

RESEARCH

Care for the Visa: Maximising Mobility from Northwest Russia to the Schengen Area

Olga Tkach

Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR), St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, RU
tkach@cisr.ru

This article analyses how and why the residents of Northwest Russia—holders and users of the unified Schengen multiple-entry ‘C’ visas issued by the state of Finland—care for their visas by balancing trips to Finland against trips to the wider Schengen Area, according to the rules that require such balancing. Applying the concept of productive work and reproductive labour, and drawing on in-depth interviews with the Schengen visa-dependants in Russia, I show how Schengen visa policies operate on the local level of the EU’s external border. The article explores how such visas facilitate short-term mobility, yet require from their holders constant efforts to maintain this resource, and therefore operate as a nexus of freedom of movement and commitment. I argue that the role of the short-term Schengen visa issued to non-EU visitors goes far beyond simple permission for crossing the border and materialises as a facilitator of Europe-wide mobility and, therefore, an object of constant care.

Keywords: The Schengen visa; Short-term mobility; Reproductive labour; Finland; Northwest Russia

Introduction

In the contemporary global world, unequal and hierarchical rights to cross-border mobility are institutionalized and materialized in the systems of citizenship, confirmed by state-issued IDs, as well as border control and visa policies. This article seeks to contribute to the studies of mobility and inequality based on the case of Russian tourism to the Schengen Area where Russian passport holders as third-country nationals (TCNs) need a visa to enter.¹

Until recently, scholarship paid no serious attention to visa-based short-term travelling (Gülzau et al. 2016: 1–2; Mau et al. 2015: 2). Mobilities and tourism studies mostly overlook visa issues as they focus on the experiences of visa-free travellers (Freudental-Pedersen 2009; Glick Schiller & Salazar 2013; Sheller & Urry 2004, 2016). On the other hand, border, migration and refugee studies turn to visas as an indispensable instrument of national securitization and screening of ‘suspicious’ long-term visitors to developed and influential countries

¹ The Passport Power Rank 35, which the Russian Federation currently occupies, gives its citizens visa-free entry to 80 states out of 195 states worldwide and to 41 with visa upon arrival (Passport Index 2020).

(Brabandt & Mau 2013; Czaika & Neumayer 2017; Glick, Schiller & Salazar 2013; Gülzau et al. 2016; Mau 2010; Mau et al. 2012; Mau et al. 2015; Neumayer 2010; Salter 2006; Shamir 2005).

The regimes-of-mobility approach that this article follows turns to a mosaic picture of mobilities that fits into neither elitist free global movements nor migrants' mobility restrictions. It recognizes multiplicity, variety and regional diversity of mobility patterns, localized and situational forms and degrees of mobility (Glick, Schiller & Salazar 2013; Jensen 2013; Manderscheid 2016; Richardson 2013; Salter 2013), and is especially interested in the clustering of mobility rights as a basic component and determinant of 'mobility citizenship' (Mau 2010: 340). This approach is sensitive to underexplored non-European mobilities neglected within the dominant Anglo-American/Eurocentric literature on tourism (Hall 2015; Jansen 2009). It studies visas not just as a barrier, but also as a mobility rights provider or a facilitator of 'motility'—the capacity of a person to be mobile and able to turn mobility potential into actuality through struggling with different constraints (Freudendal-Pedersen 2009; Mau 2010).

This article explores how TCNs with deprived and restricted mobility in Europe strive for their aspirations and opportunities to travel there. It focuses on St. Petersburg, the biggest city of the Northwest (NW) region of Russia bordering Finland. This EU and Schengen member state is the leading Schengen visa provider for St. Petersburg residents and one of Russians' top five tourist destinations.² In 2019, the traffic between Finland at the eastern border and Russia was over 9.5 million passengers (Findicator 2020). One can easily organize a trip from St. Petersburg to destinations in Finland, choosing between the high-speed commuter train, the ferry, luxury or low-cost buses, door-to-door minibuses and cars or car-sharing services, and even free round trips by bus in return for spending 100 Euro at a shopping-mall on the Finnish side of the border. Unlike their co-nationals, St. Petersburg residents have relatively easy access to Finland, not only due to their vicinity to its eastern border areas, but also thanks to the relaxed requirements of the short-term Schengen visas assigned to them. Importantly, a short-stay multiple-entry Schengen visa issued by the neighbouring state of Finland opens the gate to the remaining 25 member countries that can be visited via Finland or directly from St. Petersburg, albeit under certain conditions. Visa holders must keep their travels to the wider Schengen Area proportional to their trips to Finland, and negotiating this balancing act is supposed to be the visa holder's responsibility. Although the user manuals for the short-stay Schengen visa and the calculator of travel days are available on the website of the European Commission, still the rules remain opaque for many visa-dependants.

In fact, it is not enough to have a visa that issues a right to travel, but it also requires extra efforts to use it properly and maintain this resource. This nexus of freedom and unfreedom that the visa-dependant travellers negotiate inspired my research.³ My aim in this article is to analyse how and why St. Petersburg residents—holders and users of the unified Schengen multiple-entry 'C' visas issued by the state of Finland—care for their visas through balancing trips to Finland against trips to the wider Schengen Area and negotiating the opaque rules that govern such balancing.

The article starts by introducing the research context and the qualitative empirical data collected. It is followed by the analytical framework that conceptualizes a visa as an object

² In 2017, Finland issued a total of 727,224 visas in Russia, compared 89,572 visas issued in other countries combined. The Consulate General of Finland in St. Petersburg receives more than 80% of visa applications from Russian citizens, whilst Finland's Embassy in Moscow receives less than 10% (Ministry 2018).

