like (Redactsiya, 2022). Such descriptions of ambivalence toward the Russian identity reveal the threat to self-esteem that has accompanied negative interactions and external categorizations of these individuals as members of a low status or stigmatized group of "Russians". I am therefore interested in investigating the extent to which these anti-war Russian volunteers and activists have experienced a crisis of self-image; the mechanisms by which they maintain a positive self-image; and their (de-/re-)construction of collective identity.

## Literature Riverview

Social Identity Theory (SIT) began to take shape in the 1960s and was formally developed by the social psychologists Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s. At the core of SIT lies a foundational principle of social psychology: that individuals strive for a positive self-image and, accordingly, for a positive social identity, which are "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). This conceptualization of the centrality of group membership and social status to an individual's self-image inspired a large body of research into the impact of perceived membership in a low status group on self-esteem and self-identification with that group.

### Discrimination, Self-Esteem, and Group Identification

The terms "self-image", "self-concept", and "self-definition" are used interchangeably in the literature and are generally undefined, used instead as the basis for other definitions. Essentially, self-image/-concept/-definition refers to how an individual perceives and understands themselves and their position in society. Crocker and Major (1989) introduced a definition of self-esteem as "feelings of self-worth, or a generalized feeling of self-acceptance, goodness, worthiness, and self-respect" (p. 609). In other words, self-esteem is how one *evaluates* their self-image.

Numerous theories have conceptualized the intimate link between self-image and self-esteem, hypothesizing that the internalization of negative external attitudes into one's self-image should negatively impact self-esteem (see Crocker & Major, 1989 for a review). However, Crocker and Major (1989) observed that "despite the strong theoretical support for such a prediction," there is "remarkably scarce" empirical evidence of lower levels of self-esteem

among stigmatized populations (p. 610–11). They also find that empirical measures of personal and collective self-esteem are "only moderately correlated" (p. 609).

To explain the discrepancy between theory and data, Crocker and Major and argue that stigma can have "self-protective qualities" by allowing stigmatized individuals to attribute negative outcomes to prejudice against their group (rather than personal flaws), which protects personal self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Crocker, 1993). However, Eccleston and Major (2006) found that a discriminatory attribution style was correlated with *lower* personal self-esteem by increasing appraisals of discrimination as stable, severe, and global, an attitude which overrides any self-protective qualities of attributing discrimination to an external cause. Similarly, Brown (1998) found that specifically the *expectation* that one will be viewed or judged stereotypically negatively impacts their self-esteem.

Several studies have found a correlation between discrimination attributions and group identification (Bourguignon et al., 2006; Branscombe et al., 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989; Eccleston & Major, 2006). However, while some models assign self-protective qualities to the process of discrimination attribution (Bourguignon et al., 2006; Crocker & Major, 1989), Branscombe et. al.'s (1999) "rejection-identification model" proposes that experiences of discrimination/prejudice ("rejection") increase minority group identification, and this latter process is specifically responsible for self-esteem maintenance. Crandall et al. (2000) found that self-protective cognitions occur only when individuals are faced with a *meaningful*, group-based stigma (i.e., related to a group with which they identify). Ethnic/national stigmas are one such type of meaningful group-based stigma: membership in a specific ethnic/national group has been found to be generally assumed and accepted by people as "natural" (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003;

Mijić, 2014) and a belief in the uniqueness of being a member of a specific national/ethnic group can mitigate the effects of discrimination (Eccleston & Major, 2006).

The literature also shows that personal and group discrimination are perceived and internalized differently. Individuals have been found to discern a higher level of prejudice toward their group than toward themselves (Crosby et al., 1989; Taylor et al., 1990). Several studies observed that only experiences of personal discrimination negatively impact personal self-esteem (Armenta & Hunt, 2009; Bourguignon et al., 2006; Walker, 1999), while group discrimination was linked with higher self-esteem (Armenta & Hunt, 2009; Bourguignon et al., 2006). However, while Bourguignon et. al. (2006) noted a positive correlation between personal discrimination and group identification but no relationship between group discrimination and identification, Armenta and Hunt (2009) observed that personal discrimination decreased group identification while group discrimination increased identification.

Several studies have also investigated the relationship between high and low levels of group identification and self-esteem. Finding a positive correlation between group identification and self-esteem, Crocker and Major (1989) postulated that the more an individual structures their self-concept around membership in a devalued group, the higher their personal self-esteem will be (p. 620). McCoy and Major (2003), however, found that *lower* levels of group identification moderate the negative effects of perceived group discrimination better than high identification levels, because the more central to an individual's self-image the group is, the more detrimental prejudice toward the group is toward the individual's self-image as well. In other words, they suggest Crocker and Major's (1989) discounting hypothesis "may be primarily effective for those members of stigmatized groups for whom the group is not a core aspect of self" (p. 1011).

**Self-Esteem Maintenance Strategies**

In addition to the (debated) self-protective qualities of discrimination attributions and minority group identification, various self-esteem maintenance strategies have been identified in the literature. One such strategy is a positive distortion of information that allows individuals to remember and find more credible positive feedback about their group, while ascribing negative outcomes to external causes (Crocker et al., 1993, p. 65). These biased interpretations of situations can reduce negative emotions and restore self-esteem (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009, p. 13). Another strategy is engaging in social comparison with a group perceived as even lower status in order to maintain a perception of relative high status (Crocker et al., 1993, p. 52). Fein and Spencer (1997) similarly found that negative evaluations of a stereotyped target helped to restore self-esteem after an individual was faced with a threat to self-image.

Another cognitive self-esteem maintenance mechanism is selective devaluing of dimensions or social comparisons which elicit a negative evaluation of one's group and selectively valuing dimensions and comparisons from which their group is favorably evaluated (Crocker & Major, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tesser, 2000; Valenta, 2009). Additionally, value expression/self-affirmation—the declaration of a value that is most important to oneself—acts as a buffer against the negative impacts of social devaluing (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Tesser, 2000), which can even reduce the likelihood that an individual faced with a self-image threat will engage in derogation of others (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Tesser (2000) also found that self-esteem maintenance mechanisms can and often are substituted for each other—even across self-domains, meaning an individual can focus on the positive evaluations of themselves in one regard to bolster the threatened aspect of self.

Valenta (2009) observed a range of strategies used by immigrants from Iraq and the former Yugoslavia in Norway faced with stigma, including: compensation (consciously avoiding behaviors which could be construed in a stereotypical way); humor (including using irony or sarcasm to expose the absurdity of stereotypes); minimizing stigmatizing aspects of their identity and promoting favorable aspects (similar to selective valuing of dimensions); passing and covering (e.g., changing one's appearance to "fit in" better); and strategic silence or withdrawal (to avoid negative encounters). Smart Richman and Leary (2009) theorized that socially avoidant behavior will tend to occur when individuals perceive rejection as pervasive and chronic, while prosocial behavior is predicted by a belief in the potential of relationship/status repair, and antisocial behavior will tend to result from perceptions of unfair or unjustified rejection.

A handful of studies have investigated the self-esteem maintenance strategies among anti-war political activists who are members of groups perceived as the aggressor in a conflict. This (limited) field of research has centered around anti-war activism in Serbia during the 1990s. Bilić (2011, 2012) suggests that political protest can be a form of self-esteem maintenance. In his examination of Serbian anti-war activism as "therapy", Bilić (2011) finds that "protesting can be a psychologically transformative experience because it constitutes protestors as political actors and creates a sense of freedom and agency" (p. 55). He observes that many people engaged in anti-war activism because they perceived the activist groups as "safe-havens" that allowed them to "openly express and share their thoughts and emotions… and alleviate feelings of fear" (p. 60). Bilić (2011) argues that the case of Serbian anti-war activism—and social movements in general—should be conceptualized as process-oriented activities which can fulfill "collectively distributed but still very personal [psychological] needs that are not necessarily and immediately articulated as political issues" (p. 61).

**Knowledge Gap**

Bilić's (2011, 2012) work indicates that high identification with the anti-war protest group—as opposed to the wider Serbian "nation"—was an important cognitive mechanism by which anti-war activists in Serbia were able to maintain a positive self-image. However, the relationship between activist group identification and self-esteem was not explicitly explored in this study, and to my knowledge, has not been studied in a comprehensive manner to date. Additionally, many of the relevant studies about discrimination/stigma, self-image, self-esteem, and group identification, as explored in this chapter, are from the 1990s and 2000s. Since then, much of the research on stigma and self-image has focused on mental health-related stigma and rarely deals with group identification, but rather personal self-esteem maintenance.

Moreover, to my knowledge, there has been no research about the impact of a recently-acquired, *meaningful* group-related stigma on self-image. Crandall et al. (2000) did include a group of participants given a "novel" and transient stigma (bad breath, induced by eating a clove of raw garlic), but this did not have statistically significant impact on self-esteem, nor did it trigger the self-protective cognitions; Crandall et. al. (2000) argue this is because the stigma was not related to a meaningful group that the individuals identified with. It is still unknown how identification and self-esteem would be affected when an individual's meaningful group has recently become stigmatized.

Crocker and Major (1989) theorize that individuals newly faced with stigma will be more vulnerable to low self-esteem than those who have had their stigmatizing condition since birth, since they are more likely to feel a sense of responsibility (p. 620). However, they also predict that "membership in a stigmatized ethnic, racial, or religious group" should make it particularly unlikely that an individual feels responsible for their stigmatizing condition, and therefore

unlikely that they have low self-esteem (p. 620). Nevertheless, this hypothesis was made with the assumption that the condition had been stigmatizing "since birth" (p. 620).

The literature has yet to shed light on the effects of membership in a national group that has only recently become stigmatized (e.g., due to dramatic developments in international relations, such as a war). This thesis seeks to help fill this knowledge gap by examining the extent to which anti-war activists from Russia who volunteer with Ukrainian refugees have perceived a stigma connected to their Russian nationality/citizenship and how this perception has impacted their self-image and collective identity.

**Theoretical Framework**

Before exploring the interplay between stigma, national/ethnic identity, self-image, and group identification, it is necessary to clarify these concepts and the connection between them. This thesis is grounded in Jenkins' (1994, 2000, 2014) conceptualization of identity; Tajfel's (1978) and Tajfel and Turner's (1979, 2004) theory of social identity maintenance and intergroup behavior; and Goffman's (1963) framework of stigma management. These influential social psychological theories inform my understanding that the national identity of Russian volunteers assisting Ukrainian refugees has likely exerted a significant impact on how they are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves considering that their Russian citizenship ties them to Russia, the country widely perceived as responsible for creating the over 6 million refugees from Ukraine. When this citizenship/national identity is assigned a low status or stigma in a particular context, such as in the sphere of assisting Ukrainian refugees, these theories elucidate the impact such a negative external evaluation will have on identity and self-esteem.

**Conceptualizing "Identity"**

This project hinges on an understanding of identity, or one's sense of self, as an evolving and socially contingent phenomenon. In his seminal work *Social Identity*, Jenkins (2014) defines "identity" as the process by which individuals and groups distinguish and are distinguished from other individuals and groups via social interaction. Identity is essentially "our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)" (p. 19). "Identification", then, is the "systematic establishment and signification… of relationships of similarity and difference" (p. 19), which includes the two interdependent process of "identification *with*" and "differentiation *from*" other

individuals and groups (p. 21). Since identity is inherently relational and multidimensional, it must be conceived as just as processual as—and intimately connected to—identification; it is "a process of 'being' or 'becoming'" (p. 18).

