A Closer Look at Citizenship: The Social Engagement of 'Russian Germans' in Bavaria

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Abstract: *This article draws on ethnographic research with 'Russian Germans' in Bavaria who engage in full-time or voluntary work as administrative counsellors for Ukrainian refugees, unravelling perceptions of citizenship and integration in the context of the current war. It is not uncommon for 'Russian Germans' to be presented negatively on social media: as 'AfD voters' or 'Putin supporters'. I would like to break down the homogenising negative image of this group and instead offer a differentiated picture. Their social engagement, which is articulated and practised in everyday life, changes the positioning of the group in different respects. It expands the participation in social processes that are important for the country. Furthermore, it broadens the political field of action of individual 'Russian-German' citizens in the form of participation, shaping 'integration policy' in Germany. Drawing on field notes and two vignettes, the article points to how participants depoliticise their role and the use of the Russian language, framing their work as ethical citizenship for the common good. The conversations described also draw attention to the 'uncanny' intimacy produced by practices such as gift-giving, in the interface between German and post-Soviet cultural expectations of institutional encounters.*

Keywords: *'Russian Germans'; Ukrainian refugees; counselling; active commitment; citizenship*

Introduction

The imprecise term 'Russian Germans' has become established in the social sciences as well in mainstream popular discourse to refer to people who come not only from Russia, but from various areas of the former Soviet Union (see more in Petersen 2023).[1] While I put this term in inverted commas, I continue to use it instead of 'late repatriates', not only because it is commonly used by the organisations and media studied here, but also because the mention of Russia awakens very specific connotations, whose politicised implications for identity formation are the focus of my research.[2]

'Russian Germans' who emigrated to Germany from various countries of the former USSR find themselves in a remarkable situation as migrants. On the one hand, they are migrants because they have an observable history of migration behind them. On the other hand, according to German citizenship law, they belong to the German nation and have full citizenship rights (Panagiotidis 2021). As a result of this 'legally privileged form of immigration' (Darieva 2006: 352), they have been granted citizenship and various forms of support (cf. Strobl 2006: 88).

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of people fled their homeland in various directions, many of them to Western Europe and Germany. Very soon afterwards, several formal and informal organisations and groups emerged in Germany that were involved in various ways in 'Ukrainian refugee aid'.[3] These organisations made intensive efforts to help

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1 This paper is a part of larger project 'About the fulfilment and failure of the hope of living as a German among Germans. Germans from the former Soviet Union in Bavaria' and is based on field work that has been ongoing in Bavaria since March 2024. The research was carried out at the FHAB: 'Centre for Culture and Remembrance. Expellees and Resettlers in Bavaria' at IOS in Regensburg. The project was financed by the Free State of Bavaria with a special grant (Project TG 78 'Culture and Remembrance. Expellees and Resettlers in Bavaria'].

2 The legal term '*Aussiedler*' (ethnic German repatriates) was introduced by § 1 para. 2 no. 3 of the Federal Constitutional Court Act (BVFG) as a subgroup of the '*Vertriebene*' (expellees) defined in Section 1. People who came to Germany after the 1992 law reform were defined as ethnic German repatriates (Panagiotidis 2020: 109).

3 The research was carried out using various qualitative methods: participant observation in counselling centres and the cultural organisations of 'Russian Germans' as well as in the places where Russian-speakers gather: in 'Russian shops', Orthodox churches, etc. Other components of the research included topic-centred interviews on citizenship and identity, the keeping of diaries, the research and analysis of information from public media and politics in connection with a focus group, and newspaper analyses. I had informal conversations directly with six counsellors. Additionally, I conducted seven topic-centred

Ukrainians throughout Germany. Nationwide, nine of these are cultural organisations of 'Russian Germans'.[4] The organisations serve to maintain the culture, traditions, and customs of Germans from the former USSR and former areas of German settlement in Central and Eastern Europe, and they now also offer state-funded advice for adult immigrants. Informal and voluntary help from members of these organisations is difficult to quantify (in Bavaria alone there are 17 local institutions).

