Mediated Marriage: Internet Matchmaking in Provincial Russia

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*Slogan on a mug bought at a department store in Yoshkar-Ola, summer 2003*

Susan Gal and Gail Kligman have argued that concerns over the reproduction of the nation have placed women’s behaviour at the centre of political debates in many post-socialist states (Gal & Kligman, 2000, p. 15). During a year as a teaching fellow at Mari State University in Yoshkar-Ola, the capital of one of the autonomous republics in Russia’s Volga region, I found that women’s reproductive labour was one of the few commodities which the republic was bringing to an international market, while anxieties about national reproduction centred on men as endangered and rejected ‘domestic producers’. Many of my female students and other acquaintances were corresponding with American, Western European and Australian men who had obtained their addresses through internet matchmaking agencies. Sometimes they asked me to translate difficult passages, such as one in which an American man wrote that he had walked by ‘Victoria’s Secret’ in the ‘mall’ and wanted to know his friend’s ‘measurements’ in order to buy her a present there.

Another acquaintance, the 20-year-old son of one of my colleagues, showed me photographs taken on a summer trip to the US, which included several pictures of suburban couples in their kitchens or in front of their cars. After working at a summer camp, he had been able to travel around the Midwest by visiting several female relatives and friends of his family who had married Americans, and was obviously very favourably impressed with the conditions in which he found them living.

I seldom heard people in Yoshkar-Ola discuss the issues that I, having lived and studied in Frankfurt-on-Main, associated with the mail-order bride business: women abused and forced into prostitution, locked into brothels or prevented by immigration laws from getting a divorce. In Yoshkar-Ola internet matchmaking agencies were a ubiquitous presence, and many women considered the possibility of looking for a husband abroad as one potential way of coping with post-socialist life. During the year I worked at Mari State University three students in the foreign language department married men from the US or Mexico, with the expressed approval of older faculty members. The agencies also provided a welcome source of income to people with foreign-language skills. Several of my students and colleagues worked for them.
as translators. In fact, the few times that I heard people dream of opening their own business in Yoshkar-Ola, their idea was to open a matchmaking service.

The concerns I did hear people express over the exodus of brides from Russia were mainly of the sort alluded to in my epigraph: worries that the fact that Russian women were choosing Western men was a quality judgment on Russian men, who were very much in the public eye anyway owing to their rising death rate and declining life expectancy. Whereas Gal & Kligman see debates over national reproduction as a context in which women become a focus of post-socialist politics, one of the arguments of this article will be that Russian debates over the demographic future of the nation, in which much attention is paid to the high mortality rates of men, are about masculinity at least as much as about femininity. Whereas the quantity and quality of Russia’s male population figured prominently in women’s discussions of why it was desirable to find a foreign husband, I did not hear residents of Marii El express worries over a possible lack of women caused by the out-migration of brides from the republic. Neither did they express the kind of condemnation of brides as traitors to the nation which has been a feature of the national press coverage of internet matchmaking (Pilkington, 1996, p. 208).

In this article I will consider the significance of internet matchmaking for constructions of gender in post-Soviet Russia by looking at the largest matchmaking agency in Yoshkar-Ola, Virginia. I will place the services Virginia offers in the context of an international gendered and racialised division of labour, as well as in the local context, where the agency functions as a mediator of international connections. To understand why businesses like Virginia are able to flourish, we need to look at the changing expectations men and women in the former Soviet Union and in the West have of each other, and at changing imaginaries of the nation and the foreign in provincial Russia.

**Virginia—the agency**

In an economically very depressed part of the Russian Federation—in 2001 the mean monthly per capita income in Marii El was the fifth lowest of the 89 subjects of the Russian Federation—Virginia has managed to expand from a family working from their home computer to a business employing about 70 people, offering a range of services in spacious offices on one of Yoshkar-Ola’s central streets. Unlike its neighbours Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, Marii El has no valuable mineral resources from which to generate income. The local economy under socialism relied heavily on arms production, and unemployment has been very high since the arms factories closed or sharply reduced production. It is not surprising, then, that a successful business in the republic’s capital would be one that deals in several ways with brokering international contacts and facilitating temporary or permanent movement abroad.

The services offered by Virginia include matchmaking, local and international employment contracting, visa service and flight tickets for both foreign citizens visiting Russia and Russians traveling abroad, a digital photo studio, a real estate agency and a language school. Each of the different branches has its own director, and the matchmaking agency even goes by a separate name, Maksim Introductions. But
all are located in the same building, under the general directorship of the elder of two brothers who founded the company together with their mother in 1996, just months after the first internet server became available in Marii El. At first, the family merely used email to send letters of introduction from local women to a small matchmaking agency in Wisconsin, but after one and a half years they created their own website, which allowed them to address Western men looking for a Russian wife directly. Since then Virginia has built up its own network of subcontractors at locations in Marii El, in the neighbouring republics of Tatarstan and Chuvashiya, and as far away as Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Taganrog in Southern Russia. Subcontractors place their customers’ photos and biographical information on Virginia’s website and use Virginia’s bank connections to receive payments from abroad (in exchange for a commission which usually amounts to 50% of the sum transferred).

Women who want to place an advertisement on the web have to go to the office of Maksim Introductions in Yoshkar-Ola or to one of the subcontractors, where they pay for the digital photography and the web-space. When they start receiving letters from abroad, there are two possibilities for payment: if men who are not registered subscribers visit the site, view a ‘lady’s’ picture and short biography and write to her, she has to pay for the letter when she picks it up, for the reply when she sends it, and additional fees for translations if she needs them. However, interested men are encouraged to register on the website and either pay a monthly or yearly subscription fee or a separate fee for each letter, in which case the ‘lady’ incurs no charges. Subscribers receive extra benefits such as being able to request a report on a woman’s English skills or to check whether other men have written to her or sent her an invitation.

