

## Spiritually ours, factually yours: Karelia and Russia in Finnish public consciousness

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# Spiritually Ours, Factually Yours: Karelia and Russia in Finnish Public Consciousness

JUSSI P. LAINE and MARTIN VAN DER VELDE

## **Abstract**

Based on an analysis of the leading Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, this paper explores Finnish attitudes towards and understandings of Russia. It pays special attention to the so-called Karelia Question and the way it has shaped public discussion in Finland. The article seeks to investigate human signifying practices in the region's specific social and cultural circumstances and explains meaning-making as a social practice. It evaluates how public opinion, as expressed in the letters page of the newspaper, has evolved and been affected by the broader changes that have occurred at the border. There are clear changes over time, both in a quantitative and qualitative sense. This may be summarised as representing a trend of general fading into history, but also as a more cyclical effect and as the interplay between bilateral relations and broader geopolitical changes.

*Karelia Question; Public opinion; Newspaper; Finland; Russia; Social semiotics*

## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Spiritually Ours, Factually Yours: Karelien und Russland im finnischen öffentlichen Bewusstsein**

Diese Veröffentlichung erforscht auf der Grundlage einer Untersuchung der führenden finnischen Tageszeitung *Helsingin Sanomat* die Einstellungen und das Verständnis der Finnen zu Russland. Sie beschäftigt sich besonders mit der sogenannten Karelien-Frage und die Art und Weise, wie diese die öffentliche Diskussion in Finnland geprägt hat. Der Artikel versucht, meinungsbildende Verhaltensweisen in den spezifischen sozialen und kulturellen Verhältnissen zu untersuchen und erläutert die Meinungsbildung als gesellschaftliches Verhalten. Er bewertet, wie sich die öffentliche Meinung, wie sie sich auf der Leserbriefseite der Zeitung ausdrückt, entwickelt hat und von den größeren Veränderungen beeinflusst worden ist, die an der Grenze stattgefunden haben. Es gibt im Laufe der Zeit eindeutige Veränderungen sowohl in quantitativem als auch qualitativem Sinn. Dies lässt sich als Darstellung eines Trends zum allgemeinen Verschwinden in der Geschichte zusammenfassen, aber auch als periodisch auftretender Effekt und als Zusammenspiel zwischen bilateralen Beziehungen und allgemeineren geopolitischer Veränderungen.

*Karelien-Frage; öffentliche Meinung; Tageszeitung; Finnland; Russland; Sozialsemiotik*

## Introduction

The Karelia Question refers to a dispute in Finland over whether Finland should attempt to regain sovereignty over the territories that it was forced to cede to the Soviet Union after the Continuation War,<sup>1</sup> fought during the Second World War. Officially, there is no question, as both governments agree that no open territorial dispute exists between the countries; however, the reacquisition of ceded territories and a potential adjustment of the borderline remain a topic that continues to arouse strong feelings in Finnish public debate. The Russian leadership has indicated on several occasions that it has no intention of participating in discussions concerning the matter, while Finland's official stance is that the borders may be changed through peaceful negotiation, but that there is no need to open talks, as Russia has shown no intention of discussing this (Fig. 1).

Although the case of Karelia may be seen in retrospect as a positive case of a mutual rediscovery and exploitation of historical commonalities, common landscapes, and regional traditions (SCOTT 2013, p. 88), it has not been and is not immune to the wider fluctuations of Finnish/EU–Russian relations. This paper goes behind the mere historical and international relations perspectives and assumes a more semiotic angle on opinion pieces published in the Finnish national newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), analysing how the argumentation behind the Karelia Question has evolved from 1990 to 2015 and how the image of Karelia has been formed. It argues that while the Finnish relation with Russia have become clearly less loaded than what they were earlier with the Soviet Union, they still cannot be reduced to mere forms of pragmatism, interdependencies or the simple equations between supply and demand, but there are also subtler discursive and symbolic forces at play (cf. PAASI 1996; LAINE 2015).



Fig. 1: Karelia and the Finnish-Russian borderland

During the study period significant changes have occurred at the Finnish-Russian interface. In 1990 the world was still divided into two camps and the 1948 Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between Finland and the Soviet Union was in effect. However, in the following year the Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War came to an end, and Finland was quick to apply for European Union (EU) membership. When Finland then joined in 1995, previously bilateral border issues were suddenly framed as part of broader EU-Russia relations. All these shifts are very clearly reflected in public opinion as expressed in the newspaper.

This article investigates the development of the debate in these quite specific social and cultural circumstances and aims for a better understanding of the development of public opinion vis-à-vis broader geopolitical changes and international relations. We understand

meaning-making as a social practice bound to the context in which it occurs, whereby tying our analysis on a historical newspaper record helps us to situate the debate in the context it originally took place in, diminishing thus the risk of hindsight bias. Following this introduction we will describe the role Karelia plays in Finnish-Russian relations, and newspapers' function as a platform for public debate. Building on the material collected from *Helsingin Sanomat*, the next chapter will describe the development of the Karelia Question and shed light on the role the newspaper has played in this process. The collected material is discussed by connecting the changes in the foci of the debate with the broader changes that have occurred at the border. The second empirical section, before the conclusions, uses readers' contributions to analyse the development of public opinion concerning the

<sup>1</sup> The Continuation War involved hostilities between Finland and the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1944. It began shortly after the end of the Winter War, during which the Soviet Union had attempted to invade Finland.

Karelia Question. The task here is to look beyond the specific texts to the systems of functional distinction operating within them and to identify the underlying conventions and significant differences.

### Karelia in Transition

Finland's post-Second World War relationship with the Soviet Union, and more recently with Russia, has been both close and distant – at times concurrently (LAINE 2015). It has been shaped by a common history, Cold War realities, pragmatism, interdependencies, and the lessons learned from devastating armed conflicts. A particularly long lasting dispute has concerned the contested territory of Karelia, a region that extends across the border between Finland and Russia. In its historical development Karelia may be understood as a zone of transition, politico-religious division and, most recently, of a Finnish–Russian rapprochement and re-evaluation of common experience (SCOTT 2013, p. 88).

The two countries in question view the region somewhat differently. For Finland – or for some Finns, to be more precise – Karelia plays an important role as a cradle of the nation, and even as a holy territory, and hence as central to any understanding of the essence of Finnishness (cf. BROWNING & JOENNIEMI 2014, p. 1). For Russians Karelia has a clearly less emotional place. Instead, Russia has traditionally drawn a close link between territory and security that has seen control of Karelia as very important for imperial thinking, geostrategic reasoning, and territorial defence (HIRSCH 2005; KANGASPURO 2000; LIIKANEN 1999; cf. LAINE 2002).

Although Finland gained independence in 1917, there was a general dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of congruence between Finland's national and territorial borders (BROWNING & JOENNIEMI 2014, p. 13). Geographers claimed that the 1918 borders were “artificial” and identified – in the spirit of the times – the nation's expanded “natural” borders as encompassing Karelian territory (PAASI 1996, pp. 182–183). These ideas, supported by

mounting Karelianism,<sup>2</sup> led Finland to attempt to undo its post-Winter War concessions to the Soviet Union regarding Karelia and to launch an offensive deep into Soviet territory to fulfil the national mission and fight for Finland's perceived *Lebensraum*; i.e. to reincorporate Karelia into Finland. Ultimately, however, Finland lost the war – and most of Karelia, which became subsequently systematically Sovietised.