Members of this group were perceived by various state institutions as mediators of sorts, who, in addition to their linguistic resources (speaking, besides German, mainly Russian and sometimes also Ukrainian), were also familiar with the post-socialist experiences of citizens of the former Soviet space and could thus better help Ukrainian refugees (see also Wagner and Schwenken 2023: 51–52).

In some cases, the counsellors (project-based counsellors at state-funded institutions dedicated to Germans from the former USSR or Eastern Europe) come from Ukraine themselves and therefore have a deep emotional connection to the work. Very often, full-time employees in integration work also do voluntary work in their free time. My research interlocutors are officially employed in state 'integration infrastructures'. For my analysis I use the term 'integration as a process' (*Integration als Geschehen und Prozess*) in the sense employed by Friedrich Heckmann (2015: 78). My interlocutors are described as working in the field of integration (*Integrationsbereich*), meaning they are involved in teaching German to adult migrants and offering guidance in the search for public services, etc. To put it another way, these people help new arrivals to settle in and find a common language with the host state's institutions. They are also active in 'political education' by designing and organising workshops for social workers in which socially and politically relevant topics, such as discrimination, diversity, and similar issues, are discussed.[5]

This article is structured as follows. I will first present a newspaper article and use it as an opening story through which to reflect on the actual perceptions of 'Russian Germans' in Germany. I will then briefly discuss concepts such as citizenship, integration, and identity and place them in a theoretical framework. The main part of my discussion includes two ethnographic vignettes that are intended

interviews and had several informal conversations with activists working in the immediate vicinity of the consultants and I report on their activities from an outside perspective. These activists themselves often work voluntarily with Ukrainian refugees.

4 These are larger organizations with established structures. There are also numerous smaller local groups that also carry out aid activities.

5 As part of my research, I have further ethnographic observations from practice in political education. However, this paper focuses only on refugee counselling.

to draw a differentiated and contrasting picture of the negative image of politicised identities about 'Russian Germans'. The ethnographic description focuses on the everyday life of refugee counsellors at their workplace. I use situational analysis to unravel various relevant nuances of how citizenship and integration are perceived, both from above (the state perspective) and from below (at the individual level of those affected). Finally, I present my conclusions.

I develop the article's argument along the following lines: Through their everyday full-time or voluntary activities, 'Russian Germans' busy in the field of integration as refugee counsellors perform a form of 'active commitment', whereby they practise 'good citizenship' and contribute to the common good of German society. Due to the work ethic of employees in integration work, the actions of refugee counsellors are very complex. On the one hand, they act according to administrative rules in how they operate, speak, and define problems and processes in relation to their clients (cf. Walther 2021). On the other hand, they themselves are people with similar experiences as newcomers trying to understand the German state. Decades of experience in 'speaking' to the new state (cf. Obeid 2010: 339) after migrating have equipped them with valuable 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1988), which they actively apply in their current work. This knowledge strengthens their ability to act and thus expands the political agency of early migrants to participate in important social events in their new home country.

In addition, sound 'situated knowledges' give them the capacity to determine which measures are appropriate and effective in the context of their own work. This happens in the following way. The counsellors present their work as 'apolitical', that is, disconnected from the topic of the war, and claim to maintain objectivity in terms of counselling. In order to keep their work 'apolitical', they 'depoliticise' their field of action – the counselling office. This is framed as follows: what takes place in the counselling rooms is assistance, similar to humanitarian aid, and everyone in need is helped, regardless of nationality or country of origin (cf. Brković 2016).

Last but not least, one of the very special features of these consultations is the 'language of help' itself. The use of the Russian language in these consultations generates ambiguities in the processes that gives rise to delicate, opaque situations that could be labelled 'uncanny-intimate'. As I will describe and analyse in my ethnographic case studies, the counsellors look for the best ways to deal with and manage erased ambiguities (cf. Brković 2017).