The offer of special check-ups on a woman’s past indicates that many male customers worry about being cheated. The danger of being ‘scammed’ by professional letter writers who place fake photographs on the web in order to obtain money from a large number of men figures prominently on websites which offer advice to men interested in marrying Russian women. There is even a site which asks men to report agencies and individual women who deceived them. Virginia’s director made a point of telling me that his agency accepted only profiles submitted in person by the woman, and only after inspecting her passport, which gives information about her marital status.

Women in Yoshkar-Ola tended to suspect the agency, rather than their male correspondence partners, of fraud. There were many rumours about Virginia breaking up the correspondence of people who seemed to get along well, for the sake of keeping both partners as paying customers. It is also well known that Virginia makes a considerable profit on gifts purchased by male customers for their ‘ladies’. Through the website, male customers can order gift baskets and flowers, pay for English classes at Virginia’s own language school, or buy a monthly pass for Yoshkar-Ola’s trolley busses. The charges for these gifts by far exceed the local price: for a trolley bus pass, for instance, they were charging $18 in the summer of 2003, while the pass itself cost less than $6. Aware of this profit margin which the agency reserves for itself, women often ask their correspondence partners to send money via Western Union rather than sending funds or gifts through the agency.

We are beginning to see how closely connected the different branches of Virginia
are: the travel agency specialises in obtaining visas and passports necessary for romantic meetings arranged by the matchmakers or for people who have found work abroad through the job agency. For men who want to meet women in person rather than through email, the travel agency also offers a ‘Romantic Tour’ package deal combining sightseeing in the Volga region with parties with single women. The real estate agency rents apartments to men who want to meet several women while they are in Yoshkar-Ola, or whose correspondence partner is unable to host them in her own home. The photo studio takes the digital pictures women need for their web ads, and the language school offers English classes for women hoping to marry a foreigner. This is not to say that people do not use these services for other purposes as well, but the name Virginia is usually perceived to be connected to international matchmaking. When I was working in Yoshkar-Ola a physician who had befriended me was taking an English class at Virginia to prepare for an internship at a German hospital. She told me, laughing, that she was the only one in her class who did not have her American boyfriend pay for the lessons, and that she would have to drop out of the course toward the end, when they would have a unit on ‘love and sex’.

When I asked the director whether his company still worked together with matchmaking services located in the US or Western Europe, he denied this: ‘It is very difficult to work with the competition’. Virginia’s policy of allowing men to write to a ‘lady’ free of charge, passing the financial burden on to her, may be an attempt to attract customers away from Western agencies, which typically require advance payment for each address or for access to a database. A comparison with a small sample of other web-based matchmaking agencies in the former Soviet Union suggests that neither Virginia’s price range nor its policy of allowing men to choose between paying for individual letters or purchasing a membership are unusual. However, not all agencies allow free initial contacts, and some offer the option of purchasing a woman’s home address rather than conducting all correspondence through the agency. Agencies also differ in the range of services they offer. Some merely sell addresses, others equal Virginia by offering everything from digital photography and translations to visa and ticket services and English classes. Given the large number of agencies, the market must be quite competitive, and the strategy pursued by agencies like Virginia seems to be to become the one intermediary necessary for establishing relationships between Western men and Russian women, bypassing further intermediaries in the West and outdoing post-Soviet competitors by offering the greatest diversity of services and the best precautions against fraud.

International arranged marriage and female migration

In the literature on women in post-socialist Eastern Europe internet matchmaking has rarely received detailed attention. While sometimes mentioned as a coping strategy in the context of greatly restricted employment opportunities for women after socialism (Bridger & Kay, 1996, p. 34), it is often subsumed under the rubric of ‘trafficking’ and discussed as one way to lead women into forced prostitution and other forms of abuse. Hughes (2000, pp. 634–635) mentions the mail-order bride business as one ‘route into the sex industry’:
The recruiters may be traffickers or work directly with traffickers. The woman may meet with a man who promises marriage at a later date. The man may use the woman himself for a short period of time, then coerce her into making pornography and later sell her to the sex industry, or he may directly deliver the woman to a brothel.

While such abuse doubtless occurs, none of the examples Hughes gives of women working in the sex industry has such a history. Most of the women whose cases she cites were tricked by fraudulent job offers. The same is true for cases described by Le Breton & Fiechter (2001). While Virginia’s example shows that the same company can be in the business of international matchmaking and of international labour contracting, the very least we can conclude is that the literature on ‘trafficking’ contains more generalisations than case studies to support them. Bloch (2003, pp. 152–158) has made this point even with regard to women who really end up working in the sex industry. In her interviews with Russian-speaking women working as dancers or prostitutes in Turkey, she found no one who had been pressed into this work against her will. All of them had been put in contact with contractors by other women from their home towns, and some were on their second and third contracts.11 Although one might still ask about the context of narrowing economic opportunities and changing media representations in which some women ‘choose’ prostitution (Bridger & Kay, 1996, p. 34), Bloch shows convincingly that migrant sex workers cannot be understood merely as helpless and unsuspecting victims of trafficking. Similarly, the motivations of women and men who seek partners through international arranged marriage may turn out to be more complex than portrayals of victimised women and abusive men suggest.

In one chapter of her book on Russian–American marriages, Visson (2001, pp. 213–225) describes the recent boom of couples meeting online. Visson also heard about a case of abuse: a woman came to the US on a fiancée visa only to hear the man who invited her announce that he had no intention of marrying her. He forced her to live and sleep with him for the three months which her visa allowed her to stay, then bought her a plane ticket back to Russia. But far more of the problems which surfaced in her interviews with Russian–American couples living in the US sprang not from criminal intentions but from the expectations each spouse had of their life together: women from Russian cities languishing in the isolation of American suburbs, language problems, she turning out to be not as submissive and domestic as he had thought Russian women would be, his standard of living turning out to be not as high as she had hoped, or he discovering that she was more interested in making her own life in the US than in starting a family with him.

