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EAST-EUROPEAN BRİDES İN THE WEST: A STUDY OF CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES IN THE UNITED STATES

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The present article analyzes stereotypes about international marriages in the American mass media, particularly about couples where husband is native-born American citizen and wife comes from one of the post-Soviet East-European countries. In mass consciousness, masculinity is seen as a model of authority and, by extension, becomes a metaphor of the American state. In this case, wives from Eastern Europe are almost exclusively represented through their sexuality and their relationship to men, their identity is constructed as deviant, as one that undermines mainstream intra-ethnic male-female equilibrium. The image of a woman then functions as an epitome of cultural otherness that is transmitted by both gender and national symbolism.

Keywords: US immigration, mail-order brides, marriage stereotypes, Russian wife.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created new forms of encounters on the international stage. One of them is transnational marriages between women from former Soviet countries and American men, which were made possible by the societies' increased mobility on the one hand, and by emergence of internet communication on the other. This paper aims to outline the context surrounding these marriages, and to answer the question on how borders, rights, relations and positions in such couples reflect a wider sociopolitical agenda.

To explore the complex nature of marriages between East-European women and American men, it is, first of all, necessary to stress that in American mass consciousness ethnic identity is usually simplified and these women are presented as Russian wives whether they come from Bulgaria, Ukraine, Latvia or any other Post-Soviet country. This, understandably, adds a substantial political dimension to representations of such international couples in popular culture. At the same time, border crossing by people, ideas, and beliefs are movements not in one direction, but in both. Therefore, a wider legal, social and cultural background should be taken into consideration in order to understand civil processes behind East-European marriage migration into the United States.

It is particularly important to take into consideration citizenship and civil rights of naturalized immigrants and their opportunities for participation in the American society. Thus, within the present study, statistical data provided by the United States was analyzed, as well as theoretical tools from migration studies, ethnic and citizenship studies. The question then can be posed whether legal rights and obligations of women from post-Soviet countries influence formation of ethnic and gender stereotypes towards Russian-American international marriages. How are couples' femininities and masculinities proclaimed within each society? How are gender and national positions negotiated between partners? Do such marriages challenge what is considered acceptable?

To answer these questions, various media materials were taken into consideration: online sources such as newspapers and dating sites provide the primary material for this analysis. Internet brides from post-Soviet countries have also frequently appeared in television and cinema discourses, including films Birthday Girl (dir. Jez Butterworth 2001), From Russia Without Love (dir. Mike B. Anderson and Matthew Nastuk 2018) and The Russian Bride (dir. Michael S. Ojeda 2019). These feature and animated films provide material to examine popular mainstream perceptions of Russian immigrant women in the United States and their encoding through certain symbolic and metaphoric images.

In a world where geographical and cultural boundaries are continuously shifted or eliminated, human mobility is taken for granted as an integral part of social and political life. While historically people have always moved from one place to another and migration has accompanied civilization in every stage of its development, the contemporary context of globalization has brought the world's borders much closer. Society is recognized as being in a constant state of flux. People are presented with multiple images, information, and possibilities at the same time and at an ever increasing pace. Individuals are therefore forced to respond in one way or another to these forces that operate on them.

Migration is often perceived as a predominantly male movement, with women either being left behind or following their male relatives as dependents. Ahsan Ullah, in his study of transnational migration through the lens of gender, explains that "[o]f the total, low- and semi-skilled ones form the majority of the migrants. This implies that either these migrants are not allowed to bring their family with them or they cannot afford. This means, their wives and, of course, along with their children remain behind" (Ullah 2014, 60). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the majority of women who migrate legally do so due to some kind of family circumstances: international marriage among them.

Although globalization seems to offer an equal opportunity for everyone to enter the global marriage market, it would be naïve to say that cross-border marriage flows are geographically balanced. Transnational marriage migration is obviously affected by power imbalance between rich and poor countries and parallels universal migration flows. On a global scale, immigrants from East and South-East Asia lead the transnational marriage market: in South Korea, for example, transnational marriages account for thirty percent of all new marriages (Ryabov 2013, 44). In the United States, Asian women, particularly those coming from Philippines, dominate bride immigration, while Eastern-European women and women from the former Soviet Union come second (Constable 2003, 3).