The newspaper report

In April 2024, the Federal Criminal Police Office in Bavaria arrested two individuals with dual German and Russian citizenship and accused them of spying for Russia and planning acts of sabotage. The newspaper article, titled 'Putin's Spies in Bavaria', reported that the acts of sabotage were intended in particular to 'undermine the military support provided by Germany to Ukraine against the Russian war of aggression'. (Clasmann 2024: 2) One of those arrested, Dieter S., is said to have fought for the pro-Russian organisation 'Donetsk People's Republic' in eastern Ukraine between December 2014 and September 2016. The article continued: "Foreign Minister Baerbock summoned the Russian ambassador after the arrest. 'The suspicion that Putin is recruiting agents in our country to carry out attacks on German soil is extremely serious' [...]. The German government will not allow the Russian president to 'bring his terror to Germany'" […]. (Clasmann in Mittelbayerische Zeitung, 19 April 2024: 2 [my translation])

This newspaper article can be approached as a case for discussions of political anthropology, such as citizenship, membership, and the politicisation of identities. The two detainees have dual citizenship and are said to be actively involved in transnational political and social networks. In addition, their dual citizenship is seen as a type of liability for belonging to two states: Germany and Russia. In addition to citizenship, other identities also seem to be at play. Those affected are 'Russian Germans', a diverse group of people who immigrated to Germany from the former USSR in the 1990s (Panagiotidis 2021). They are regarded as Germans because of their legally defined German ethnic origin, which is culturally and socially controversial (cf. Ipsen-Peitzmeier and Kaiser 2006; Aivazishvili-Gehne 2024: 120).

This group is already stereotyped as lacking loyalty to the German state and as associated with the AfD or with 'Putin's Russia' (Panagiotidis 2021: 151–152). Although the term 'Russian Germans' *per se* does not have the direct meaning of being 'Russia's Germans' or 'Putin's fifth column' (cf. Panagiotidis: 151), in a time of war it takes on highly politicised, negative connotations (Aivazishvili-Gehne; Jašina-Schäfer and Panagiotidis 2022). Nevertheless, there are many 'Russian Germans' in Germany who dedicate their everyday lives to the common good, both full-time and on a voluntary basis, providing newcomers with the information they need to make their entry into the new society as easy as possible.[6] I understand these everyday activities as practices of citizenship in which different

[6] For my analysis I use the term 'common good' (*Gemeinwohl*) and not 'commonwealth' (*Gemeinwesen*). For a detailed differentiation between these two terms, see Eckert (2020: 13).

forms of state–citizen relations and citizenship rights are negotiated. Bryan Turner (1997) speaks of 'civic virtue' and solidarity to describe such citizenship activities (ibid.: 8). Andrea Muehlebach (2012) defines them as deeds of 'ethical citizenship' shaped by the 'desire' of citizens to 'create collective good through empathetic acts' (ibid.: 17).

It is therefore relevant to focus on networks of 'Russian Germans', people who act every day as committed and thus good citizens of Germany. However, before I get to my ethnographic case studies, I would like to briefly outline my theoretical framework and introduce some discussions of terms such as 'citizenship', 'state', and 'integration' to which my material contributes.

Theoretical considerations on state, citizenship, and integration

One of the classic works that addresses and analyses state–citizen relations in the everyday contexts of 'encounters' is by Akhil Gupta (2006). Gupta claims that citizens 'encounter' the state at the local level through their interactions with bureaucrats (Gupta 2006: 214).

Gupta's considerations are helpful for my analysis. Nevertheless, following the suggestions of Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Vetters, and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (2018), I complicate this perspective and focus on the practices and politics of 'relational modalities, embeddedness and boundary work' (cf. ibid.: 10–11; see also Thiemann 2024: 5). This approach helps to better illuminate the perceptions of not only those seeking help but also the counsellors who explain, translate (literally and figuratively), and bring the 'state' (the rules) closer to the newcomers. For this reason, I take a closer look not only at how ordinary people perceive the state, but also at how the state 'sees' new arrivals (cf. Scott 1999), 'knows' how to use relevant practices (cf. Eckert 2020), and 'works' (cf. Bierschenk and de Sardan 2014). In other words, my contribution offers insights into the 'heart' of the state (cf. Fassin 2015).