I have adopted the term "identity" following Jenkins' (2014) conceptualization specifically because of the numerous and interrelated aspects of the term. In their essay "Beyond 'identity'", Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that the term has been semantically overloaded—since "identity" can refer to a plethora of concepts including self-interest, sameness, selfhood, and groupness—and therefore loses all usefulness as an analytical tool. They also warn about the reifying implications of the term "identity", which runs the risk of presenting the idea of a stable, primordial, or fixed self. They suggest instead using the specific terms "identification" and "categorization"; "self-understanding" and "social location"; and "commonality", "connectedness", and "groupness" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). However, Jenkins' (2014) nuanced conceptualization of identity emphasizes the importance of taking all of these factors into consideration *because* an individual's sense of self is so multi-faceted and dependent on various interconnected internal and external processes. Furthermore, Jenkins adopts an anti-essentialist framing of identity as negotiable and flexible which precludes the "reifying" implications that Brubaker and Cooper (2000) warn about. In fact, since he conceptualizes identity as the *process* of being/becoming, Jenkins (2014) concludes that the replacement of "identity" with "identification" is an unnecessary semantic maneuver when used simply to emphasize the processual nature of the phenomenon (p. 15).

Additionally, Jenkins makes a compelling case for the use of a wider-reaching definition of "identity" than the original, more specific definition. The term "social identity" was originally proposed by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner to refer to "those aspects of an

individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). Jenkins (2014), however, points out that "all human identities are, by definition, social identities" because identification is always an interactional, relational process—and it is therefore redundant to include the "social" in the term (p. 18). In fact, Jenkins specifies that he simply uses the terms "identity" and "identification" specifically *because* it doesn't require distinguishing between the "social" and "cultural", which are inextricably bound and should not be analytically separated (p. 18). Moreover, the crux of Jenkins' framework is the equal importance of identification with *and* differentiation from; the social categories that an individual perceives themselves as *not* belonging to are just as influential on an individual's self-image as those to which they perceive self as belonging, and thus must be taken into account when exploring identity. This model of identity as centered around conceptions of similarity and difference is central to the exploration of (non-)belonging among anti-war Russian volunteers who interact with a variety of similar and different others.

### *Identity as an Internal-External Dialectic*

To best capture the process of socially constructing identities, Jenkins (2014) proposes the model of the "internal-external dialectic of identification" which functions on a continuum from the individual to the collective level. All identities are the result of the interplay between individual and collective identification, negotiated between the individual/group in question and other individuals/groups with which they interact, which results in a sort of homeostasis between (internal) self-definition and (external) categorization. Jenkins specifies three mutually-implicating levels, or "orders", on which this dialectic occurs: the individual, the interaction, and the institutional. The "individual order" occurs in the cognitive processes of individuals, or

"what-goes-on-in-their-heads" (p. 41): Jenkins draws on Mead (1934) to characterize the dialectic at this order as occurring between the internal "I" ("the ongoing moment of unique individuality") and the external "me" ("the internalised attitudes of significant others") (p. 43). The "interaction order" is next on the individual⟵⟶collective continuum, typified by the interface between the internal "self-image" (how an individual views themselves) and external "public image" (how an individual seeks to portray themselves to others) (p. 44). Finally, the "institutional order" represents the identification of collectivities, a process that involves internal "group identification" (when a collectivity identifies and defines itself) and external "categorization" (when others identify and define a collectivity) (p. 45).

This identification/categorization distinction mirrors Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) suggested terms for discussing identity, but in Jenkins' framework also includes the sense of "groupness" felt among those who identify with a collectivity. Sherif (1953) proposes the useful term "reference groups" to refer to "those groups to which the individual relates himself as a part or to which he aspires to relate himself psychologically" (p. 206). While keeping in mind that structural factors always shape an individual's perception of the social world (p. 213), Sherif postulates that the values and norms of the reference groups act as "anchorings" for the individual, around which their experience of self-identity is organized (p. 207).

### The Impact of Categorizations

One's understanding of similarity and differentness results from internalization of others' definitions (categorizations), specifically categorizations from institutions and people endowed with "the power or authority to generate consequences, to make identification matter" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 9). These external categorizations, as Dahinden et al. (2021) show, are never neutral, but

entail and reflect moral evaluation; categories are derived from "a specific social position, from historically determined ways of interpreting the world and from particular interests" (p. 539). Because of this, people *react* to categorizations, demonstrating that self-image and public image are not necessarily congruent (Dahinden et al., 2021, p. 549). In other words, since identity is the outcome of an internal-external dialectic of self- and collective definitions, categorizations that are externally ascribed to an individual (from influential "others") are understood to exert some level of influence on an individual's identity but will not necessarily be fully internalized in their self-image. Organizational identification is an important labeling process which influences an individual's public image (Jenkins, 2014, p. 189) and, depending on the level of internalization of the label, their self-image. In fact, in cases where an individual seeks out a specific organizational membership, this can even be a strategy for managing their public image.

Because of the importance of external categorizations, Jenkins (2014) distinguishes between the "nominal" and "virtual" aspects of identity, with the "nominal" referring to the name/label and the "virtual" signifying the experience of the identity (p. 46). The nominal becomes especially consequential when conferred by institutions with power, but the virtual aspects of identity may still differ between individuals ascribed the same nominal identity when they are differently affected by the label (Jenkins, 2014, p. 102). For example, individuals with the nominal "Russian" national identity may have dramatically different experiences in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and the United States, even if they all possess the same Russian citizenship. Furthermore, individuals with this nominal identity who choose to volunteer with Ukrainian refugees will have a different experience of "being Russian" than others considered "Russian" who are not volunteers—even those who consider themselves to be opposed to the war.

**Ethnicity, Nationality, Citizenship, and Cosmopolitanism**

Central to this study is the presumption that the experience of Russian volunteers assisting Ukrainian refugees has largely been nationally-/ethnically-framed. In order to investigate if this is the case and the impact of such an experience, the concepts of "nationality" and "ethnicity" must first be discussed. Ethnicity, as Jenkins (1994) conceptualizes, is a form of social identity that therefore must be understood in the framework laid out above, with attention paid to power and authority, i.e., whose definition matters (p. 219). This approach holds true as well for the related concept of nationality, which is often used as a category of practice that signifies country of origin (sometimes referring to one's country of citizenship, other times to one's imagined ancestral country of origin). The fuzziness that surrounds these concepts and the difficulty of precisely defining them is a result of ethnicity and nationality being cognitive *perspectives* on the world, rather than objective or natural groups (Brubaker, 2002, p. 174). Nevertheless, these categories can significantly influence an individual's social interactions, opportunities, and understanding of their social location, and they can "crystallize" in certain situations (Brubaker, 2002, p. 175).

Isin and Wood (1999) differentiate citizenship as more of a status than an identity, but nevertheless conceptualize both citizenship and identity as group markers (p. 20). Since, as discussed above, categorizations and group membership play a significant role in shaping one's identity, particularly when the external categorizations come from positions of influence or authority, it can be assumed that the categorization of citizenship—granted by a state and usually internationally recognized—can have a significant impact on one's self-image. This is likely to be especially important in the post-Soviet space, where citizenship is often equated with nationality, a legacy of the Soviet policy of issuing internal passports with identifications of

"nationality" indicating republic of origin. Such a government-designated classification is bound to become "established in official discourses, discourses that are powerfully constitutive of social reality" (Jenkins, 1994, p. 215). Thus, it can be theorized that citizenship will become constitutive of social identity as an influential external categorization which structurally and psychologically molds an individual's self-conception and social experience.

Though ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship are highly influential categorizations, they will not inevitably be fully internalized by an individual; people who express a cosmopolitan personal philosophy reject these categories as defining forms of identity. Nevertheless, Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt (2017) posit that cosmopolitanism itself can function as a social identity because people who conceptualize their identity as cosmopolitan or "non-national" are in fact drawing on a social identity discourse which involves differentiation from Others and emphasizes shared cultural resources such as common values and lifestyles to define an "us" (p. 135). Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt (2017) therefore consider cosmopolitanism as a socially accomplished mode of collective belonging, rather than a post-identity phenomenon (p. 129).

**Identity and Ontological Security**

One's identity, their experience of "being" and "becoming", is central to human existence, providing individuals an orienting and meaning-making frame for understanding and navigating the world. Jenkins (2014) argues that identity and identification allow people to construct and maintain a sense of "self" in order to know who they are and know to act (p. 51), to possess repertoires for meaningfully and consistently relating to each other (p. 28). Similarly, Tajfel (1978) describes how categorizations from influential others play a key role in signaling to a person their group membership, creating a "system of orientation" which "define[s] the

individual's place in society" (p. 258). This interplay between an individual's self-image and their environment informs the concept of ontological security, which refers to an individual's confidence in "the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens, 1990, as cited in Skey, 2011, p. 23). Skey (2011) investigates the phenomenon of national belonging, theorizing that identification with a national/ethnic group can provide a sense of ontological security to an individual through an "ongoing and relatively stabilized sense of (national) self" (p. 24). In short, one's understanding of their identity—including their national/ethnic identity—is essential to their self-esteem, sense of ontological security, and, ultimately, psychological well-being.

Migration is a process that can undermine ontological security as well as trigger a crystallization of a national/ethnic lens, particularly because national/ethnic categorizations are often central to the experience of migration. An individual's country of origin or citizenship impacts which other countries they are able to migrate to, and their nationality and ethnicity can influence their experience in the new society to which they arrive. Schütz (1944) illustrates in his famous essay "The Stranger" how migration can disrupt an individual's "thinking as usual," which triggers a "personal crisis" (p. 502). Such a disruption to ontological security leads a migrant (or "stranger" to a new society) to question the "basic assumptions" that seem unquestionable to the approached group, as well as reflect on their own "basic assumptions" (p. 502). If a migrant is faced with a negative external categorization, e.g., considered to be part of a low status or stigmatized group, this can lead them to question their basic assumptions about their collective identity. That is, if anti-war Russian volunteers who have emigrated from Russia have been faced with negative experiences due to their Russian citizenship/ethnicity, this may cause them to question their basic assumptions about "being Russian".

**Self-Image and Social Identity**

Identification with a social group is central to an individual's psychological well-being; the "need to belong" can be considered a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and the "need to directly experience the esteem of one's peers" is an important—if not primary—driver of group formation (Honneth, 2012, p. 207). This principle underlies Tajfel and Turner's (1979) conceptualization of social identity theory, which was developed after numerous studies showed that the "mere perception of belonging" to a distinct group is enough to trigger bias toward this group, or "in-group favoritism" (p. 38).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) understand social identity to signify the part of an individual's self-image which is derived from perceptions of group membership (p. 40). Building on the fundamental social psychological principle that an individual will strive for a positive self-image, they theorize that individuals will seek to identify themselves with a group that enhances their social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). A positive social identity is primarily based on favorable social comparisons between the "in-group"—the group to which an individual perceive themselves as belonging, or what Sherif (1953) calls a "reference group"—and a relevant "out-group" to which the individual does not perceives themselves as belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40).

If an individual perceives that they are part of a "low-prestige" category that harms their social identity, Tajfel and Turner (1979) outline three categories of reactions. First, individuals with a threatened social identity will attempt to engage in "individual mobility", which involves dissociating from other members of the category and "attempt[ing], on an individual basis, to achieve upward social mobility, to pass from a lower- to a higher-status group" (p. 43). However, there are conditions when an individual will not leave their "group", either because it is

impossible for "objective" reasons (e.g., they are unable to "pass" as a member of a higher-status group) or leaving conflicts with values that are a part of the individual's positive self-image (Tajfel, 1978, p. 256). Anti-war Russian volunteers likely fall into this category, because their Russian citizenship makes it highly unlikely that they can totally separate a Russian national identity from their social identity.