The majority of existing scholarly studies on transnational marriages focus on cases from Asia.[1] There have only been a few studies of transnational marriages from other countries, although Post-Soviet countries and Central America are important source regions of marriage migrants for the United States. Lynn Visson's Wedded Stranger: The Challenges of Russian-American Marriages (1998) remains the most well-known analysis of transnational marriage from the former Soviet republics. The study is based on a large material collected over ten years of research from more than 100 couples in the US. With numerous examples and case studies, the author provides an insightful picture not only of intercultural family life but also of the cultural differences that can arise in relationships of that type. The second expanded issue of the publication appeared in 2001 and included separate chapters on Internet dating and mail-order bride industry, on couples that decide to live both in the Russian Federation and in the United States, and a chapter on Russian-American children as a result of these transnational marriages.

More recent work on the subject of post-Soviet marriage migration into the United States is Ericka Johnson's Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance (2007). It is a highly readable combination of memoir and journalistic research which examines reasons behind six women's decisions to seek partners abroad. While the book allows East-European women to regain their voice in the mainstream American consciousness, the author does not elaborate on the topic of macro-sociological context of transnational marriage migration.

Academic studies of cross-border marriages between American men and east-European women are few and often deal with specific aspects of the question. Svitlana Taraban's research of the post-Soviet mail-order bride industry "Birthday Girls, Russian Dolls, and Others: Internet Bride as the Emerging Global Identity of Post-Soviet Women" which appeared in the collection Living Gender After Communism (2007) is perhaps the most thorough investigation of the recent explosion of the Internet bride market from East-European countries. In her study, Taraban asks such questions as what the reasons are behind the presence of Post-Soviet women online and what these women aim to achieve through the online strategy of husband-seeking. Constructions of gender and womanhood that appear at online dating sites allow the scholar to conclude

[1] For in-depth analyses on marriage migration from East and South-East Asia to the United States see, for example, Constable 2003, 160−186; Man, 140−160; Sims, 161−174, Lauser, 85−110.

that Post-Soviet women develop "neotraditional ideology" in order to negotiate the processes of change and continuity in their lives (Taraban 2007, 122). Igor Ryabov's 2013 article in Quantitative Sociology Review "Russian Wives in America: A Sketchy Portrait" is focused on post-immigration experiences of twenty women who left the former Soviet Union to marry US nationals. The main finding of the research, stressed Ryabov, is that the mainstream gender ideology both stigmatizes marriage migrants and shapes their integration trajectories in American society.

Russian population is the second largest ethnic group represented by more than ten percent (almost three million people) of the total foreign-born population of the United States[2]. Many Americans have some form of connection to Soviet-born people living in the United States either as family, friends or colleagues (about two percent of the total US population claim their ancestry as post-Soviet and almost a million households speak Russian as their home language[3]). These numbers however would be much higher if non-naturalized immigrants were taken into account.

This statistical data, when considered through gender perspective, exposes an important peculiarity of the East-European community in the United States. According to The 2017 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, over twenty five percent of naturalized immigrants from East-European countries obtaining lawful permanent residence status (i.e. "green card") in that year alone are spouses of US citizens (compared to eleven percent of employment-based preferences, ten percent refugees etc.). Moreover, naturalization statistics reveal that until nineteen years of age, ratio of male and female immigrants is approximately the same, with a slight shift towards male immigrants. Starting from twenty years of age, however, we see an obvious domination of naturalized women immigrants, the difference accounting for up to twenty five percent for the ages 20−24, twenty percent for ages 25−29 and three percent for ages 30−34[4]. These numbers illustrate that in the United States an overwhelming majority of post-Soviet immigrants are, strictly speaking, women of marriageable age who obtain citizenship through marriage. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the concept Russian bride, which is used to refer to all Russian-speaking women from Post-Soviet countries, has been firmly ingrained into contemporary American cultural consciousness.