While the region has seen many wars and has often been subject to military incursions, after the Second World War Karelia's role as a source of tension in Finnish-Soviet/Russian relations lessened (BROWNING & JOENNIEMI 2014, p. 2). Nevertheless, the debate on the potential return of ceded territories has remained an important matter of public debate, and has on occasion been endorsed at the highest levels. During the Cold War Finland developed what was widely perceived as a mutually beneficial, if in many ways lopsided and forced, relationship with its former enemy, the Soviet Union. Politically, the USSR's proximate military power resulted in a preconditioned prudence to avoid causing Moscow offence, which was manifested in conscious and unconscious self-censorship and excessively responsible journalism. Any open debate regarding Karelia was largely suppressed by the era's *realpolitik*-al slant, which to an extent only further helped to mythologise the position of Karelia in Finnish nationalist narratives. The dissolution of the Soviet Union freed public debate, which, in conjunction with its successor's subsequent flexibility, brought the Karelia Question back to the table and allowed a more direct formulation of opinions in public.

The more open border also allowed Finns to visit the areas that had been lost. However, what they discovered was not a “Promised Land”; the overriding

impression for many was of a land that suffered from economic stagnation, backwardness, and that had been largely Russified (BROWNING & JOENNIEMI 2014, p. 22). This was perhaps most famously captured by Gustav Häggglund, a member of the Finnish military leadership, in his 1992 statement that for serious reasons of national defence Finland would not wish to have Karelia returned “even if it was offered on a golden plate”<sup>3</sup> – a statement whose significance was underlined by the fact that General Häggglund himself had been born in Vyborg, a city ceded to the Soviet Union in the Second World War. It became increasingly clear that there was no motivation amongst the Finnish political leadership to reopen the question, a reflection of the realisation that reigniting a territorial dispute with Russia would only undermine Finland's bid for EU membership (MEDVEDEV 1998; JOENNIEMI 1998).

Karelia is thus not only emblematic of the post-Cold War political change in Europe but also affords an example of how a reframing of historical experiences and relationships has served to develop a new sense of cross-border “neighbourliness” (BELOKUROVA 2010). Karelian issues are often coloured by historical memory and the various aspects of national symbolisms (SCOTT 2013, p. 81). The cultural landscape thus has a constitutive element in the construction of Karelian history, as has become evident in the alternating, and often conflicting, projects of nation-building – or “nationalisation” (PAASI & RAIVO 1998; RAIVO 2004; HEIKKINEN & LIIKANEN 2008). A major Karelian narrative has been that of its Finnish “essence” and its depiction as a liminal space (SHIELDS 1991), an indeterminate but highly symbolic region charged with meaning for the formation of the Finnish national identity and with powerful nostalgic significance (HÄYRYNEN 2008; FINGERROOS 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Karelianism began as a cultural phenomenon involving writers, painters, poets, and sculptors curious about the Karelian heritage and landscape. It portrayed Karelia as a refuge for the authentic essence of „Finnishness”. Later, as WWII approached, these ideas fuelled an irredentist movement aspiring to create a Greater Finland, a single state encompassing many, if not all, Finnic peoples.

<sup>3</sup> *Dagens Nyheter*, 6 March 1992.

## Newspapers as a Vent for Public Opinion

History often seems clear because it is written after the event. Newspapers, however, provide us with a valuable historical record which daily details everyday life in a text's original context (LAINE 2015). Newspapers are products of their culture, which means that culture-specific values are almost unavoidably encoded in their text (REAH 1998; FOWLER 1991). Language therefore becomes "loaded"; it carries with it more or less obvious connotations that render the message either limited or biased. A newspaper's slant is the result of a screening process; the reader of a newspaper is the recipient of *selected* information (RICHARDSON 2007). What is published is not only a reflection of events' importance, but it also reveals a complex and artificial set of criteria for selection (FOWLER 1991, p. 2). The gate-keeping function of editors especially affects the contents of the letters page, used in the second empirical section of this analysis, and thus the composition of voices in the public debate (WAHL-JORGENSEN 2001, p. 304; cf. GREY & BROWN 1970; RENFRO 1979). When such material is used in analysis, it is important to keep in mind that in choosing what to publish editors tend to prefer emotionally charged, personal stories, and look for an aesthetic authenticity that shows the writer's words "come from the heart", forging emotional bonds between readers and writers (Ibid.).

In many cases the letters page forms one of the most popular, and one of the most important, elements of a newspaper; to a large extent the public is often more interested in the views of other readers than in those of the professionals (ROMANOV et al. 1969). The letters page is also widely celebrated as one of the few arenas for ordinary citizens to engage in public discussion, making it a key institution of the public sphere. Rather than being an aggregate of individual opinions, HABERMAS (1997, p. 59) suggests, public opinion is something people arrive at together through communicative public action – public discussion and debate. The

letters page as a forum is influenced by an editorial agenda; instead of serving as a representative barometer of public opinion, it provides a "hazy reflection of public opinion" (GREY & BROWN 1970, p. 450). Letter writers tend to be demographically and politically unrepresentative of the general public (SIGELMAN & WALKOSZ 1992, p. 944) – typically middle-aged or older, male, well educated, well employed, and conservative (SINGLETERY & COWLING 1979, p. 165). However, as we are especially interested in the *development* of public opinion, this bias presents no problems if it remains stable over the years of our analysis.<sup>4</sup>

The material used for this research has been collected from *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), which is the largest subscription newspaper in Finland. The paper was founded as *Päivälehti* in 1889, when Finland was a Grand Duchy under the Tsar of Russia, to serve as an organ of the Young Finnish Party. As the paper opposed Russification and advocated greater Finnish freedom and even full independence, it was often forced to suspend publication. During its history HS has established itself as a significant player in Finnish society. The paper has been politically independent and non-aligned since the 1930s. The opinion page was published for the first time on 30 November 1977. The proportion of letters published to those received has fluctuated over the years. The record was set in 2010, when there were more than 24,000 letters to the editor (Fig. 2). On average the recent publication/acceptance rate has been around 25 per cent. Although the large quantity of letters makes the selection process difficult, the editors of the HS opinion pages maintain that their main purpose remains to "reflect the entire spectrum of the Finnish opinion climate as closely as possible" (HS 10. 1. 1993; also 31. 12. 2010).

In the following, prior to proceeding to the analysis of the tone and orientation

<sup>4</sup> This analysis of public opinion confines itself to letters to the editor. We are aware of the importance of social media, but have chosen not to include this, mainly because our analysis starts in the early 90s of the previous century, when social media as we now know it did not really exist (see: BOYD & ELLISON 2008).

of the public opinion proper, the collected empirical material consisting of the letters to the editor (indicated as 'L'), but also editorials (E) and op-eds (OE) in cases where they were clearly linked with the discussion taking place in the letters, is elucidated as to demonstrate how the debate on Karelia has evolved and been impacted by broader national and regional developments as well as changes in prominent geopolitical context since the early 1990s. A total of 5,089 opinion articles that discussed the Finnish-Russian border or relations more in general were collected from the years 1990–2015, yet only the articles focusing on Karelia were included in this analysis. The aim here is to situate what has been discussed in the context in which it has occurred in order to investigate the discursive field of signifying practices, explain meaning-making as a social practice and describe the potential changes in the foci of the debates by interlinking them with the broader changes that have occurred at the border.