³ The research was a part of the large project EUBORDERSCAPES: Bordering, Political Landscapes and Social Arenas: Potentials and Challenges of Evolving Border Concepts in a post-Cold War World, funded in 2012–2016 through the EU's 7th Framework Programme for Science and Innovation (Grant agreement number 299775).

of productive work needed to get one issued and an object of reproductive labour, or caring, needed to get one renewed. The next two sections demonstrate how the Schengen visa issued by Finland operates as a valuable mobility facilitator and what kind of constant care it requires in return from its holders—St. Petersburg residents travelling to Finland and wider Europe. In the final part, I discuss how the role of the visa issued to non-EU visitors goes far beyond simple permission for crossing the border of the Schengen Area.

Research Context, Data and Method

Economic, social and cultural relations between Finland and Russia have a long history. Its modern period began in the 1990s, when Finland–Russia cross-border interactions, including various forms of mutual mobility, especially shuttle trade from the Russian side, intensified (Olimpieva et al. 2007; Stammler-Gossmann 2010). Finland acceded to the EU in 1995 and became a member state of the Schengen Area in 2001. It shares 1340 kilometres of border with Russia—the longest border in the EU, as well as nine border crossing points meant for passenger traffic.⁴ Four of them—Imatra, Nuijamaa, Vaalimaa, Vainikkala—are closest to St. Petersburg (see **Picture 1**).

From the perspective of the regime-of-mobility approach, the border area of NW Russia, including St. Petersburg and surrounding Leningrad Oblast, and Finland, especially its eastern parts, can be viewed as a local cluster that functions as a ‘mobility hub within the global distribution of mobility rights and creates new forms of territoriality’ (Gülzau et al. 2016: 12). This hub can be seen as a node that features special visa regulations, attracts more dynamic connections, gives extra mobility rights to its visitors and lives its own inner life in the wider Schengen Area–Russia flow of mobility (cf. Schnepel & Alpers 2018: 25).



Picture 1: The Southeast Finland–Russia borderland.

⁴ Besides Finland, NW Russia borders with Estonia, Latvia, Norway and Poland.

Regional travels between NW Russia and Finland are regulated by a set of documents adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, such as the Schengen Visa Code (EU 810/2009) and Regulation EU 2018/1806 (EUR-Lex 2009, 2018), as well as Visa Facilitation Agreement (VFA) (EUR-Lex 2007). The EU assesses NW Russia as a region with low risk of illegal immigration to the Schengen Member States; therefore, it enjoys a facilitated visa regime. Officially registered residents of the region apply for short-stay 'C' visas for up to 90 days per half-year, with the required set of documents reduced to (1) international passport with at least six months' remaining validity, (2) completed application form with photo, (3) travel health insurance. The application does not involve the set of supporting documents, such as a statement of employment, recent salary slips, proof of real estate property, recent bank statements, accommodation reservations or return travel tickets, but these may be additionally requested from an applicant at any moment (Dekalchuk 2014: 11; EUR-Lex 2009).⁵ Initially, an applicant receives a single entry short-term visa, then subsequently a multi-entry one- or six-month visa, and finally graduates to a one-year or two-year multi-entry visa, which is currently seen as the pinnacle of the 'visa career'.⁶

Visa facilitation alongside the geographical proximity of Finland could not but reflect on the number of visa applications processed by the Consulate General (CG) of Finland in St. Petersburg (see **Figure 1**). In the 2000–2010s, this number steadily increased and in 2013 exceeded 1 million. Then it reduced due to depreciation of the Russian ruble against the Euro, and subsequently, more two-year visas were issued. However, recently it has grown again and remains relatively stable. As the percentage of rejections due to abuse of visa is usually very low—about 1% or less (SchengenVisaInfo.com 2020), the number of visas issued is comparable to the number of applications. The need to process an increasing number of visa applications resulted in the opening of the Finnish Visa Application Centre in February 2011 in St. Petersburg downtown. The Centre outsourced the application process⁷ but also made it

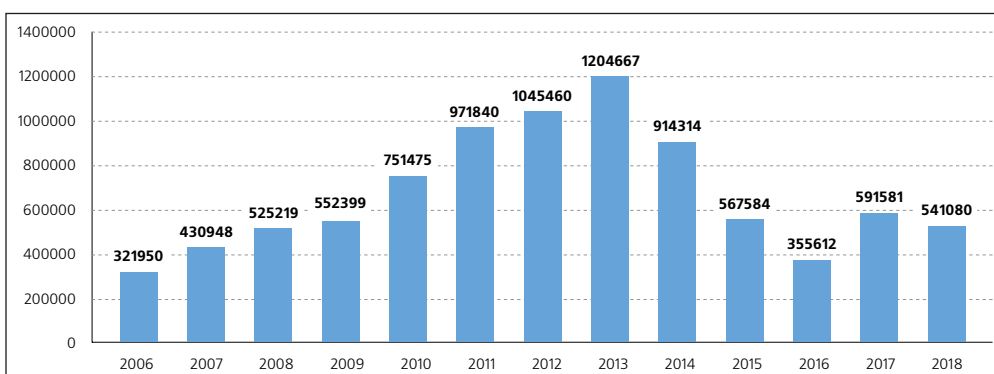


Figure 1: The number of visa applications processed by the Consulate General of Finland in St. Petersburg 2006–2018. Sources: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Finland and the Consulate General of Finland in St. Petersburg.

⁵ According to the EU requirements, since September 1, 2019, two extra documents were added to the list: (1) plan of the trip and (2) proof of financial means. Still, the former can be submitted as a written travel description, and the latter as an electronic bank statement. Both did not make the procedure any harder.

⁶ Since 2020, the state of Finland plans to issue five-year visas to customers who already had two-year visas and used them properly.

⁷ Currently, the 'C' visa costs an applicant about 90€, including 35€ visa fee, 26.27€ service fee, about 20€ average travel insurance valid for the Schengen Area for 60 days, and about 5€ for visa photo.

easier, faster and almost queue-free. A lot of insurance agencies surrounding the Visa Centre besides selling travel insurance also prepare the whole set of application documents: take photos, fill out the form, make copies and so on. A broad range of travel agencies, transport companies and transportation routes, as well as online booking services and communities of border crossers functioning as peer support, also facilitate easy border crossing.