While since the mid-1990s women from the former Soviet Union became more visible among transnational marriage migrants in the United States, the situation has not always been straightforward. Being a woman of East-European origin would often come to be considered as different than being an immigrant from any other European country. This idea was a result of the Cold War ideology and was proclaimed in July 1959 during the so called "Kitchen Debate" between Vice President Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Standing in the kitchen of the exhibit's model suburban house at the US Trade and Cultural Fair in Moscow, Nixon pointed at the shiny kitchen appliances and said, "In America, we like to make things easier for our housewives. […] There are some instances where you might be ahead of us – for example in the development of the thrust of your rockets for the investigation of outer space. There may be some instances, for example, color television, where we are ahead of you" (The Kitchen Debate – transcript). To show how communism was failing the Soviet people, American mass consciousness cast Russian women as poor, exhausted and exploited, with bad wardrobes and no makeup – a striking contrast to perfect American housewives who "even if the States were bombed, would rise out of the rubble perfectly coiffed and ready to tend to their steaming homes" writes Marlen Komar in "In the Cold War, Makeup was a Weapon: How Red Lipstick was Part of the US Arsenal." The Soviet feminine ideal, on the other hand, was created with an opposing narrative that stressed liberation from such idle notions as housekeeping, sexuality and glamour, expecting women to express themselves through active participation in society and production. "In a war of ideologies – where it was consumerism versus communism, Us versus Them – women became soldiers and their compacts became bullets" (Komar 2017).

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[2] The leading ethnic group is Mexicans that constitutes twenty eight percent or 7.8 million of all US foreign-born population.

[3] (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates; https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk).

[4] Table 8 of The 2017 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, the Department of Homeland Security; https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2017/table8.

The Soviet ideology created a framework of repressed sexuality, projecting interpersonal intimate feelings towards the regime (consider, for example, a catchphrase claiming the lack of sex in the USSR). Following the collapse of the Soviet state, the public discourse on sexuality was considerably liberalized and notions of gender reentered the public sphere. At the same time, religious re-traditionalization, political and economic instabilities, as well as commercialization of everyday life each had its influence on expressions of femininity and masculinity in post-Soviet countries. Sarah Ashwin in Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia explains:

[T]he collapse of the Soviet state has removed the institutional underpinning of the gender order forged in the Soviet era. Women are no longer guaranteed work outside the home, while social benefits are being eroded and motherhood is being redefined as a private institution and responsibility. The corollary of this is that men are expected to reassume the traditional 'male' responsibilities which have now been abandoned by the state, but in a context in which real wages are falling and traditionally high-status male industries, such as mining, metallurgy and the military-industrial complex, have been particularly badly hit by the economic crisis (Ashwin 2000, 2).

Both Marina Kublitskaya in "Russia's Female Breadwinners: the Changing Subjective Experience" and Sergei Kukhterin in "Fathers and Patriarchs in Communist and Post-Communist Russia" note that women in contemporary post-Soviet countries attempt to restore traditional patriarchal norms, at least to the extent that will allow them to have some support and male participation in domestic decision-making (Kublitskaya 2000, 55−70, and Kukhterin 2000, 71−89). Meanwhile, the expectation that men will perform the traditional male responsibilities, which have been abandoned by the state, implies increased pressure and obligations many men are not willing to assume. On the other hand, those men who are prepared to perform patriarchal role in the society, contribute to the current trend of "new traditionalism" (Kukhterin 2000, 110) and long for a full return to conservative lifestyle. Therefore women, who usually want only a modified version of tradition, are drawn to foreign ways of negotiating gender roles within a family and some of them, consequently, join the ranks of "Russian" brides abroad.