## The Karelia Question in/and Helsingin Sanomat

Two significant external events during the study period stand out: the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991 and Finland's accession to the EU in early 1995. Both allowed new interpretations of Finland's position, but also provided a new framework for the Karelia Question. By 1990 the situation in the Soviet Union had deteriorated to the point that debates in Finland about the future of Finno-Soviet relations had begun to intensify. Although the Finns were now more confident about diverging from official policy as compared with previous decades, in practice official foreign policy and public opinion continued to largely coincide. Polls suggested that 80 per cent of Finns believed that the 1948 Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance had been necessary (HS 23. 12. 1990), and that no fewer than 75 percent believed that the treaty would remain in force until 2000. It was therefore no surprise that nearly 70 percent of Finns also agreed with the official government position that the

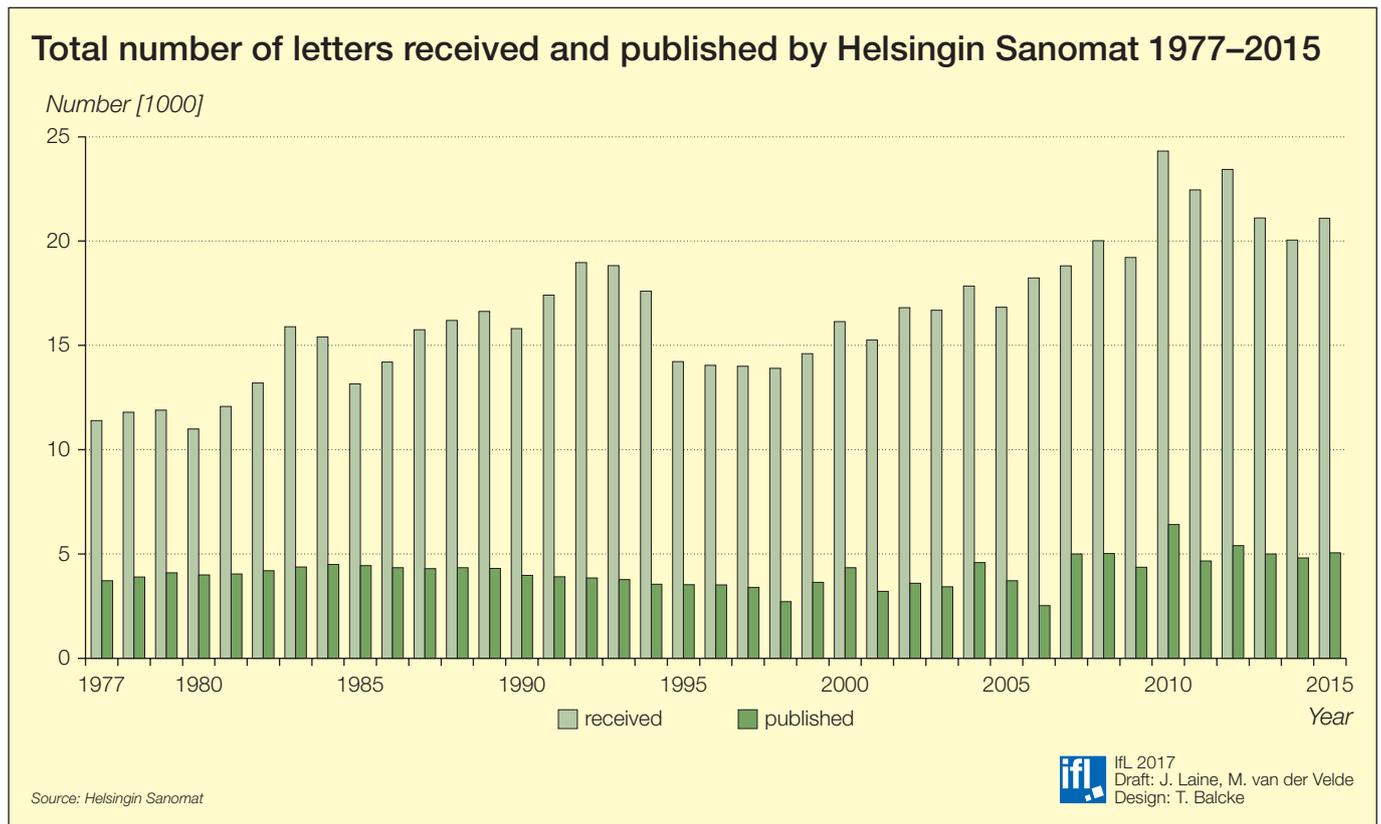


Fig. 2: Total number of letters received and published by Helsingin Sanomat, 1977–2015

Karelia Question had been settled and it was better not to act on the matter (HS L 10. 12. 1990).

While it was understood that the complete return of Karelia was an unrealistic goal, it was suggested that when the time was ripe Finns should seize the opportunity and seek to “create a normal neighbourhood through cooperation across the eastern border” for this was “certainly what the masses wish” (HS L 9. 10. 1991). Only one in four wished the government to take the initiative to restore Karelia. However, when President Koivisto (in office between 1982 and 1994) dismissed the hopes of those who wanted Karelia returned by reminding them that Finland had lost it in two wars (HS L 23. 9. 1991), discussion about the territory became critical of the Finnish political elite. Continuing to live by the former and introverted political formulas of “sneaking around and lacking initiative” (HS L 9. 10. 1991) was deemed to help neither Finland nor its neighbour. It was rather suggested that the new situation required

both an open mind and willingness to act quickly now “that mending the old communist era errors” was at its peak in the Soviet Union and all the problems had been exposed for what they were (HS L 9. 10. 1991).

The collapse of the Soviet Union was immediately seen as providing the longed for opportunity to make a move on the Karelia Question. The ongoing preparation of a new treaty to be signed with what was now Russia was also seen as crucial for Karelia’s future:

*“It is now the eleventh hour if the matter of Karelia, and in particular the new Russia agreement, is to be brought to a critical parliamentary reading. If signed, the agreement will seal the Karelia Question indefinitely, because this time the agreement will be signed of our own free will.” (HS L 26. 1. 1992)*

It was directly suggested that Karelia should be returned to Finland because it had been “annexed by violence” through

“barbarian injustice” and because the invasion had also been considered illegal by the League of Nations (HS L 2. 6. 1992). In addition to enabling a fresh start for relations, the return of Karelia, it was suggested, “would lift the people out of their spiritual recession” (HS L 28. 6. 1992) and restore “our spiritual, and perhaps eventually even financial, capital” (HS L 13. 10. 1993). Others acquiesced to the official view that the Finns could not “require the return of Karelia” as it had once been “given away” (HS L 7. 1. 1992). However, no one could dispute that the Finns had a “moral right to hope for it” (Ibid.).

While in the ideal case scenario the Finnish-Russian border would “shrink to be like a European border as is the practice, for example, between the Nordic countries or within the EU”, for the moment there were no signs that this goal could ever be realised (HS L 29. 6. 1992). Russian President Yeltsin’s (1991–1999) proposal to make the border of ceded Karelia “transparent” was greeted positively, because it was seen as offering a potential

basis for solving the Karelia Question (HS L 22. 7. 1992). The proposal suggested that Karelia would continue to belong to Russia, but that a transparent border would allow closer interaction. In Finland the proposal was interpreted as meaning the facilitation of border crossings and even visa-free travel, the latter of which was rejected outright by the Finnish President Koivisto (HS L 22. 7. 1992).

However, the debate about Karelia soon receded as the focus of the political elite had already shifted westward. A new co-operation treaty was now signed with Russia, replacing the 1948 Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance treaty and the special relations it had framed. Only a few weeks later Finland applied for membership of the EU. Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen's (1995–2003) "inadvertently cynical" announcement that Finland had no interest in taking back the ceded areas, even if they were offered, because Finland could not afford it, was taken as an "unfortunate example of our ever-secularising world" (HS L 27. 8. 1995). The debate focused less on the EU *per se*, and more on the implications of EU membership for the Finnish-Russian relationship. The threatening Soviet Union had become an unpredictable Russia, and few knew what to expect.

The Russian 1998 financial crisis fuelled the Karelia debate yet again. The Finnish media was accused of being cowardly and "the last fortress of Finlandisation"<sup>5</sup> for not taking an active part and position in the debate. This prompted the HS editorial reporter Erkki Pennanen finally to address the issue by arguing that to jump aboard the revanchist spirit, which had strengthened in some circles as a response to Russia's perceived weakness arising from its worsening financial situation, would lead to "daydream journalism" and a Karelia debate which might be characterised as being about "who's

afraid of the big bad wolf?". The editorial went on to question the rectitude and exceptionality of the basic premises of the debate and to suggest that EU-Europe, the new frame of reference for Finland, was the wrong place for such revanchism (HS E 20. 1. 1998).

