Athens Journal of Demography & Anthropology –
Volume 1, Issue 1, March 2025 – Pages 31-50

Linguistic and Cultural Adaptation of the Russophone Migrant Women

By Maria Yelenevskaya[±] & Ekaterina Protassova[*]

Based on individual and group interviews, as well as on written sources, this study focused on female practices of linguistic and cultural adaptation in immigration. In Russophone families, women play the central role in creating a sense of home away from home through preservation of cultural traditions and community connections. At the same time, they face numerous challenges such as discrimination and language barrier. In some cases, they also become sole breadwinners, thus bearing the double load of occupational and household duties. The women's resilience and dedication contribute to family stability and well-being, serving as a source of inspiration for the young. Russophone immigrant women often influence family language policies by deciding which language/s they speak to the children. The choice of home language/s often depends on such factors as fluency in different languages and beliefs about cultural heritage. Expansion of language repertoires typical of Russophone immigrant families leads to translanguaging and code mixing. An initial choice between the native language and the language of the new country may gradually change, impacting children's linguistic and cultural development. On the other hand, children's integration into the local society and cultural hybridization affects family language policies. Besides occupational and linguistic challenges, Russophone women are sometimes confronted with ethnic discrimination. As a result, some feel ashamed of or try to hide their background, while others seek support through social networks or online communities when offline communication with the co-ethnics is limited.

Keywords: *integration, post-Soviet states, Russian language, intercultural marriage, family language policy, multilingualism, female communities, Russophone women*

Introduction

Since immigration is a stressful life event for adults and children, it often proves a hard test for families. On the one hand, in the Soviet period women made a leap in emancipation competing with men in terms of education and career targets; on the other hand, the popular perception of gender roles in the family remained largely patriarchal and conservative (Peri 2018, Varga-Harris 2019). The need to excel at work, participate in public life did not free women of the burden of household duties. Women were expected to be skillful housekeepers, caring wives, and the main educators of the children. The abundance of obligations drained women and in many ways made them feel and behave patronizingly towards men (Engel, Posadskaya-Vanderbeck 1998). The clash of the "Soviet super-woman" and the lazy and "good-

[±]Senior Teaching Fellow, Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel.
[*]Associate Professor, University of Helsinki, Finland.

https://doi.org/10.30958/ajda.1-1-2 doi=10.30958/ajda.1-1-2

for-nothing man" was a popular topic of the Soviet jokelore (Antoshchuk, Gewinner 2020). The shuttle trade, often underestimated due to its seemingly small scale, emerged as a significant aspect of Russian consumer trade in the 1990s, primarily driven by women, with Mukhina's (2014) study shedding light on their motivations, experiences, and the broader social impact, revealing how gender dynamics shaped the transition period from communism to market economies and highlighting the disparities between market rhetoric and reality.

Paradoxically, it was the reformist Mikhail Gorbachev who declared as a societal goal to bring women back home so that they could act as wives and mothers without having to seek employment. This paved the way to overtly discriminatory attitudes to women and policies developed in the Russian post-Soviet labor market (Riabova, Ovcharova 2016). These views were expressed officially and went hand in hand with rejection of feminism. Even in emigration, interviews with older women reveal common themes of social suffering, including trauma of World War II, poor living conditions in the Soviet Union, scarcity of resources, and fear of persecution, all of which influenced their sense of identity (Pushkareva 2013). These interviews show a prevalent feeling of disconnection from the future, highlighting the importance of life stability (de Medeiros et al. 2015). However, in the first post-Soviet years, when Russians did not travel much, the myth that everybody living abroad was affluent still lingered on.

Moreover, women themselves dismissed feminism as inapplicable in the Russian situation. In the 1970s nearly 90 per cent of the women were employed. After the demise of the Soviet Union these numbers dropped, but most women could not afford to stay at home even if they wanted to and sought alternative means of earning a living, for example, in other parts of the former Soviet Union (Kangas et al. 2023, Kosmarskaya 2022). For many marrying a foreigner seemed to be the only reasonable alternative, promising stability and affluence. Matchmaking agencies opened in many towns, helping their clients to write letters to their suitors (some of the brides did not speak any other languages but Russian). The agencies organized photo-sessions and even distributed texts explaining specific features of the "national character" of potential grooms (Heyse 2011). As a result, many a disappointment awaited "Russian brides" who found upon arrival in their spouse's country that their husbands could not afford the luxuries they had dreamt about (Cvajner 2019). The most common problems encountered by Russian-speaking immigrants is difficulties in finding jobs due to incompatibility of skills or impossibility of practicing their profession in the new country. This is common among the highly educated, reluctant to retrain and/or learn new skills in the occupations which are in demand in the local labor market (Sverdljuk 2010, 2016). Sivoplyasova and Gafurova (2022) claim that the number of Russians moving abroad for marriage and family creation is increasing, particularly towards Eastern countries like Korea, China, and Japan. Recent years have seen a shift in motivations, with moral and psychological factors playing a significant role. Additionally, there is a shift in the marriage market infrastructure, with the emergence of dating sites alongside traditional marriage agencies.