Beer (1996, p. 84) comes to similar conclusions in a study of German–Filipina couples, many of whom had also met through the services of marriage agencies, contact advertisements or other conscious efforts to find a foreign partner. The problems couples talked about had to do with different notions about obligations to one’s extended family, child rearing or food preparation. While not denying that couples who do have abusive, exploitative relationships may simply be unwilling to be interviewed by an anthropologist, Beer argues that authors and activists who demonise mail-order marriages draw too easy a division between such arranged
relationships and those which come about without professional intermediaries, as if the latter never involved unequal power relations or false preconceptions.

Many of the Filipinas Beer talked to had looked for a foreign husband in order to be able to leave the Philippines or to legalise their stay in Germany. Marriage as a migration strategy does put the spouse who moves to the other’s country of citizenship into a vulnerable position, because most countries mandate a period of time in which a divorce leads to the foreign spouse losing her or his right of residency. In the US this period is two years, in Germany four, unless physical abuse can be proved. Immigration regulations also determine the steps in an internet couple’s relationship. While I have heard of women from Yoshkar-Ola going to Germany on the invitation of a potential groom they had never met before, US fiancée visas are issued only if the couple can show proof of having met in person, so that US citizens usually visit Yoshkar-Ola, or meet their ‘lady’ in one of the countries which Russian citizens can enter without visas, such as Jamaica. Sometimes even the marriage is held in Russia, followed by a long wait during which the husband, back in the US, petitions immigration services to issue documents for his wife to join him.

It is also no accident that matchmaking services focus on bringing together men from the wealthy industrialised countries of Western Europe, North America and Australia and women from the Third World and Eastern Europe. The women are coming from the same parts of the world as those who enter the wealthy countries as prostitutes, maids and nurses, pointing to a common context of these different forms of female international migration. Salazar Parrenas (2001) argues that, in a situation where women in Western countries increasingly refuse to take sole responsibility for the work of nurturing and care-giving traditionally thought of as female, but men are not at the same rate taking up their share of it, a new ‘international division of reproductive labour’ occurs—the work of cooking, cleaning and child-raising remains female-coded, but is in part taken over by women from economically disadvantaged countries or communities, freeing a number of middle and upper-class Western women to devote themselves exclusively to formerly male-coded work. Indeed, men whose letters I read and whom I met at the agency—US, German and British citizens—said that the women of their countries were too emancipated, no longer believed in differences between men and women and could not show or receive tenderness. In contrast, the photographs with which women are presented on Virginia’s site—close-ups of the face and upper body shot slightly from above—create the impression of submissive, vulnerable creatures waiting to be rescued from their hard life.

The stereotype of ‘Russian’ women (‘Russian’ serving as a label for women from the former Soviet Union—many of those advertising through Virginia are actually Tatar or Mari) as being ‘feminine’ and ‘submissive’ is similar to the stereotype of Asian women, who were the major group promoted as ‘mail-order brides’ before the collapse of socialism. The way Maksim Introductions advertises the ‘ladies’ men can meet on their ‘Romantic Tours’ would also fit the stereotypes of Asian women:

You dream of meeting a real Russian family-oriented lady! You can find such ladies only in small towns in the centre of Russia! They are not spoilt by the life of big cities, they value family life and will make you happy for the rest of your life! […] WE GUARANTEE that
during our tour you will be exposed to HUNDREDS of beautiful ladies who are extremely interested in establishing relationships with Western men of all ages. This is not a ‘sex tour’! The women you will meet have high moral values. We do not concentrate on ladies of ‘elite class’ (models, for example)—instead our goal is to introduce you to women of substance and values, with middle and upper class backgrounds who are as sincere about meeting you as you are them. … Typically there will be several ladies for every man in attendance. The atmosphere is light and relaxing. There is romantic lighting, quiet music and even a dance floor for your enjoyment. Russian ladies love to dance, so inviting a lady to join you on the dance floor is a great way of introducing yourself. Everything is centred around making you feel welcomed, comfortable and relaxed, so that you can make the most of your time and reach your goal—meeting a woman of your dreams.14

Much of this could come from a website advertising Asian women—beautiful, caring, family-oriented ladies, unspoilt by luxury and typically appearing in large numbers, eager to please even the older Western visitor (cf. Wilson, 1988). However, the emphasis on a middle-class background, suggesting similarity of status and outlook with the potential groom, already hints at a difference between Russian and Asian ‘ladies’, which is spelled out more clearly in a reader’s review, published on amazon.com, of a CD-Rom produced by a veteran searcher for Russian brides:

The idea of having a wife from a more traditional background, the idea of the man going out to work while the woman stays and tends the home has long been an ideal of mine. I was raised in such a family and see from my viewpoint that, when both spouses work, the quality of living suffers. Even if both spouses are making tons of money it still seems that the relationship lacks the polarity that I want when I am with a woman. Probably the only place left on the planet where there are Caucasian women who have notions compatible with mine concerning marriage and its structure is in Russia or that part of the world. When I read Weston’s book it was a real eye opener in terms of the struggle it takes to pull off a successful marriage between an American man and a Russian woman. Is it possible? Is it worth it? I believe more than ever that it is from reading Weston’s book. (Newbury, 2001, emphasis added)

In his search for a woman whose notion of marriage is compatible with his own, this man is obviously looking specifically for a white woman.15 Women in Russia seem to offer all the traditional values men used to look to Asia for, but fit more neatly into the racial hierarchies of the US, and may be less readily recognised as ‘mail-order brides’ when appearing with their husbands in public.