In order to attract Western grooms, East-European women often capitalize on three marketable qualities: appearance, dedication to domestic service, and sexual availability. The myth of a Russian woman creates a new gender phenomenon which promises a combination of traditionalism, sexual pleasures and housekeeping skills, with an added privilege of the white race identity. These qualities are particularly stressed by potential brides in their online ads throughout numerous Internet dating sites that target American men. For example, on new.russianbrides.com we find such advertisements:

Daria, 31: Sweet, kind and emotional woman. I am a reliable companion and loving daughter. I am cheerful and educated. When I was a little girl, I saw how my parents treated each other and I am happy that I grew up in this wonderful family. Now I'm an adult girl))) It's time to think about personal happiness and start a family. I don't know what kind of wife and mother I will be for my future children, but I will do everything possible and even impossible to make my family happy!

Yekaterina, 33: Very feminine, elegant, good-looking but I'd prefer my man to be attracted to my personality more than to my appearance ;) I'm honest, caring, romantic, emotional, optimistic, smart, educated, open-minded, with a good sense of humour and a very kind heart. I'm family-focused and love kids, though I don't have any yet. I'm a talented cook and love making a house into home. Sounds like advertising but it's all true ;-) what else can I say?

Another web-site, rubridesclub.com, has a separate editorial entry page which comments on major assets of Russian wives. Women are being marketed as a fantasy of a traditional pre-feminist spouse – a sexually attractive, devoted, submissive and feminine woman:

When you are checking out hot Russian brides, know that you are getting more than what you bargained for. Ten-to-one, you will be matched with a woman who is smart, charming, and an excellent person to run a household. They do not want to match men's abilities, but they want to be appreciated for their feminine characteristics that they developed in their childhood. Somewhere in Western society, the roles of women and men got mixed up, to the point where genders are now crossing physically. For Russian women, this is not the case. They pride themselves on being strong matriarchal characters and hold their femininity to be one of their

most treasured aspects. You will always see a Russian woman dressed as a woman should be, including showing off her more womanly attributes. You will rarely ever see them trying to do what their male counterparts do because their mothers and grandmothers taught them what it is to be a real woman.

It is obvious that these representations are meant to be read in opposition to the stereotypical idea of Western women, who are presented as unfeminine, career-oriented, opinionated, and selfish. Understandably, men who fall for such unequivocal images of female merits are those whose sense of entitlement for male domination was compromised by women's emancipation. Some studies have shown that consumer-husbands are predominantly white, often middle-aged (i.e. older than wives they choose), politically conservative, and socially alienated. More than half of the clientele of Internet dating sites have experienced a bitter divorce.

These patterns of masculinity and femininity within Russian-American marriages are firmly encoded into social narrative through their numerous representations in American popular culture. Such texts often objectify the women as disposable commodity which can be ordered or returned if rendered unsuitable by the client. The men, on the other hand, are often presented as victims of some sort of misunderstanding (ether bad service, mistake of the dating site or lack of communication with a foreign bride) but at the end are given an opportunity to win the heart of the woman.

In one of Simpson's episodes, From Russia Without Love (2018), the bartender Moe and his Russian mail-order bride present a stereotypical pair of a Russian wife and an American husband counterpoising hypermasculine and hyperfeminine traits of the couple. Throughout the series, Moe is presented as violent and easily irritated, his mood fluctuating between anger, indifference and suicidal despair. He runs illegal activities from his bar and frequently threatens his guests with a shotgun he keeps behind the counter. As a result of his bad temper and ugly appearance, Moe is unsuccessful in romantic relationships and is rejected or maltreated by every woman he tries to court. Although the character is depicted as a caring and forgiving partner, his loneliness is suggested to have transformed into some form of sexual deviance: in the opening scene of the episode Homer and Marge remember that last year Moe brought a rubber sex doll to Thanksgiving dinner.