In the Soviet period interethnic marriages were encouraged because they were regarded as contributors to the gradual disappearance of differences between the peoples populating the country. Soviet ideology viewed intermarriages as more

progressive because they were less subject to the hold of traditional values; moreover, they reinforced Russification as partners would often use Russian as a home language (Gorenburg 2006: 149–150). Intermarriages with foreigners were very rare in the Soviet period, because few people were allowed or had a chance to maintain international contacts. Furthermore, until Perestroika, marrying a Westerner was akin to treason, and could have adverse effect on the career and social status of the "defecting" bride's family members remaining in the USSR. However, in the post-Soviet period transnational marriage migration evolved into one of the chief forms of mobility for women. Ryazantsev and Sivoplyasova (2020) state that "Russian brides" are primarily women from post-Soviet nations who speak Russian and have a Slavic look, creating a kind of brand on the worldwide marriage market. There are different models for finding foreign husbands: through match-making agencies, independent search on the internet, personal meetings through work or during vacations, and through family members or friends residing abroad. Along with the opportunity to study abroad, Russophone girls have gained a chance for a more careful selection of their future, including search for a spouse, and entering same-sex relationships and partnerships.

Societal expectations of gender roles are often expressed by the media and the media shapes them. Shevchenko and Lachover (2023) examine media representations of 1.5 generation post-Soviet women in Israel using a special issue of the periodical *La'isha* [Woman], highlighting four discourses shaping women's identity (nationality, Russianness, transforming into an Israeli, successfulness). They argue that the magazine portrays them as successful symbols of Western neoliberal feminism within the context of Israeli gender norms and ethno-national identity. Other possible identities are either deemed uninteresting or denied the label of "successful".

Identity in mixed families is a multifaceted concept influenced by interactions with persons with diverse cultural backgrounds and the evolving nature of language use in which code mixing and translanguaging become the norm. Everyday practices in mixed families are inseparable from negotiations and attempts to find common grounds. Sometimes they cause confusion and result in miscommunication; yet they also offer opportunities for personal growth and intercultural understanding.

The goal of the present study is to explore Russophone women's narratives and conversations in online discussions in order to trace evolution of their identity under the influence of migration.

Starting the project, we posed the following research questions:

- How do language dynamics impact the social integration of Russophone female emigrants in their host countries?
- What role does the Russian language play in the communication patterns and social interactions of female emigrants within their families compared to their interactions outside familial circles?
- How do Russian-speaking female emigrants explore linguistic and cultural differences in their host countries, and how does this affect their daily activities and social interactions?
- What are the multifaceted roles that Russian-speaking female emigrants assume in their unique situation between two cultures?

- How do women balance traditional expectations with the realities of their new environment?
- How do the experiences of Russian-speaking female emigrants shed light on the complexities of identity, belonging, and adaptation in cross-cultural settings?

Materials and Methods

Our material was drawn from numerous in-depth biographic interviews the authors conducted in Australia, Finland, Greece, Israel, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK, and USA. Some of them were audio- and others video-recorded and later transcribed. For close analysis we chose 55 interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and its anonymity (in the excerpts from the interviews they are marked with initials in bold). Furthermore, we monitored various online discussion forums and analyzed threads in which women shared their experiences of adapting to their new environment. We listed themes related to their search for new identities and a sense of home. We also examined 35 oral narratives and written documents created by the Russian women who write fiction and non-fiction abroad.

The methods we relied on are thematic and motif analyses, as well as biography studies, which are often used in qualitative research (e.g., Fuhse, Mützel 2011, Herz et al. 2015, Knox et al. 2006, Kuckartz, Rädiker 2022, Mey, Mruck 2020, Pushkareva 2019). Thematic analysis originated in psychology. It is used to systematically identify, organize, and offer insight into patterns of meaning across a data set (Braun, Clarke 2012). Focusing on meaning found across the chosen data set, enables the researcher to find and make sense of shared meanings and experience. Motif analysis is frequently used in folkloristics and relies on the classical index of elementary motifs compiled by S. Thompson. Although his purpose was to describe traditional world folklore in the abstract form (Thompson 1955-1958), it proved effective in the analysis of contemporary narratives (see, e.g., Fialkova, Yelenevskaya 2007; Uther 1996). For a more thorough analysis, we chose specific themes based on their frequency in the interviews and other sources we have gathered. It was important for us to triangulate both sources for analysis and methods to ensure that the phenomena we study are not random, although even a single instance can validate its presence in the research material.

Intermarriage as an Adventure

The process of language acculturation is a route to achieving economic prosperity for immigrants, in particular for those with a high level of education. However, when women undergo acculturation at a swifter pace than their partners, it challenges traditional gender roles within the economic sphere (Kisselev et al. 2010). Intermarriage can be seen as an adventure in cultural discovery, personal growth, and building relationships across differences. It offers the opportunity for individuals to broaden

their perspectives, learn about new customs and traditions, and form connections with people from different backgrounds. Braux (2015) encourages a nuanced exploration beyond stereotypes, addressing issues of prostitution, trafficking, and bi-national marriages between Turkish citizens and women from Russia and Ukraine, shedding light on deeply ingrained prejudices. Seeking for a Russian wife might also mean seeking for an old-type traditional woman dedicated to the household and satisfied with financial security and stability for herself and her children. Yet as far as the Russian women are concerned, the traditions are interrelated with full emancipation, self-consciousness and independence.