In such a case when membership in a low status group negatively impacts an individual's social identity but there are significant barriers to dissociation from the group, there are at least two group-based, rather than individualistic, solutions: "social creativity" and "social competition". Social creativity involves seeking positive distinctiveness for the in-group by changing (i) the dimensions on which social comparisons are made, (ii) the out-group used for comparisons, and/or (iii) the values assigned to in-group attributes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, pp. 43–44). While social creativity does not require a change in the in-group's actual status, social competition may involve attempts from group members to achieve positive distinctiveness for their in-group in relation to another, including through social action (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 44). In this framework, social creativity captures the self-esteem maintenance mechanisms of selective valuing/interpretation of attributes and social comparisons observed in several studies in the literature review (using various terminology), while political protest/activism can be considered social action/competition intended to raise the overall image of a group.

## Stigma Management

Stigmatized individuals inevitably face a threat to their social identity; they have what Goffman (1963) deems a "spoiled identity". Goffman defines stigma as "an attribute that makes a person different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less

desirable kind" (p. 3). When a person is identified with a particular national, ethnic/racial, or religious group, Goffman terms this a "tribal stigma" which can "equally contaminate all members of a family" (p. 4). At the heart of this stigmatization are categorizations of similarities with and differences from others, as described by the processes of social identity formation above. However, whereas the "in-group" in Tajfel and Turner's conceptualization refers to the group with which an individual identifies, Goffman (1963) uses "in-group" to signify the stigma category to which an individual is (externally) believed to belong and "out-group" to signify the wider (non-stigmatized) society of "normal" people.

Due to the supposed similarity of individuals with the same stigma, a stigma category can "dispose its members to group-formation and relationships," although all members will not inevitably constitute a group (Goffman, 1963, p. 24). In other words, members of a stigma category may be prone to in-group favoritism toward other members of the stigma category. However, due to the inability to live up to the societal "identity standards" which have been internalized through socialization (that is, internalization of the stigma), a stigmatized individual will feel some degree of ambivalence toward themselves and the other members of their stigma category (Goffman, 1963, p. 106).

Goffman (1963) focuses on the cognitive processes by which an individual copes with stigma, since the "normal" and the "stigmatized" are cognitive perspectives (p. 138). He theorizes that the inevitable ambivalence a stigmatized individual feels toward their spoiled identity will lead them to develop a "doctrine which makes consistent sense out of [their] situation" (p. 109). Of course, the individual's cognitive processes can be observed in their behavior, since actions are motivated by psychological processes. The stigma management strategies which accompany their "proposed philosophies of life" will directly impact the

individual's social interactions and group identification since the philosophies are informed by groups, "in the broad sense of like-situated individuals": either the "in-group" of members of the same stigma category or the "out-group" of wider society (i.e., non-stigmatized people) (p. 112).

On the one hand, stigmatized individuals may exhibit "in-group alignment" to the claim that an individual's "real group" is "the aggregate of persons who are likely to have to suffer the same derivations" as them by virtue of possessing the same stigma (Goffman, 1963, p. 113). This alignment can even lead stigmatized individuals to engage in advocacy on behalf of their whole "group", causing a politicization of their own life (pp. 113–114). Central to this perspective is the conviction that they are different from wider society, but that this differentness should not be stigmatized (p. 114).

On the other hand, individuals may exhibit signs of "out-group alignment" by attempting to distance themselves from the stigma category. In such a case, the individuals will try to see themselves from the point of view of wider (non-stigmatized) society, as "not a type or a category, but a human being" (Goffman, 1963, p. 115). In other words, their personal doctrine centers around a conviction that they are "a human being like anyone else," and therefore should be accepted on "equal grounds" (p. 7). This type of psychological alignment encourages the stigmatized individual to not be ashamed of or hide their stigma, but rather to develop the following "formula": that non-stigmatized people "really mean no harm" and therefore perceived offenses should either be ignored, or the stigmatized individual should "make an effort at sympathetic re-education" of the non-stigmatized individual (p. 116). Moreover, these stigmatized individuals with an out-group alignment may act with a "phantom acceptance" which implies the stigma does not have such a negative impact on them, thereby laying the base for "phantom normalcy" (p. 122).

In all circumstances in which an individual possesses a stigmatizing quality, there is a factor of information control by which the individual attempts to manage the social information able to be discovered about them, thereby managing their social identity; they can try to conceal the discrediting information or choose to voluntarily disclose it (Goffman, 1963, p. 100). One strategy of self-disclosure is to voluntarily wear a "stigma symbol"— a "highly visible sign" which reveals one's stigma category (p. 100). Conversely, stigmatized individuals may try to conceal their stigma entirely (a process referred to as "passing") or downplay the stigmatized attribute to manage its effect on social interactions (referred to as "covering") (p. 103).

The previous chapter reviewed a prominent debate in the literature about whether or not minority group identification buffers or harms self-esteem when an individual is faced with stigmatization. The contradictory findings are to be expected according to Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma management, since a stigmatized individual will often undergo "affiliation cycles" with "oscillations in belief about the nature of [their] own group and the nature of [others]" (p. 38). Nevertheless, identification with a group that an individual feels positively about is central to their maintenance of a positive social identity and self-esteem.

Goffman (1963) and Tajfel and Turner (1979) use the concepts of "in-group" and "out-group" slightly differently; whereas Goffman refers to a cognitive *alignment* with these groups that structures how an individual thinks about a stigma they are faced with, Tajfel and Turner refer to an active *identification with* a certain group and efforts to maintain a positive image for both the group and one's own social identity by virtue of membership in the group. These two conceptualizations may overlap, such as when an individual exhibiting in-group alignment with a stigma group undertakes advocacy efforts on behalf of the entire group, but also will not

necessarily align in instance where an individual exhibiting out-group alignment conceptualizes their in-group *membership* as different from the stigma category.

Therefore, in this thesis I am interested in exploring the extent to which Russian volunteers assisting Ukrainian refugees perceive a stigma against themselves; if they consider this stigma from an in-group or out-group point of view; to which in-group (reference group) these volunteers express a sense of belonging; and by which cognitive and behavioral strategies they maintain a positive self-image and collective identity.

**Methodology**

Almost all of the studies described in the literature review were experiments analyzed using quantitative methods. However, these studies have produced conflicting results about how perceived discrimination impacts group identification and self-esteem. Therefore, I have chosen a qualitative approach to explore in which cases individuals use specific stigma management and social identity maintenance strategies, and how this is impacted by the subjective meaning they ascribe to various events and experiences. As I am not using quantitative measures to assess self-esteem, I will not be examining how discrimination and group identification have impacted individuals' self-esteem; rather, I will focus on conceptualizations of identity, assuming these are intended to protect one's self-esteem, as theorized by Tajfel and Turner (1979).

I have selected the organization Russians for Ukraine (RFU) in Poland as a case study to investigate self-image and collective identity formation among anti-war Russians volunteers. In the spring and summer of 2023, I spent over three months volunteering with another organization assisting Ukrainian refugees in the same town as RFU. During this time, I came into contact with numerous RFU volunteers as well as other (non-Russian) volunteers who expressed varying opinions about the organization Russians for Ukraine. I was also able to observe how RFU volunteers interacted with each other, with members of other volunteer organizations, and with Ukrainian refugees. I draw on these observations as background knowledge, which I supplement with interviews and official participant observation conducted in spring of 2024.

**Case Study Background**

Russians for Ukraine operates in a small town in eastern Poland less than 13 kilometers from the Ukrainian border. This area is a major site of border crossings for Ukrainian refugees

and therefore has been a hub for humanitarian organizations in Poland (particularly during the first year of the war). RFU prides themselves on being the first volunteers to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees at the Polish-Ukrainian border, beginning operations only two days after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Defining themselves as "Russians who have left Russia at various times," RFU has hosted over 320 volunteers since February 2022, almost all of whom are Russian citizens who have immigrated to countries such as Spain, Finland, Poland, and Georgia. These volunteers are overwhelmingly political migrants and exiles; many left Russia in 2008,[1] 2014,[2] and 2022, the key flashpoints of Russian invasions of neighboring countries and Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power.

Many of the RFU volunteers had direct or indirect connections to Alexei Navalny.[3] For example, several worked in the network of regional offices called Navalny Headquarters which was founded during Navalny's 2017 presidential campaign and organized anti-regime protests following Putin's re-election in 2018. The network was forced to closed in April 2021 after being designated as an extremist organization, and because association with Navalny and his organizations is considered grounds for imprisonment in Russia on charges of "extremism", these RFU volunteers who worked with/for Navalny fled Russia after 2021.

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[1] On May 8, 2008, Vladimir Putin was appointed prime minister by his chosen successor, Dmitriy Medvedev, only a day after Medvedev assumed the presidency. When this occurred, many Russians understood that Putin would continue to control the Russian state from behind the scenes and the country was turning toward authoritarianism. In August of that year, Russian-backed South Ossetian forces in Georgia began attacks on Georgian villages in a bid for separatism, escalating into a war between Georgia and Russia which those opposed to Putin's regime consider an illegal invasion by Russia.

[2] In March 2014, Russia annexed the Crimea peninsula of Ukraine as well as backed separatists in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine.

[3] Alexei Navalny was a lawyer, anti-corruption activist, and opposition leader in Russia who was poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok in August 2020 (agents from the Russian Federal Security Service were implicated in the poisoning in an investigation published in December 2020 by Bellingcat and The Insider). Navalny was arrested in January 2021, triggering mass protests around Russia, and his death in a Siberian penal colony was announced on February 16, 2024.

"Russians for Ukraine" is a highly political organization, describing itself as a group of "like-minded" and "ideological" people (Free Russia Foundation Project, 2024a). RFU volunteers frequently emphasize the broader anti-Kremlin motivations of the organization, and in front of the RFU volunteer house hangs a massive "Free Russia" flag: the white-blue-white flag which emerged at the end of February 2022 as a symbol of opposition to the war in Ukraine and of "the free Russia of the future" (*Flag of the Wonderful Russia of the Future: A Symbol of Freedom and Peace*, n.d.). In fact, the founder of RFU had previously founded the organization "For a Free Russia" in Poland in 2016, and he frequently emphasizes the political motivations of RFU as well.

Nonetheless, RFU's primary mission is to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees. During the first year and a half of the war, the volunteers from the organization managed a refugee shelter, provided transport for refugees (often to Warsaw or Berlin), and met arriving trains and buses from Ukraine every day to help carry bags and provide information. During this time, RFU volunteers could be found at the main train station—where a majority of humanitarian response efforts were centered—almost around the clock, meeting the 5am train arriving from Kyiv every day and staying until the last train to Ukraine had departed, sometimes as late as midnight. Many organizations providing assistance to Ukrainian refugees began to wind down operations in the spring and summer of 2023 as funding and the flow of refugees decreased; for these reasons, RFU closed its refugee shelter in December 2023. Since then, RFU volunteers have acted as translators for one of the remaining refugee shelters in the town, worked with another organization coordinating evacuation buses from frontline cities in Ukraine, and continued to transport refugees throughout Europe.

**Usage of the Category "Russian"**

When considering the processes of self-image and collective identity among anti-war Russians who volunteer to assist Ukrainian refugees, it is important to reflect on the implications of "methodological nationalism" or "methodological ethnicity", i.e., the unreflective analysis of social phenomena and identity primarily through the lens of the nation-state or ethnic groups (Glick Schiller, 2008; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Investigating psychological processes among a specific national or ethnic group entails an assumption that these individuals' experiences have principally been shaped by their nationality or ethnicity, making it appropriate to examine these individuals as a "group".