Although some women in Yoshkar-Ola laughed at letters in which men expressed the belief that Russian women were tender and submissive, most seemed to regard them as a reassuring answer to the question why there were so many seemingly healthy, seemingly well-off bachelors in the West. Having themselves a largely negative view of Western feminism, they could sympathise with men who did not want to marry a feminist.16 Not surprisingly, gender relations in Russia figured far more prominently in their discussions of their plans than gender relations in the West.
'All the good ones are taken'—on the challenges of putting one's personal life in order

Contrary to the stereotype of the 20-year-old Russian beauty marrying an elderly American pervert, the ages of the women advertising through Virginia vary widely. In November 2002 the first 55 women on the site ranged in age from 20 to 53, with the largest group of women (21) between 31 and 40. All of them had post-secondary education, more than two-thirds of them at university level (‘higher’ in Russian terminology), the rest had gone to vocational school (‘middle specialised’). Some 11 of the women had never been married, 24 were divorced, one was divorcing, three were widows and 16 gave no information on their marital status. More than half the women already had one or two children. According to Virginia’s director, women between 25 and 35 with no more than one child and higher education have the greatest chances of finding a husband. The oldest woman who married through the agency was 57.

In describing their ‘ideal man’ most women simply give an age span (typically starting at a few years older than they are and going to 10–15 years above that) and a minimum height (typically a little over their own height). Some add remarks such as ‘kind, caring, loving children’, a desired country of residence or a language that he should speak. These standardised questionnaires are accompanied by one or two photographs and usually followed by a short letter of introduction in which the woman discusses her interests and aspirations. These letters are submitted by the women, but edited by agency staff before they are put on the web.

What motivates these women to look for a husband abroad? I have characterised international arranged marriage as a female migration strategy. That the desire to move to ‘the West’ is a primary motivation for women who use the services of matchmaking agencies was assumed by many people I interviewed in Yoshkar-Ola. In a conversation with Rita and Lida, two unmarried sisters, I was told with great glee the story of a failed migration. An American bridegroom arrived in Yoshkar-Ola to marry his chosen one, but liked the natural scenery of the republic so much that he stayed in her village, where the couple were still living more than a year after their marriage, much to the dismay of the bride. What made the story funny was the unspoken assumption that she had married him in order to move to the US, not to live in a Mari village with him.

On the other hand, women who were looking for a husband over the internet, as well as some who were not, often explained the motivation for marrying a foreigner differently. Many women—whether young and unmarried or middle-aged and divorced—talked about being lonely, wanting to have a family. They would be happy to marry a Russian, many of them said, if they could find someone who was not a drunkard and would actually be a help and support rather than a big child who needed to be taken care of. Such men, they claimed, were almost impossible to find in Yoshkar-Ola, because they either got ‘taken’ by other women (‘vse khoroshie zanyaty’—as I often heard it expressed) or moved away to find work in a bigger city.

Even if some women may simply have considered it more acceptable to describe their plans as emigrating in order to marry rather than marrying in order to emigrate, it may be worthwhile to take seriously what so many of them were saying and think
of marriage as more than just a channel for migration.\textsuperscript{21} The very difficulty of starting and sustaining what these women considered a desirable family life may be one of the factors leading them to decide to leave Russia. ‘\textit{Obustroit’ sebe lichnuyu zhizn’}’—to put one’s personal life in order, to settle down with a stable family—was often mentioned as a woman’s central concern in life, but just as frequent were complaints that post-Soviet life was ‘\textit{takaya neustroennaya}’—so disorderly, uncivilised and chaotic. Masha, a young woman who was very actively searching for a husband abroad, corresponding successively with several Americans and a German (and married in the US at the time of this writing), exemplifies the difficulties of creating the kind of orderly life she might have wanted in Yoshkar-Ola. At 21 years old, she had moved to Yoshkar-Ola from a smaller town, was working as a nurse and living in the apartment occupied by an uncle and his family. Since her monthly salary did not even cover the cost of groceries, she had no hope of ever being able to rent or buy her own apartment, so getting married to someone with access to his own housing was literally the only way for her to leave the obviously uncomfortable living situation with her relatives.

Another of the agency’s customers, Olga, was a divorced librarian, living in a university dormitory with her 11-year-old daughter, since her former husband had kept their apartment. All her floor neighbours were male students, and she was concerned over her daughter sharing washroom facilities with them, but the only improvement of her living situation she could hope for in Yoshkar-Ola was persuading the administration to move her to a dormitory reserved for staff and faculty.

Whether these women might have been able to find husbands locally is another question. Male alcoholism has been discussed as a leading cause of illness and death throughout Russia for decades (Shlapentokh, 1984, p. 187; Cockerham, 1997), and labour migration to Moscow and St Petersburg may well be more common for men than for women, if the cases I heard about are any indication. So there may be a stronger drain on active, working-age men in Yoshkar-Ola than on women. Another part of the problem is that even a reasonably sober young couple will have a hard time generating enough income to be able to establish their own household and live in some comfort. The options for finding any sort of employment which pays a living wage are very limited in Yoshkar-Ola. Women who already had children claimed that this added to the difficulty of finding a man willing and able to take on the financial burden.\textsuperscript{22}

While there appears to be some truth to women’s claims that eligible men are scarce in Yoshkar-Ola, part of the problem may be that men and women have adjusted their views of gender roles differently under the changing conditions of post-Soviet Russia. Sociological studies indicate that respondents in contemporary Russia tend to be critical of the obligatory mobilisation of women into the workforce by the Soviet government, and that many men and women agree that it is desirable for the husband to be the main breadwinner, while women should work part-time or at least subordinate their careers to their family (Dmitrieva, 1996; Meshcherkina, 2000). However, Kiblitskaya (2000, pp. 92–94) has argued that men and women differ in their interpretation of the breadwinner role. While women long for a man who will devote his energy and his income to taking care of his family, men see their earnings as a way to gain autonomy, and try to reserve part of them for sustaining
social relationships outside the family—for instance, through social drinking with colleagues.