Russian brides are often seen as creatures seeking a gilded cage, complete security, and fulfillment of all their wishes, which they are legally entitled to in the East (see, e.g., the documentary series *Vostochnye zheny* 'Eastern Wives' and *Russkie zheny* 'Russian Wives' on Youtube). In exchange, these women are willing to tolerate their husbands' polygamy. The primary reason for this ambivalence is the domestic family model's turmoil. Many young women with no education or previous career leave Russia, and their grooms are frequently middle-aged men willing to start a family. Besides financial security, for Russian women today there is one more vitally important reason to search for partners abroad: in their home country there is a shortage of men who maintain healthy-life habits and do not indulge in excessive alcohol consumption, heavy smoking, and risky sexual behavior. Moreover, unlike Russian men, who see a woman's child from a previous marriage as an obstacle, foreigners are often willing to adopt their brides' children.

Stories of Russian women managing their life away from home appear in many novels and novelettes by the authors who themselves have gone through migrant experience. Life stories of women married to Austrian men are collected by Barkan (2017). She shows that Russian women behave differently from their western peers: some dedicate their lives to children, others to husbands, and some dare concentrate on themselves, which is a break-away from the Russian vision of an "ideal woman" and requires courage. Geier (2019) narrates her journey from Ukraine to Germany where she married a German, became a famous translator of the Russian classic literature, especially Dostoevsky, and spent her time between the languages. For her, translation is a form of breathing.

A third generation Germanist with a Ph.D. and an MBA diploma, a graduate from a German university, Katinskaya (a penname; 2023) has managed language centers in North Rhine-Westphalia. Born in Yaroslavl, central Russia, she won grants for trips to German universities. Inspired by her internship in Konstanz, she debuted with the novel "Time of Pickled Cucumbers." Now, she is raising multilingual twins with her Franco-German spouse who encourages her to stay true to her identity. She narrates adventures of a provincial girl who came to study in Germany and met her love there. She describes the mixed Russian-German language[1] of a Russian German

[1]Like ***Ist nicht dein Ernst!*** *Мне просто нужен* ***Geschenk zum Geburtstag meiner Mutter****, понимаешь?* ***Dringend!*** '**Are you serious?** I just need **a gift for my mother's birthday**, you know? **Urgently!**'. The speech of the older generation speaking German with a Russian accent, is presented in Cyrillic transliteration, while those who grew up in Germany, except for individual words, do not have an accent; they borrow more complex expressions from German, and these are given in Latin script. See also Meng, Protassova 2022.

girl from Central Asia who chooses a Turkish man as her partner. She also depicts life trajectories of two Russophone students from different post-Soviet states who experience cultural shock, use German concepts in their Russian, strive to adapt to the situation and deliberate over the dilemma: to stay in Germany or return home. One of them lives with an age-mate from Ukraine, the other, with an older German man implicated in criminal behavior. Remarkably, all the characters are to different degrees proficient in German, while Germans from the East of the country still speak some Russian.

A perspective of a western man married to a Russian woman is presented by a Norwegian professional who was working in Moscow (Sandermoen 2018) whose love story started in Moscow where he met his future wife. The reader clearly sees that the spouses had very different background, which explains their different worldviews. Many things in Moscow seem strange to the author. This is how he formulates his first impressions of Russian men and women: When visiting Russia, one immediately notices an abundance of elegantly dressed beautiful women, seemingly ready to party. They have slim figures largely unaffected by fast and ultraprocessed foods. By contrast Russian men seem to him looking sloppy. They are seldom brought up to pay attention to their health and grooming. Their views of family life, man and wife relations are reminiscent of some traditional Asian cultures and are quite different from what is acceptable and common among Europeans. Contrary to the widespread stereotype that Russian women are "fortune seekers," the author realizes that Russophone women want to have happy family life and offer warmth and passion once a close connection is established. They demonstrate devotion and love for old-fashioned gallantry in their relationships. Sandermoen believes that Russian women prioritize their appearances, dressing up even for a visit to the nearby store, which reflects a cultural emphasis on beauty and self-presentation. Like with any generalization, these descriptions lack subtlety, although the author did capture some of the trends.

Growing up in the Soviet Union, the author's wife faced additional challenges, because she was born in Tajikistan where her grandparents were exiled in Stalin's times, and she had a Georgian surname. As a result, she had to experience the society's chauvinistic and sometimes racist attitudes towards satellite republics. She recalls pleasant memories from her childhood in Dushanbe (the capital of Tadjikistan), but also the need to be vigilant against disrespectful behavior towards females, particularly young girls. In the West, access to social and health services became a universal right, exemplified by practices like child allowance payments. Conversely, in Russia, people rely more on interpersonal networks rather than state services. Russian wives consult online communities before making decisions about healthcare, social insurance or legal issues rather than follow official channels. It is not customary to discuss intimate matters with neighbors, but it is acceptable to share them with strangers.