At this point Bart, Nelson, and Milhouse decide to make a "hardcore" prank on Moe and order a Russian bride "that will break Moe's heart and his wallet." It is therefore suggested that after the bartender's previous relationships with a co-worker, a dwarf, a woman much older than he, and a sex doll, a Russian mail-order bride would mark the climax of Moe's sexual abnormality. Here, the parallel between a sex doll and a Russian bride is not accidental. At first, the viewers are unaware of the nature of an internet order made by Bart and his friends and are therefore led to believe that it is of an inanimate object. Although the suspense is soon resolved, there is little doubt about objectification of the woman. Simpsons make yet another bitter parallel to the image of a Russian bride – that of a pregnant rat, ordered by Bart simultaneously with the woman. When the parents find out about the boy's mischief, they make him write "I will not order pregnant rats" on the driveway, seemingly forgetting about the main prank.

Anastasia is introduced as a shy, homely and hardworking woman who manages to refurbish the gloom tavern and attract new upper-class visitors to the bar. "I do good. I work hard, clean up bar. I even chase out moose and squirrel" says the woman asking Moe not to send her away. However, when the bartender agrees to marry his mail-order bride, the fraud is revealed and Moe learns that Anastasia is in fact an American trying to get hold of his property. The wedding is promptly cancelled while the woman leaves with her new victim.

Stigma of delinquency follows the stereotype of a Russian wife as closely as does the perception of her excessive sexuality and traditional femininity. When a woman from a non-Western country marries an American man, it is commonly expected, or at least feared, that this marriage is pro-forma, established to give the woman an illegal gateway into the United States. What is distinctive about Russian-American marriages, however, is their connection to the cliché of a Russian villain which is deeply ingrained in mainstream western entertainment (a Russian accent is equivalent to malevolence in every film from James Bond thrillers to children's fantasy series about Harry Potter). If love is simply taken for granted in marriages between people from western countries, romantic emotions are assumed to be absent in the marriages where one partner is from an Eastern-European country.

These concerns form the backbone of Jez Butterworth's 2001 thriller Birthday Girl, starring Nicole Kidman as a Russian mail-order bride. The film's opening scene shows John Buckingham (Ben Chaplin), a thirty-something suburban bank clerk, browsing through entries of an online dating site called, quite predictably, "From Russia With Love." From the first glance, suspense is created by a noticeable dissonance between the man's apparently ordinary middle-class lifestyle, and women's bizarre presentations of themselves and their image of an ideal partner: "I don't want anything fat. Looks like Johnny Depp" says one applicant, while another remarks "I do wild things. I'm actually looking for someone who can control it." Already from the beginning of the film, viewers anticipate that appearance of a Russian bride will bring disorder and confusion into the protagonist's life. The man who also seems to sense this anxiety affirms: "Some people might not understand what I'm doing. […] I think it's quite a brave move."

When John collects Nadia (Nicole Kidman) from the airport, he realizes that she doesn't meet any of the requirements for his order: she doesn't speak English except for a short "yes", she is a smoker, and, moreover, looks drunk and vomits on their way from the airport. As a faulty product, she has to be returned for a refund or a replacement, so John repeatedly attempts to call a support line of the dating site; the number, however, does not answer. John is thus compelled to spend more time with Nadia and, following anticipated developments of the plot, affection is born between the couple.

In the film's narrative structure, the Russian woman serves as an embodiment of otherness on numerous levels: not only does she represent socially visible conflicts within class, ethnicity, cultural and economic status, but also denotes commitment to less acceptable categories of crime, alcoholism and deviant sexuality. Nadia brings chaos and felony to John's existence, and, as a result of their relationships, he is forced to abandon his comfortable suburban life. At the end, the protagonist commits robbery at the bank he has been working at for over ten years, assumes identity of Nadia's criminal ex-boyfriend Alexei (Vincent Cassei) and boards a flight to Moscow together with his mail-order bride. Through his romantic and sexual involvement with an epitome of the other, John himself becomes infected with the stigma of marginality and has to reestablish his identity from scratch.