This assumption can be particularly problematic when there are discrepancies between an individual's ethnic identity and citizenship, which is the case for a significant number of RFU volunteers, who have not all been ethnically Russian. In fact, as the founder likes to make jokes about, the first three members of Russians for Ukraine were: a Kazakh (him), a Tajik, and a Tatar. The Russian language makes an important distinction between ethnicity (generally understood as ancestry) and nationality (referring to citizenship) in describing most ethnic/national groups. Thus, there are two ways to describe a person who is Russian: the term *russkiy* (русский) is used to refer to a person with Russian ethnicity, while *rossiyanin* (россиянин) refers to someone with Russian nationality. The first three members of RFU identify as rossiyan (Russian by nationality), but not russkiy (Russian by ethnicity).

Even the use of a "national" lens (i.e., categorizing all Russian volunteers as rossiyane, or Russian citizens) can be problematic in this type of research on identity formation as it cannot be assumed that all Russian volunteers consider "Russian" to be a meaningful identity category for themselves. In such an instance, a label assigned by the researcher can be contested by a research

participant, who considers their identity and experiences to be primarily shaped by other factors (Dahinden et al., 2021).

However, I have intentionally selected a case study of people from Russia who chose to join an organization specifically named for the national group "Russians". During their time working with the organization, all of the volunteers live in close quarters in the RFU house, where the Free Russia flag can be found on everything from the front terrace to the refrigerator to the tea kettle, and the kitchen is regularly occupied by discussions about the future of Russia and what it means to be Russian. Regardless of whether the nationally-framed nature of RFU was the primary motivator for joining the organization, it can be assumed that the daily interactions with this national frame by virtue of their membership in the organization have reinforced for these individuals a national lens through which they view their experiences.

While RFU volunteers have primarily been Russian citizens, there have been exceptions, including several Belarusian, Kazakhstani, American, and Ukrainian citizens. Many of these individuals do espouse some sort of attachment to "Russianness", to which they relate linguistically or ethnically, but the particular nuance of their relationship to the Russian identity will be considered outside the scope of this project. I focus only on those RFU volunteers who possess Russian citizenship, and therefore have inevitably been confronted with their connection to the state of Russia and external categorization as "Russian" at the very least while showing their passport to register as a volunteer. For these reasons—and primarily because of their membership in an organization which self-identifies as comprising Russians—I will use the terms "Russians" and "Russian volunteers".

**Interview Sample and Method**

I conducted interviews with seven individuals who volunteered with RFU at various times since the organization began operations in February 2022 in order to ensure the anonymity of the research participants as well as capture a range of experiences and perceptions of external attitudes throughout the course of the organization's operations. My interview sample consisted of four men and three women, all of whom were between the ages of 20 and 40. All of the interviewees were Russian citizens, though not all were ethnically Russian. Four of these interviews were conducted in English and three in Russian, depending on the participant's preference. Four interviews were held online via Zoom and three were conducted in person. These interviews ranged between 45 minutes and three hours; the average length of the interviews was 88 minutes. I have used pseudonyms for all of the participants' names.

I conducted narrative interviews designed to elicit the interviewee's interpretations of their experiences as a Russian volunteer assisting Ukrainian refugees. This interview style aims to have the interviewee "tell the story of the area of interest in question as a consistent story of all relevant events from its beginning to its end" (Hermanns, 1995, as quoted in Flick, 2009, p. 177). The narrative interview begins with an open-ended question intended to generate the interviewee's main narrative, which they are allowed as much time as needed to tell. Only after this main narration has concluded does the researcher ask "narrative probing" questions designed to complete any narrative fragments not already exhaustively answered, and finally conduct the "balancing phase" designed to elicit theoretical accounts of experiences, taking the interviewees as "experts and theoreticians of themselves" (Flick, 2009b, p. 178).

This interview style is well-suited for the analysis of subjective views and activities and the reconstruction of the internal logic of processes (Flick, 2009b, pp. 184–185), as it is designed

to evoke in-depth accounts of events that are most relevant to the interviewee. Thus, narrative interviews allowed me to deduce if the interviewee was unaware of the negative experiences and treatment of Russian volunteers at the beginning of the war and/or of the presence of negative attitudes toward RFU held by members of other (non-Russian) volunteer organizations—or, if the respondent was aware of these negative aspects of "being Russian" in Poland, they did not ascribe much importance to it. Additionally, since the narrative was centered around the participants' experience as an RFU volunteer, I was able to avoid using the category "Russian" and only posed questions related to being a "member of RFU" until the balancing phase in order to not enforce a national frame that had not previously been utilized by the interviewee.

## Supplementary Data

In addition to the seven interviews that I conducted, I also draw on several other previously published interviews with Russian volunteers assisting Ukrainian refugees. Some of these interviews are from news articles focused on RFU volunteers during the first year of the war, when the organization faced the greatest number of problems, which provides insight into how these Russian volunteers responded to negative experiences in the moment (rather than a year later, when they are reflecting on negative experiences). Additionally, I incorporate interviews from the November 2022 documentary "Russophobia, guilt, and self-help: How do volunteers around the world work now?," in which Russian volunteers answer many of the specific questions I am interested in, such as how they feel telling others that they are Russian. While some of these volunteers are from RFU, others are from organizations in Poland, Germany and Georgia, which provides a (limited) understanding of the generalizability of the experiences and identity formation of Russian volunteers in Poland.

I also engaged in participant observation during a two-week stay in spring 2024 in the town where RFU operates. This field strategy simultaneously involves direct participation and observation, interviewing, and introspection and devotes "a special interest in human meaning and interaction as viewed from the perspective of people who are insiders or members of particular situations and settings" (Flick, 2009c, p. 226). During my period of participant observation, I visited the RFU volunteer house and spent a day at the refugee shelter where RFU volunteers work as translators in order to observe how the members of RFU interact with each other, with Ukrainian refugees, and with members of other volunteer organizations. I also conducted an expert interview with the founder of RFU, as well as spoke with the founder of the shelter where RFU volunteers now work, and members of several other volunteer organizations in the town to gather a variety of opinions and experiences. I incorporate my observations into my analysis to help provide a fuller picture of the social dynamics within RFU and among the wider community as well as gain a better understanding of the volunteers' perspectives of the social environment.

**Data Analysis**

I have performed qualitative content analysis of the narrative interviews that I conducted as well as the supplementary interviews and participant observation. The theoretical perspective underlying this framework of interpretation is symbolic interactionism, which investigates the processes of interaction based on an understanding of social actions as possessing a symbolic character which reflects the "subjective meaning that individuals attribute to their activities and their environments" (Flick, 2009d, p. 57). This methodological principle is grounded in the Thomas theorem, which claims that a situation which a person defines as real will be real in its

consequences, and therefore a researcher must reconstruct the subject's viewpoint to understand the subjectively-defined, objectively perceived reality (Flick, 2009d, p. 58). The goal of analyzing narrative data, then, is to uncover the processes by which individuals form their "life constructions" through recounting their history (Flick, 2009a, p. 347).

Analyzing the subjective meaning imbued by Russian volunteers to their national identity and experiences with RFU allows me to assess their conceptions of themselves and their group membership. Assuming that their group identification and attitudes toward RFU members and non-RFU members are formed in order to maintain a positive social identity and self-image, reconstructing their interpretations of experiences will allow me to assess the extent to which these Russian volunteers have internalized a stigma against themselves/their national group and their strategies for social identity maintenance in a stigmatizing context. The Russian language interviews were also particularly useful in understanding if an individual primarily viewed their Russian identity (and the stigma toward Russians) in terms of ethnicity or citizenship, depending on their use of the term russkiy or rossiyanin.

**Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

One problem generally associated with the narrative interview is that the narrative is constructed in a specific form and context, and memories of the events may be influenced by this situation (Flick, 2009b, p. 184). That is, "factual" experiences could either be over-exaggerated, downplayed, or left out entirely. For this reason, I have supplemented the narrative interviews with background knowledge gained from previous observations and previously-conducted interviews, as well as participant observation, in order to gain a more accurate representation of the social environment. Of course, not all phenomena can be observed in participant observation,

especially considering the short timeline I had, and the method itself is essentially just a general research strategy due to the difficulties in standardizing and formalizing participant observation (Flick, 2009c, p. 233). Finally, the sheer volume of data generated by both narrative interviews and participant observation has restricted the number of cases included for analysis; nevertheless, in the context of this research, I believe the depth of analysis is more important than the breadth of cases considered.

My primary ethical consideration is in maintaining the confidentiality of the volunteers interviewed. Many of these volunteers do not have permanent residency in the countries they have migrated to and/or must travel back to Russia for various reasons, and they would face imprisonment for their activities with RFU if these were discovered by the Russian government. Additionally, the organization continues is still operating in the town and interacting with other volunteer organizations with whom they have described both positive and negative experiences. For this reason, I have anonymized all identifying information of the participants whom I interviewed, such as their name, current place of residence, occupation, and exact time period when they volunteered with the organization. Every participant signed an informed consent form which detailed the purpose and scale of the research as well as the data protection measures taken in this research in accordance with GDPR standards. Additionally, I obtained consent from the founder to quote him directly, but I prefer to not disclose his name and will refer to him as "the founder of RFU". In my analysis, most of the quotes have been edited for readability (e.g., filler words such as "like" and "you know" have been removed) when this does not impact the accuracy of interpretation of the statement(s).

**Findings**

**Social Environment**

The region where RFU operates is a stronghold for the right-wing populist and national-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, which espouses a strong anti-Russian sentiment. Local PiS officials have played an important role in regulating the humanitarian response efforts in the city, most of which are centered at the main train station, where the Polish Territorial Defense Forces (WOT) coordinates volunteer activity.[4] All volunteers are required to register with the WOT each time they work a shift at the train station in order to receive a wristband confirming that they are an approved volunteer—meaning every day that a volunteer works at the station, they must have their passport processed by these WOT soldiers.

There were several other humanitarian organizations operating in the town which would consistently have volunteers at the main train station. Those with whom RFU volunteers interact(ed) include: two small American NGOs; one small UK-based NGO; a Ukrainian cultural center which had already existed in the town for over 100 years and is staffed primarily by members of the Ukrainian minority from the local town; UNICEF/UNHCR, primarily staffed by Poles with a handful of the staff from Ukraine; and the Polish Red Cross, employing an almost entirely Polish staff. Among these groups, only volunteers from the small American and UK-based NGOs and RFU were unpaid; all other organizations had salaried staff, even though they are usually referred to as "volunteers".

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[4] PiS created the WOT in 2016 to counter Russian "hybrid warfare" and continues to exert massive influence on the organization; the local WOT forces have even been described as a "private paramilitary" that could be leveraged by PiS (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2024).

During the first year of the war, the largest refugee shelter in the town was located in the building of a former Tesco supermarket (and therefore is simply referred to as "Tesco"). Officially managed and funded by the Polish Red Cross, the Tesco shelter was operated almost entirely by volunteers from other organizations for the first six months, specifically those volunteers who could speak Ukrainian or Russian. During this period of time, volunteers from the various organizations were all in close contact by virtue of working in the same shelter every day. Additionally, between March 2022 and April 2023, there was a free evacuation train that ran every other day to Hannover. This train was officially organized by the Polish Red Cross, but RFU volunteers were always present during the boarding of this train to translate. Finally, most organizations would consistently have some volunteers at the fifth platform—where trains departed to and arrived from Ukraine—to provide assistance to refugees. In this regard, RFU volunteers were in close proximity to other volunteer organizations, particularly during the first year and a half of the war.

From my observations, it appears that there is a tight-knit community among volunteers from other organizations in the town—particularly among Ukrainian volunteers—but Russian volunteers have largely been excluded from this community. For example, these other volunteers frequently spend time together outside of working hours, going to bars or even traveling together. The only organizations that RFU volunteers described having positive relations or "friendships" with—and the only volunteers whom I heard express positive attitudes toward RFU—were the American and British NGOs. However, the RFU volunteers appeared to have their own tight-knit community among themselves; several of them described how they still kept in close contact with other RFU volunteers and even met up with them in various parts of Europe to travel together. During the handful of times that I visited the RFU house, there were always several

volunteers spending time together in the kitchen and their interactions with each other were incredibly comfortable and familial.