Such disagreements over gender roles between men and women in Russia lead some Russian women to look abroad in the hope of finding a man who is both able and willing to fulfil the breadwinner role she envisions. This does not mean that none of these women wants to work or study after marriage. During an English class which I attended at Virginia, the students—all women in their early or mid-twenties corresponding with Anglophone men through the agency—asked me whether American men minded if their wives worked, and the instructor, also a young woman, encouraged them to discuss this question with their correspondence partners. Like the young women interviewed by Dmitrieva (1996), these women combined dreams of a professional career with the expectation that the husband should be both the main source of material support and the person holding authority in a marriage.

In Yoshkar-Ola I rarely heard people condemn women for seeking to marry a foreigner, and I would like to suggest that this was due to a widespread recognition of the strain placed on male–female relationships by the conditions of post-Soviet life, as well as to a preoccupation with men as the weakest link in Russia’s demographic future. While I heard only one instance of someone condemning women who search for a foreign husband as acting out of calculation (a male speaker setting up a distinction between marriage for love—‘po lyubvi’—and out of calculation—‘po raschetu’), I heard several young women complain that marriage between Russians had become more calculating. Young people used to get married when they felt like it, Rita explained, because they knew that their salaries were more or less assured, child care and education for their children would be provided, and that they would be assigned a state-owned apartment eventually, even if it would take a long time. Today, by contrast, people really needed to count whether they would be able to support themselves and children, how and where they would find housing, and how they would pay for their children’s education.

Even though Shlapentokh’s (1984, pp. 97–98) study of marriage and love in the Soviet Union confirms that economic considerations were not very central to Soviet couples, we should keep in mind that themes of marrying for the sake of receiving a residence permit in a large city or getting rid of a last name denoting an undesirable ethnic origin do occur in Soviet biographies (Pilkington, 1992, p. 213). Although calculating the advantages and disadvantages of a relationship is thus nothing new to the post-Soviet period, the growing importance of financial considerations is shown by the inner-Russian equivalent of the mail-order bride business—contact pages in newspapers. Since the early 1990s newspapers have frequently carried advertisements in which men offered young, attractive women financial security and housing in return for sexual favours (Bridger, Kay & Pinnick, 1996).

If financial insecurity is a relatively new concern for couples, the concern over a gender imbalance in Russian society predates the collapse of the Soviet Union, and was one of the reasons for the legalisation of matchmaking services during the Brezhnev era. The life expectancy of Russian men has been declining since the 1960s, a trend that increased in the 1990s. In 2001 life expectancy at birth was 58.6 years for men, compared with 72.1 for women. Since the mortality rate is especially high for men between 35 and 55, it is in this age bracket and above that women outnumber
men. In the 1970s unmarried or divorced women in their 30s and 40s already had
difficulties finding male partners, which led to the establishment of some inner-Soviet
dating agencies in the late 1970s, after a long period of prohibition of such
‘bourgeois’ institutions (Shlapentokh, 1984, pp. 166, 186–188; Goskomstat Rossii,
2002, pp. 70, 73).

In the post-Soviet period this demographic imbalance has received increasing
media and scholarly attention, along with the sinking birth rate and rising divorce rate.
Matveeva & Shlyapentokh (2000, p. 145) speak of a post-Soviet ‘catastrophism’ that
focuses on fear of social, rather than natural, catastrophes, and Gal & Kligman (2000,
p. 25) have identified the central role that public debates over reproduction—issues
ranging from abortion legislation to stopping demographic decline—have played in
the politics of most Eastern European states since 1990. They argue that taking up the
issue of reproduction helps new governments gain legitimacy by constructing a link
between the private concerns of citizens and the future of the state, and showing
themselves as practising moral, responsible politics. For them, an important conse-
quence of such debates is attempts at regulating women’s sexual behaviour, and
Russian feminist scholarship has also shown how the discourse on demographic
decline blames women for not wanting to have children, and portrays reproduction as
a female responsibility at the very time when the state is no longer offering much help
to parents (Posadskaya, 1994; Issoupova, 2000). However, I found that much of the
public anxiety in Yoshkar-Ola focused not on women but on the Russian man as an
endangered species, weakened, just like Russian economic production, by the chang-
ing times and the demands of a Western life-style.

Although the national press had long discussed the out-marriage of Russian women
as a problem affecting the genetic composition of the nation (its genofond), I did not
hear people in Yoshkar-Ola express worries that there would be a shortage of brides
in the republic. The popularity of international marriages mainly raised anxieties over
the quality of the nation’s male members, who seemed to be rejected by consumers
in much the same way as Russian products. This link is made in the parody of ‘buy
Russian’ slogans on the mug which I cite in my epigraph. It also came out during the
International Women’s Day celebration (8 March 2001) of our overwhelmingly
female work collective at the foreign language department of Mari State University.
As the elderly colleagues were debating the question whether all the young, unmar-
rried members of the faculty should better marry Russians or foreigners, Galina
Aleksandrovna maintained that Russian men were best. She was silenced by Natal’ya
Grigor’evna’s question, ‘Yes, but where can they be found?’, followed by a story
about a drunken army officer on the bus. As the conversation turned to remembering
how tasty the imported chocolates brought by recent guests had been, Galina
Aleksandrovna interjected: ‘But sausages from Zvenigovo23 are the best in the world!’