By the 'state' I mean its bureaucratic dimension, which is 'expressed in tangible institutions as well as discourse' (Brown 2006: 192). Interaction between citizens/residents and the state is not static. Representations are based on diverse individual experiences and depend on historical context. From this perspective, the practices and rights of citizenship are also to be understood as produced in a constant process that involves specific social, political, and economic relations (cf. Anderson 2013: 2). Here the focus is less on how civil, political, or social rights are articulated (cf. Marshall 1998), and more on the practices that are carried out in the name of the positive state–citizen relationship and are geared to creating the best possible cooperative society for the common good (cf. Rawls 1998: 60).

I understand the above-mentioned best possible cooperation in society as 'good citizenship'. My understanding of such citizenship has similarities with Andrea Muehlebach's (2012) concept of 'ethical citizenship', where active 'soulful' citizens provide relational labour and engage in publicly useful activity (ibid.: 18). Such citizenship 'has citizens imagine themselves as bound together by moral and affective rather than social and political ties, and primarily through duties rather than rights' (Muehlebach 2012: 43).

I conclude my theoretical framing and reflections by briefly addressing the term 'integration'. It is beyond the scope of this paper to showcase the entire discussion about why the term has been heavily criticised in the social sciences (Favell 2019, 2001; Rytter 2019). Instead, I focus on 'the process called integration' (cf. Heckmann 2015) and analyse the practices of 'how it works' (Vertovec 2020:10).

Sitting 'on the other side of the table': everyday life for refugee counsellors from the former USSR in Bavaria

When asked about their motivation for taking on counselling work, my interlocutors gave similar answers in every case, saying that they knew very well how important such advice was. They explained that two or in some cases three decades ago, they themselves had come to Germany from the USSR and were 'sitting on the other side of the [counsellors'] table'. They hoped for hints and advice about how they could best cope in their new living environment. In some cases, the counsellors themselves had come from Ukraine, and, in addition to good will, they had a very high emotional connection to the job involved. They felt bound to their old homeland, too, suffered together with their clients, and tried to do not only factual or practical but also emotional work.

The field of research proved to be particularly sensitive. Since the data on refugees had to be handled very carefully, I faced strict restrictions. I was only allowed to gain a few insights from the counselling situations myself and most of the conversations with counsellors were conducted without a recording device. Conversations were held almost exclusively in German. Only when it came to certain bureaucratic terms, common for Russian-speaking clients, they were explained to me in Russian in addition to German. For data protection reasons, not only are all names anonymised, but no exact names of the employing institutions are mentioned.

In almost all cases, the counselling was conducted in Russian, as the refugees did not speak German and the counsellors were mostly Russian-speaking. The aspect of language mediation was not always without problems. Some clients refused to speak in Russian. In such cases, counselling was not possible and

those seeking help were forwarded to Ukrainian speakers. I will come back to the linguistic aspects of counselling later, but at this point I would like to present my first ethnographic vignette.

> Tatjana (a 31-year-old 'Russian German' from Ukraine, who came to Germany as a child in 2003) is a counsellor and we have an appointment. […] I sit quietly on the stairs behind the chair where the person seeking help is sitting. Tatjana and I thought this place would be the least disturbing. It was possible to hear everything well and not irritate people with eye contact. Of course, we had asked the visitors in advance whether I could be there to listen to the conversation. […] The counselling is conducted in Russian […]."
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> A woman in her fifties is looking for help. She stays for 45 minutes. The consultation is about housing costs. The ancillary costs were too high for her and she tried to get a new apartment or to get financial help from a job centre. Tatjana wrote a suitable letter for this purpose. The woman kept repeating that the counsellor should write the letter in a way that would definitely help her. Tatjana translated the tenancy agreement for the flat point by point and tried to explain to her that she couldn't expect any reduction in the amount of rent. She would try to change something with the letter, but she couldn't promise anything. […]
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> As soon as the woman leaves, another one comes in. This woman, evidently in her late thirties, seems to be familiar with Tatjana. She enters with a smile, addresses the counsellor using a diminutive version of her first name [Tanjushka], and brings her some fruit. "I've already heard on the phone that you have a cold, these are the vitamins for you." […] This second visitor has three different official letters with her that she didn't really understand and wanted to consult with 'Tanjushka' about. This conversation is again entirely in Russian. She is also warned by Tatjana that an appeal letter will be sent to the job centre, but whether they will be courteous remains open. […] This visit lasts half an hour and is followed by a telephone consultation with another person. Since Tatjana is ill, she quits work early today. She does not take the fruit bowl the visitor brought with her, but places it in the reception room for everyone. (field diary, 2 May 2024)

While this ethnographic vignette only shows small fragments of a counsellor's daily work, it nevertheless enables a multi-layered analysis of integration as a process.