This article draws on interviews with customers of these services—St. Petersburg residents—who are holders and active users of the Schengen visas issued by Finland, excluding shuttle traders and petty retailers. They are accustomed to holding a multi-entry Schengen visa, timely renewing it with the CG of Finland in St. Petersburg, keeping it valid, and using it for travel across Europe. Several times a year, they visit different destinations in Finland for various reasons, either with large shopping buses, mini-buses or private cars. They either go solo or in pairs (with a friend, partner, relative or colleague) or with a bigger group of family and friends.

The sample encompasses 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews held from late 2013 to early 2017. The fieldwork covered 2014 when economic sanctions were imposed on Russia, the Euro exchange rate increased dramatically and Russia banned the import of some EU-made food products. It enabled me to learn more about how structural constraints influence the research participants' visa and mobility prospects. The interviews were designed as 'travel stories' traced from the first international journey to the most recent one. The interview guide contained such topics as issuing and utilization of international passports and Schengen visas, crossing the Russia–Finland border and ways of exploring Finland, as well as the aspiration to wider travel. The research participants were recruited via personal and professional networks and also by snowballing.

The interviewees are 20-50-year-old highly educated men and women, working both in public and private sectors, such as trade and investment, management and administration, HR and bookkeeping, research and design, NGO and university. Economically and culturally, the research participants belong to the middle-classes and, unlike many co-nationals, can afford to travel abroad and bear the expenses for international passports, visas, travel insurances and tickets and accommodation abroad.⁸ They prioritize international journeys and invest time, effort and money into them, therefore facilitating the diffusion of a consumer culture that values travel-related consumption. With their informed consent, I also refer to visa issues that five of my Facebook friends belonging to the academic community shared publicly in the last three years. Their posts contained spontaneous emotional reflections on visa usage valuable for the analysis of approaches to and problems arising from 'visa balancing'. I also cite my own experience of visa application, issuance and usage.

Visa-Based Short-Term Mobility: From Work to Labour

Current tourism and mobility studies conceptualize visas from the perspective of the interrelation of human actors and non-human/material objects through mobility. It came from the governmobility approach (Bærenholdt 2013) that combines Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in tourism studies (Endres et al. 2016; Franklin 2004; Manderscheid 2016; Van der Duim et al. 2013) with Foucault's (1978) ideas of governmentality. In general, governmobility seeks to understand how people are governed through mobility. Rather than through subjects, governmobility is highly enacted through objects or non-human mobility devices, such as

⁸ The national survey of 2016 demonstrated that up to 72% of Russians did not even possess international passports and almost the same percentage of them has never been abroad (Levada-Centre 2016). This could have been due to lack of desire, financial constraints and administrative-political reasons (cf. Jansen 2009: 821–823), as well as inaccessibility of embassies and consulates.

transportation infrastructures, settlement structures, information and communication technology devices, as well as legal documents (passport, driving license or railcard).

Out of a large network of objects, the visa has a significant, if not primarily, formative role in the regulation of limited mobility. It appears to be a prescription, which can take the form of permissions and grants for mobility. A visa provides relative freedom of movement and guides the desire to travel. Yet, in return, it requires applicants' efforts and investments in symbolic, practical, financial and other means (Bærenholdt 2013: 28–31; Endres et al. 2016; see also Franklin 2004; Glick Schiller & Salazar 2013: 188–190; Manderscheid 2016: 104; Mincke 2016: 15; Van der Duim et al. 2013).

The governmobility approach tends to consider tourism as *work* rather than leisure. Visa processing is a segment of this work that comprises the cost and hassle of application via post, which can take weeks or months; via a professional visa service provider; or in person. Sometimes this encompasses a trip to bigger cities where embassies and consulates are usually located. A variety of bureaucratic hurdles include application fees and long waits in queues, as well as possible informal interactions and transactions. The consulate or embassy can deny the application without giving any reason (Neumayer 2010: 171; Shamir 2005: 206) or issue the long-awaited visa on dates that do not correspond to the tourist's expectations.

Documented cross-border mobility produces obedient, 'docile' bodies through confessionary-like examination practices, such as filling out the visa application form, going through the visa interviews and answering questions later at the checkpoints (Jansen 2009: 815; Salter 2006: 170). Visas make applicants self-ordering, self-directed and self-disciplined not only by the means of experiences but also by ways of sensing (Bærenholdt 2013: 27; Franklin 2004: 280, 285; Salter 2006: 180). Documents placed in specific social relations with persons have the potential to discharge affective energies that are felt by persons. Recent anthropological studies on how non-EU citizens process travel documents in Western European contexts show that on top of going through rationalized bureaucratic procedures they experience anxiety, feelings of inferiority and even panic. The value of the documents produced by Western European law is so high for their possessors lacking mobility rights that nervous agitation for fear of making a mistake becomes part and parcel of the application process and usage of the documents (Jansen 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2007).

I argue that the productive work that has to be performed to obtain the visa does not fully explain its holders' behaviour, as the visa is a renewable document and requires certain repetitive actions. In fact, the visa has to be not only obtained, but also maintained, and sometimes under very challenging conditions. Regardless of its formal status, in many cases, visa requirements assume lacunae, uncertainty, and semi-formal documentary strategies, especially when the rules of visa usage are not sufficiently clear. There are rare examples of research into long-term migrants who undertake visa-run border-crossings to renew a visa/permit of the host country with fewer efforts (Green 2015; Schenk 2018: 193). These works demonstrate that, once documented, visa-dependants still feel vulnerable and deprived of mobility and have to undertake extra efforts to retain mobility rights.