If the aim of the editorial had been to de-escalate the debate, it failed terribly. It sparked an intense dispute not just about the reasons for and against the return of Karelia to Finland, but also about how the topic should be discussed. Mr. Pennanen was accused of siding with Russia; his writing was attacked for using "variants of expressions used by Russians" and for distinguishing the Karelians from the Finns "in an orthodox Russian manner" (HS L 29. 1. 1998). After all, the Karelia Question "should be a matter for Finns and not just Karelians" (HS L 2. 6. 1999). It was argued that Mr. Pennanen and hence *Helsingin Sanomat* and the Russians were bound together in that they both saw the restoration of Karelia as an issue not for the entire Finnish people, but only for the Karelians, which facilitated the issue's trivialisation. However, agreement on the issue was hardly helped when a proponent of the return of Karelia referred to those "who think they are highly intelligent when they refuse to countenance the Karelia's return" as "non-people" (HS L 5. 7. 1998).

The premise of Mr. Pennanen's reference to a wider European framework was criticised because not everyone comprehended "[w]hy the eastern border of Finland, in particular, should be sanctified and eternal, while the 'European order' is in this respect the result of an agreement between those [Hitler and Stalin] who carried out two massacres in 1939" (HS L 1. 2. 1998). The idea that the "image of Finland [was] as a manager of others' things all around the world" to be "polished" at the same time as "we have our own chickens waiting to be plucked" (HS L 2. 6. 1999) was thus deemed incoherent and misguided. Others felt that the fact that Finns now lived in an EU-Europe did not mean an end to the hopes for Karelia's restoration, but presented a new

opportunity because the borders could now "be restored under bilateral peace agreements" (HS L 9. 7. 1998).

For the most part public debate about Karelia remained focused on whether the ceded areas should be returned to Finland. Simply put, Finland was deemed to have "a right to demand the return of Karelia" (HS L 28. 7. 1998) as it had been annexed illegally by Stalin (e. g. HS L 31. 7. 1998, 21. 11. 1998, 28. 11. 1998) and because it rightly "belongs to us" (HS L 30. 7. 1998) and would have to be "saved from them [the current Russian residents of the area]" (HS L 2. 6. 1999). The matter was thus a "question of basic rights" (HS 26. 8. 1998) and about nullifying the "aggressor's rewards" (HS L 3. 2. 1998). Returning the divested areas would not only be "beneficial for Finland over time", but also of "great political and economic benefit to Russia" (HS L 30. 8. 1998), because both countries would benefit from a more prosperous Karelia.

Those against the return of Karelia wrote more descriptively, striking a pessimistic note and depicting Karelia as undesirable, usually because of its large non-Finnish population and the costs its return to Finland would entail. While those who advocated the return of Karelia were more active in writing to the paper, the majority of the Finnish population was however said to "stand behind the current border both geopolitically and otherwise" (HS L 1. 8. 1998) and to concur with the idea that "the future [of Finland] does not need Karelia" (HS L 29. 8. 1998).

At the beginning of the new millennium, with Vladimir Putin (2000–2008; 2012-present) in power in Russia, a "new era of intense interaction" began in Finnish-Russian relations (HS E 2. 3. 2002). Relations were seen to be grounded in, and enabled by, Finland's strengthened status as an EU member, Mr. Putin's earlier connections to Finland, and the new possibilities opened by his reform policies. However, euphoria about Putin quickly evaporated. Whereas events in Russia had been central to the international news-flow in the previous 15 years, Russia was suddenly now almost

5 Finlandisation, a term coined in 1961 by German political scientist Richard Löwenthal, can be defined as a process by which a powerful country strongly influences the policies of a smaller neighbouring country, while allowing it to keep its independence and its own political system. It originally refers to the influence of the Soviet Union on Finland's policies during the Cold War.

forgotten. “Nothing of special interest” took place in Russia, the country’s influence was judged to have diminished in international politics, and few seemed to know what was happening there (HS OE 16. 4. 2002). No news was not, however, simply good news from either Russia’s or its Western partners’ perspective.

Those longing for the return of the ceded territories, it was suggested, were a marginal phenomenon. Instead, the miserable state of Karelia was threatening to “poison” Finns’ attitude towards Russia in a completely different way. The terrifying image of the parlous situation in Karelia that had come to light during the recent severe frost, the editorial column (HS E 9. 2. 2003) suggested, served unmistakably to corroborate the realistic-pessimistic view of the older generation of Finns.

The blunter debate about Karelia was, however, a clear sign of more open conditions and a less restricted use of language. Nevertheless, although Karelia was discussed more openly and many visits there were made, a growing majority of Finns rejected the idea of its return. An HS Gallup poll revealed that nearly two-thirds of Finns saw the return of Karelia as undesirable, a third saw it as completely undesirable, whereas only one in ten saw it as desirable. These figures were taken to reflect Finnish pragmatism rather than sentiment. No one had forgotten that “the areas were unjustly seized from Finland” (HS E 22. 8. 2005), but there was neither a place nor a politically fertile spiritual ground for a mood for revenge in contemporary Europe, and especially not in Finland. Accordingly, the Finnish Karelian League, which had once directly advocated the return of Karelia, now focused its work on the preservation of the history, traditions, and culture of the Karelia that had been lost. However, in an interview with HS the following day the chairman of the Finnish Karelian League not only claimed that “Karelianism is alive and well, even if the state border is at its present location”, but insisted that “[a]fter all, spiritually we own Karelia, even if it is not part of the Finnish state” (HS 23. 8. 2005).

The fact that the HS editorial board yet again took a position on the Karelia Question (HS E 27. 6. 2006) only fuelled the debate further. It argued that speculation about the recovery of the area lost in the wars was unrealistic hankering. It was suggested that while it was easy to understand the longing for Karelia, the reality was that Finland had accepted the existing border in international agreements. Changing it by voluntary arrangement seemed no more likely than it ever had. The editorial received its anticipated response. It was accused of being mistaken in several matters, and it was averred that there was no denying that ceded Karelia was an essential part of Finnish national history (HS L 21. 7. 2006). While some felt the Finnish leadership’s passivity had been wise because “foreign policy should not be made according to nostalgic emotional criteria, but based on realistic cool calculations of benefits” (HS L 28. 7. 2006; cf. HS L 11. 8. 2006) and that the return of Karelia today was indeed unrealistic (HS L 21. 8. 2006), others argued that its return would benefit both Finland and Russia (HS L 30. 7. 2006).

In the second half of the 2000s the debate became increasingly realistic. The romantic image of lost Karelia was described as “skewed and imaginary” (HS OE 4. 8. 2009). It was evident that several people still had a personal, national, or ideological bond with the border region, but this bond was superficial:

*“A zeal for Karelianism springs into life in most cases only during the summer. It belongs to the summer in the same way as the Midsummer festival, flies, and barbecue. During the winter Karelia is not wanted – Russian Karelia does not exist in the winter for the Finns.” (HS OE 4. 8. 2009)*

The article went on to fan the flames by asserting that contemporary tourism was politically framed: Russian Karelia was made more Finnish by being “over there”. It also touched on a sacred topic by suggesting that in addition to the human tragedy, the yearning for lost Karelia could be explained as an attempt to

spread a map of political memory around Karelia as well as by the unfortunate trauma the failed military operation had caused. The bitterness of loss, it argued, had been reproduced ever since in memoirs and reminiscences.

The article touched a nerve among many. As it acknowledged before responses began to come in, even today it was “unacceptable to discuss deficiencies, such as financial hardship, the civil war, the ill treatment of Russians, or the human inequality of the lost societies at the same time as memories of Karelia” (HS OE 4. 8. 2009). The debate would, however, be normalised, because with the passage of time even those who had had to leave their homes and who saw such questions as taboo would be seen from a less emotional and more realistic perspective. The image of modern Karelia portrayed by the researchers, for all its realism, was incompatible with the “politically oriented or emotional love for Karelia”. The integration of the two lenses of analysis, however, was expected to make contemporary travel across the border more enriching than it had been when it was to “meander in the ruins of the Finnish houses in the border area” (Ibid.).