**Experiences and Perceptions of Stigma**

The Russian passport/Russian citizenship as a stigma symbol emerged as a key theme in this research. During the first six months of war, RFU volunteers encountered several problems with the WOT soldiers, who even refused to approve the registration of volunteers with Russian passports at times. As one RFU volunteer described in November 2022, these problems intensified during active phases of the war with high media coverage:

> I drew a correlation between when they began to put pressure on our organization RFU, and when some big events happened. The world knew about Bucha, we were once again under attack because we are Russians. The world learned what happened in Izium—no one would let us in the station (Redactsiya, 2022, 00:31:13).

In the opinion of the founder of RFU, this is because "the Russian passport—it's a kind of stigma in some sense. When people see it—not all, of course, but officials, the functionary type—they immediately have a wary attitude, especially if they are security forces" (Redactsiya, 2022, 00:30:26). Later, in February 2024, the founder described his Russian citizenship as "the seal of Cain" on his forehead (Volovelskaya, 2024). All of the volunteers whom I interviewed expressed a negative attitude toward the Russian passport and Russian citizenship in general, which most of them pointed to as the cause of their problems during registration, and many expressed a wish to have another citizenship/passport.

The interviewees consistently associated registration with showing their passport and revealing their nationality, since this was the time when the volunteers' "Russianness" was most

visible. In fact, all of the volunteers described their nationality as not highly perceptible in most contexts of volunteering at the train station, explaining that most of the time it was not known that they were Russian because so many of the Ukrainian refugees themselves were speaking Russian and interactions were not long enough for the volunteers' country of origin to become known. Registration, then, was the time when the volunteers' Russian identity was most on display and most likely to cause problems.

A few months after beginning operations, RFU volunteers were prohibited by Polish officials and security forces (i.e., the WOT soldiers, border guards, and security guards at the train station) from wearing their organization's white volunteer vests at the train station. All volunteers wear vests to identify them as such; UNICEF/UNHCR wears blue vests, the Red Cross wears red vests, and all other organizations either have yellow vests with their organization's name or generic yellow vests with the word "volunteer" written in Ukrainian on the back. During the first few months of the war, RFU volunteers wore white vests with the white-blue-white flag of free Russia, the Ukrainian flag, and the inscription "Russians for Ukraine" in small letters on the back. In May 2022, RFU volunteers were told it was prohibited to wear these white vests and they may only wear yellow vests distributed by Polish officials.

Russian volunteers also sometimes encountered negative reactions from Ukrainian refugees when their nationality became known. For example, several Russian volunteers in the documentary "Russophobia, guilt, and self-help" described an "uncomfortable pause" that always arose when refugees asked where they were from and they answered "Russia" (Redactsiya, 2022). A Russian volunteer in Berlin said that when he began volunteering at the start of the war, Ukrainian refugees were "shocked, angry, scared" when they learned he was from Russia (Redactsiya, 2022, 00:46:08), and one RFU volunteer recounted a time when a

woman from Ukraine became aggressive, shouting, "You're from Russia? What did you come here for? To bomb us?" (00:21:20).

The last group with whom RFU volunteers have encountered negative interactions is volunteers from other humanitarian organizations, primarily those from the Ukrainian cultural center, UNICEF/UNHCR, and the Polish Red Cross. Several volunteers whom I interviewed perceived that these organizations held negative attitudes toward RFU. For example, Katya, reflecting on the Red Cross and the Ukrainian cultural center, said, "They don't really like us, and this was always felt. After two years that we've been here and worked together, they still pretend like we don't exist." She reflected on a time in the summer of 2022 when the Red Cross organized an event for the various humanitarian organizations working in the town and it was "very uncomfortable" for the RFU volunteers, with whom none of the other volunteers would speak; she detailed the awkwardness and hurt she felt when a Red Cross volunteer whom she had previously worked with in the Tesco shelter and had amicable relations with ignored her presence and would not speak to her at the event, pretending that she did not know Katya. Sofia described a similar experience with a volunteer from the Ukrainian cultural center whom she previously had worked with in the Tesco shelter and felt she had "great relations"; when Sofia returned to the town to volunteer for the second time a few months later, Sofia said the Ukrainian volunteer pretended to not know her.

In fact, most of the negative experiences with other volunteers that RFU members recounted in their interviews were with people from the Ukrainian cultural center. A major point of contention was that this organization seeks to promote the use of the Ukrainian language and volunteers from the organization would refuse to speak Russian with the RFU volunteers, even if these Ukrainian volunteers themselves knew Russian and could not communicate in English. As

Sofia said, "They spoke with me through gritted teeth, in Ukrainian," whenever she would try to ask for help. Viktor described the problems as "mostly with the volunteers, with the Ukrainian volunteers, but not with the refugees" and not with the Polish officials after the first few months; "[these Ukrainian volunteers] treated us with mistrust, and disdain, you could even say."

All of the volunteers whom I interviewed, regardless of the time that they had volunteered with RFU, noted that there was a difference in how RFU was regarded and treated in the town at the beginning and one year after a war, describing the situation as much better a year on. In fact, some of the volunteers who joined RFU after the first year did not face any negative experiences themselves; nevertheless, they were all aware of the problems that the organization had faced during the first months of the war and referred to stories they heard about bad experiences that Russian volunteers had in the town. All of the interviewees expressed a perception of a negative attitude toward Russians by a generalized "Other" in the world: as Dmitriy said, "No one wants to see Russians anywhere, especially in Poland." Viktor noted that this is particularly the case within Ukraine, because saying good things about Russians "does not put them [Ukrainians] in the mood for victory." So, he perceived that:

> You can't say that there are Russians on the border who are helping, you can't say there are Russians in Moscow who protest and are dying in prison because they are opposed to the war… It is necessary to hate Russians.

Viktor explained that this is particularly the case in online spaces, where "Russians are either bad or—bad. There are no others." He perceived a complete lack of nuance which he viewed as subjecting him and other anti-war Russians to unfair categorization: "We will always be orcs,[5]

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[5] "Orc" is a pejorative used (primarily by Ukrainians) to refer to Russian soldiers or Russians who support the war in Ukraine.

they will always be victims." Many of the volunteers shared this perception and predicted that this would be the case for a very long time.

**Reactions to Stigma**

All of the interviewees expressed an understanding of and willingness to accept negative treatment from Ukrainian refugees. Sergey explained that he would probably react the same way: "Imagine your family, like someone in your arms who was killed by the Russian army. I guess you would be super hateful toward Russia…. There is no room for extra sympathy." He even provided an analogy to how he would likely feel if South Korea attacked Russia: "I would probably be super pissed at all Koreans, honestly." Thus, Sergey and the other volunteers expressed a large degree of empathy toward the situation of the Ukrainians, feeling that any negative treatment from them would be justified given the circumstances.

In fact, almost all of them described expecting negative reactions from the refugees. For example, Aleksandr reflected:

> You know, I was kind of—not afraid—but I was expecting that people would not be willing to speak Russian with me, or would have some complaints about my presence there, and they would interpret me and my intentions the wrong way. And when I first arrived there, my personal attitude was like: Well, this is your heritage, now suffer. You deserve it.

For Dmitriy, the expectation of negative reactions was informed by hearing stories about previous volunteers encountering "pretty aggressive Ukrainian people, both at the train station and the shelter." However, Dmitriy and every other volunteer interviewed emphasized that the overwhelming majority of interactions with Ukrainian refugees were positive; for Dmitriy, the

worst that happened was "once or twice" someone wouldn't give him their bag to carry when they heard him speaking Russian—but "most of the people were smiling and grateful… the reaction was 99.9% positive from the Ukrainian people." One volunteer described how she even began to conduct an "experiment" during her second time volunteering with RFU where she would tell everyone that she is from Russia; "This time, it's very funny, in response to the fact that I'm from Russia, people started giving me chocolates, hugging me. It's really cool" (Redactsiya, 2022, 00:45:32).

Nevertheless, RFU volunteers reacted differently to perceived negative external evaluations from other groups. These reactions correspond with whether the individual considered their situation from an in-group or out-group perspective and the level of identification they demonstrated with the national group "Russians". Therefore, in my analysis of these reactions, I will group these volunteers by in-/out-group alignment and high/low identification with the category "Russian".

### Group Alignment

Four of the volunteers—Viktor, Sofia, Katya, and Aleksandr—exhibited strong in-group alignment, a perspective which claims that the stigma category is the individual's real group to which they "naturally belong" (Goffman, 1963, p. 112). This alignment was exemplified by these volunteers' descriptions of RFU as their "people" and politicization of their attitudes and efforts to redeem the category "Russian". They expressed a strong sense of connection with the other RFU volunteers, not simply because of shared values, but also shared (negative) experiences, as predicted by Goffman's (1963) conception of the in-group perspective to consider members of one's "real group" to be those who are "likely to have to suffer the same deprivations… because

of having the same stigma" (p. 113). Sofia described RFU as "another family that accepts you, that loves you and that helps you a lot," emphasizing how everyone "looks out for each other" since they "do not have a lot of rights there [in Poland]" and the organization could easily be discredited, such as if someone planted drugs in the house. As Katya said, "We are tight-knit, but because we've had so much happen."

The volunteers exhibiting in-group alignment were those who had personal experiences of discrimination/prejudice during their time volunteering. They were also more likely to attribute negative interactions to prejudice. Sofia recounted a story about how Russian volunteers were prohibited from entering the train station:

> At first, they said, "Today only men can volunteer." And we were like, come on! Mostly women and children are traveling, and we are helping these women and children carry suitcases—exactly on par with men, too. And then we realized that, well, it was specifically directed against Russian volunteers. We [RFU] had mostly girls.

Katya also attributed negative interactions with Ukrainian volunteers to prejudice: "The problem is obviously that we're Russian, that well, they don't interact with Russians positively." Aleksandr shared this perception of the Ukrainian cultural center, recounting a time when the organization prohibited the use of the Russian language in a project organized by RFU to gather letters from Ukrainian refugees for the one-year anniversary of the start of the war; he criticized this policy as "language xenophobia."

Despite professing an understanding of negative reactions from Ukrainian refugees, these in-group aligned volunteers explicitly rejected the notion that they should generally be stigmatized on the basis of their "Russianness", particularly from people who are not refugees. Several of them mentioned the saying "A good Russian is a dead Russian," expressing

dissatisfaction with this type of broad prejudice and lack of nuance in thinking about people from Russia. Katya recounted how at the beginning of the war, she would always excuse when her Ukrainian acquaintances would say this because she thought, "Well, they have every right to say this." However, after several months volunteering with RFU, she describes a shift in her thinking: "I got really tired and I thought, what? They have a right to say this? That can't be! Why do I have to die? No, I don't have to.'" Katya and the other volunteers with in-group alignment expressed a profound desire to show the world that not all Russians support the war and that some have given up everything to oppose the war and help Ukrainian refugees—and therefore "Russians" should not be viewed as a homogenous, guilty group. In other words, their ultimate aim is to "remove the stigma from [their] differentness" (Goffman, 1963, p. 114).