Social reproductive theory (SRT), which is not usually applied to tourism and mobility studies, can be a useful tool to understand the repetitive activities of visa-dependants on the maintenance of their motility and visa certainty. In the framework of SRT, human *labour* is 'at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole' (Bhattacharya 2017: 2), which can also be referred to as access to mobility. In my research, this labour goes to sustain and reproduce the visa, and respectively, its holder and user is capable of following the visa rules as well as flouting them. While the travellers' work enables them to acquire a visa, their labour reproduces the opportunity to have this visa in the future. Care is the most commonly referred

activity that embodies reproductive labour (Bhattacharya 2017: 9–19). I introduce the concept of care to mobility research through the adoption of some substantial characteristics that have been attributed to care as a specific human activity. Care as a process (1) includes both physical and affective labour; (2) requires a copious amount of time and responsibility from a caregiver; (3) embraces informal and semi-formal activities; (4) is endless and does not necessarily have a rewarding effect (Bhattacharya 2017; see Tronto 2010).

The next two sections demonstrate how the Schengen visa issued by Finland operates as a valuable mobility facilitator and what kind of constant care it requires, in return, from its holders—St. Petersburg residents visiting Finland and wider Europe.

The Enabling Visa

It is officially required that Finland should be the main tourist destination for the holders of the multi-entry Schengen visa obtained from the state. Some research participants have a specific interest in Finnish culture and architecture and explore the country extensively: 'We've been to Helsinki, Imatra, Lappeenranta, Porvoo, Hyvinkää, Tampere, Kouvola. We are now eager to go to Lapland and Savonlinna' (Zoia, 27, restaurant administrator). Finland also attracts many as a site for wellness tourism, including spas and cottages. These short-term leisure visits have been experienced as breaks from stressful life in the Russian big city and immersion into the quiet and friendly Finnish atmosphere:

[Trips to Finland] make me relaxed, so this is a therapeutic effect, I would say. [...] I guess [it depends] on these ideas in the air that it is hard and dangerous to live here [in St. Petersburg], and there is a comfortable and calm Western world. Even though I'm saying this ironically, still I'm influenced by this myth to a certain extent. (Uliana⁹, 32, journalist)

Russians as non-EU travellers imagine and experience Finland as part of a more civilized and wealthier global 'West', or at least European West as opposed to the reality of their home city (cf. Krivosos & Näre 2019: 1178–1185). It is especially valuable that this different world, as a comfortable recreational and consumer site, is across the border and always accessible. Notwithstanding, it is more tempting for many Petersburgers to perceive and use Finland as a gateway to the longed-for journeys to the wider Schengen Area. They go directly from Pulkovo airport in St. Petersburg, via Helsinki Vantaa, Turku or Lappeenranta airports or the seaports in Helsinki or Turku. The interviewees mentioned Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands and others as destination countries. The Central and South European directions, including magnet cultural centres and sea resorts, are very popular with Russian tourists. Compared to Finland, some of these destinations seem less expensive or more appealing and prestigious to visit. When it provides transit to the wider Schengen Area, apparently, tourists from St. Petersburg begin to see Finland quite similar to their home city in terms of climate and architecture, and less European than 'good old Europe'.

The Schengen Finland-issued visa maintains its holders' motility—the potential to be flexible and prepared to move at a moment's notice (Freudental-Pedersen 2009: 76). The possibility of travel to Europe is considered a normal attribute of 'mobility citizenship' of a Petersburgers as a Schengen multi-visa holder:

⁹ This and other names of interviewees used in this article are pseudonyms.

When the visa is opened, you understand that you can go any time, and this makes me relaxed. This relates not only to Finland but other countries as well. Why isn't it possible? It is possible! You understand that you have an opportunity to go. If you don't have it, you feel like something is wrong. (Evgeny, 33, self-employed)

I try to renew my 'Finnish' [Schengen] visa as soon as it expires because this is a pleasant thing to have handy all the time. This is a feeling that I can [go] at any time. I've never gone spontaneously like that anywhere, but I just like that this is possible. (Mila, 26, technical designer)

A traveller is coming into being in a particular way through the visa (Jansen 2009: 816; cf. Navaro-Yashin 2007: 95), so the unified Schengen multi-visa equates non-EU St. Petersburg residents to Europeans, at least partly and fragmentarily, and privileges them relative to their co-nationals—residents of other regions. The Schengen Area is not the whole world, but it is a considerable part of it, so the visa obtained from Finland fuels Petersburg tourists' desire to 'maximize mobility' (Freudental-Pedersen 2009: 6) and their 'aspiration to prove their European-ness' (cf. Jensen 2009: 830). Their excitement about getting easier access to Europe and their aspiration to visit it as often as possible go hand in hand with reflections on global inequality and injustice, feelings of mobility deprivation and humiliation as 'beggars at the consulates' (cf. Sheller 2018). As Ivan (35, NGO activist) bitterly noted, 'Russia is a third world country, so its citizens need visas to go anywhere, apart from similar countries.' Even though none of our interlocutors imagined lifestyle migration or emigration to Finland, a Schengen visa increases their chance to escape from Russia in case of severe political repression, therefore revealing and supporting their political views. This became especially crucial after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent cooling of international relations with Russia:

Now a passport and Finnish visa can become needed when it is time to flee. Last year I heard that in my social circle quite often. These are not detailed talks about how we will leave if anything happens. These are rather some ideas that consider such a situation possible. This is not professional emigration, this is some type of refuge. (Uliana, 32, journalist)

Even during the crisis of 2014, our research participants were reluctant to give up travelling due to the strength of the Euro against the Russian ruble. They accepted a decrease in tourism, even by replacing Italy with Georgia sometimes, but still kept travelling to Europe. The Schengen visa widens their horizon of mobility and enhances the desire to travel. It allows them to spend vacations in Nice or to attend the exhibition of Bruegel in Vienna. It enables them to organize spontaneously a long weekend in Punkaharju resort, Finland, and bring back good cheese and coffee from this trip. It also imparts feelings of safety and tolerance to those who endure the current situation in Russia. Hence, the Schengen visa obtained from Finland expands the mobility rights of St. Petersburg residents and feeds quite a wide range of their lifestyles and identities, from hedonistic to cultural or intellectual, and even ideological and political (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2007: 88). All these advantages seem worth the efforts to sustain this visa and keep it renewable.