As might have been expected, many Karelians and their descendants struggled to recognise themselves in this somewhat simplistic and disparaging generalisation presented as an academic perspective. A representative of the Finnish Karelian League wrote (HS L 7. 8. 2009) to reclaim the Karelians’ right to reminisce by asserting that they were not seeking traces of their Finnishness, but of themselves, their families, and their ancestry. They had lived in Karelia for hundreds of years, and their search was for traces of their Karelian culture. Such heritage tourism was thus a key part of Karelian identity, which had traditionally been strongly place-specific and geographically bound, and it also gave the young descendants of Karelian immigrants “many meanings, social capital, and in particular a great sense of solidarity” (Ibid.). This cross-border travel could also be seen as the first form of cross-border interaction,

because many had tried to help the elderly and families with children in Karelia in various ways when they visited. The editorial staff of HS restricted themselves to replying that a better knowledge of the Swedish and Finnish history of former Finnish Karelia would undoubtedly be beneficial for the current population and an obvious goal for a civilised country. This, in turn, would create a more solid base for relations between Russia and Finland, as well as between Russians and Finns, which should gradually arrive at a more natural and more mature phase (HS E 11. 11. 2009).

Whereas analysis of newspaper material suggests that the image of Russia had normalised and become more honest by 2010, developments since have again reversed this trend and media coverage has again strongly reinforced the perception of Russia as the problematic other. Broader geopolitical concerns have clearly overshadowed the debate on Karelia, reflected in the decreasing number of letters focusing on it (Fig. 3). The

Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a tipping point heralding an unexpected change in both official and public rhetoric. Debate about Karelia was practically non-existent, although some letters discussed the potential impact of the Ukraine crisis on Finland and its border with Russia. It was only in 2015 that the increased influx of refugees refuelled the discussion about Karelia, as many drew parallels between the contemporary situation and the evacuation of Finnish Karelians and the ceding of Karelia after the 1940 Moscow Peace Treaty that had ended the Winter War.

### The Karelia Question in Public Opinion

The second empirical analysis concerns public opinion as it appears in the letters to the editor between 1990 and 2015. An initial simple word search for Karelia yielded 525 relevant letters for analysis out of 161,698 published during this period. Given that on average only a quarter of letters make it to the printed version of

the newspaper, the total number of letters on this topic sent to the editor is of course much higher. For example, during a two-month period from mid-September to mid-November 1991, no fewer than 225 letters about the Karelia Question were sent to the editor, but only 53 of these (24 per cent) were published.

### Karelia Question

As we are especially interested in the Karelia Question, the selected letters were first scrutinised to see if the Question was addressed. This was the case in a little over half the contributions (285). The remainder focused on other aspects of Karelia, but made no specific reference to the actual question. The overall picture is one of a generally declining interest in Karelia in readers' contributions, and of a fluctuating division over the years between those that address the question and those that discuss Karelia in a more general sense, which is often sparked by a particular event or an individual article (Fig. 3). Despite the possible influence

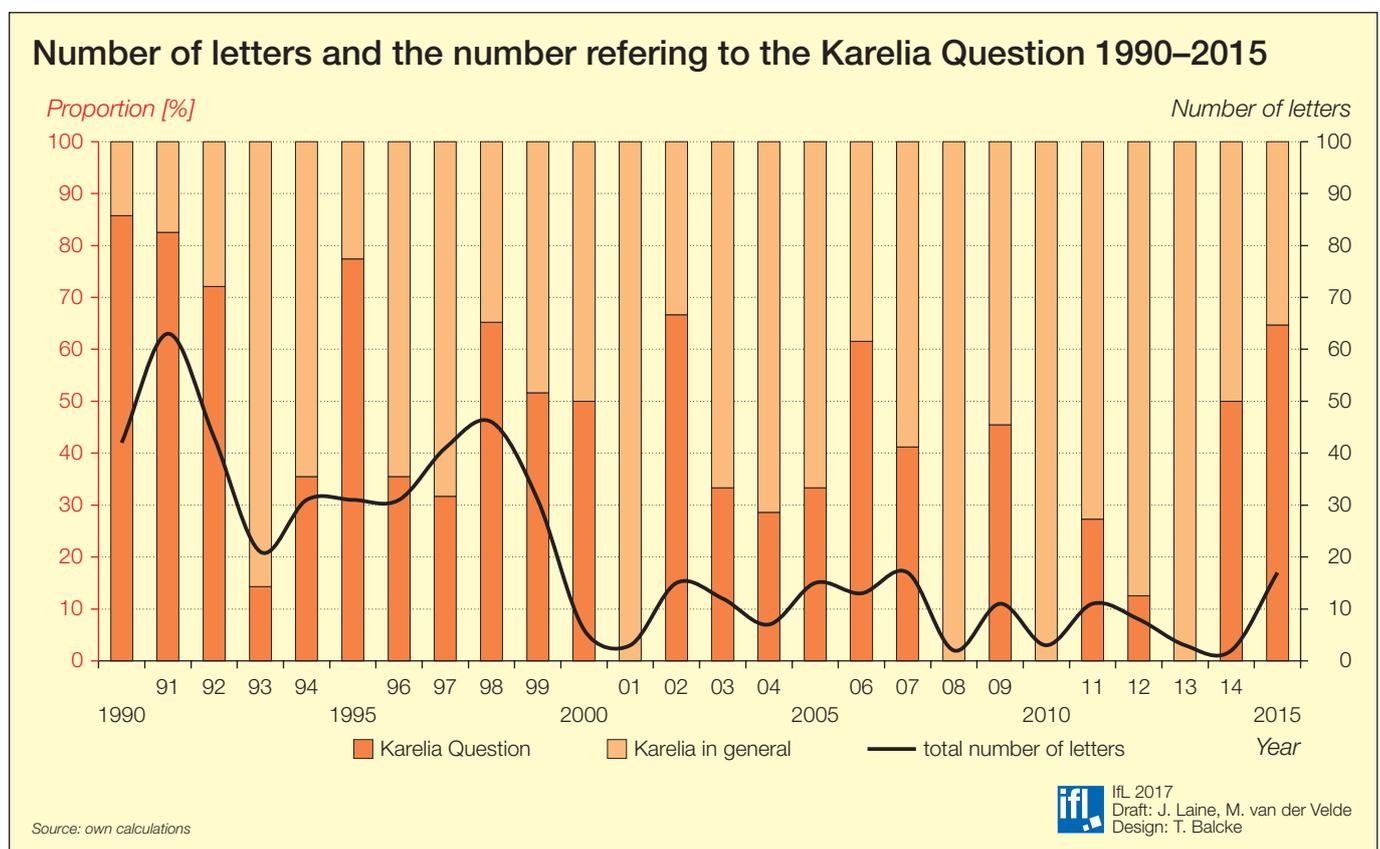


Fig. 3: Number of letters and the number referring to the Karelia Question 1990–2015

of editorial policy, the general decline in the number of letters is still an indication that the Karelia Question is becoming less newsworthy.

The analysis began by focusing on whether the authors supported or opposed reunification. In general, the proportion of people in favour of reunification (returning Karelia to Finland) was declining. In the most recent period there was a slight increase. Within the group that seemed to be in favour a further distinction was made between those who were in favour out of principle (Karelia as a whole is a “natural” part of Finland), those who were in favour but wanted to negotiate reunification, and a third group that was basically in favour but was prepared to delay it and in the meantime foster close cooperation. Letters showing a resistance towards reunification were further divided into a group that was prepared to cooperate (without a readjustment of the border, “owning” Karelia by being present) and a group that distinctly wished to ignore the Russian part as a lost cause. In all, almost three-quarters of the letters analysed were in favour of reunification: 38 percent argued that the question was a matter of principle, while 28 percent were willing to negotiate the matter with Russia. Of those against reunification, about two-thirds were prepared to cooperate.