According to Sandermoen (ibid.), Russian mothers uphold a strict and traditional approach to parenting, emphasizing the importance of their children's neatness and obedience, and they are direct in addressing any shortcomings. This style is in stark contrast with a more lenient and praise-oriented Western parenting style that may inadvertently foster unrealistic expectations. Russian schools prioritize strict discipline,

academic rigor, and early testing compared to their European counterparts, whereas Western European schools often prioritize joy, play, and teamwork, particularly in the lower grades.

In Sandermoen's view, Russian women constantly think that everyone is hungry and try to offer too much food; they consider the kitchen to be their territory. Russians more often have portraits of their writers on the walls than of their own relatives; they know classic music much better than the cinema and the Western fiction. When asked "How are you?" Russians take it seriously and give a detailed report about their life. They sit down and keep silent for a while before starting on a journey. They always tell jokes, love long toasts, birch trees and quote from old Soviet films. When visiting friends, they bring small gifts. They are convinced that it is boring to live anywhere outside Russia.

A frequent case of a mixed marriage is when a Russian woman marries a foreigner older than herself. It is often a second marriage for both, and they already have children. Mattisson's book (2024) begins with the heroine explaining how difficult it was for her to live in Russia with a Ukrainian surname.[2] Although she spent summers with her grandmother in Western Ukraine as a child, she did not learn the language, and her Ukrainian identity did not form. Marrying a Swede as her second husband, Mattisson changed her surname, but for her, the word *familiya* 'surname' itself began to be etymologized as 'family.' Her second husband was an abuser. Two more children were born. The author feels she is in limbo: neither Swedish nor Russian. In the beginning, she could not follow traditions because the Swedes she had met would not share them. A foreign country, unfamiliar language, and severe climate—all of these caused rejection. She observes that lacking knowledge about the simplest things that were done automatically at home makes you feel stupid. You cannot make use of your previous experience and skills and it is next to impossible to achieve a respectable status in the new country, although you were "someone to respect" back home.

Children experience changes more acutely and more emotionally. Vulnerability experienced by their parents in the first stages of immigration makes them feel unprotected. But they have an important advantage: they usually learn a new language faster. Today, few migrants start their journey to a new country without learning some English. Before 2014, Mattison was not inhibited to talk about her origin, and everyone laughed at the thought that Russia could invade a neighboring country. No more. In Sweden, it was completely normal to communicate with a new family of the spouse whom you divorced. Mattison embraced the idea of going to university at the age of almost 30. Today the author is proud to speak Swedish fluently with but a slight accent. She understands almost everything, and if she doesn't, she memorizes unfamiliar words in context. She feels it was important for her to move from one place to another because gradually you learn to adapt to different ways of life in your surroundings, to find the right man, to resist manipulation, and to

[2]The surname was just strange (Muzyka 'music'), it could not be associated with Ukraine, and Ukraine was their own, friendly country. In Russia, millions of people live with Ukrainian surnames that do not raise suspicions, including people in the Russian government. We can also give an example when in Finland a girl was teased because of her supposedly Russian surname, while in fact it was Polish-Ukrainian. See also Protassova, Yelenevskaya 2024a.

reestablish yourself in your profession. Although the Russian language might hurt today, the Russian classic literature remains her anchor, says the author.

New experiences, events and encounters affect development of one's identity, and migration and building up family life under new conditions makes this process deeper and more dramatic. The questions "Who am I? Who do I identify with? In what spirit shall I bring up my children? Should I make a goal to bring them up in such a way that they would wish to maintain my native language and culture, or will it be easier for them to live if they completely assimilate and become indistinguishable from their peers in the host country? In various internet discussion forums created by and for women, and uniting Russian speakers coming from various communities and linguistic surroundings these questions emerge again and again, triggering heated discussions. We came across numerous reflective posts that reveal immigrants' search for an answer to the question of who and what they identify with. On the website *eva.ru* one of discussants writes about her self-perception:

> **EV:** And if you're curious about who I am in terms of nationality, I'd be delighted to tell you. I was born in the Soviet Union, I was a Ukrainian citizen until recently, and I've been a US citizen for approximately a year. According to the nationality entry in my ancestors' passports, I am approximately half Russian, a quarter Jewish, and a quarter German. So, who do you think I feel I am?

The author of the post seems to be at peace with different components of her background. She is neither proud nor ashamed of any of them, taking hybridity as a natural part of her life and identity.

Attempts to facilitate the assimilation of 'imported' wives through the establishment of organizations for them, driving lessons, group outings and trips are particularly interesting. Clubs for older immigrants might be formed to organize activities such as tourist trips (including overseas), camping vacations, reading groups, and choirs. Theater and journalistic studios, photo clubs, fashion design, and camps are available for younger people. To breed some unity of the Russian speakers in the young generation, parents organize language and art courses, send Christmas vs New Year cards, arrange meetings around the globe, exhibitions of children's art, festivals of the amateur theaters and other cultural events.

The process of merging two cultures and traditions in the family sometimes leads to conflicts and requires a lot of open-mindedness, tolerance and readiness to find compromise. Intermarried couples sometimes face discrimination and misunderstanding by people in their environment, adding an extra layer of difficulty to their journey. Regardless of these challenges, many intermarried couples find that the difficulties they have to overcome bring them closer together and help them to appreciate and respect their partner's cultural heritage. They often find that the journey of intermarriage leads to personal growth and a deeper understanding of the world and each other.