Through its storyline and rather stereotyped characters, Birthday Girl describes the situation which is familiar to many transnational marriage migrants from Post-Soviet countries. Difference in class, education and cultural background, as well as the lack of a shared language and unfamiliarity with the partner's culture are often preconditions for Russian-American marriages. Although migration obstacles are common to all migrants, marriage migration practices seem to introduce a specific element of inequality, namely, inequality between marriage partners. For an outsider, people who come from such dissimilar countries seem to have little in common to form a long-lasting family union. These marriages not only raise suspicion in the eyes of ordinary people but also invite extra scrutiny from state authorities – the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and from the US State Department. In other words, the private and public dimensions of transnational marriages are intertwined and dependant on each other. On the one hand, the decision to create a family and marry is private, with the family's legal right for being free from public attention. On the other hand, marriage as a legal arrangement becomes explicitly public if it is feared to pose a threat for the state's integrity. After Nadia's arrival, John feels exposed and dreads a possibility that his neighbors and co-workers can find out about his nonconformism, including his most private secrets such as his interest in brutal sexual practices. This uneasy anticipation of an exposure is summarized in a scene when together with Nadia they are boarding a flight with fake passports and John expects a customs officer to stop and hand them over to the police. When his fear does not come true and they successfully cross the American border, John seems surprised as much as he is relieved.

Despite the chaos that Nadia's arrival brought to John's life, he was nevertheless more successful in maintaining his premarital lifestyle as compared to his immigrant wife. While John is able to continue his life almost uninterrupted, going to work and even getting a promotion, Nadia spends time at home and never seems to leave the house. As illustrated by Birthday Girl, the post-marital statuses of a native-born husband and an immigrant wife in Russian-American marriages differ dramatically. Due to the migration legislation, women who gain residence permits via marriage are considered as dependent, under the care of their husbands. For example, the petitioning US spouse must prove to the government an ability to provide sufficient financial

support to the immigrant in order to guarantee that the partners won't need to rely on government assistance. Therefore, the husband, as a breadwinner, will assure the wife's well-being and keep the family from the need to apply for public support.

Being in a dependent position within the family impairs woman's freedom as she has to rely on her husband in financial, judicial and cultural matters. These factors tend to result in her heavy dependence on American spouse; without his support the Russian woman would find her newly accepted lifestyle difficult to understand and manage. The situation is reflected in the theme of bondage that is a recurrent metaphor in Butterworth's film. Soon after Nadia's arrival, she finds a stack of video cassettes containing BDSM porn in John's apartment, she then allows him to tie her down with his necktie as if at once surrendering to his sexual preferences and to his respectful suburban way of living. Later, however, when Nadia's earlier life story resurfaces, the woman is treated very differently by Alexei and his friend Yuri (Mathieu Kassovitz), who leave her beaten and tied to a radiator in a motel room. She is haunted by her criminal past, bound hostage by the previous identity. It is no coincidence that John, who is the representation of her newly found American life, is the one who finds and unties her.

Hence, given an immigrant woman's overall dependence on her husband in a transnational marriage, it is understandable why the role of husband is assigned great importance in facilitating the Russian bride's assimilation to the new country. Immigration scholars agree that marital satisfaction is an important expression of socio-cultural adjustment and a proof of assimilation into the mainstream culture. Indeed, as Ryabov's research shows, the connection between private life and social adjustment is the most important one: those women who expressed feeling happy and fulfilled in their marital relationships enjoyed overall better adaptation than those who were dissatisfied with their marriage (Ryabov 2013, 57).

However, being in a dependent position within the family also puts Russian immigrant wives at an increased risk of violent and abusive relationships. Dehumanization of these women, commodification of their identity, makes it easier for their American husbands to abuse them. Research conducted by various authorities indicate, that domestic violence is expected to be more widespread in transnational marriages than in marriages where partners come from similar backgrounds. Studies commissioned by the United States Congress found that domestic violence rates could be very high (up to 77% in one study) in marriages between foreign-born brides and lawful permanent resident men (illustrated in H. R. REP. No. 103−395). When compared to the national average of 28% of American couples who report domestic violence, the figure is even more shocking. To further complicate the matter, only few cases are reported to the police because it is often unclear whether having a record of abuse would jeopardize the woman's right to obtain residence permit or citizenship. Some men speculate in the situation and use the legal regulations on marriage immigration to exercise full control over their spouses, threatening them with governmental expel. That is why many immigrant women chose to stay in the abusive relationship until they are granted American citizenship.