On my next visit, Tatjana summarised her activity logs for me. Other carers did the same. It is remarkable how many people the individual employees

look after each year. In some cases it is hundreds, in others thousands. One counsellor living in the same city, but from another organisation, provided 1,359 individual counselling sessions in one and a half years. Two other women from another city in Bavaria had 2,260 counselling sessions in one year. Some clients come several times. There are families who only come once a year and some who come every month. (The record was 30 sessions for one person in one year). The numbers per person are recorded, but the actual counselling sessions overall is much higher.

The example also shows how familiarity at the workplace is constantly renegotiated (cf. Thelen, Thiemann and Roth 2018). The counsellor is addressed with both polite phrases and terms of endearment. Not only material things such as letters or bills are brought to the counselling session, but also small gifts that express empathy, intimacy, and gratitude. These gestures are not always easy to handle and sometimes lead to misunderstandings on both sides. This aspect is explored further in the second vignette below.

Emotional empathy comes into play in diverse contexts. Tatjana is aware that these people are very dependent on her help, so she puts her own health second and is there for those seeking help, even when she is not feeling so well herself. Looking at the example of Tatjana (and observing similar commitment with other counsellors), Julia Eckert's critique of the common perception of civil servants as abstract 'automatons' is relevant here. They should not be seen as being driven only by self-interest or calculation (Eckert 2020: 14).

Tatjana expressed her own motivation for assisting people in the following words: 'I should start my story a bit from my earlier experiences. There was the same [desire and willingness to help needy Ukrainians] in our family long before this conflict – my aunt and uncle in Odessa were already volunteers [before February 2022; they had been involved in helping refugees in Ukraine since 2014]. My aunt organised ten women around her. They cooked for soldiers. When the war broke out [in February 2022] I was shocked and wanted to do something as well. This activity here is not my professional work. I didn't study social work or social education [but design].' (Tatjana, 2 May 2024)

At our second meeting a few weeks later, Tatjana mentioned that she herself had been helped in this way when she came to Germany, and this experience played an important role in her decision to take up this job.

Tatjana has held her current position since October 2022. Prior to that, she worked as an unpaid translator at the Family Benefits Office.[7] At the time, she was also translating for the city she lives in, which was a paid job. Nevertheless,

7 She speaks both Russian and Ukrainian as her mother tongues.

the job was emotionally taxing: 'I have a child myself [a 4-year-old boy], and it was mainly about children, minors from 10 to 16, unaccompanied. They were sent out of the war zones alone by their parents. The mothers stayed with fathers themselves. It was hard and that's why I was glad the job worked out here.' (Tatjana, 2 May 2024)

Here, too, it is clear that work is not just an activity that is over at the end of the workday and with which a person no longer has any emotional involvement with after they go home. As a counsellor, but also as a person, Tatjana is emotional and empathetic. She explains her motivation not only as someone from Ukraine, but also as a mother who understands very well how difficult the situation can be for minors and their family members, and what it means to give up being with your own children and to send them into the unknown in the hope that they will survive.

Among other things, we also talked about daily routines. Tatjana works two days full-time and two days part-time. She accepts up to twenty clients per week, exclusively from Ukraine. Most of the visitors are women, but in the last four or five months more old men have been coming than before. On the day we spoke she had five clients. One man and four women.