Friendships

Researchers have shown that female immigrants need social networks outside their workplace more than men. Women tend to be more active in maintaining contacts

with fellow immigrants and making new acquaintances both with co-ethnics and members of the majority in their host countries (Remennick 2005, 2007, Ryabov 2013, 2016). The trouble is that host countries' majorities only partially meet the women's need for support in a new environment. The newcomers carefully probe their environment to find a way to better life for themselves and their families and seek to find spiritual 'sisters'. Those who are used to being socially active form NGOs, but most prefer informal contacts by participating in community organizations and events, such as clubs, hobby groups, festivals, charity organizations, weight-watching groups and others. This enables women to spend their leisure hours meaningfully and break the monotony of their daily routine. Some of these activities, such as concerts, hikes and excursions are organized for families, but others are for women only, enabling them to socialize outside the family milieu (cf. Intke-Hernández, Holm 2015). The desire to share experiences and problems and receive advice from the likeminded is also manifested in numerous online groups for Russian-speaking women, such as Facebook groups "Girls in Belgium", "Russian-speaking mothers in Germany, Russian-speaking mothers in Israel", "Russian girls in Valencia", "Russian girls in Turkey" and others (Yelenevskaya 2024).

Female groups are among the most popular communities uniting Russian-speaking diasporans. Members of these communities do not always meet in person, and their communication is primarily virtual. Sometimes they bring together women residing in one country, but more often they are transnational. The women discover that their worldview, everyday practices, and child rearing methods are markedly different from those of women in their host societies; at the same time, they find that their reasons for migration, problems they encounter in integration and patterns of cultural adaptation are quite similar, irrespective of which country in the post-Soviet space they come from. Russian is the lingua franca of their communication; they speak the same language, literally and metaphorically. Before the pandemic it was not uncommon to organize offline meetings and conferences consolidating their new global friendships. These contacts are the pillars of the diasporans' transnational identity, which has supplanted the previous Soviet supranational identity (Protassova 2012). The worldwide virtual community of Russian speakers is thriving even today despite the new dividing line: those who support Russian invasion in Ukraine and those who are against it.

Many Russophone families continue celebrating the International Women's Day but do not ignore Mothers' and Fathers' days. These celebrations sometimes turn into acts demonstrating determination to preserve one's identity. Thus, in the study conducted by Wara and Munkejord in Norway (2022), Russian-speaking women narrated that on the 8th of March they put on their best clothes and high-heeled shoes. They make up thoroughly using bright lipstick and go out. They use this holiday as an occasion to both confirm their identity and resist what they conceive as the majority's prejudiced perceptions of them as a group ('Russian women in Norway'). This is an opportunity for them to express femininity as they see it and which they feel they have to downplay on other days to avoid criticism of the local communities. This is also a revolt against the understanding of equality as sameness, which they feel dominates in Norwegian society.

Similar stories appear in the interview with our Israeli participant **S**. A university lecturer, she told us that she shocked her colleagues by wearing heels to classes and specially chosen clothes to the exams. She felt it was her way to express respectful attitude to the event and cited a popular Soviet phrase: *На работу как на праздник* 'Going to work like to a festivity'.

EP, who arrived in Norway from Vologda, talks about the Russian-speaking life in Tromsø and Bergen: they organize celebrations for the Old New Year (13th of January, the New Year in the Julian calendar), International Women's Day (March 8), *Maslenitsa* (Pancake week), Cosmonautics Day (April 12, commemorating the first manned flight to outer space by Yuri Gagarin), Victory Day, they arrange various quizzes and more. During their get-togethers they serve delicious food, sing folk and popular songs. Such events allow Norwegian and foreign husbands to become acquainted with Russian culture. Some women have lived in Norway for a long time, and for them maintenance of Russian cultural traditions is an important part of life. When the town is small, people are more interested and united; however, being part of Norwegian society is more important, remarks our interviewee.

A Poet and an expert in the Slavic studies at the University of Berkeley, Polina Barskova, describes herself in her pedagogical and research activities as a "laborer of literature", a somewhat unromantic stance. Having left her beloved city of St. Petersburg due to a personal tragedy, she views her emigration as one of the best things that happened in her life (besides the birth of her daughter). It offered her complexity, experience, and freedom, although she still longs for her hometown. Despite being far from her people, she believes in the importance of nurturing various loves and connections, finding significance in the ability to contribute to culture in her new environment. If necessary, she rereads Alexander Herzen, Russian exiled writer of the 19th century. However, she believes that people are given different loves, different respects, different friendships, different relationships, and what she feels towards Berlin, San Francisco, New York are also important parts of herself (Gordeeva 2023).