When the element of time was added, the analysis revealed that while the principal account held true, an increasing proportion regarded cooperation, not readjustment of the borderline, as a solution to the Karelia Question. This cooperative approach had overtaken the more extreme voices wishing to ignore the entire matter. Shifting the border was no longer perceived as a realistic goal, not only because of Russia’s negative attitude, but also because the current situation was now part of a pan-European reality and the Finnish-Russian border was only one among many that had been drawn with the sword after the Second World War. If one were to begin to modify them, “the whole European order would start to be shaken” (HS 12. 6. 2002). Essentially, there was therefore no reason

to seek a readjustment of the border, because the role of borders *per se* in Europe had fundamentally changed: “In a united Europe, [b]orders are no longer insurmountable crevasses insulating countries from each other. They are open” (Ibid.).

### Signifiers and signified

The core of our analysis of people’s meaning-making is a combination of a more qualitative social semiotic analysis and a more quantitative oriented content analysis. While a linguistic analysis of the newspaper material is beyond the scope of the current research, a semiotic approach does allow us to see beyond mere words and numbers. We combined this with a more quantitative approach on how often the different signifiers were used over the different periods. The more qualitative approach based on social semiotics helps us in how these signifiers might be interpreted both where it concerns the signified and the tone.

Drawing upon social semiotics enables us to study not just *what* signs mean (semantics), but also to focus on *how* they mean. Semiotics distinguishes between communication and signification (SAUSSURE 1974; BARTHES 1988). While communication is understood as the mere transfer of knowledge from sender to receiver, signification refers to communicative meaning-making, whereby a text evokes a process of interpretation in the receiver.

Social semiotics builds on the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure, but takes a step further by emphasising the socially contextualised nature of signs and meaning-making (signifying) processes and practices. For SAUSSURE (1974) the term signification referred to the dyadic relationship between the signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*), which together constituted a sign (Fig. 4). A sign can be anything as long as someone interprets it as signifying something (PEIRCE 1931; CHANDLER 2002). As SAUSSURE (1974, p. 118) himself puts it, it is not the metal in a coin that fixes its value.

Signs are not stable, but constantly made afresh; the relationship between

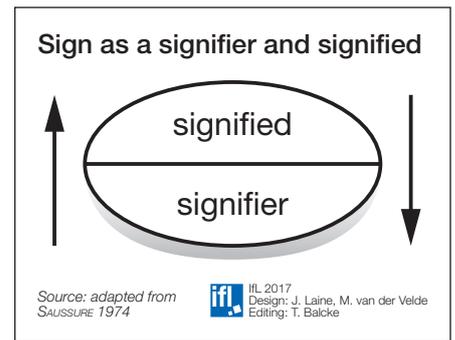


Fig. 4: Sign as a signifier and signified

the signifier and signified is in a constant state of flux as people connect form and meaning in ways deemed apt for the particular need and occasion (KRESS 1997). On the one hand, the same signifier can stand for a different signified (constituting a different sign). A black cat in some cultures stands for good fortune and in others for bad. On the other hand, many signifiers can also stand for the same signified (again forming a different sign). Russia is at times portrayed as assertive or even as the aggressive Russian bear, but also as a dear neighbour.

In our case the signified is in all cases Karelia (or the question about it) and/or Russia. Drawing upon the work of EDENSSOR (1998; 2002) and WODAK (2004; 2008), we distinguish five categories of signifiers: activities; objects; events; places; and stories. An important determining factor of the activities signifier is that it can be characterised as being of longer duration or having a certain permanence. It concerns, for example, longer lasting processes and policies. An event, however, is more or less a one-time occurrence. This might be a natural disaster, a political act, or a historical event. Objects can either be categorised as material culture or as personifying certain groups. The category of places is used when a clear reference is made to specific geographies and landscapes. Finally, stories point to accounts, narrative, reports, and myths mainly related to (a shared) history. When it comes to the Karelia Question in general, places, events, and stories can be seen as discussing this within a tradition of storytelling, often referring to a

mythical history. Activities and objects, on the other hand, are used more often in contemporary discussion and are more subject to the spur of the moment.

Letters on defence strategies, the process of Europeanisation, humanitarian aid, cooperation etc. were labelled as using activities (characterised as having a longer duration or certain permanence) as signifiers. Those dealing with the evacuation of Finnish Karelia after the Winter War, a proposition in Finnish politics, or an environmental incident were put in the event category. Letters discussing the Finnish leadership, Russia, Ingrians, Karelians, etc. were regarded as address objects – material culture or personifications of certain groups. This mainly concerned the latter in our analysis. When Karelia or specific locations like Vyborg were used, the letter was categorised as dealing with places (making a clear reference to specific geographies and landscapes). Finally, stories (as accounts, narrative, reports, and myths related mainly to (a shared history)) in our case translated into issues such as the Finnish rights to Karelia, the (re)drawing of the border, personal histories, and the historic actions of Stalin or the USSR.

Having labelled the letters by content, their general tone was established. We confined ourselves here to a simple three-fold categorisation: positive; neutral; or negative. Finally, for analytical purposes we also labelled the letters by their attitude towards Karelia as a region and Russia in general as the signified. Here again we used the categories of positive, neutral, and negative. Having established the coding of the letters, several analyses were performed by confronting the signifiers with the tone of the letters in general and concerning Karelia and Russia. Special interest was then paid to the development of both the signifiers used as well as the general attitude during the previous two and a half decades.

For analytical purposes we distinguished six periods. These are based on the analysis of the development of the Karelia Question as it appeared in *Helsingin Sanomat* (in the previous section).

The first (1990–1993) was labelled *Russiaphoria*, because the collapse of the Soviet Union was seen as the long awaited opportunity to move on the Karelia Question, while at the same time there was uncertainty concerning developments and what they would mean for the Finnish-Russian relationship. In the following years (1994–1997) Finnish accession to the EU was seen as a major step in seeking protection against an increasingly unpredictable Russia, causing a state of *Euphoria*. Between 1998 and 2000 the financial *Crisis in Russia* fuelled debates about Karelia. When Putin came to power, the idea of a period of *Transitionism* gained traction, and there was a period of relative optimism in the Finnish-Russian relationship, which, however, soon faded. Between 2007 and 2011 we can witness a state of *New Realism*, in which romantic images of Karelia and the relationship with Russia were exchanged for more realistic ones that could now be depicted less emotionally. In the period from 2012, which coincides with Putin's third presidential term, there is a tendency to work *Towards a New Standoff* with Russia, albeit with an uncertain outcome.

As figure 5 implies, most of the analysed letters fall under the main signifier categories of activity (82 letters) and story (70 letters). Places (used in 53 letters) and objects (50 letters) almost tied for third place, while events were used

less as a signifier (30 letters). These are, of course, analytical distinctions to help structure the analysis. In practice, categories are interrelated as many letters referred to more than one. However, in most cases the prime signifier was quite easy to identify.