> 'The dates are usually set one week in advance by appointment. Otherwise, it would be impossible for me to work. There are a lot of them. Per day usually up to eight people with appointments. Some try without, but then they have to wait a long time. Sometimes there is a queue here.' When departing, she said with a smile: " think I won't take sick leave either. There is no one here to stand in for me.' (field diary, 2 May 2024)
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> Tatjana's everyday counselling mostly involves issues related to initial registration, finding accommodation, and the like:
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> 'There are still many people arriving. I would have thought there would be less now, but no. More and more are coming. Some could speak Russian but refuse to do so and only want to speak in Ukrainian. The emotional situation is difficult. People are very depressed and emotionally not stable. Older people often come and ask about digital registration. The job centre service is becoming more and more digital and it is very difficult for old people to follow it. […] Young people usually only come once. I show them where and what is being done and they learn it ...Very often it is about looking for a job. We then search together according to their profile.' (ibid.)
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> Tatjana is very reflective and critical in her observations and assessments. In addition to the emotional situation, the technical and bureaucratic hurdles that new arrivals must overcome are mentioned. Reflecting on the state's labour

policy, she said: 'I'm so annoyed with the labour policy myself. I have so many good people. Doctors, surgeons. They can't do anything here. It is impossible to achieve C1 in one year. It's a pity.' (field diary, 2 May 2024)[8]

A box of chocolates, the Russian language, and misinterpretations in counselling for refugees

I found the refugee counsellors Katharina and Ira (as they are called here) in an online search. After making contact by email, they agreed to talk to me. Yet due to their busy schedule, the meeting did not take place until a month after the initial contact. Here are some of my impressions from the first meeting:

'Katharina and Ira share a room. They sit opposite each other at a spacious table on which computers are placed. On one wall is a display of flyers on various integrative measures and offers. The women were very helpful. We had two hours for our informal conversation and this took place with both of them together. Their own experiences as newcomers were one of the themes. Both mentioned that this experience affected their desire to go to counselling themselves. "It is a great job; you help migrants enter the new society".' (field diary, 12 July 2024)[9]

Katharina is 46 years old. She originally comes from northern Kazakhstan and has a mixed Russian – 'Russian German' family history. She is married with two children. In one of the transit camps (Durchgangslager) in Bavaria, Katharina's family was counselled by social education workers (*Sozialpädagogen*). Until then, she had not known about this job and was immediately fascinated.

Katharina had studied Slavic languages and philology in Kazakhstan, but her diplomas were not recognised in Germany. Wanting to pursue her studies, she obtained information from a university and thought about which course of study would be suitable for her. She was asked to choose between psychology and

8 A C1 Certificate is a German-language exam for adults. It confirms an advanced language level and corresponds to the fifth level (C1) on the six-level competence scale of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

9 In contrast to Tatjana, who has worked with refugees from Ukraine from the beginning, Katharina and Ira, as counsellors for adult immigrants (MBE- Migrationsberatung für die erwachsene Zuwanderer) had been advising various migrant workers from Eastern Europe and refugees from different countries in Germany for years before February 2022. From 2015 till 2018 these were people from Syria, Iraq, and Iran, later followed by Bulgarians and Romanians.

social education and decided on the latter. During this period and in the first few years after her studies, she volunteered to help neighbours, relatives, and others. 'We [she and her husband] were very young when we arrived and were quicker to learn the language than our older acquaintances. We then helped them with what we could, be it translating official letters, doctor's visits, etc.' (Katharina, 12 July 2024)

Ira is also 46 years old, married, and a mother of two. She arrived in Germany in 2001. Before then, however, she had been in Germany for a year on an *au pair* programme. As Ira explained, she thus got to know the German language and society better. She returned to Kazakhstan and soon after came back with her family, her husband and two children, as a 'late repatriate'.