The latest wave of migration gives examples of friendships evolving into professional partnerships. A case in point is career trajectories of Miriam Sekhon and Liza Miller (Leyfer 2024) The two women have known each other since early childhood. Born and brought up in Moscow, they pursued successful careers, one as a theater and movie actress, the other as a classic musician playing a multitude of instruments. After working in Russia and traveling the world, both settled in Montreal where they formed a duet. They are fluent in French and English and their songs are in three languages, attracting Russophone immigrants and Canadians. At the end of the interview, also conducted in three languages after the box-office success of their concerts, they said that it was an amazing gift to find each other in the same city again. Transforming a lifelong friendship into professional relations opens new horizons. They feel that everything is possible, because whatever disputes arise in the process of creating new shows, they are still close friends ready for give and take.

Many Russian-speaking immigrant women find strength and resilience through their communities and find a sense of belonging and purpose in their new home. Their experience as immigrants is unique, and it also testifies that the human spirit is powerful, demonstrating the ability to persevere through adversity. Russophone

women often play the lead role in maintaining family life and integrating into a new society while serving as nurturers and supporters of their families. They also feel responsible for creating a sense of comfort and community (cf. Protassova, Yelenevskaya 2024b).

Immigrant Women as Anchors of the Family Life

In Europe, there is no statistically significant variation in family size or child count between intermarried and endogamous couples. In the US, mixed-nationality couples have greater labor-force participation rates but substantially lower formal marriage rates, whereas higher Gender Inequality Index values were positively connected with the propensity to work for money and work longer hours, implying self-selection in the US immigration system. Children of working Russian-speaking immigrant mothers who are also more involved in their children's school affairs, get superior academic results (Ponomareva 2017).

Family communication and child-directed speech vary from family to family (Koptjevskaja Tamm 2000, Goleva 2012, Vorobeva 2024). A family language is inevitably the one that is used in larger communities, because idiolects are smaller in volume than sociolects. A child growing up in a single family cannot have the same vocabulary as a child growing up, figuratively speaking, communicating with an entire village. Sociolinguistic studies of bilingual families' linguistic practices address the contexts, procedures, and outcomes of private communication between spouses from various national and cultural groups.

There are also issues with the adoption of Russian-speaking children (cf. Schwartz, Kaslow 2003). Fogle (2012) investigates how Russian-speaking adoptees in three US households actively influence chances for language acquisition and identity building through everyday communication. She also studies how these children acquire proficiency in the language of their new environment and socialize in it while still maintaining Russian. In the framework of the family language policy theory Fogle and Curdt-Christiansen (2013) demonstrate that when adoptive parents of the older native Russian-speaking adoptees made decisions based on their children's specific cognitive and emotional abilities, educational requirements, and desire to build a family, such strategy proves beneficial for the adoptees and contributes to their successful integration into society.

Mattisson (2024: 101) explains that one of the reasons for divorcing her Swedish husband was that, although she had adapted to his language and culture, he had not learned her language and culture. He disliked her speaking Russian with their children and her relatives, referring to the language as strange, despite her efforts to translate everything or switch to English in the presence of others. If the wife in a mixed family has a good command of the dominant language of the environment, it does not contribute to her husband's motivation to study Russian.

Yet, some Russian schools in the diaspora are already offering Russian language classes to parents who do not speak Russian. According to the one-parent-one-language principle, children are addressed in the native language of the parent. However, unless this principle has been consciously chosen, and the adults are disciplined in

adhering to it, most families find it difficult to communicate at home without code mixing and translanguaging. Today, translanguaging is becoming more acceptable in language pedagogies, and school policies concerning bilingual children are becoming more tolerant and more flexible. Sometimes, different strategies are tried with different children in the same family. Language and culture appear to be of vital relevance in intermarriage in terms of establishing a new identity and deeper understanding of each other. Personal experience, society and the marital partner influence the Russian-speaking immigrants' decisions. In most situations, the easiest solution with the least amount of effort is chosen.

For **RU**, living in Oslo and coming from an international family, a crucial part of supporting the Russian language for her children is visits from her mother who meets the children after school and entertains them during their free time. An important aspect of **RU**'s life is socializing with expatriates and other international families. Generation roles have changed in modern societies as the elderly remain socially active much longer than in the past. This also concerns diasporic grandparents who see their peers in western societies continuing to travel, take courses and do sports. Turning into a free babysitter for the family is no longer perceived as a standard practice. But the role grandparents do take upon themselves willingly is transferring the language and culture of the home-country to the young. This role is not always rewarding, because both children and their parents may show resistance to Russian language maintenance, which seems to them to be a wasted effort.

MT, who has been living in Sweden for a long time, does not find it possible to be involved in Russian-speaking organizations, while speaking Russian in the family is perfectly natural for her. While conversing with her child in Russian at a café, she encountered situations where Swedes would give her odd looks, and she had to explain in sophisticated Swedish that multilingualism is an asset, not a deficiency.

Those who used to live in a monolingual environment find it difficult to acquire the language/s of the majority at the same time improving their proficiency in English, which is becoming a prerequisite for employment in many spheres (Iikkanen 2020). It is not always easy to overcome generation gaps, and Russian-speaking parents eager for their bi- and multilingual children to share their values and interests resort to various ways of transferring their culture to their offspring growing up away from Russia (Karpava et al. 2024). At the same time, it often happens that immigrants of the one-and-a-half and second generation are so deeply immersed in the culture of the host society that even when they marry within the community, they switch over to the majority language in their home communication, and their parents who have not learned it well, feel that they are losing ties with their children and grandchildren (Tiaynen-Qadir, Matyska 2020; Yelenevskaya 2023).

