

MIDDLE-AGED AND OLDER RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MEN'S SOCIAL RELATIONS

FINDINGS FROM THE RASTI AND CHARM STUDIES

Older people, especially migrants, are at greater risk of social disconnectedness and isolation, as migration can disrupt existing social relations, while age-related changes make it harder to establish new contacts. Previous research on older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland showed that approximately 30% had fewer than two people they considered to be close. Despite this, older men reported feeling lonely almost half as often as older women did. In interviews with older men born in the Soviet Union, we found that they were mostly satisfied with their social contacts, and their friendships helped them meet their needs for recognition and respect. However, the war in Ukraine has challenged men's social relations.

Keywords: social relationships, friendship, older migrants, older men

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Introduction

As people age, their social networks tend to shrink. Fewer social contacts may be associated with an increased risk of social disconnectedness, isolation, and even depressive symptoms (Santini et al. 2020). The risks are particularly pronounced among individuals with a migrant background, who frequently face structural, cultural, and linguistic barriers to social integration in later life (Guruge et al. 2025). A study of older men from minoritized ethnic groups in England found that men are especially vulnerable because they experience higher levels of loneliness and social isolation than women of the same age (Hayanga, Kneale & Phoenix 2022). Migration can affect men's sense of masculinity. A new social and cultural context often entails reconfiguring one's social status, professional identity, and family roles, thereby also necessitating a renegotiation of masculine identities (Donaldson & Howson 2009). These transformations may further complicate migrant men's ability to form and maintain social ties in later life.

Little research exists on how older migrant men negotiate their masculinities in the context of migration, how they build and sustain new social relationships, and how they select their social contacts. To address this knowledge gap, we discuss the social relations of older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland, with a particular focus on men. Specifically, we explore social relationships among midlife and older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland by examining (1) their understanding of friendships after migration and (2) how the war in Ukraine has shaped their everyday social interactions. These discussions highlight some of the complex intersections of aging, migration, masculinity, and social connectedness in later life.

Gendered patterns of social relationships among midlife and older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland

Russian speakers in Finland comprise the largest language group among people with a migrant background and account for 2% of the total population (Statistics Finland 2025). Most Russian speakers moved to Finland after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, and they are a highly diverse group in terms of their country of origin, reasons for migration, ethnic background, and arrival time. About one-third are of Finnish descent, having lived in the Russian territory between St. Petersburg and the Gulf of Finland and were classified as Finnish by the Soviet state; they

were granted returnee status by the Finnish government under a repatriation program between 1990 and 2011. A nationally representative CHARM (Care, Health, and Aging of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Finland) study, conducted between May 2019 and October 2022 (N=1806), provides empirical insights into the social relations of Russian-speaking migrants aged 50 and above who permanently reside in Finland (Kemppainen et al. 2020). According to the CHARM data, the main reasons for migration for older Russian speakers included repatriation, one's own or a spouse's job or studies, and family reasons, such as marriage or a new relationship in Finland (see Table 1).

Additionally, migration among Russian-speaking migrants typically occurred in mid-adulthood (mean age=44). By 2019, half of the participants had acquired Finnish citizenship, and approximately 50% had completed higher education prior to migration, indicating relatively strong educational resources. Older Russian-speaking migrants had lived in Finland for an average of 18 years, reflecting long-term settlement (see Table 1). Despite this extended period of residence, notable gender differences persist in social relations and the degree of linguistic integration. Women reported significantly higher local language skills than men (see Figure 1), which may highlight dif-

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, pooled CHARM data (both men and women)

Characteristics		%	n
Sex	Men	56	1008
	Women	44	798
Education in Finland	No education/missing	62	1122
	Some education	38	684
Higher education in the country of origin	Yes	50.1	905
	No	49.9	901
Finnish citizenship	Yes	52	932
	No	48	846
Friends of Finnish origin	Yes	30	457
	No	70	1050
Length of stay		mean(StDev)	Min/max
		17.4 (9.06)	0/76
Age		44.2 (8.23)	50/93

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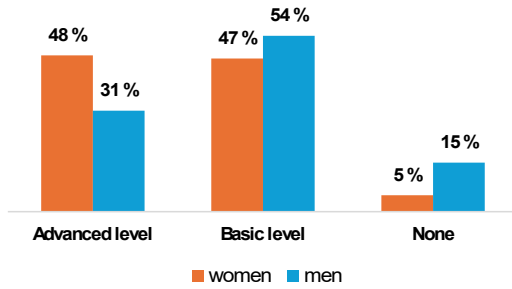


Figure 1. Self-reported local language skills (N=1673).