What is remarkable is that in the most recent periods the proportion of (his)stories used as signifiers has increased. The more contemporary activities and objects on the other hand are used less. This may be explained by the fact that Karelia – and especially reunification – is becoming a myth. In the most recent period events are the most frequently occurring signifiers, again an indication that Karelia and its question are becoming a thing of the past. Of course, we must keep in mind that the number of letters in the later periods is quite small. The evidence concerning letters' general tone or connotation is in line with this. The proportion of negative letters declined from 50 to 65 percent in earlier years to about 30 percent on more recent years. This may also indicate that the rough edges of the Karelian scar are slowly healing and fading in people's memory, while the more neutral and positive images remain. When this is linked to the signifier categories we can see some marked differences. When the categories of activities and objects, signalling a more contemporary and current interpretation are employed, most letters have a clearly

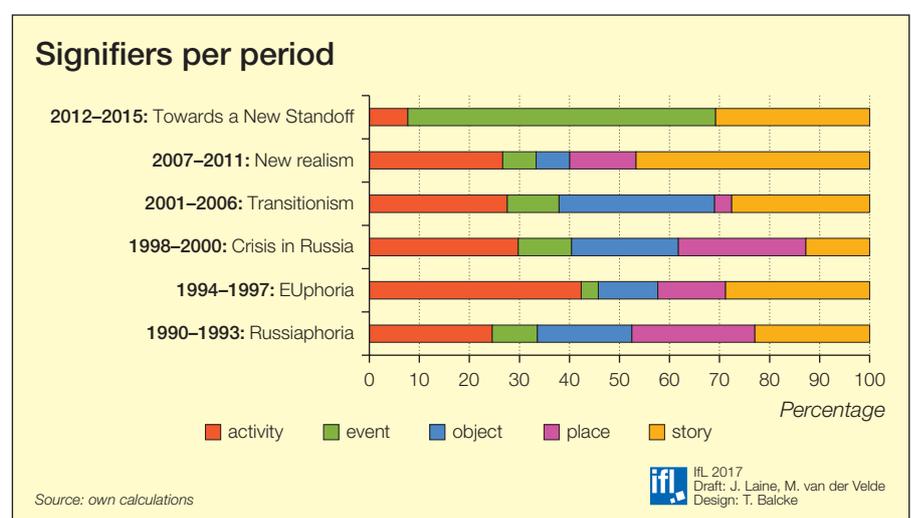


Fig. 5: Signifiers per period

negative connotation. Events, places, and stories (indication often a more historical view) are used more positively. This may also be explained as a mythologisation of the question. When the latter signifiers are used, the Karelia Question seems to be seen increasingly as a thing of the past and thus more neutrally and even positively (Fig. 6).

A special note may be made concerning the signifier category “place”, which was most often used in a positive sense. Almost two-thirds of the letters were positive. This may be the result of the fact that Karelia was used to an extent with respect to a different signified. In some letters Karelia was approached almost as an internal Finnish issue with little or no reference to Russia.

When we explicitly examine how Karelia is portrayed in the letters, we find that the proportion with a clearly positive attitude is diminishing with the exception of the final period (Fig. 7). On average this also applies to those with an outspoken negative opinion. Consequently, the issue is increasingly dealt with quite neutrally, or in a more “realist(ic)” and less polarised way. It has become part of everyday life.

Finally, when we examine how Russia is viewed, the most obvious finding is that with a single exception there are no letters exhibiting a positive attitude. As for the others, on average it is possible to observe a slight and increasing tendency towards a neutral position. Remarkably, the same signifier can stand for more than one signified, thus constituting a different sign. For example, when cross-border cooperation is discussed using Karelia as a signified, the tone is often positive, whereas when the signified is Russia, the tone is notably more negative. Similarly, places and stories about Karelia take a positive, or at least neutral, position noticeably more often than those depicting Russia as the signified.

**Conclusions**

This analysis of the public debate in *Helsingin Sanomat* has provided a fascinating overview of how Finnish attitudes and

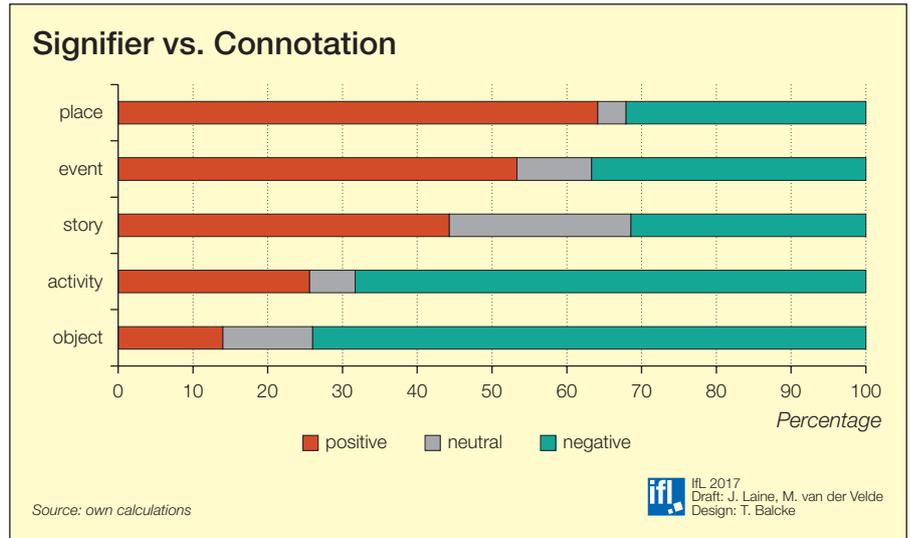


Fig. 6: Signifier vs. Connotation

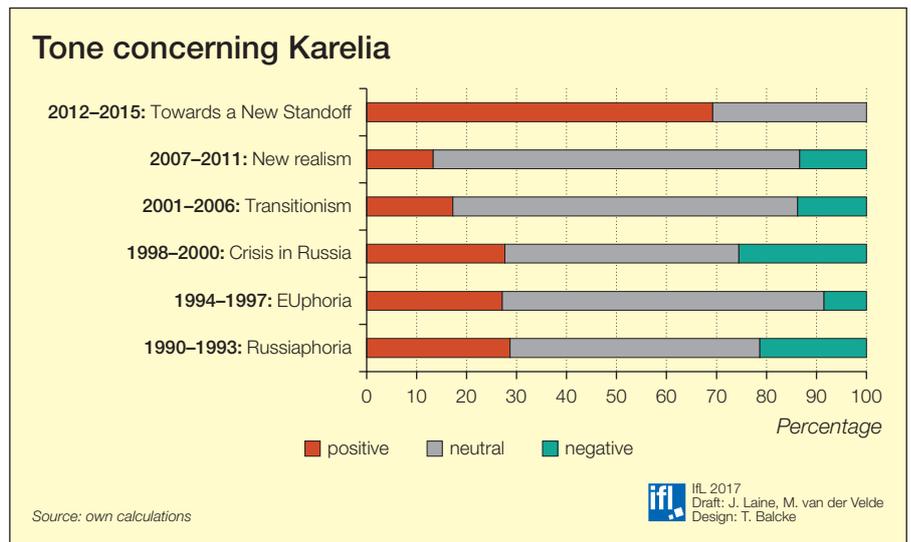


Fig. 7: Tone concerning Karelia

opinions concerning the Karelia Question have evolved since the 1990s. The starting point of the analysis was the interesting period when the threat of the Soviet Union lessened, allowing a previously unseen scope for free public debate. With the end of the Cold War the previously stable border concept was transformed into something broader and more complex, but this also meant that the question about a potential adjustment of the border was no longer considered untouchable.

The study period was divided into six shorter periods with a distinctive tone and focus. As the Soviet Union collapsed

and Finland came to share a border with its successor, the Russian Federation, the rules of the game changed fundamentally. The “end of history” provided a new beginning, and the disappearance of a neighbour to which Finns had grown accustomed and with which they had traded resulted in a severe recession, which also contributed to the marked opportunism of the early years (1990–1993), accompanied by a somewhat positive vision of the future of Finnish-Russian relations. When the signs used at that time are examined, all categories are almost equally represented, with events slightly underrepresented. Compared with the subsequent

two periods the general tone is relatively positive.

Between 1994 and 1997 the debate focused increasingly on the EU and the significance it would have for the Finnish-Russian relationship. This period shows the highest proportion of letters in favour of negotiation concerning the Karelia Question. This is possibly encouraged by the perceived support of the EU. Compared with other periods, activities are used more frequently and the general tone of the letters becomes more negative, whereas Karelia is talked about more neutrally.