However, three other volunteers—Dmitriy, Sergey, and Irina—exhibited out-group alignment, exemplified by viewing oneself as, above all, a "human being like anyone else" (Goffman, 1963, p. 115). Dmitriy and Irina explicitly rejected feeling any shame about being Russian since, as their "affliction is nothing in itself, [they] should not be ashamed of it or others who have it" (Goffman, 1963, p. 116). Sergey similarly did not express hesitancy or embarrassment when telling others he is from Russia. Importantly, none of these three volunteers described facing any personal experiences of discrimination/prejudice. They were also less likely to attribute negative experiences to prejudice: Sergey disregarded negative evaluations in the Scandinavian country he now lives in, saying, "Some people are against migration from Russia. But usually, these people are also against migration from wherever else. So, it's not like they don't like specifically us, but it's just them not liking everyone." Irina attributed RFU's exclusion from the larger volunteer community to RFU isolating itself: "They're doing a great job, but they want to be together because they are Russians and they feel comfortable with themselves. And I

think it's a barrier from other volunteer groups a little bit." That is, these out-group aligned volunteers generally believed that other (non-Russian) people "really mean no harm," even if situations may appear discriminatory, and therefore perceived offenses should not be internalized (Goffman, 1963, p. 116).

These volunteers did reject the general stigmatization of Russians, as the in-group aligned volunteers did. However, for the volunteer with the most consistent out-group alignment, Dmitriy, this belief was based on the rejection of the entire category of nationality. Dmitriy took this perspective to the cosmopolitan extreme, espousing a philosophy wholly opposed to the concepts of nationalism, patriotism, and the nation-state. He repeatedly expressed a view of himself as simply a "normal human" and a desire that all people be viewed the same regardless of their country of origin; that they should be accepted on "equal grounds" (Goffman, 1963, p. 7). Dmitriy's largely positive experiences volunteering with RFU reinforced this cosmopolitan, anti-groupist personal philosophy. First joining RFU in summer 2023, over one year into the war, he neither faced any negative experiences during registration or with the Ukrainians whom he assisted. For him, most people with whom he interacted were "smiling and grateful," which pleasantly surprised him and "proved the point" to him that although the "'us versus them' mentality is something very biological," these Ukrainians "override it… [because] they're still humans, too." That is, his primary goal is not to remove the stigma from the differentness of being Russian, but to remove the differentiation of people by nationality altogether, giving all "humans" equal footing to accept and support each other. Irina and Sergey exhibited less consistent out-group alignment and much more ambivalence toward distinctions by nationality, opting to express detached support for how RFU seeks to challenge stigma toward Russians rather than form an independent and cohesive doctrine about this issue.

*Collective Identification*

All of the volunteers reflected an understanding of their nationality/citizenship as inevitably connecting them to the Russian state, despite how strongly they would wish otherwise. This understanding resulted from the influential categorization of citizenship: as Dmitriy explained,

> Having a Russian passport sucks completely because this kind of mentally attaches you to the regime, because the passport is a physical object that is issued by the regime. It's kind of like they—the people you hate the most, the tyrants, the murderers—they are those giving you that passport, giving you this only chance to move from country to country.

Similarly, Aleksandr described feeling "sorry for what happened" despite knowing he can't affect government decisions: "I still feel myself related, maybe because it's something done in my name." The founder also described difficulty separating himself from the Russian government's actions, despite never identifying with the regime and knowing "at one time" how to separate "a terrible state" and "a beloved country"; on February 24, 2022, everything was "divided into black and white: we are Russians, we are occupiers" (Volovelskaya, 2024). These descriptions of the dominance of one's nationality in defining their identity reflects a "crystallization" of the national lens (Brubaker, 2002) which occurred when the war began.

However, this crystallization of the national lens was internalized differently by different volunteers, impacting their self-image to various degrees. Rather than fully deconstruct their Russian identity, the majority of the volunteers reconstructed their conception of collective identity to be centered around being an *anti-war* Russian *volunteer*. This identity was granted to them via membership in RFU so, accordingly, these volunteers demonstrated a high level of

identification with Russians for Ukraine as a reference group, often using the first-person plural pronouns "we" and "us". This is best articulated by Viktor: "I think that RFU, for us—for me, for many of my friends—it's already like a brand and a manner of self-identification… everyone says, 'we are RFU,' and this is like an 'identity.'"

This construction of an RFU collective identity was derived from conceptions of similarity with and difference from various out-groups. For Sergey, his identification with RFU was articulated primarily in direct contrast to pro-war/pro-Putin Russians, against whom he held his own stigma. This led him to describe his sense of belonging with RFU as similar to going to a vegan restaurant as a vegetarian:

> I'm super happy because whatever I pick, it's going to be vegetarian or vegan, so I can eat it… And when I go to a regular place, I have to read carefully to make sure it doesn't contain anything I don't eat… It's the same with making new contacts from Russia… I don't want acquaintances or friends who voted for Putin or support the war… And the place where it's not happening—it's in RFU.

For Sergey, RFU provided an ideal organization to find people with similar values and lifestyles, with whom he knows he will feel comfortable because "they're like-minded people, they're like *my* people." That is, he demonstrated a high level of identification with RFU and anti-war Russians, but minimal identification with the general Russian national identity; having already been a permanent resident in a Scandinavian country for several years, he did not have any desire to ever return to Russia, and instead was enthusiastic about how he will soon receive citizenship in the country he migrated to.

On the other hand, the four volunteers with the greatest in-group alignment (Viktor, Sofia, Katya, and Aleksandr) exhibited a high level of identification not only with RFU but also

with the Russian national identity. By definition, stigmatized individuals with an in-group alignment consider their stigma category as their "natural" group (Goffman, 1963, p. 112). Consequently, these in-group aligned volunteers felt that they could not "get rid of" their Russian identity even if they wanted to; as Sofia said, "I am Russian [russkaya], I can't do anything. I understand that I can't change this. I was born in Russia, my mom is Russian [russkaya], my dad is Russian [russkiy]." Like Sofia, the volunteers who gave interviews in Russian (with me and in the documentary/news articles) almost exclusively referred to themselves using the adjectives russkiy/russkaya/russkiye (denoting ethnic Russian identity in the masculine, feminine, and plural forms, respectively). That is, despite identifying the Russian passport as the main source of their problems, these volunteers nevertheless primarily conceived of their Russian identity in ethnic terms. This is not surprising given the general prevalence of the term russkiy (rather than rossiyanin), particularly in countries such as Poland and Ukraine, where Russians (even specifically Russian citizens) are usually referred to in ethnic terms. That is, the primary categorization that these volunteers have internalized is an ethnic one that can nevertheless be used to refer to nationality/citizenship.

However, in my interview with the founder—who used the term russkiy in the early news articles—he expressed ambivalence toward this ethnic designation. Recounting how a friend originally suggested to him the name "Russians [russkiye] for Ukraine", he reflected that it is very "convenient" for him that the name of the organization is always said in English, which does not make a distinction between ethnicity and nationality, because for him, "Russian—this is more likely rossiyanie." He said that he and the other two original members of RFU—"a Tajik and a Tatar"—consider themselves "above all rossiyanin—but not russkiy." The founder joked

that he can say that he is russkiy, but everyone looks at him and laughs, since it is possible to discern from his features that he is ethnically Central Asian.

Katya expressed a similar ambivalence toward the ethnic designation russkiy, saying, "I am not even particularly Russian [russkaya]," since her dad is from the Caucasus. For Katya, this internalized categorization of herself as not fully Russian made her feel that she has always "differed from all the people who were around" her. This perceived differentness became particularly problematic for her after the beginning of the war: "In Russia, they didn't even particularly like me because I'm not Russian [russkaya], and now it's as if they don't like me because I am Russian [russkaya]... In short, it's a strange feeling." This "strange feeling" is ambivalence toward an ethnic identity that is perceived to be devalued in all contexts, presenting the challenge of finding a collective identity which will not harm her self-image.

While Katya and the founder considered themselves to be different from the wider category of Russians in ethnic terms, they also constructed their difference from other Russians in terms of political values—as did the rest of the volunteers who internalized "Russianness" as a primary identity marker. For example, Sofia considered herself to be different from many Russian citizens—a differentness reinforced by her trips back to Russia, where she felt that lots of people genuinely support the war and everywhere are Russian flags and the letter Z, "like a symbol of war that they write, some kind of very fascist sign… it became like you couldn't be in this country anymore." Katya also expressed a perception of difference from pro-war Russians as well as those who are politically disengaged: "their psyche is structured differently and they simply decided not to pay attention to this, that there is a war… I just couldn't do that."

However, these volunteers not only constructed their identity via differentiation from certain types of Russians, but also from non-Russians, and this latter comparison reinforced a

feeling of their "Russianness" as inescapable and natural. This was clearly articulated by Aleksandr, who reflected,

> Before I left, I would say, 'I'm a cosmopolitan'... But I found out that after leaving Russia, I understood my identity as a Russian. Temporarily, I can live anywhere, but my home is there… It's funny how leaving my country made more concrete my identity as Russian, which I never before identified myself. It's like, when you are living in water, like for a fish, you don't realize you are in water. You realize it only when you get out— ah, that is my natural environment.

As a result of this enduring centrality of the national identity to the self-image of these volunteers, they struggled to not internalize the negative aspects of Russian nationality and all described feeling shame, guilt, and/or responsibility. Katya recounted how she "experienced a kind of identity crisis" during the first year of the war: "The fact that I am Russian, it made me feel very ashamed." Similarly, Sofia reflected, "I definitely still feel guilt for the fact that I am Russian. I still can't get rid of it." These forms of self-stigma reflect Goffman's (1963) prediction that when someone who becomes stigmatized later in life, they will "presumably… have a special problem in re-identifying [themselves], and a special likelihood of developing disapproval of self" (p. 34).

For these volunteers, identification with RFU was the most effective means of re-identifying themselves since it did not involve a full rejection of their Russian identity, but rather a narrower definition of collective identity which redeemed a particular subsection of the stigma category "Russians". This was reinforced by the influence that organizational identification exerts on public image (Jenkins, 2014, p. 189) by providing an external categorization validated by influential others which corroborates these individuals' self-image as not simply Russian, but

a Russian *for Ukraine*. Sofia described her affiliation with RFU as providing a social identity which she can be proud of:

> I like the name and I like to say that I am from Russians from Ukraine. And I don't feel any shame about this, or I don't feel any difficulty saying it out loud, because I know that this organization did a lot and continues to do as much as it can.

The importance of this organizational identification was particularly true for the volunteers who struggled to understand their relationship to the Russian national identity even before the war due to their different ethnic background; in order to cope with the "strange feeling" of possessing a devalued ethnic identity in all contexts, Katya explained, "this word 'Russians' [said in English] was very important to me to save… this name [Russians for Ukraine] is very important to me." That is, identification with the organization Russians for Ukraine—a name which makes immediately clear the volunteers' Russian identity, reframed in a positive light—is a critical strategy for Katya and other highly identified volunteers to maintain a positive self-image because the organization provides a reference group with which they can genuinely self-identify through perceptions of real similarity.

For these volunteers whose Russian identity was a central aspect of self-image, identification with RFU was accompanied by internalization of the organization's political mission to fight for a free, democratic Russia. For example, Aleksandr reflected that since understanding his identity as a Russian after leaving Russia, he has developed a new motivation: "I want this 'beautiful Russian future,' as Navalny said, to happen someday. I want to return to build it." That is, despite their distaste of and disidentification from the current regime in Russia, these volunteers' acceptance of the Russian national identity evoked a desire to make this an identity that they can one day be proud of and feel real similarity with—which they believed

could be done if the new Russian "nation" were modeled after the ideals of RFU. In other words, close identification with RFU also reinforced conceptions of "Russianness", expanding the group on behalf of which the volunteers seek a positive social identity.