Without a doubt, cases of extreme violence between immigrant wives and native-born husbands dominate the scope of public attention towards Russian-American transnational marriages. In early 2000s, the American media was captivated by the story of Anastasia King, who was killed by her husband little over two years after her arrival to the United States. In 2006, the case of Hans and Nina Reiser gained public attention; few years later a murder story of Chris Collier's Russian wife Julia ran on the front pages of American newspapers, and in 2017 yet another tragedy occurred, this time involving Anna Repkina and William Chase Hargrove. This consolidated list of husband-wife homicide committed against East European immigrant women by their American husbands is by no means exhaustive and many more cases could be found in local and regional newspapers. Analyzing narratives from American national news agencies that covered the abovementioned cases, we find that reports create specific image of Russian-American transnational marriage. Newspaper articles inevitably focused on the men's hypermasculinity which, as the readers were led to believe, should have caused Russian bride's suspicion already before the marriage. In April 2002, Los Angeles Times published the following article called "Slain Bride's Parents Tormented by 'If Onlys'" which investigated the murder case of Anastasia King:

Indle King was persistent. He wrote, he called, and in December 1997 he arrived in Kyrgyzstan for a visit. He struck Anastasia's father as an organized, efficient man. […] Indle was

twice their daughter's age, and at 270 pounds was nearly twice her weight. She was beautiful, with silken hair down to her waist; he was dumpy and nearly bald. […] By the summer of 2000, two years into their marriage, "it was warfare", her mother says. Indle was corresponding with other prospective mail-order brides. Anastasia was seeing other men and keeping a list of her husband's transgressions. He threatened to hurt her, forced her to have sex, and forbade her from going to a counselor.

Another article which appeared almost two decades later in the Washington Post's about Anna Repkina's murder presented a similar discourse of violence towards foreign brides in the United States: both through the pictures and through the verbal descriptions, the woman was shown as young, attractive, and naïve, while the man was assumed to be a pathological cheater, womanizer, and abuser.

Ms Repkina had reportedly been lured from Russia by William Chase Hargrove's promise to marry her - but his existing lover was furious as their relationship developed. He murdered Ms Repkina "execution style", it is alleged. […] He took the victim out to a very remote logging location, and she was found shot dead in the back of her head.

Such descriptions become deeply ingrained into the mainstream perception of female migration from the Post-Soviet countries and tend to firmly link Russian-American marriages to the stigma of gender inequality, violence and abuse. Donna M. Hughes, an American scholar who dedicated her academic career to the topic of human trafficking and mail-order bride industry from Eastern Europe, writes: "From my contacts with domestic violence service providers, I have heard about numerous cases […] of women being abused and/or murdered after marrying a man they met through a marriage agency" (Hughes 2013, 2).

One of the recent films, Michael S. Ojeda's 2019 horror The Russian Bride, consciously employs the context of brutality and exploitation to synthesize feelings of anticipation and dread. As viewers are introduced to the protagonists, the sensation of imminent danger is created through subtle references to widespread and commonly acknowledged predicament of violence within Russian-American marriages. Thus, when the storyline juxtaposes an upper-middle class sixty-three year old retired plastic surgeon from New England and a poor middle-aged single mother from a fictional rural town in Northern Bulgaria, it is expected that the man has some instrumental interests in the relationship and the conflict will be based on the theme of sexual abuse and brutality. The film's opening scene shows Karl Frederick (Corbin Bernson) inside what looks like a Gilded Age mansion: his study boasts large stained glass windows, floor-to-ceiling bookcases, and classic furniture. The man's obvious prosperity, power and high social status raise suspicion that his interest in Internet brides is connected to sexuality and eroticism. Nina (Oksana Orlan), on the other hand, presents an image of desexualized, modest and domestic femininity. Together with her teenage daughter Dasha, Nina agrees to marry Karl and flies to the US both to escape her abusive alcoholic ex-husband, and to find a better future for her daughter.