In 1998 the financial crisis in Russia briefly fuelled debates about Karelia. While the older generations' attitudes were guided largely by the emotions, the young tended to prefer reason. They argued that Karelia's fate had already been sealed and that patriotism had its limits. Sentiment concerning the Karelia Question increasingly turned against the idea of returning the region to Finland. This is also the period when places are most used as a signifier. The general tone remains somewhat negative. As the most used signifier often relates to a specific Karelian location or geography, it is unsurprising that the general tone concerning the region is also quite negative compared with other periods.

With Vladimir Putin in power a period of relative optimism about the Finnish-Russian relationship began. Demands for the restoration of Karelia were softened as increased interaction was deemed to provide significant benefits and new economic opportunities to both parties. Attempts were made to go beyond the traditional Karelia Question; it was suggested that instead of painting threats, attention should be paid to exploiting the benefits of globalisation, i.e., enlarged market areas, a reduction in the importance of borders, and the growing importance of knowledge, cultural enrichment, and diversification. This is demonstrated by the fact that the proportion of letters against reunification but willing to cooperate is the largest in this period. Objects are used relatively often and the tone of letters

becomes more neutral and even positive. Karelia itself is regarded much more neutrally. The general tone concerning Russia is also largely neutral. The proportion of clearly negative letters is the smallest in this period.

From 2007 we can observe a state of *New Realism*, in which the almost romantic images of Karelia and the relationship with Russia are exchanged for more realistic ones that can now be depicted in less emotional terms. Although a relatively large number of letters continues to oppose the return of Karelia, the proportion in favour on principle is also sizeable. This suggests a conflict between a more emotional longing for the past and a more realistic academic approach to Karelia. This is also a period when stories become more important as signifiers. In general, there is a correlation between the use of stories and being in favour of the return of Karelia on principle.

The most outstanding feature of the most recent period is a further increase in those in favour of the restoration of Karelia on principle. Although some caution is required in drawing conclusions because of the relatively small number of letters, this may itself be explained by a declining interest in the Karelia Question itself (especially among those who formerly opposed reunification) and the confirmation of the possible threat presented by contemporary Russia (fuelled by the events in the region) and the consequent declining probability of a common solution for Karelia retaining the current borders. This has been accompanied by an increase in the use of (historic) events as signifiers, the less positive tone of letters, but also a more favourable tone concerning Karelia.

### **Karelia Question 2.0**

The Karelia Question has become increasingly more about principle and less about practice. This should not, however, be taken to indicate that Karelia has lost its evocative role in the Finnish national identity discourse altogether, but rather that the nature of this role has begun to change. The anxiety generated by the loss

of Karelia has been salved by the formulation of different self-narratives (BROWNING & JOENNIEMI 2014, p. 2). The repatriation of Karelia, once seen as possible, has now become a receding myth, far-removed from the key political debates of today. Given the ageing population, direct links to the lost areas have diminished.

While some Finns may indeed consider that they "spiritually" own Karelia, it remains very much part of Russia. Debate concerning Karelia stems from the past and often gets stuck there. Instead of focusing on what is happening today, the debate tends to look back and builds heavily on personal accounts that are difficult to verify. Subjective historical remarks about what once happened are often presented as facts, based on which the "truth" is generated in the form of a story. This supports RAIVO'S (2004, p. 71) argument that in the contemporary context it is no longer so important to whom the ceded areas should belong now or in the future, but the question is rather about to whom their past belongs. While there are differences of opinion, nowadays both sides at least realise that there are two parallel narratives associated with the memory and traditions of Karelia: a Finnish past and a Russian present (Ibid.).

During the study period the national appropriations of Karelia that have especially characterised the Finnish debate in the past, particularly until 2014, have been transcended by notions of a shared regional space. Accordingly, the question of ownership has been overshadowed by a new rhetoric promoting cross-border cooperation and a reframing of history to better match with the evolving multifaceted, and to an extent post-national, regional understandings of Karelia. Instead of understanding Karelia within the traditional framework of nationalising historiographies, these interpretations have depicted Karelia as a borderland – a space of cultural and historical ambiguity marked but not dominated by alternating phases of Russification, Finnishisation and Sovietisation (cf. SCOTT 2013). The Karelia Question thus becomes less of a question and, at least until 2014 when the crisis in

Ukraine again changed the rhetoric, apparent changes in both the high and low geopolitical context have borne witness to gestures of Finnish–Russian reconciliation rather than to ideological assessments of regional history.

Especially important here is the apparent acceptance of the loss of Karelia and the resulting acquirement of a more polyvalent perspective, acknowledging not only various personal reflections but also the more relational nature of space. This is to say that while the symbolic if not mythical role Karelia plays for many Finns remains, its understanding is no longer necessarily tied to a specific territory. Indeed, confronted with the economic and social realities of the region it seems that the value of Karelia for Finnish national identity has, for many, shifted from its location to its status as a mythical and fantastical construct whose actual location and bordering are largely irrelevant (HARLE & MOISIO 2000, p. 115–117; BROWNING & JOENNIEMI 2014, p. 23; cf. MINKKINEN 2012).

The material we have analysed suggests that Karelia's meaning has evolved from a concrete geographical place to a more nebulous mythical region, if not a state of mind, discussion of which now serves a therapeutic function more than anything else. The number of people with personal reminiscences of lost Karelia has diminished. Accordingly, what were golden memories for some have increasingly been replaced by more negative perceptions of the border region as a locus of crime, vodka and sex tourism, human trafficking, and other social problems. Nevertheless, Karelia remains a matter of debate, but the existential Karelia *Question* is now far less of a question; it has become one issue among many others and the tone in which it is now discussed and written about has become more neutral.

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### **Резюме**

ДЖАССИ П. ЛЕЙН, МАРТИН ВАН ДЕР ВЕЛЬДЕ

#### **Карелия и Россия в финском общественном сознании**

В статье на основе данных ведущей финской ежедневной газеты Helsingin Sanomat/Хельсинские новости рассматривается отношение финнов к России. Это касается особенно так называемого Карельского вопроса и того, каким образом это повлияло на общественные дебаты в Финляндии. В статье предпринята попытка изучения влияющих на общественное мнение поведенческих моделей в конкретных социальных и культурных условиях и трактуется формирование общественного мнения как социального поведения. При этом общественное мнение оценивается по письмам читателей данной газеты с учётом основных произошедших на границе изменений. В течение времени здесь имеются отчётливые количественные и качественные тенденции. Наряду с общим низходящим трендом, можно говорить о периодически возникающем эффекте и взаимодействии между двусторонними отношениями и общими геополитическими изменениями.

*Карельский вопрос; общественное мнение; ежедневная газета; Финляндия; Россия; социо семиотика*

### **Résumé**

JUSSI P. LAINE et MARTIN VAN DER VELDE

#### **Spirituellement nôtre, factuellement vôtre: Carélie et la Russie dans la conscience publique finlandaise**

Basé sur une analyse du principal quotidien finlandais, Helsingin Sanomat, cet article explore le comportement et la perception qu'ont les Finlandais de la Russie. Il accorde une attention particulière à la question dite de la Carélie et comment elle a influé sur le discours public en Finlande. L'article vise à enquêter sur les pratiques humaines significatives en fonction des circonstances sociales et culturelles spécifiques à la région et explique que le fait de donner du sens est une pratique sociale. Il évalue la manière dont l'opinion publique, telle qu'exprimée dans la page des courriers du journal, a évolué et a été influencée par les changements importants qui ont eu lieu à la frontière. Des changements clairs, aussi bien quantitatifs que qualitatifs, ont eu lieu au fil du temps. Ils peuvent être résumés comme représentant une tendance de passage général dans l'histoire, mais aussi comme un effet plus cyclique et comme l'interaction entre relations bilatérales et changements géopolitiques plus importants.

*Question Carélie; opinion publique; quotidien; Finlande; Russie; sémiotique sociale*