For Dmitriy and Irina, on the other hand, the experience of leaving Russia after the war began solidified a cosmopolitan self-image. These were the only two volunteers to reject feeling any sense of responsibility or guilt, which they both felt made them different from the other RFU volunteers, who they considered to share as Irina put it, "a common sense of guilt." Neither of these volunteers described feeling a strong sense of belonging in RFU. Dmitriy said he "actually didn't like the socialization they had," which he felt revolved around constantly discussing politics and the news: "I mean, maybe there is some kind of psychological support in listening to each other talking about that, to hate Putin together or support the Ukrainian army together. Maybe they do gain something from it, but not me." Irina similarly described herself as different from RFU because, although she supports their political motivations, this is "not really [her] vibe… [she's] not that mentally involved in this." Instead, she has "always liked an international community" and felt that a drawback of RFU was that "they were just Russians."

The perceptions of differentness from Russian volunteers shared by Dmitriy and Irina also translated to a disidentification with the entire category of Russian nationality. Instead, these two volunteers considered themselves to be most similar to other cosmopolitan individuals with similar values. For Irina, these were other volunteers outside of RFU who did not isolate themselves in groups with other people of the same nationality: for example, when discussing the attitudes of local Polish people in the town, she differentiated those who choose to volunteer and who are friends with her: "This is a bit different—they're Polish people who are internationals. They're not really locals," she laughed. "But they are locals, they've lived here all their life."

Dmitriy similarly singled out people with a cosmopolitan orientation as those to whom he most closely relates; he reflected that the reason he most likes the international sporting league in which he participates is that "they're the people who don't divide people by the country they were born in, they just know better." In deconstructing their Russian national identity, Dmitriy and Irina constructed a cosmopolitan social identity which draws on both perceptions of similarity and difference, defining an "us" which shares common values and lifestyles in contrast to (nationalist) "Others" (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2017, p. 140). Consequently, when discussing the anti-war stance and liberal political values that they shared with RFU volunteers, Dmitriy and Irina were more likely to express a feeling of similarity with RFU volunteers, but overall, they did not consider describe a feeling of belonging with this group, since they conceived of themselves as belonging with other cosmopolitans.

Nevertheless, despite their professed cosmopolitan philosophy and social identity, these two volunteers demonstrated some ambivalence to their ability to maintain a positive social identity in the absence of a (positive) national identity. This was particularly true for Dmitriy, who, despite describing the passport as "a prison," still expressed a desire to be legally and emotionally tied to a higher prestige citizenship: "I don't know, somebody give me, like, a Swedish passport or Norwegian or whatever! I want to feel that attachment to at least a better country in terms of values." Such a longing for "attachment" to a "better country" revealed a discrepancy in the philosophy wholly opposed to any forms of national feeling or patriotism otherwise espoused by Dmitriy. He resolved this internal contradiction by explaining that in his ideal world, "we are all citizens of planet Earth [and] there are no borders," but lamented that this would almost certainly not happen in his lifetime. Dmitriy's internal struggle to maintain a positive sense of self solely through the construction of a cosmopolitan social identity and his

lingering desire for some national attachment reveals the enduring importance of national identity to one's ontological security and self-esteem.

### *Social Identity Management*

The perception shared by the volunteers of membership in a low status national group (that is, a group negatively evaluated by at least a generalized "Other" in the world, if not specific individuals with whom they interact) triggered a threat to their social identity. Volunteering was a key strategy for these Russian volunteers to maintain a positive social identity, for both individualistic and group-based reasons. The collective element of their motivations was linked with the extent of in-group alignment and identification with the Russian identity exhibited by the volunteers.

For those with the greatest attachment to RFU and the Russian identity, volunteering specifically with the organization Russians for Ukraine was key to their social identity management. Not only did membership in RFU allow these individuals to bolster their public image from "Russian" to "anti-war Russian volunteer", but it also provided them with a sense of agency from which they could recover dignity they felt had been lost by their government acting in their name against their will. As Aleksandr observed, "I guess this shame is connected with losing agency, that you feel powerless." Volunteering then, was a way to "return this agency"; a long-term RFU volunteer felt that "people come here to be healed, in order to not go crazy with powerlessness and do something" (Egorova & Odissonova, 2023). By taking back this agency, many of these volunteers felt they had "justified" themselves from any stigma related to their Russian identity. Sofia recounted how people often asked why she did not attend protests in

Russia, reflecting that she was grateful to RFU for giving her a way to actually do something to help Ukrainians, since if she were to stay in Russia and protest, she would likely get sent to jail.

Katya also felt that her experience volunteering with RFU had vindicated her connection to Russia. She reflected on how she noticed she would always try to justify herself when she would tell someone she is Russian and asserted she shouldn't have to do this: "I don't have to justify myself because I've already been justified by everything I've done here. All of these difficulties of volunteering that I went through and everyone else went through." Nevertheless, she noted that she continues to try to justify herself: "I still notice that when I'm in a non-volunteer environment, like in Warsaw on vacation, when I get to know people, I have to say, 'I'm a Russian, but I'm a volunteer.' So that they understand." Volunteering with RFU thus provided Katya and these other highly identified volunteers an opportunity to regain a positive public and self-image by nullifying the negative aspects of their collective identity.

Since they were so highly identified with both RFU and the Russian identity, these in-group aligned volunteers exhibited consistent in-group favoritism and engaged primarily in group-based strategies to maintain a positive social identity. This mainly involved instances of social creativity, which does not require any objective change in the group's status but rather efforts to establish positive distinctiveness for one's group through new evaluations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 43). One method for doing this was by changing the dimensions of social comparisons (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 43): instead of evaluating their social identity based on treatment from the Polish security forces and their inclusion in the wider volunteer community, the RFU volunteers considered the Ukrainian refugees to be the most significant "Others" whose evaluations should be internalized, which allowed volunteers to discount the importance of negative experiences with other groups. For example, when Sofia described negative encounters

with both the Polish WOT during registration and a volunteer from the Ukrainian cultural center whom she previously considered a friend but later was ignored by, she dismissed the importance of approval from these individuals by saying both times, "Well, we didn't come here for them anyway." Instead, the perception of overwhelmingly positive experiences with Ukrainian refugees shared by Sofia and the other volunteers reinforced a positive view of themselves and their organization.

Another important comparative dimension for social identity maintenance was the efficacy of the organization in providing genuine help to and proper treatment of Ukrainian refugees. This was achieved primarily through comparisons with individuals or groups they considered to not be doing enough to help Ukrainians, and particularly those who they felt were actively worsening the situation. For example, Sofia described how terribly some of the Polish security forces treated Ukrainian refugees at the beginning of the war: "There were some who even swore at the Ukrainians! Shouted right at the Ukrainian refugees, they were like damn gestapovsty,[6] fascists!" Aleksandr recounted an argument he had with the Red Cross volunteers who were refused to accept a family of Roma refugees on the evacuation train to Hannover: "I said, why don't you want to take these people? Are you racist?" He also felt that the other organizations which ran refugee shelters were becoming "more and more useless with the passing of time" because their criteria for providing aid and admission to the shelter became more and more restricted. By comparing themselves to other volunteer groups they felt were acting deplorably, these in-group aligned volunteers were able to classify these others as the ones who are "not quite human" and deserving of low status (Goffman, 1963, p. 6).

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[6] A Russian term (гестаповцы) referring to members of the Gestapo, the secret police of Nazi Germany.

All four of these volunteers also criticized the other volunteer organizations for not doing enough, noting that these people were even getting paid for their work while the RFU volunteers were not. Viktor remarked that almost all of the other humanitarian organizations besides the small NGOs have staff who are "just wonderfully paid" and yet "work as though they're getting paid to do nothing." He said he would always compare such ineffective volunteers to UNICEF, "because that's really what UNICEF would do—just pass the time in the train station, work away the hours." Sofia told several stories to illustrate the inadequacy of the Red Cross, who she said often "simply refused to help" even when she knew they could. She demonstrated the positive impact this had on her self-image when she took it upon herself to solve problems that she believed the Red Cross should have been responsible for at their own shelter: "I'm just a simple Russian girl on the Ukrainian-Polish border, and we did everything!" Comparisons to other volunteer organizations' work not only positively impacted the volunteers' self-image, but also their collective identity via membership in RFU: Sofia reflected on a meaningful moment when the Polish authorities began to permit Russian volunteers again after a drop in volunteer capacity: "They simply had no choice because there were no more volunteers. And I remember that at some point I realized that now there were only Russian volunteers at the station." This realization reinforced a national lens for Sofia, but in a positive manner which highlighted the positive distinctiveness of her national group: "This was such an interesting moment because we are in Poland, we are on the Ukrainian border, and only Russian volunteers are in the train station."

In seeking to redeem their social identity as Russian volunteers, these in-group aligned individuals were much more likely to engage in the more assertive forms of stigma management strategies detailed by Goffman (1963): disclosure and activism. While their Russian identity was possible to cover, especially in short interactions with Ukrainian refuges, the name of the

organization was considered by these volunteers to be an important form of advocacy to challenge general stigmatization against all Russians. Sofia describes her initial reaction to the name "Russians for Ukraine" as, "Wow, this is bold! To be called like this during a war. I thought, cool. Like it's some kind of challenge." In fact, this "challenge" to the stereotype of "good Russians are dead Russians" continues to be a central motivation for RFU, as the founder explained: "It is important for us to help. And it is important that we are visible. This way, we can show that not all Russians support the war" (Siradzka & Pozdnyakova, 2022). The founder articulated this motivation even more directly in our discussion: "This is, well, a type of national diplomacy—to defend the honor of Russians." Insomuch as these stigma management strategies were intended to raise the actual status of anti-war Russians as a group, these motivations can be considered social competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 44).

The strong in-group favoritism among these volunteers also led them to rely on in-group identification and support to maintain a positive self-image and collective identity. Other RFU volunteers represented "sympathetic others" who know "from their own experience what it is like to have this particular stigma," and therefore can provide "moral support" and "the comfort of feeling at home, at ease, accepted as a person" (Goffman, 1963, p. 20). In fact, the terms "family" and "home" were frequently invoked by these volunteers. For example, Sofia recounted the joy of meeting up with other previous volunteers and the comfort she felt being in their presence again: "This is what I mean by you seem to have found yourself simply another family that accepts you, that loves you and helps you a lot." And in describing her several returns to volunteer with RFU: "Personally, I come there just like to my own home… It's really like my second family." Similarly, Katya expressed the gratitude she feels for finding this "family" which allows her to know that she is "always near people who will understand" her. No matter the

negative experiences faced by these volunteers, they all emphasized the importance of having formed a community with like-minded people who understand and support them through difficult times.

The other volunteers who exhibited out-group alignment, on the other hand, did not rely on in-group identification with RFU as *Russian* volunteers to cope with a perceived stigma, as these individuals distanced themselves from the category "Russian". Rather, they expressed some in-group favoritism toward RFU members as volunteers doing effective work—who happened to be Russian—but similarly expressed these positive evaluations of other volunteers and volunteer groups doing effective work; this affiliation with people "doing the right thing" is what buffered their social identity. Even Sergey, who did express a feeling of belonging with RFU, attributed this to shared values, not to membership in the same national group: "There are no homophobes, there are no racists there. They're, you know, people like me." This positive evaluation of the in-group of RFU was specifically connected to social identity maintenance via identification with moral individuals, rather than stigma management.

This general identification with moral individuals seeking to "help others" is illustrated in the out-group aligned volunteers' descriptions of their time with RFU as part of a larger story of volunteering to assist Ukrainian refugees, including with other organizations that were not nationally-framed.  All three of these individuals had volunteered to support Ukrainian refugees before and/or after their time with RFU and described their motivation for joining RFU (and volunteering in general) as related to personal fulfillment—an individualistic motivation. For example, Dmitriy recounted how he felt unhappy with his job, which had stopped motivating him, and he was relieved when he discovered he could volunteer part-time: "This will potentially solve all my problems with the feeling of self-fulfillment." Irina also described feeling "bored"

after leaving eastern Europe, where she initially volunteered with Ukrainian refugees for the several months of the war, to move to western Europe; this sense of unfulfillment drove her to seek out volunteer opportunities in Poland, leading her to RFU.