The Demanding Visa

The rules for balancing trips to Finland and wider Europe are not transparent to many visa holders. The Schengen Agreement does not clearly define how many of the days allowed can be spent in each Schengen country. Besides, in the borderless Schengen Area, it is nearly

impossible to verify the duration of stay in each country. It also remains vague for many what the calculating guideline is: the days spent in Finland or entries to Finland. How the 90/180 rule works, which stipulates that the visa holder is permitted to spend no more than 90 days within 180 days in the territory of the Schengen Area, also looks confusing to the border crossers. They doubt whether they can travel throughout the Schengen Area for up to 90 days in each calendar half-year or any 180 days. Another obscure and changing rule relates to the necessity of first entering the Schengen Area via Finland when using a visa newly issued by Finland.

The officers of the CG of Finland in St. Petersburg answer general questions evasively. They refer to official rules or assure that each decision on visa issuance is made individually, based on the travel record documented in the passport (i.e., the number of visits to Finland). If trips to the rest of the Schengen Area have prevailed over visits to Finland, the consulate may reject the next visa application of this customer. Usually, visa applicants cannot contact the consulate officers directly, so they turn to various 'border mediators'—insurance agents, travel guides and bus drivers—to discuss their cases before the application. Insurance agents seem to be the most informed and trustworthy experts who get timely updated official information directly from the Visa Centre and collect 'real' cases of visa abuse sanctioned by the consulate. Also, amateur experts, such as experienced travellers, relay their experience by word of mouth or via social networks. This mix of official information and lay expert knowledge regarding Schengen visas feeds travellers' anxieties and fears and makes them worry about how to correctly use their visas.

Each visa history is archived for 10 years, and the consulate officers, as well as the border guards can trace it easily. Thus, the collection of 'Finnish' border-crossing stamps in international passports that proves a good travel history becomes essential for Petersburgers extensively travelling to the Schengen Area. They undertake care work towards their visas that involves practical, emotional and economic aspects. Three possible ways of caring for the visa have been distinguished analytically, as ideal types, in the interview narratives based on the degree of travellers' self-discipline and emotional engagement.

Highly-disciplined care for the visa implies attentive observation of the available rules, systematic and anticipatory checks of the relevant EU documents, updates on possible changes of the regulations, monitoring of related individual cases and sounding out experts' opinions. The unwritten rule of 'opening the visa' (*otkrytie vīzy*) (i.e., making the first entry to the Schengen Area via Finland) is scrupulously followed. For instance, if a person gets a multi-entry visa from Finland in order to travel to Greece for a vacation, s/he goes to Finland first. Yet, the rule of opening a visa can work differently for different visitors and in different periods. I always ask insurance agents if the rule of first entry to Finland with a newly issued visa still applies. Usually, they insist that it was legitimate to ignore Finland and go directly to the destination. In mid-summer 2015, when I applied for multi-entry Finnish visas for my family, the reaction to this question was quite the opposite. The agent stressed very emotionally that due to the changing political and economic situation the rule had become stricter those days. She told a cautionary tale of some of her customers who ignored the rule and travelled with a visa issued by Finland to Hungary first. They were banned from applying for Schengen visas for five years. This example demonstrates that care for the visa can never be an automatic process due to the variety of mutable factors, such as a changing political situation that is beyond travellers' control. Experts' recommendations help travellers stay up to date and provide good care for the visa, create a flawless travel history for the Finnish state and expect smooth visa issuance later:

I go on holiday to Europe only via Helsinki. I have a 'Finnish' Schengen visa. I renew it annually, and I don't want to put extra effort into this. I only let Finnish stamps be [in

the passport]. So, I will definitely get my next visa without a sweat, and I don't have to think about this at all. (Uliana, 32, journalist)

The record of entries to Finland is also levelled up through the so-called 'taking a visa for a ride' or visa run (*otkat vizy*). It means a one day or even half-day trip to Finnish destinations close to the crossing points to get a stamp. According to the statistics, about 70% of all border crossings in NW Russia are same-day tours to Finnish border towns (Studzińska et al. 2018: 122) just to use the visa. All 'border mediators' instruct their customers that claiming 'stamping a passport' as the purpose of the trip at the checkpoints is inappropriate. It is not forbidden to go for the sake of getting the stamp, but it should not be specified as the purpose of a short-term visit that is supposed to correspond to the visa type. So the border crossers hide the real purpose of their visits under the pretext of shopping or other legitimate activities (cf. Studzińska et al. 2018: 122). Such simulation of spending time in the country reduces visa anxiety. By visiting it at least briefly and ritualistically, the travellers 'imitate' tourism to Finland, therefore earning a right to go somewhere else later:

I found a wonderful tour called 'Finland for two hours'. This is just taking the visa for a ride, when you take a bus at 8 am, you're in Finland at noon, you get a bottle of Fairy liquid and detergent, and go back home. [...] We calm ourselves down like that. I went to Italy three times a year minimum. So, three-four times minimum I went to Finland for those two-hour tours. I went like this to get the next visa without a problem. (Nastia, 35, HR manager)

To reduce expenses and time spent on taking the visa for a ride, the majority of travellers visit southeastern border towns of Lappeenranta or Imatra or even shopping malls built by the border especially for Russian customers. Such trips can begin at about 4–5 am or even earlier, when the bus driver picks up passengers across Petersburg, and end at about midnight or even later. The border crossers spend almost the whole day on a bus, and only two to three hours walking around, moving from one shop to another. It may cost around 15–30 Euro for a round trip plus 100–500 Euro on average for purchases. These involuntary visitors who are not fans of Finland or of shuttle trading endure such trips for the sake of spending Christmas in Paris. Tourism to 'good old Europe' is the reward for compulsory visits to borderland Finland that some of the research participants perceive like a shopping trip rather than travel abroad.