In this conversation between older women Russian men and Russian products were
the focus of attention, symbols of the nation’s threatened economic and biological
future. By implying that Russian women have to turn to foreign men because real
Russian men have become a rarity, they relieved young women of the charge of
betraying the nation but also made light of the problems these women faced, be it in
trying to lead tolerable lives in Russia or in leaving their country on the invitation of
men they hardly know. Like the media discourse on Russia’s gender imbalance and
demographic decline, conversations such as these simultaneously reinforce the idea that it is a woman’s foremost aim to find a husband and that it is very difficult to do so in Russia. Another sub-text of this conversation is the opinion, expressed by scholars as well as by many of my female interlocutors, that men have been harder hit than women by the changes of post-Soviet life, because male identities were tied more strongly to their status of worker in the Soviet economy (cf. Kiblitskaya, 2000; Kukhterin, 2000). If women are choosing foreign husbands only because Russian men have been devastated by the collapse of the former socio-economic order, female marriage migration is not an active, and potentially selfish, coping strategy but a reaction women are forced into by the failure of their male compatriots to cope. However, if we look at international matchmaking as a way to establish transnational relationships, rather than simply a substitute for marrying a Russian, we can see how active, and varied, the range of strategies employed by female customers actually is.

Commodifying introductions: the value of foreign connections

Lemon points to the ambiguous relationship of ex-Soviet citizens to Western commodities and money: while they have been seen as a threat to the integrity of Russian national substance, they have also formed the focus of fantasies about 'possibilities of faraway exchange … of extensions of the self' (Lemon, 1998, p. 29). In Marii El and other parts of provincial Russia the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought an explosion of (often contradictory) media images from and of 'the West', while the difficult economic situation and visa restrictions still make traveling abroad impossible for most people, and foreign visitors remain rare (see Pilkington et al., 2002). In this situation internet matchmaking services offer a chance for some women to travel or move abroad, but they also create channels along which material and symbolic resources move into provincial Russia. For the mediators as well as their female customers, establishing such channels requires both new skills and the adaptation of modes of behaviour familiar from Soviet times. For instance, the matchmaking business is a way of enlarging social networks through introductions, reminiscent of the Soviet system of gaining access to goods and services through social relations (blat). But it differs from Soviet blat networks in several ways. The role of intermediary becomes commodified as a paid service, and the access provided is no longer to personal acquaintances but to technologies and skills which are needed to enter into contact with people who are unknown to the mediator as well as to the customer.

The number of Russian women who establish foreign connections through Virginia or similar agencies is greater than those who actually get married and emigrate. Visson (2001, p. 213) gives figures—from unnamed sources—of 10–40% of female clients of internet agencies who get married. Virginia’s director would not give a success rate, since the process can take several years, and some women either give up along the way or marry locally. He claimed that any woman seriously pursuing the idea of finding a foreign husband could succeed eventually. This implies that female customers differ in their commitment to finding a husband through the agency, something I can confirm from the women I spoke to. Some were going to the agency once or twice a month to see whether they had received messages, while others were
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corresponding intensely with several men at a time, taking English classes to prepare for moving abroad, and even had telephone conversations with their correspondence partners. The first group of women seemed to treat the matchmaking service more like an insurance that might pay off in case of future need. For the agency itself, it is more profitable if a woman corresponds with men for a long time without getting married. According to its director, Virginia was the first company in Marii El to accept credit card payments, providing a way to bring in funds from Western countries in exchange for local goods and services.

Some women use the connections they gain through the matchmaking service without intending to emigrate permanently. Marina, a foreign language instructor, presented the most striking example. When I met her in the autumn of 2000 she was recently divorced (from a man whom she had helped run a matchmaking agency, working as a translator). That autumn she spent a week in Italy at the invitation of one of her correspondence partners, whom she also asked to send her money for a new television set as a New Year gift. In the spring she married a local Russian. Placing an advertisement on the internet opens up possibilities of travel and consumption for some women which would be closed to them without the material and legal support of a foreign contact. Even though for such women neither migration nor marriage is the immediate goal, they use the matchmaking agency to extend their network of connections abroad, helping make life in Yoshkar-Ola more pleasant.

Much has been written about the role of social connections in the organisation of socialist and post-socialist economies. Ledeneva’s (1998, p. 37) work on blat analyses Soviet social networks as constituted by exchanges of ‘favours of access’, in which social connections were used to get things done and acquire goods that would have been impossible to obtain by official, anonymous channels. A crucial function in a blat network is that of the intermediary who introduces the person in need of a service or commodity to the person who can grant access to it. The intermediary puts an acquaintance in touch with another acquaintance with whom the intermediary had formerly established a reciprocal relationship. The introduction thus serves as a knot tying two previously unconnected networks together, and extending the networks of all concerned. It is this intermediary function, Ledeneva observes, that has lent itself to commodification in the post-socialist period, when people bringing potential business partners together begin to feel entitled to a percentage of the profits or another form of remuneration (Ledeneva, 1998, pp. 106, 156–158). International introductions, it seems to me, particularly lend themselves to commodification, because they offer access to a scarce resource, by means of a specific technology and through very extended, largely anonymous networks.

The value of international connections has to be seen as separate from that of local social networks. In 2000–01 local blat networks played a great role in the way people in Yoshkar-Ola obtained doctor’s appointments, university admissions, passing grades and affordable food. International connections would usually help very little with these everyday concerns, but carried a different sort of prestige. As one of the few foreign nationals spending a length of time in Yoshkar-Ola,24 I was confronted with the variety of hopes attached to international connections in the requests people made of me. They ranged from teachers inviting me to be the first live foreigner to speak to their class, to the owner of a store dealing in Mari crafts asking me to teach their
daughter German so that they could start exporting products to Germany, and a man asking (through an intermediary known to both of us) if I could help him find a partner in Germany to sell his mother’s embroidery. Competition over access to international connections was also one of the main sources of ethnic friction I encountered among the local intelligentsia. Russians often complained that Maris, as members of the Finno-Ugric language family, were privileged when Finnish organisations were sponsoring internships and language classes in Finland. Foreign connections were coveted because of their scarcity and the promise of ‘extension of the self’ they held, offering both material benefits and a sense of adventure, of being part of a wider world.