These three volunteers emphasized the emotional fulfillment they received from volunteering because it made them feel that they were doing something meaningful and impactful. Dmitriy described the small, energizing interactions of "helping people in a very primitive way" as the reason he returned to volunteer with RFU a second time: "That feeling of helping people, it's a bit of a drug. It's a bit of a mental thing. So I really wanted that." Irina, who had volunteered for a much longer time, explained that she also felt this energizing effect for the first few months, but "after some time, this romantic part fell away, and you don't feel like wow, this is so great—it's just hard work all the time." In fact, she warned that it is easy to get depressed "if you expect lots of emotions from volunteering" and emphasized the importance of finding fulfillment elsewhere. Irina expressed significant worry about the futility of volunteer work, "that people gave lots of effort and it can all be for nothing." She resolved this internal ambivalence toward the value of her efforts—and the "sacrifice" of RFU volunteers, who she felt had experienced much greater hardships than her—through a formulation of a universal moral duty to "do the right," even without the guarantee of seeing the results:

> I think it will still produce some results, but we won't necessarily see them. We won't necessarily enjoy the fruits of it. And some things just have to happen, and you have to play your part in it… you still have to do it because it's the right thing.

Thus, even though she claimed to no longer receive direct emotional fulfillment from volunteering, Irina still indicated the role that volunteering has played in her maintenance of a positive self-image by providing a feeling of existential assurance.

The individualistic motivations of these three volunteers and their disidentification from their "erstwhile in-group" of Russians translated to their reliance on individual mobility for social identity maintenance (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 43). Accordingly, they opted for the more passive forms of stigma management detailed by Goffman (1963): covering and normification. Unlike the volunteers who believed it to be important to disclose their Russian identity as a form of advocacy, these volunteers relied on their nationality not being known most of the time. Sergey said he was worried that refugees would "show hatred toward us because, well, it's our country who attacked them. But most of the time, like 99% of the interactions, people didn't even know my nationality." Irina and Dmitriy described similar experiences, how interactions were usually not long enough for the refugees they were assisting to "discover" their nationality, since most of the refugees were from eastern Ukraine and themselves primarily spoke Russian, and therefore often assumed the volunteers were also Ukrainian.

These volunteers also demonstrated "normification", or the effort to present oneself "as an ordinary person, although not necessarily making a secret" or their stigmatized attribute (Goffman, 1963, p. 31). Dmitriy, who demonstrated the highest degree of out-group alignment, therefore interpreted the organization name "Russians for Ukraine" differently than the in-group aligned volunteers: for him, this name is "a message that it doesn't matter where you come from… there will always be people who are willing to help, and it doesn't matter what language they speak or what passport they have." "We don't come as 'good Russians,'" he said, "just normal people with a good urge to help others." Irina and Sergey expressed more ambivalence toward advocacy as a form of stigma management, indicating some support for the political motivation of RFU to show that, as Irina put it, "Russians can be good people." Nevertheless, both Irina and Sergey distanced themselves from this strategy, noting that this was not their main

motivation for volunteering and mentioning no other support for advocacy to remove stigma from Russians who oppose the war. Instead, they expressed more support for "sympathetic re-education" of others who held negative attitudes toward all Russians, believing the best way to manage this stigma was to show "quietly, and with delicacy, that in spite of appearances… [they are], underneath it all, a fully-human being" (Goffman, 1963, p. 116).

Thus, these out-group aligned volunteers did not personally engage in social creativity or social competition to seek positive distinctiveness for the national group Russians or for RFU as an organization, but rather relied on individual mobility to seek positive personal distinctiveness. Consequently, they drew almost no intergroup comparisons between Russians/RFU and other out-groups. Instead, they made some intragroup comparisons (as illustrated in the previous section on collective identification, primarily by Dmitriy and Irina) as well as comparisons with people who don't volunteer at all, regardless of their nationality. For example, Dmitriy noted that among people he knows, it is "pretty unique" that he volunteered with Ukrainian refugees, and both he and Sergey highlighted that people always tell him that their volunteer work is amazing. In short, the primary role of volunteering in these individual's social identity maintenance was to reinforce their image as a good *person*, rather than a good Russian.

## Conclusion

RFU volunteers all expressed awareness of negative interactions that Russian volunteers from their organization had experienced with a variety of out-groups, including Polish authorities and security forces, Polish and Ukrainian volunteers, and Ukrainian refugees. While not all of them personally experienced these negative interactions—or attributed them to discrimination/prejudice—all of the volunteers whom I interviewed expressed a perception of a negative attitude toward Russian among a generalized "Other". This was also true for the other volunteers from Poland, Germany, and Georgia with whom previous interviews have been published, suggesting that Russian volunteers share a common assessment of low status of the national group with which they are externally identified.

Previous research had yet to examine the effects of a recently-acquired stigma related to a meaningful group on self-image and group identification. Crocker and Major (1989) theorized that individuals newly faced with a stigma would be more vulnerable to low self-esteem and a sense of responsibility, while individuals faced with a tribal stigma would be less likely to feel responsible and experience low self-esteem. This research on Russian volunteers faced with a newly-acquired tribal stigma revealed that feelings of responsibility and strategies for coping with a threat to social identity were correlated with the perspective from which an individual considered the stigma and with which reference group they identified. Group alignment and reference group identification were largely aligned, though not in every case: one volunteer, Sergey, expressed a meaningful sense of belonging with the reference group RFU, though disidentified himself from the national group "Russians" and therefore exhibited out-group alignment. This suggests that the response to stigma largely correlated with identification with the larger category of "Russians" rather than the narrower group of RFU.

Several trends emerged in this research. The volunteers who exhibited in-group alignment were those who had personally encountered discrimination/prejudice and who were more likely to attribute negative experiences faced by other Russians to discrimination/prejudice. On the other hand, the volunteers who demonstrated out-group alignment were those who did not personally encounter instances of prejudice, and they were also less likely to attribute other Russians' negative experiences to discrimination. This link between discrimination attributions and group identification is consistent with previous research (Bourguignon et al., 2006; Branscombe et al., 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989; Eccleston & Major, 2006). The in-group aligned volunteers also expressed the highest degree of identification with the national group "Russians", which they considered to be a natural group, consistent with the findings of Barreto and Ellemers (2003) and Mijić (2014). In contrast, the out-group aligned volunteers were not highly identified with the national group "Russians" but rather considered themselves to be "international" or "cosmopolitan" and, above all, a "normal human."

Identification with the reference group Russians for Ukraine was particularly important for the volunteers highly identified with the Russian identity as it allowed them to reconstruct their collective identity around a more restricted definition of their national group, rather than fully reject an identity that was consistently assigned to them externally. They felt that their membership in RFU justified their connection to Russia as well as restored to them a sense of agency, creating the "psychologically transformative experiences" akin to therapy that Bilić (2012) found anti-war activism can provide (p. 55). For the volunteers demonstrating low identification with the Russian identity, identification with volunteers in general (rather than just RFU) as a reference group allowed them to deconstruct their national identity and construct a cosmopolitan social identity centered around being a "good person" who seeks to help others and

fulfill a moral duty, regardless of their nationality. Because these volunteers identified more with the humanitarian aspect of the work, rather than political protest, they did not portray their experience to be therapeutic as the in-group aligned volunteers did. Rather, they consistently described the experience to be energizing and uplifting, specifically because of the "wonderful people" they interacted with.

RFU's mission to redeem the category "Russians" was deeply important to the in-group aligned volunteers, and accordingly, they engaged in the more assertive forms of stigma management—disclosure and activism—to show that not all Russians support the war. They strongly identified with the name of the organization, which they felt was crucial to their efforts to remove the stigma from their "Russianness". In contrast, the out-group aligned volunteers did not seek to remove the stigma from their national group, but rather rejected this category as a meaningful identity marker altogether. Consequently, they opted for the more passive forms of stigma management, primarily covering and normification.

The highly identified volunteers drew on group-based strategies to maintain a positive social identity, which they achieved through selective valuing of social comparisons and group attributes, consistent with previous research (Crocker & Major, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tesser, 2000; Valenta, 2009). They exhibited positive distortions of information (a strategy identified by Crocker et. al., 1993) by emphasizing positive interactions with Ukrainian refugees, whom they considered to be the most important "Others", and discounting negative evaluations from Polish security forces and Polish and Ukrainian volunteers, whom they considered to be the "not quite human" ones. The low identifying volunteers, meanwhile, relied on individualistic strategies of social identity maintenance and made almost no intergroup comparisons, focusing instead on personal distinctiveness. Positive distortions of information were also demonstrated

by these volunteers, who considered the "overwhelmingly positive" interactions with Ukrainian refugees to be the distinguishing aspect of their experience.

Value expression/self-affirmation was an important identity maintenance mechanism for all of the volunteers, as shown by previous studies to act as a buffer for self-esteem (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Tesser, 2000). In the case of highly identified volunteers, the value expression was group-based in relation to their "Russianness", and it was important to them that they were not only Russians for Ukraine, but also Russians for a free democratic Russia. For the disidentifying volunteers, values were conceptualized in terms of universal principles of moral duty. Liberal, anti-discriminatory political and social values were central to their self-image.

In sum, this research has demonstrated that individuals newly faced with a tribal stigma can draw on a range of social identity maintenance strategies. Some may seek in-group support, causing them to identify more closely with the stigma category. Protest/activism against the "evils" of the larger group provides these individuals an opportunity to reconstruct their national identity in a positive light via selective identification with like-minded members of the group. Others may seek to disidentify themselves entirely from the stigma category, and the deconstruction of their national identity is correlated with a construction of a cosmopolitan social identity. However, even these individuals demonstrated ambivalence toward their national identity and a lingering desire to belong to a national group which they could be proud of. The prevalence of the former strategy of reconstructing collective identity among the cases examined in this research—considered in tandem with the ambivalence toward national identity demonstrated by individuals seeking to deconstruct this aspect of their social identity—reveals the enduring importance of nationality/citizenship to one's identity and ontological security.

Since this research relied on a qualitative examination of the impact of a newly acquired tribal stigma on self-image, I was not able to assess effects on self-esteem—as usually measured in quantitative studies in this field—but rather assumed that conceptualizations of self-image and collective identification were strategies of self-esteem maintenance. Nevertheless, this research could be supplemented by quantitative methods to assess whether high or low identification with the national group "Russians" buffered the negative impact of group devaluation on the individuals' self-esteem more effectively—an effect that remains debated within the literature. Additionally, I was only able to identify general patterns among volunteers who exhibited similar types of reactions to societal devaluation, but my methodology did not allow me to draw any causal effects. It would therefore be beneficial to investigate whether, for example, higher identification with the national group "Russians" increased the frequency of discrimination attributions, or if perceived discrimination was the causal factor in increased group identification.

The RFU volunteers who were not Russian citizens were considered outside of the scope of this research, but it would be incredibly interesting to examine perceptions and internalization of stigma among these individuals and how they relate to "Russianness". This avenue of research would also enhance the understanding of whether the perceived stigma against Russians is conceptualized in ethnic or national terms. Finally, there were numerous individuals among the 320 RFU volunteers who had more than one citizenship, most often Israeli citizenship. A worthwhile extension of this research would be an exploration of how membership in a devalued national group impacts attitudes toward other citizenships/nationalities, particularly if the other citizenship is perceived as recently stigmatized as well.

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