Emergency care for the visa requires active travelling across the Schengen Area and procrastinating about balancing it by trips to Finland. Before visa expiry, the travellers urgently try to learn about similar cases of visa abuse and related sanctions, take counsel from acquaintances or 'border mediators' and anticipate their visa fate:

I've he many refusals in applications for Finnish visas now. Our quite competent acquaintances looked at our passport and said that it is a 50/50 chance that we will get visas [...] I had enough trips to Finland and also 'fake' ones. We went on holiday to Greece with our 'Finnish' visa, we went on a cruise from Sweden to Estonia. We celebrated New Year in Estonia and went there in April to a health spa. Just to hang out. As far as I remember, we went to Estonia one more time later on. Too much Estonia. Finns compete with Estonians [for visitors], so I guess the Finns just won't like it. (Natalia, 31, market researcher)

Natalia admits that she abused her Schengen visa for ‘inappropriate’ trips to her favourite destinations and most likely will have to pay the price for being careless. As the official rules of balancing countries are not clear to her, she is just guessing how ‘the mean Finns’ will evaluate her visa history. Although another traveller, Michail, has already been warned by the consulate about visa abuse, he still engages in hectic compensatory trips to Finland:

Now it's time to apply for a new Schengen visa. I am looking at my passport – Hamburg, Tallinn, Amsterdam [are on the stamps]. Last time, when the Finnish Consulate gave me my passport back, I found a piece of paper there, saying that if I plan to visit Germany, France or Spain instead of Finland, I should apply for visas in the respective consulates. ‘Otherwise, next time your visa application will be rejected’. So, now I need to go to Helsinki then. (Michail, 35, political scientist)

The fear of losing the Schengen visa forced Michail and other travellers like him to visit Finland and demonstrate loyalty to it, although they would prefer to go somewhere else. The experts, especially insurance agents, also cultivate this fear, and if they find annual visa usage has been careless, they strongly recommend that visa-dependents stay more disciplined and visit Finland intensively.

Relaxed visa care is practised by experienced visa users who know more about the possibilities for using the unified visa within the borderless Schengen Area and are less anxious. For instance, Yaroslava (50, accountant) recalls that as a first-time visa holder she was terrified of doing something wrong; she behaved too good even for the ‘border mediators’:

I always travel with a Finnish visa. At first, I didn't. Once I obtained a ‘Portuguese’ [Schengen] visa to go to Portugal, although an insurance agent told me, ‘Come on, this is silly. Just go with the “Finnish” one’. I was scared of terrifying stories that they [other Schengen countries] don't allow you to go with a ‘Finnish’ visa. But then I tried and saw that everything was OK. So now I don't get other visas anymore.

Although the visa holders are aware of possible sanctions or had even already been sanctioned, they cannot miss their chances to voyage across the Schengen Area, sometimes even breaking the rule of balancing countries:

Last year [...] I was lazy in opening it via Finland, and I went directly to Germany for three weeks. When I got to Berlin, they put a stamp right on the visa. I thought I would have problems with the Finns. Then, in August, I went to Greece for two weeks. Then I decided that I had to go to Finland at least once. Then I went to France. I was afraid they would reject my application. But they easily gave me another six-month visa. (Sofia, 23, university administrator)

Once I offended the Finns. I went to Italy and Poland, and only once – to Finland. [...] [N]ext time they issued me just a single-entry visa for 10 days. So I had to apply once again because I had already bought my ticket to Portugal. I went to Finland first, and then applied again, and thank God it was a multi-entry visa for half a year. I mean, this punishment was not severe. At the end of the day, they issued me the visa, single-entry, but still, and then again – multi-entry. (Anna, 27, GIS analyst)

As both Sofia and Anna avoided negative sanctions, they perceive visa issuance as a lottery or black box, where the result is independent of tourists' efforts to self-discipline. Such views make these border crossers more careless and trusting to luck. Their courage and confidence in a favourable visa destiny also draw on the idea that Finland benefits economically from Russian tourism (see Findicator 2020).

However, such a relaxed approach to visa use can clash at any time with random controls at the border of the Schengen Area:

They say its tourist agencies that made up the rule of the first entry, but this is not true. Right now I was stopped at the border of the Netherlands and told that I might not be allowed into the country with my 'Finnish' visa unopened. (Svetlana, 35, anthropologist)

Svetlana's post on Facebook prompted numerous comments. Some travellers shared similar stories, while others cited the Visa Code and called the rule of the first entry a 'myth'. One of the commentators recalled that Finland once rejected her visa application because she had opened her previous visa issued there in Latvia. Another person mentioned an incident when people flying to some destination in Europe who had no Finnish stamps on the newly issued visas were terrified by warnings even from Russian airport personnel that they would not be checked in for the flight. This example returns us to the polyphony of information explaining the rules of visa usage, travellers' lack of knowledge of the written and unwritten rules and overwhelming fear of losing mobility rights within the Schengen Area. Relaxed visa care has a high cost, so it tends to be (self-)stigmatized as indicating a lack of self-discipline and laziness among the visa holders. Similarly, Svetlana regretted that she cared poorly for her visa and therefore put at risk her freedom of movement.

Care for the visa through the collection of as many stamps as possible at the Finland–Russia border resembles never-ending reproductive labour and can be very exhausting. This is the labour of 'moving to get calm and coping with uncertainties through mobility' (Bærenholdt 2013: 28) and endeavouring to follow the obscure rules and compile a good visa history that is supposed to guarantee the smooth issuance of the next Schengen visa by the state of Finland.