Blat relations involving mutual favours rather than immediate payment for services also existed in the matchmaking industry. Several women I knew were not paying to place their photograph on the web but corresponded with men whose addresses they had obtained through working at an agency or knowing someone who worked there. Others paid to place an advertisement on an agency’s website but avoided further expenses by having translations done by friends and sending messages from computers at their workplace or a friend’s house. But in general the field of international matchmaking lends itself to commodification because of the technical nature of the access provided. Rather than introducing acquaintances, the internet matchmaker merely provides the technology to create a site in virtual space where interested women post their pictures and where interested men select the women they want to contact. Neither the women nor the men have to be previously known to the matchmaker maintaining the site. While favours granted in blat networks depend on pre-existing relationships and are often conducted in a rhetoric of free gifts (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 141), there is no need to affect disinterestedness here, and the economic nature of the service rendered by the intermediary is recognised by all concerned. In a country where few people own their own computer, foreign language education has emphasised translation from a foreign language rather than text production, and whose citizens—especially unmarried women—have great difficulties obtaining visas to most Western countries, many women also have to pay for the other services of access offered by companies like Virginia: computer time for sending and receiving emails, translators to enable communication and paperwork for visas and invitations.

Other than the technology necessary for making international contacts, the internet matchmaker also provides male and female customers with access to knowledge about each others’ cultures, constructing a specific image of the gendered expectations of Western men and Russian women. On the English-language site of Maksim Introductions a monthly newsletter features articles on Russian customs and holidays, with reminders of the possibility to purchase gifts and flowers for a ‘lady’ through the agency. The agency’s Russian-language pages also contain a calendar of holidays celebrated in selected Western countries, and the instructions for taking attractive pictures construct an image of the essentials of Western culture:

No matter how sad you may feel, try to smile. The smile is an integral element (yavllyaetsya neot’emlemym elementom) of Western culture, and without a smile you will receive far fewer letters. Do not transfer your problems onto your potential grooms.
Further on, the intricacies of the English language with respect to relations between the sexes are explained:

Try to make your clothing underline the merits of your sex and seksapil’nost’ (don’t let this word frighten you—translated, it means ‘attractiveness for the opposite sex’). A woman in a dress attracts men more than in trousers.26

This leads to a discussion of other pictures men may find attractive: although the agency discourages nude photographs on the publicly accessible web page, it suggests that women can place such pictures on protected pages accessible only to registered members (who, we remember, are paying money to the agency). Women are also urged to fulfil any requests ‘your friend’ may make for pictures in specific attire or poses: ‘Try to fulfil his request, since these photographs do much to promote emotional attachment and even feelings of love’.27 In letters I was asked to translate men frequently hinted that they would like to see what their correspondence partner looked like in a bikini, which is probably one of the things referred to here. For Western men wishing to visit Yoshkar-Ola, Virginia offers not only visa service, transfers and interpreters but, most importantly, ‘the expertise of an experienced tour company to handle any difficult situations that might arise in Russia’.28

International matchmakers, even if they do not personally know their clients, provide each side with an introduction to the cultural environment of the other. Like all intermediaries, they depend on keeping two groups of people interested in each other as well as separated.29 In order to sustain this mutual interest, the agencies actively reinforce the idea that Russian women and Western men offer each other answers to crises in gender relations in their respective societies. By promising each side that they will find abroad what they have been looking for in vain at home, international matchmaking agencies both rely on and strengthen existing gender stereotypes in each society. However, they also encourage people to think about their life prospects in broader geographical and social terms than they might otherwise do.

In the perception of Virginia’s female customers, the difficulty of ‘putting one’s personal life in order’ in Russia is due to the failure of many Russian men to act as responsible providers, and aggravated by Russia’s depressed economy. If these women seek a solution through relationships with foreigners, they are embracing the idea of female dependence on a male breadwinner, fulfilling Western men’s expectations of ‘traditional femininity’. However, deciding to acquire the technical means and the cultural skills necessary for establishing Western contacts can also be a way to escape dependency and limited chances at home, as the examples of Masha and Olga and their housing situations show. Whether Russian men and Western women are changing their own self-image and behaviour in the face of media reports which depict them as losing out to foreign competition would be a fascinating topic for further study. As far as Western men are concerned, the many stories of female scammers which circulate on the internet show that the would-be grooms can never rule out a lingering fear: what if Russian women are not choosing them over local men out of a desire for a better provider but because a man who provides funds over the internet has less control over a woman’s life than one who lives in the same apartment with her?
Conclusion: letters and responses

I hope to have shown that internet matchmaking in Russia is a socially and economically significant phenomenon that is part of more general changes in gender relations within Russian society and within the global division of reproductive labour. I have argued that the significance of this business to Russian women has not received the scholarly attention which it deserves, but is too often written off as just another part of an international network of trafficking in defenceless, victimised women. This does not mean that I deny the risks of abuse and dependency inherent in such marriage arrangements. But in Yoshkar-Ola I often felt unable to tell my interlocutors that they had better alternatives than becoming a mail-order bride, because I could see for myself that local opportunities for supporting oneself or a family were very limited, and most channels for moving to a larger city or abroad seemed laden with similar risks of abuse.