Social stigmatization affects family relations. Since most children acquire a new language faster than adults, in the initial period following resettlement, parents often resort to their children's help hoping to use them as interpreters and translators. However, this strategy is seldom successful, because even those adolescents whose proficiency in the language/s of the host country is high are not taught skills needed for translation, nor are they familiar with the terminology of business documents, legal services and medicine—those very domains which are essential for immigrants to

understand. As a result, these failed attempts lead to frustration on both sides. Moreover, parents are humiliated by having to depend on their children, and the children lose the feeling of security since they see their parents lose self-confidence (Intke-Hernández, Holm 2015).

To combat the decline of Russian culture, migrants must dissociate the language and culture from the current regime and state, says Maria Stepanova, who now lives in Germany. Says she, "No one from the outside will be able to impose any norms, rules of behavior, or preserve it in a crystal coffin. I believe that 'preserving the Russian language' can only amount to finally giving it freedom. Let our language live wherever it wants, let it blend with other dialects. Let it whistle, chatter, produce neologisms – anglicize, germanize, arabize." With the language already detached from a specific territory due to a new wave of emigration, it should acquire new traits, allowing it to roam freely and blend with other dialects, ensuring its vitality and adaptability (Arkhangelsky 2023).

New Employment Opportunities

In the Soviet Union most women had jobs and in addition carried the biggest load of household duties. Having immigrated to the West, Russophone women integrated into the culture in which men are still considered to be the main breadwinners but are also expected to be much more involved in doing domestic chores and in child rearing. In Central Asian countries due to the reinvigoration of the Muslim culture, women feel they are losing some achievements of emancipation they enjoyed in Soviet times, and migrating they hope to regain them. However, Russian-speaking women in many countries have difficulties finding jobs according to their educational level since skills and degrees obtained in the post-Soviet states are not recognized and undervalued (Elo et al. 2020). So, these women face the dilemma of additional studies or retraining which often interferes with child rearing; otherwise, they must reconcile with unqualified jobs. Since work is a central aspect of their identities and a source of their feelings of self-worth, this professional devaluation feeds personal distress and de-emancipation (Bloch 2011, Şahin 2023).

For some female entrepreneurs, starting a business abroad can be a path to financial independence, offering an opportunity to escape limiting gender roles and restrictions in their home countries. In many cases, these entrepreneurs bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience, which they use to create successful businesses and even establish themselves as leaders in their industries. On the other hand, the path to success as a female entrepreneur abroad can also be fraught with challenges, including linguistic deficits, cultural discrepancies, and limited access to resources and networks. In many cases, female entrepreneurs face additional obstacles related to gender, such as discriminatory laws and regulations, and cultural norms that limit their opportunities, access to investments and capital.

The artist **KL** has lived in France since the beginning of 1992. She owns a small house and prioritizes her well-organized comfort above all else. This is more important for her than the country in terms of politics, language, nature, or culture, although those factors are also significant. She feels at home in France thanks to her

country cottage with a garden and a studio. She brought with her clothes, photo albums, books, and Orthodox icons that are dear to her heart. Her first husband, a Russian, emigrated in 1978 and created a distinctly Russian home in Paris, speaking poor French. **KL** helped him on all occasions. She still owns his four antique samovars and continues to acquire old and valuable Russian items. **KL** was a devoted wife, and her life revolved around her husband, but he passed away in 2010. Later she remarried a Pole, and now they are blending all cultures accessible to them.

NP who heads an institution employing several thousand people in Germany is still married to the same Russian husband with whom she migrated. She demonstrates remarkable resilience and determination, working tirelessly to build successful businesses and establish her place in the economic landscape of the world. Through her entrepreneurial spirit and hard work, she became a role model and inspiring figure for other women and girls, breaking down barriers and paving the way for greater equality and opportunity. Despite the challenges she faces, she was able to achieve remarkable success and make lasting contributions to her community.

A lawyer **PI**, had three children when she met a Norwegian in St. Petersburg, married him and moved to Norway in 1995. At that time, there were few Russian-speaking immigrants in the country. Some were descendents of the refugees who escaped October Revolution and the Civil War that followed. Only one ship arrived in 1920 from Arkhangelsk, and just a few Russian speakers remained in the country. They endeavored to maintain Russian in their families, hoping to return to Russia. Their descendants could visit this neighboring state, where the language was their native tongue, for the first time in the 1990s. According to **PI**, immigrants always establish similar organizations and organize events for children and themselves (clubs, celebrations of Russian religious holidays, schools, charity concerts, etc.), and they often vie for dominance within the community. **PI** founded her own music school, striving to keep fees as low as possible. Norwegians enjoy attending musical and themed evenings, and she is happy to provide such opportunities for them. Thanks to various events, it is possible to bring Norwegians closer to Russian culture. She also worked to organize concerts for Russian musicians, dancers, and singers.