Conclusion

Unlike the Central European Schengen member states surrounded by nations with similar mobility citizenships, Finland lies on the edge of the Area and neighbours a non-EU country, Russia. By simplifying visa regulations with NW Russia, the Finnish state balances Schengen standards with its national interests. It benefits economically from mass visa issuance and border crossings in exchange for providing Russians—as nationals with a relatively low passport index and deprived mobility citizenship—freer access to Europe. Although the regular travellers from St. Petersburg are privileged to work less on acquiring the visa, the price that they have to pay is the repetitive reproductive labour of care for it, which is the result of several sets of conditions and rules.

Although the regulations governing the Schengen visa have been published on hundreds of pages of EU documents and include regulations on how short-term visitors are supposed to balance trips between different Schengen states, this is not always easy and possible due to the lack of transparency and clarity of the requirement. The unwritten rule of compiling a proper travel history through regular short tours to Finland for deliberate collection of border crossing stamps at the Russia–Finland border constitutes 'mobility citizenship' of a Petersburger. On the one hand, care for the visa has been maintained institutionally, as it

benefits the official system of cross-border control. On the other, it expands the non-EU travellers' mobility rights and motility, though it includes high transaction costs and therefore operates as a nexus of movement freedom and commitment.

The pre-planned 'opening of the visa' and 'taking it for a ride' several times a year, and anxieties connected with this, discipline the short-term visitors to the EU. Care for the visa embraces a wide range of feelings, such as fear of negative sanctions, of loss of mobility rights due to the lack of transparency and predictability of the CG's decisions, and last but not least, of the injustice of the skewed global distribution of mobility rights. The range of responsibility and self-discipline varies depending on the level of loyalty to Finland as the main tourist destination, between 'careful' balancing trips prioritising Finland and 'careless' European tours ignoring Finland. The visa holders guess that personal factors are decisive in the process of visa issuance, so they ascribe morals and personalities to the bureaucratic institutions, regarding them as 'mean and offensive' or 'kind and generous Finns'.

The visa as an object of care takes on a multidimensional functionality that goes beyond simple permission for crossing the border. Travelling for the sake of travelling and the pragmatic collection of border-crossing stamps makes the visa not only the means of travel but also the reason for travel. If the visa-dependants I studied want to maintain their motility and keep travelling (to wider Europe), they have to keep travelling (to Finland) and express loyalty towards the state issuing the multi-entry Schengen visa. To use their extended mobility rights under the EU regulations, TCNs have to perform endless reproductive labour of compiling a proper travel history of visits to Finland. This labour can be either enforced if Finland is not on the tourist's wish-list or desired as accessible international tourism to the near abroad, which is especially valuable in the absence of time and other recourses to visit further destinations. The very low number of application rejections by the CG of Finland in St. Petersburg due to visa abuse denotes that in most of the cases the labour of care for the visa has been successfully rewarded. Yet, regardless of the precautions taken, every occasion of visa issuance makes the applicants nervous, though hopeful, and their hands tremble as they open the envelope with the passport given back from the consulate and turn the pages to look for the new visa.

Acknowledgements

This article has benefited from thoughtful comments of Laura Assmuth, Olga Brednikova, Olga Hannonen, Jukka Könönen, Daria Krivonos, Pauliina Lukinmaa, Laura Mäki, Elena Nikiforova, Elisa Pascucci, Alena Sivokoz and Oksana Zaporozhets. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their useful critique that improved the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bærenholdt, JO.** 2013. Governmobility: The Powers of Mobility. *Mobilities*, 8(1): 20–34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.747754>
- Bhattacharya, T.** 2017. Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory. In: Bhattacharya, T (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*. London: Pluto Press. pp. 1–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vz494j.5>
- Brabandt, H and Mau, S.** 2013. Liberal Cosmopolitanism and Cross-Border Mobility: The Case of Visa Policies. *Global Society*, 27(1): 53–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2012.734285>

- Czaika, M** and **Neumayer, E.** 2017. Visa restrictions and economic globalisation. *Applied Geography*, 84: 75–82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2017.04.011>
- Dekalchuk, A.** 2014. Schengen Borders in Practice: Facts about Finland (and Russia). *Working Paper Series IR "International Relations". No. WP BRP 05/IR/2014*. Moscow: National Research University – Higher School of Economics. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2498374>
- Endres, M, Manderscheid, K** and **Mincke, C.** 2016. Discourses and ideologies of mobility: An introduction. In: Endres, M, et al. (eds.), *The Mobilities Paradigm: Discourses and Ideologies*. London & New York: Routledge. pp. 1–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315555515-1>
- EUR-Lex.** 2007. *Agreement between the European Community and the Russian Federation on the facilitation of the issuance of visas to the citizens of the European Union and the Russian Federation*. 17 May 2007. Available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:22007A0517\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:22007A0517(01)) [Last accessed 27 April 2020].
- EUR-Lex.** 2009. *Regulation (EC) No 810/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas (Visa Code)*, 10 May 2009. Available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32009R0810> [Last accessed 27 April 2020].
- EUR-Lex.** 2018. *Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement*, 28 November 2018. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32018R1806> [Last accessed 27 April 2020].
- Indicator.** 2020. *Border crossing*, 23 March. Available at <https://findikaattori.fi/en/105> [Last accessed 27 April 2020].
- Foucault, M.** 1994 [1978]. Governmentality. In: Rabonow, P, et al. (eds.), *The Essential*. New York: The New Press. pp. 229–245.
- Franklin, A.** 2004. Tourism as an ordering: Towards a new ontology of tourism. *Tourist Studies*, 4(3): 277–301. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797604057328>
- Freudendal-Pedersen, M.** 2009. *Mobility in Daily Life: Between Freedom and Unfreedom*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Glick Schiller, N** and **Salazar, NB.** 2013. Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(2): 183–200. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.723253>
- Green, P.** 2015. Mobility Regimes in Practice: Later-life Westerners and Visa Runs in South-East Asia. *Mobilities*, 10(5): 748–763. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2014.927203>
- Gülzau, F, Mau, S** and **Zaun, N.** 2016. Regional Mobility Spaces? Visa Waiver Policies and Regional Integration. *International Migration*, 54(6): 164–180. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12286>
- Hall, CM.** 2015. On the mobility of tourism mobilities. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 18(1): 7–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2014.971719>
- Jansen, S.** 2009. After the red passport: Towards an anthropology of the everyday geopolitics of entrapment in the EU's 'immediate outside.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15(4): 815–832. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01586.x>
- Jensen, A.** 2013. Mobility Regimes and Borderwork in the European Community. *Mobilities*, 8(1): 35–51. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.747780>
- Krivonos, D** and **Näre, L.** 2019. Imagining the 'West' in the Context of Global Coloniality: The Case of Post-Soviet Youth Migration to Finland. *Sociology*, 53(6): 1177–1193. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519853111>