Among other things, we talked about the term 'Russian Germans' and the Russian language as a means of communication at this meeting. When asked whether the term 'Russian Germans' was all right to apply to the refugees from Ukraine they are counselling, they admitted that it is difficult for some of them to hear. 'They immediately think of Russia and don't want to have anything to do with people from Russia.' (Katharina)

Concerning the contemporary framing of the role and work of 'Russian Germans' they said:

> 'There is currently a kind of hysteria in Germany, everything that has to do with Russia is immediately turned negative, is suspicious. This is also the case with the name "Russian Germans", or with speaking Russian.' (Ira)
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> Katharina added: 'But it says everywhere, on flyers and on the website, that we take care of everyone. We help all refugees.' Smiling, Katharina continued by saying that Ukrainians call her 'our lawyer' in [name of a social media platform] groups. 'If someone needs help, they say, go to Katharina and Ira, "to our lawyers". We are not lawyers and are not allowed to offer legal advice, but they understand it differently.'
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> Ira continued: 'There were a few cases where the customers tried to talk in Ukrainian and I said, I'm sorry, but I really can't understand what you're saying. If you want to have advice in Ukrainian, you might want to look for help elsewhere. Here I can help you in Russian or in German. Then they understood and spoke Russian. However, offering advice in Russian is very complex and difficult because of the different context. Because we speak in Russian, the assumption automatically arises that we are on their[clients] side. They don't perceive us as advisors at all, but as their own people, like friends – that we will always be on their side, even if it goes against the job centre's interests. Maintaining that boundary is very difficult.'

Katharina: 'With Syrians, for example, or with Iranians, the session lasted 20, at most 30 minutes. Everything remained the same. If there was an application or letter, we helped and then it was over.'

Ira: 'And the Ukrainians keep looking at the clock. A session lasts an hour and they really try to use it to the last minute. That makes a difference. It's much more intense at the moment. And we are supposed to document everything and enter it into tables. It's also very emotional. There is case and pre- and post-history. They try to learn as much as possible during appointments.' By this she meant that when they talk to clients in German, the conversation remains purely factual. When speaking in Russian, however, the visitors try to make the conversation intimate. It's not just about finding solutions or counselling. And since they are fleeing the war, these are very dramatic and psychologically stressful stories.

Katharina and Ira also told me about other difficulties, smiling when it comes to the issue of refusing gifts. Ira (laughing): 'It's a daily struggle. Whether it's a box of chocolates or fruit. "It's just vitamins." "It's just chocolate." Sometimes they go out and at the door they leave a box of chocolate and disappear. I can't keep up. We try to explain that it doesn't work, but they don't understand. It's like that in Ukraine. "You don't get anything done without gifts", they say. Then I argue, "I'll lose my job. Do you want that?" "No, Ira, we need you." "Then I am not allowed to accept chocolate." "Why not, there are no surveillance cameras here."" [We laugh together] (field diary, Katharina and Ira, 12 July 2024)

Like the first vignette, these conversations also offer the possibility to analyse the process of counselling (and thus integration at work) in various directions. The women mentioned the particular sensitivity in the German discourse regarding the association of refugee counselors with 'Russia' (because of the term 'Russian Germans' and speaking Russian).

Katharina and Ira talked about a 'hysteria', which they do not share for the reason of their work ethic to help with people in need regardless of their nationality or country of origin. They help everyone. In doing so, they declare themselves and their own work as 'apolitical', meaning 'beyond political divisions'. This last aspect is a quite a widespread strategy in humanitarian work (see Brković 2016; for Germany see Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; Fleischmann 2019).

Čarna Brković describes this strategy as 'everyday humanitarianism' and 'depoliticisation "from below"' (2016). Based on ethnographic research in a Bosnian town, she argues that the depoliticisation of aid and distancing oneself from ethno-national rhetoric is the only reasonable strategy people can

adopt for their well-being and survival (ibid.: 109–110). I am aware that the above-mentioned authors are talking about humanitarianism, but my interlocutors frame the motivation to help through refugee counselling in a similar way. To them it is an act of humanity and thus should be apolitical. I am also well aware of the authors' critical scientific reflection on helpers' 'apolitical' attitude: rather than being located outside politics, new forms of helping are indeed highly political and have ambivalent effects. On the one hand, they can reinforce an increasingly repressive migration regime and be complicit in the reproduction of hegemonic inequalities and hierarchies; on the other hand, these developments create political opportunities that promote change (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017: 18).

