In recent decades, the notions of racism and discrimination have become some of the major frames of reference in addressing ethnicity-related issues worldwide. Narratives resting on the respective terminology do not look odd anymore in any country outside North America or Western Europe. This global shift prompts applying the same approach to Russia: the country has an ethnically diverse population; a ban on violation of equal rights is declared in the Constitution and national legislation; Russia bears international obligations concerning nondiscrimination, and international law still serves as a system of reference for the government and a large part of the general public; for decades social equality was an idol of the ruling communist party, and the vocabulary of equality penetrated numerous official declarations; academia and legal professionals have no obstacles to being aware of the disputes about racism and discrimination outside the country.

This article provides a brief overview of how the Russian society at large reacts to the phenomena that would be labeled racism or racial discrimination. Regrettably, the theme remains insufficiently studied so far; almost all of the few academic publications available are dedicated to ethnic violence and radical nationalist activities. More clarity in addressing this general issue can be achieved by dividing it into several questions narrower in scope. Are interpretative schemes resting on the notions of racism and racial discrimination employed in Russia? What kinds of social phenomena become visible and thus publicly debated through these terminologies and explanatory frames? Do people follow alternative ways to describe and explain prejudices, aggression and inequalities on ethnic or
I. ‘Racism’ and ‘Discrimination’ as Practical Categories and Cognitive Tools

Mapping the Russian case invites one to draw a parallel with ‘racisms’ or ‘counter-racisms’ in other regional or national frameworks, and this, in turn, raises questions. In addressing ethnicity-related issues, Russia employs a blend of different categorizations, and public discourses incorporate racial, ethnic, and ‘national’ (in the meaning of ethnic origin or ascribed ethnicity) terminology. Words like ‘racial’ and ‘racism’ are in use in Russia, although in a limited capacity with blurry and shifting meanings and basically remain unpopular. Russians prefer to speak about ‘ethnic discrimination’ or ‘national (with ethnic connotations) discrimination’. For this reason, the terms ‘ethnic’ and ‘racial’ discrimination will be employed here as full synonyms.

The labels of racism and discrimination, once a ‘local knowledge’ predominantly in North America, have become an agenda actively pushed toward global acceptance; nevertheless, until recently, there was no uniformity in their interpretation and application in many respects; each term marked different approaches and practices in numerous areas of human activity. The word ‘racism’ has been vaguely defined in a variety of ways and encompasses ideas, attitudes, and behaviors such as hate speech, violence, and differential treatment of people. In most cases, the term is employed in civil activism and sociology of race relations and may mean the belief that socially relevant characteristics of human beings must be regarded as derivatives of their belonging to certain categories defined in terms of origin (often taken with biological connotations), phenotypic characteristics,

2 Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (Basic Books, New York, 1983).