- Levada-Center.** 2016. *Nalichie zagranpasporta i poezdki za rubezh* [Possession of international passport and travells abroad], Press Release, 4 April 2016. Available at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/04/26/nalichie-zagranpasporta-i-poezdki-za-rubezh/> [Last accessed 27 April 2020].
- Manderscheid, K.** 2016. Who does the move? Affirmation or deconstruction of the solitary mobile subject. In: Endres, M, et al. (eds.), *The Mobilities Paradigm: Discourses and Ideologies*. London & New York: Routledge. pp. 91–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315555515-6>
- Mau, S.** 2010. Mobility Citizenship, Inequality, and the Liberal State: The Case of Visa Policies. *International Political Sociology*, 4: 339–361. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2010.00110.x>
- Mau, S, Brabandt, H, Laube, L and Roos, C.** 2012. *Liberal States and the Freedom of Movement: Selective Borders, Unequal Mobility*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137016751>
- Mau, S, Gülzau, F, Laube, L and Zaun, N.** 2015. The Global Mobility Divide: How Visa Policies Have Evolved over Time. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(8): 1192–1213. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1005007>
- Mincke, C.** 2016. From mobility to its ideology: When mobility becomes an imperative. In: Endres, M, et al. (eds.), *The Mobilities Paradigm: Discourses and Ideologies*. London & New York: Routledge. pp. 11–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315555515-2>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland.** 2018. *Visa applications by Russians up nearly 60 per cent*. Press Release, 19 January 2018. Available at https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/venalaisten-viisumihakemukset-lisaantyvitalahes-60-prosenttia?curAsset=0&stId=47307 [Last accessed 27 April 2020].
- Navaro-Yashin, Y.** 2007. Make-believe papers, legal forms and the counterfeit: Affective interactions between documents and people in Britain and Cyprus. *Anthropological Theory*, 7(1): 79–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499607074294>
- Neumayer, E.** 2010. Visa Restrictions and Bilateral Travel. *The Professional Geographer*, 62(2): 171–181. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330121003600835>
- Olimpieva, I, Pachenkov, O, Ezhova, L and Gordy, E.** 2007. *Informal Economies of St. Petersburg: Ethnographic Findings on the Cross-border Trade*. Jefferson Institute.
- Passport Index.** 2020. *Global Passport Power Rank*. Available at <https://www.passportindex.org/byRank.php> [Last accessed 27 April 2020].
- Richardson, T.** 2013. Borders and Mobilities: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Mobilities*, 8(1): 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.747747>
- Salter, MB.** 2006. The Global Visa Regime and the Political Technologies of the International Self: Borders, Bodies, Biopolitics. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 31(2): 167–189. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540603100203>
- Salter, MB.** 2013. To Make Move and Let Stop: Mobility and the Assemblage of Circulation. *Mobilities*, 8(1): 7–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.747779>
- Schenk, C.** 2018. *Why control immigration? Strategic uses of migration management in Russia*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487516352>
- Schnepel, B and Alpers, EA.** (eds.) 2018. *Connectivity in Motion: Island Hubs in the Indian Ocean World*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59725-6>
- Shamir, R.** 2005. Without Borders? Notes on Globalization as a Mobility Regime. *Sociological Theory*, 23(2): 197–217. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2005.00250.x>
- Sheller, M.** 2018. *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes*. Verso.

- Sheller, M and Urry, J.** (eds.) 2004. *Tourism Mobilities: Places to Play, Places in Play*. London: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203340332>
- Sheller, M and Urry, J.** 2016. Mobilizing the new mobilities paradigm. *Applied Mobilities*, 1(1): 10–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23800127.2016.1151216>
- ShengenVisaInfo.com.** 2020. *Country-Specific Schengen Visa Statistics*. Available at <https://statistics.schengenvisa.info/> [Last accessed 27 April 2020].
- Stammler-Gossmann, A.** 2010. “Winter-tyres-for-a-flower-bed”: Shuttle trade on the Finish-Russian border. In: Bruns, B, et al. (eds.), *Subverting borders: Doing research on smuggling and small-scale trade*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. pp. 225–247.
- Studzińska, D, Sivokoz, A and Domaniewski, S.** 2018. Russian cross-border shopping tourists in the Finnish and Polish borderlands. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift - Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 72(2): 115–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00291951.2018.1451365>
- Tronto, JC.** 2010. Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality, and Purpose. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 4(2): 158–171. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2010.484259>
- Van der Duim, R, Ren, C and Jóhannesson, GT.** 2013. Ordering, Materiality, and Multiplicity: Enacting Actor-Network Theory in Tourism. *Tourist Studies*, 13(1): 3–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797613476397>

How to cite this article: Tkach, O. 2021. Care for the Visa: Maximising Mobility from Northwest Russia to the Schengen Area. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 11(2), pp. 108–123. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.408>

Submitted: 25 December 2019

Accepted: 26 October 2020

Published: 04 June 2021

Copyright: © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, the material is not used for commercial purposes and is not altered in any way. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.