When reading the enticing self-descriptions of Russian women looking for a husband through the internet one does well to remember a point recently made by Ferguson (2002, p. 560): reading a document ‘as a letter’ means recognising that it ‘demands not a sociological analysis of its authors but a response’. Whether they want to emigrate, find a way to have a family or simply be invited to Italy for a vacation, these women are writing because they want a response, and they are writing to those people (Western men) who are both motivated to respond to them (because they dream of finding a beautiful, feminine Russian woman) and materially and legally able to respond (because they have the necessary funds to sponsor a bride and because their government’s laws recognise a right of spouses to live together). For the sake of receiving a response, these women put on their most radiant smiles in the photo studio, no matter how sad it may make the social scientist to look at them.

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1 I lived in Yoshkar-Ola in the academic year 2000/01 on a teaching fellowship from the Robert-Bosch-Foundation. In the summer of 2003 I returned for two months with a pre-dissertation research grant from the University of Michigan. This article is based on interviews and informal conversations with approximately 20 women who were using the services of internet matchmaking agencies, with the director of Yoshkar-Ola’s biggest agency, and with some of its staff members. I was also present during an English class at the agency, as well as during meetings between several international couples. I am grateful to all my interlocutors, as well as to Katherine Verdery and two anonymous reviewers for perceptive comments and criticisms.

2 A university staff member claimed in 2000 that there were 26 such businesses, often doubling as travel agencies, in this city of 250,000 people. In 2003 the director of one of the agencies said that at some point there had been around 40 agencies, most of them not officially registered but working out of private apartments. While I could not verify this number, signs like brachnoe agentstvo or mezhdunarodnye znakomstva were displayed by many local travel agencies and photo studios.

3 For a discussion of gender relations in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia which is very attentive to changing concepts of masculinity see Ashwin (2000).

4 Monthly per capita income in Marii El was 1,052.3 rubles, compared with a federal average of 2,890.1. Only Ingushetia, Chechnya, Ivanovo oblast’ and the Buryat Autonomous District had lower figures (Goskomstat Rossii, 2002, pp. 36–37).

5 Information about the history and organisational structure of the company comes from an interview with the director, 15 July 2003, and from Virginia’s websites, www.virginia.ru (in Russian) and www.yoshkar-ola.com (in English, directed at male customers).

6 This shows that women in Yoshkar-Ola are certainly not alone in looking for husbands abroad,
but there are as yet no comparative figures on the number of women seeking the services of matchmaking agencies in various parts of Russia and Eastern Europe.

7 The monthly fee ranges from $43 to $83, depending on whether the man wishes to correspond only with women from Yoshkar-Ola or with those in other cities, and whether his letters will be translated orally or in writing for the women receiving them.


10 The number of ‘Russian’ marriage agencies advertising on the internet (based in cities of the former Soviet Union as well as in Western countries) is both large and continually changing. The following three examples might provide a sense of how Virginia compares with other agencies: Charming Lady in Odessa charges $10 per individual address, going down to $3.75 each for a package of 20 addresses (www.charming-lady.net, read 5 March 2004); Svetlana’s Brides in Kyrgyzstan charges $5 per exchange of emails, including translations, $20 for filming and transmitting an hour-long video of a ‘lady’, and $5 per hour for English lessons (www.svetlanasbrides.com, read 5 March 2004); and an agency in Voronezh offers free initial contacts, then charges $8 per individual address or $50 for a month of unlimited correspondence with one ‘lady’ (www.withlovefromvoronezh.com, read 5 March 2004).

11 See also Kligman (1996, p. 78) on the various motivations of women working in prostitution.

12 According to its director, 90% of Virginia’s male customers come from the English-speaking world, 65% from the US alone. Fewer customers come from the Netherlands, Germany, India and Japan. The agency also receives requests from Arab men, but none of them has so far contracted a marriage.

13 In fact, citizens of the Philippines still received the largest numbers of fiancée visas issued by the INS in 1999, citizens of the Russian Federation coming second with some 2,700 visas (Visson, 2001, pp. 205, 212).


15 It is ironic that he uses the term ‘Caucasian’, which in Russia evokes dark-haired, dark-skinned people from the southern republics, often referred to as ‘blacks’. Most of the women he has in mind would object to being so called.

16 For a discussion of the difficult relationship of Eastern European and Russian women to Western feminism see Gal & Kligman (2000, pp. 98–104).

17 As of 14 November 2002.

18 While the level of education is generally high in Russia, and slightly higher for women than for men, these women are still above average: in the late 1990s 13.2% of urban Russian women had higher education, 28.9% post-secondary vocational training (Meshcherkina, 1999, p. 50).

19 Interview with Virginia’s director, 15 July 2003.

20 All names in this article have been changed.

21 While I know of no large studies of the marital preferences of women in Yoshkar-Ola, a small-scale survey conducted by a student among about 100 of her peers indicates that the internet is not the culturally preferred way to meet a spouse. Only a small fraction listed a marriage agency as a good way to meet, the vast majority preferring venues where people meet in person, such as classrooms, clubs and discos or work (Morozova, 2001).

22 Russian women whom Visson interviewed mentioned the willingness of American men to marry women with children as something that set them apart from Russian men. Some Americans she talked to had explicitly searched for ‘a woman with a child past the diaper age’ (Visson, 2001, p. 208).

23 A small town in Marii El.

24 To my knowledge, the number of foreigners from outside the former Soviet Union who spent more than a month in Yoshkar-Ola in 2000–01 was limited to a Lutheran pastor from Finland, an American Pentecostal minister, an American student studying Russian, two German linguists studying Mari, a group of Chinese exchange students and myself.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.


29 The choice of the name ‘Virginia’ shows how much the owners are aware of the attraction of the foreign to both sides; the director explained that he was looking for a female name but one that, unlike names such as ‘Natasha’ or ‘Anastasia’, common to many matchmaking agencies, would sound exotic to Russians as well (interview, 15 July 2003).
References