Karl's secluded mansion can be read as a metaphor for American society where rich white men have monopolized the power. Apart from the homeowner, the place is inhabited by a Latina maid and a mute Hungarian handyman. The house is also visited by Karl's friends – among others, a white Southerner whose image is complete with a cowboy hat and two model-looking women accompanying him, a young student from an Ivy League medical school, an ageing woman clothed in high-end brands and furs. Race and gender are strongly stereotyped in the microcosm of Karl's universe; therefore Nina's subjugated position in the house is hardly surprising: soon after her arrival, the protagonist claims his power by forcing her to have oral sex with him, literally and symbolically putting her on her knees in front of him.

The film's model of a patriarchal society is complete with patrilineality, a male lineage which connects Karl and his son Tyler but, understandably, excludes women – both Nina and her daughter, and Karl's long-term servant Maria who at one point also expresses hopes to inherit the property. "There is nothing more sacred to a man than his son. Nothing!" exclaims Karl when Nina finds out that she and her daughter were planned to be used as organ donors for the fatally ill boy. The woman still finds it hard to believe that her role as a housewife is left unclaimed: "You never wanted a wife, did you?" she asks Karl and he responds "No. But I have to admit you […] are an amazing cook, devoted wife, wonderful mother, and you give a mean blow job." By degrading her value to these basic functions, the film mocks the mainstream perception of post-Soviet immigrant wives and exposes stereotypes commonly associated with mail-order brides.

"What are you gonna do, Nina?" continues the protagonist. "I'm a respectful man. And what are you? Exactly. Ordered by mail. Delivered. You think the police are going to believe you?" As predicted, when Nina attempts to call 911, her voice is inaudible over the phone, so the officer on the other side of the line repeats ironic "Are you all right?".

In order to save herself and her daughter, Nina has to overcome emblematic repression, regain her integrity and personally fight Karl's domination. Although the man has shot off both her hands, depriving her of bodily completeness and of active human identity (her movements are very limited as she is heavily sedated and tied up to a wheelchair), she attaches screwdrivers to her forearms and uses them to slaughter Karl and his allies. Nina's body is therefore transformed into an instrument, a cyborg, which is no longer defined through its femininity. She arises as a new, independent and gender-neutral being who is able to protect herself and her loved ones – her daughter as a metaphor of her future existence.

On the whole, public discourse about East European immigrant wives in the United States is formed by a number of factors, many of them having little to do with these women's true identity. Post-Soviet women are almost exclusively represented in relation to their sexuality and their relationship to men, their identity is constructed as deviant, as one that undermines mainstream intra-ethnic male-female equilibrium.

Analysis of representations of the concept of a Russian wife in American popular culture can provide us with a means to explain practices within American society that tend to stigmatize and impose stereotypes on women who immigrate for marriage. As illustrated in the examples addresses in this paper, immigrant women's identities are constructed through their relation to other social groups – either other ethnic minorities, or different gender groups. As a result, East-European women are viewed as "the other" in American society, which defines what it means to be American.

While intermarriage with native-born population is often viewed as evidence of blurring boundaries between population groups, this study tried to prove that marriage is only the beginning of a long and difficult process of a woman's integration into the mainstream society. Opportunities are restricted by immigration legislation, which influence women's status in the US and limit their access to equal citizenship and participation in American society. Women's experiences should be understood as unique, not predicted by the combination of being a "woman", "Russian", "immigrant", "mail-order bride" etc. Only by accepting each constitute of their multiple social identities can the society renounce its stereotype of binary construction of "them" and "us".

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