However, speaking in Russian is difficult not only because of the context of the current war. The Russian language creates a troublesome intimate space which is 'uncanny' in the counselling context. The boundaries between work and private life became more porous. Alongside the newcomers' perception of Katharina and Ira's role in a German state institution, they are understood as 'our own lawyers', 'our own people', or even friends (cf. Yurchak 2005: 114).[10] The gifts play an important role in this (in)formal relationship and lead us to another point of discussion: the different work ethics in Germany and Ukraine. What is considered a bribe or unacceptable excessively familiar behaviour in a German workplace is interpreted as a necessary measure to protect oneself or loved ones in the Ukrainian context (cf. Wanner 2006; Polese 2008). Sometimes it is even an expression of gratitude, respect and honour (Wanner 2006: 529) or a token of appreciation for a good person (ibid.: 230–231; cf. Stan 2012: 74; Humphrey 2012), or even for a friend who helped.[11] The post-socialist phenomena of doing favours, giving gifts, and attempts to form personal ties (as well as outright bribes) with public institutions are well documented (see Ledeneva 1998; Humphrey 2002; Patico 2002; Dunn 2004; Rivkin-Fisch 2005; Brković 2022). These behaviours lead to complications that result from different experiences as a citizen at home in one's own state and in the new environment.

My examples also show that the 'Russian Germans' who immigrated decades ago are currently renegotiating their belonging as citizens in Germany. The establishment and activation of a new type of agency is linked to various internal and

[10] 'Our own people' (*Svoi ljudi*) refers to people close to you, 'normal people' with whom you lead a 'normal life'. Often *svoi* are like-minded people, friends, or friendly colleagues (Yurchak 2005: 114).

[11] For similar approaches to the phenomenon of gift-giving in post-socialist Azerbaijan and Georgia, see Aivazishvili-Gehne (2023).

external processes among 'Russian Germans'. Firstly, this has to do with a generational change. Younger generations make the group identity much more visible and audible than was the case in the first few years after 'Russian Germans' first began arriving. Various media platforms (such as Ostcklick or Steppenkinder) have emerged across Germany that deal not only with history and the past, but also specifically with the self-positioning of 'Russian Germans' in today's Germany.[12] This new kind of visibility and audibility not only has an outward effect, but also redefines the understanding and self-perception of the group's members. An important part of this self-positioning is individuals' own attitude towards the politicisation of identities in times of war. This attitude is linked to the question of (dis)loyalty to Germany, which has become relevant since 2014 with the war in Ukraine and more acutely since February 2022. It is for this very reason that the newspaper article analysed in this paper mentions the dual citizenship of the 'Russian Germans' accused in the espionage case as a kind of incriminating evidence.

Some concluding remarks

Using two ethnographic vignettes from Bavaria, I have given the reader an insight into the everyday life of 'Russian German' refugee counsellors. In doing so, I have shown how the process of counselling (and thus integration) 'works' (cf. Vertovec 2020). These examples illustrate that the counselling process is highly sensitive, emotional, and complex. The counsellors' actions are shaped and influenced by their own past and their experiences as newcomers and foreigners. At the same time, they have internalised a work ethic and act in accordance with state regulations and restrictions suitable to 'the ethics of office' (cf. Eckert 2020: 25). We should also take into consideration that counsellors are not only active and socially critical, but also possess enormously important 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1988), which should definitely be taken into account, respected, and used productively by German structures receiving newcomers/refugees. Finally, their post-socialist experience of dealing with state institutions plays a crucial role in their understanding of how best to help those seeking assistance. The balancing act between these areas of experience requires a strong sense of agency. Emotional stress is unavoidable.

[12] Ostklick is a digital space where Russian-German, Eastern European, and post-Soviet communities and democratic voices come together. Steppenkinder, – a podcast for 'late repatriates', discusses the history of those who came to Germany as children and young people from the Soviet Union.

At the same time, it should be made clear what is socially or legally unacceptable in the new environment. On the one hand, the counsellors want to help the new arrivals, even at the expense of their own well-being, because they know fully well that these people are dependent on their help. On the other hand, they want to observe the necessary ethical boundaries so as not to do anything wrong. And this should be done carefully so that people who are already in an emergency do not feel even more frustrated, misunderstood, or offended. Many practical things also require sensitivity, including language as a means of communication. It matters in what language and in what way someone speaks.

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