IL, who has been living in Germany since 1992, recalls being amazed by the products sold in German stores and by what Germans discarded. She made efforts to send large parcels to Russia, not only food but also clothing and even plastic yogurt cups. Her home has been always full of guests, especially in the early years of her family's life in the West, with hundreds of migrant friends and acquaintances coming and going. Each person left with a large bag (which she specifically kept for such occasions). **IL** learned accounting in Germany and founded her own firm, which provides services for Russian speakers.

XS, living in Italy, does not believe that there is a problem with socialization. For Italians, it is enough to go out to the square to start chatting. By becoming a guide, she helps Russian speakers get acquainted with Italian culture.

AK, who became a kindergarten teacher in Finland (living there since 1989), has grown accustomed to working in diverse teams and believes that nationality and language are irrelevant to her. What matters is a personality, whether s/he is easy to communicate and collaborate with. **AK** prefers mixed international teams to nationally homogeneous ones.

CC from Finland is involved in the global union of Russophone theaters abroad. This amateur movement receives subsidies from the government, often goes on tours, and helps Ukrainian refugees. Her education as a Russian language teacher and theatrical producer allows her to work with groups of different ages and carry out unconventional projects.

AL from Novosibirsk started working at school while she was a student, teaching French and English. Then she moved on to work at a large company and was heavily involved in training and teaching adults. Later, she went on a volunteer project to India to set up a computer class for children in a boarding school. She married a Frenchman with whom she lived in Strasbourg, France, in the USA, and now in the UK. She studied the theory of Russian language teaching, learned through practice, created teaching materials, and works both off- and online.

Polina Zherebtsova is a writer, documentarian, prose writer, and poet, best known for her *Chechen Diaries*. Since 2013, Polina and her husband have been living in Finland, where they were granted political asylum after facing persecution in Russia from both Russians and Chechens for her publications about the war in Chechnya. In her interview she says that the war in Chechnya made her leave home, although she never took sides, only supported peaceful civilians. Initially hopeful for peace, she faced escalating hostility and even genocide. Coming from a multiethnic family, she witnessed crimes committed by both sides. In Russia's peaceful regions, she felt out of place due to cultural differences and a lack of state support. Though she and her mother met kind people, survival was a struggle, and after the war, they were left homeless and unsupported, lacking documents. In 2017, Zherebtsova became a Finnish citizen and received the Ernest Hemingway Award, established to support Russian-speaking authors whose works demonstrate a quest for new artistic forms and the expansion of linguistic and semantic boundaries (Shalygina 2018).

According to Soldatov and Borogan (2019), in the 30-million Russian diaspora, seeking connections with ordinary people rather than the highbrow intelligentsia revealed the vulnerability of being an immigrant, despite potential financial gains and social upward mobility, with few opting for employment at Google and other hi-tech companies, where assimilation into a diverse workforce often leads to a new identity. However, many still experience "Russian longing" and nostalgia, sometimes leading to an unexpected affinity with Putin (Medvedev 2021). A Russophone woman told members of an online discussion forum about psychological barriers she faced since her profession was not in demand in her host country. Having small children, she could not dedicate herself to re-establishing her career. At some point she divorced her husband and changed her name to a Finnish one, after which, she started receiving more job interview invitations. Despite defending a doctoral dissertation at the University of Helsinki, another forum participant encountered challenges in working as a psychologist in Finland due to high language requirements and bureaucratic procedures, although she planned to help expats in English and Russian only. In Russia, recent changes in childcare emphasize rejecting gender stereotypes simultaneously with the idea of staying at home with a child, summarizes the third communicant. In Finland, they should include measures for integrating foreign mothers and recognize the diversity of immigrant family roles and lifestyles (Shalygina 2021).

Conclusion

The experiences of Russian-speaking female immigrants abroad are shaped by language dynamics, family interactions, and social practices, influencing their communication patterns, integration, and cultural identity. They often act as cultural bridges between their new and old home countries, promoting understanding and facilitating cultural exchange. Despite challenges like language barriers and socio-economic downward mobility typical during the first stages of immigrant life, Russophone immigrant women contribute to their communities through entrepreneurship and education initiatives. Researchers investigating Russophone diasporic communities note that despite differences in age, level of education, cultural environment in their host countries, Russophone immigrants, including women demonstrate similarity of integration patterns caused by similarity of their linguo-cultural background.

Russian female immigrant writers have made significant contributions to literature by sharing their experiences and perspectives of living in a foreign country. Their works often explore themes such as identity, belonging, and cultural displacement, as well as the challenges of adapting to a new society. These writers have provided unique and valuable perspectives on the immigrant experience, enriching the literary landscape and fostering greater understanding and empathy among readers.

Language dynamics play a significant role in the social integration of Russophone female emigrants in their host countries. The Russian language serves as a crucial tool for communication within their families, often maintained as the primary language, fostering a sense of cultural continuity and connection to their roots. However, outside familial circles, these emigrants must cope with linguistic and cultural differences, often adapting their communication patterns to fit into their new environment. This balancing act between preserving their cultural identity within their families and adapting to the norms of their host country reflects the multifaceted roles that Russian-speaking female emigrants assume. Their experiences highlight the complexities of identity, belonging, and adaptation in cross-cultural settings, as they formulate their multiple identities and affiliations while striving to maintain a sense of cultural heritage amidst the challenges of their new environment.

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