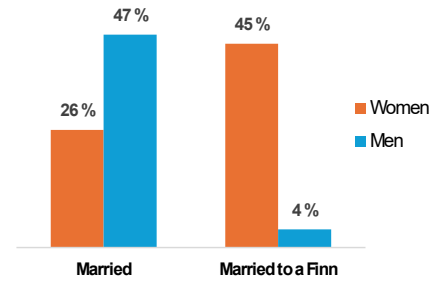


Figure 2. Marital status by gender (N=1806).

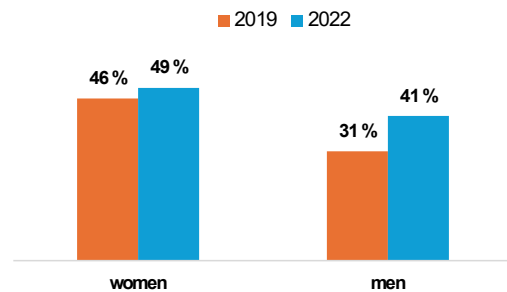


Figure 3. Self-reported loneliness, CHARM survey 2019 & 2022.

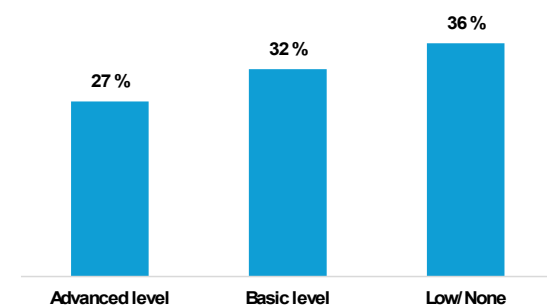


Figure 4. Self-reported Finnish language skills among men (N=22).

ferences in social participation and belonging. Men were more likely to be married or cohabiting, whereas women more often had partners of Finnish origin (see Figure 2), again pointing to differences in social integration.

At the same time, social isolation remains a significant concern for all older Russian-speaking migrants: approximately 30% of participants were classified as socially isolated, defined as having fewer than two people they considered close friends. Notably, more than 70% of older Russian speakers reported having no friends of Finnish origin (see Table 1), indicating that many social ties remain largely co-ethnic. Moreover, experiences of loneliness also display shifting and gendered patterns. Overall, women reported higher levels of loneliness than men. However, the levels of loneliness reported by men rose by 10 percentage points between 2019 and 2022 (see Figure 3). The RASTI (Limited social spaces: social relationships, sense of belonging and well-being of aging Russian-speaking men living in Finland) project further explored the well-being of older Russian-speaking men in Finland, their social relationships, and the topics, concerns, or shared experiences shaping their everyday interactions.

Older Russian-speaking men's social relations in Finland

For the RASTI project, we conducted semi-structured interviews (N=22) and observations with Russian-speaking men aged 60 years and above who resided in the Helsinki metropolitan area between May 2023 and January 2024. The participants had an average age of 68 years and on average had lived in Finland for nearly 18 years, also reflecting long-term settlement patterns. Nearly half held Finnish citizenship, while a substantial majority had obtained higher education in their countries of origin. Just over half were married or cohabiting, yet social ties with members of the majority population remained limited: 65% reported having no friends of Finnish origin, and 18% reported having no "true friends" (see Table 2). Most men moved to Finland through the repatriation program, and the majority assessed their local language skills as good or basic (see Figures 4 and 5).

During the interviews, older Russian-speaking men generally expressed satisfaction with their current social relationships in Finland. When talking about their friends, they drew a meaningful distinction between friends (droog) and acquaintances (znakomyi). They typically located "true" friendships in the past and associated them with relationships formed during their youth in Soviet

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Table 2. Descriptive statistics, RASTI data (N=22)

Characteristics		N
Higher education in the country of origin	Yes	17
	No	5
Finnish citizenship	Yes	10
	No	12
Friends of Finnish origin	Yes	7
	No	15
Marital status	Married/cohabitating	12
	Single/divorced/separated	10
		Min/max
Length of stay		5/34
Age		60/77

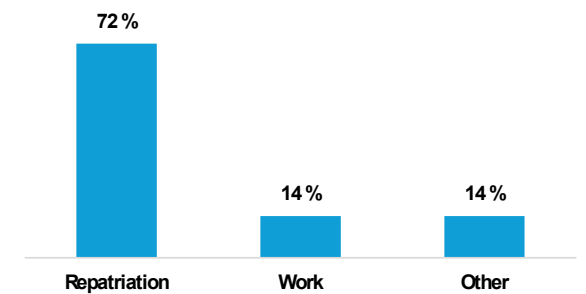


Figure 5. Reasons for migration among men (N=22).

times. Those friendships were connected to the men's self-perceptions of masculinity, including being attractive to women, capable of reckless behavior, and possessing resources. By contrast, relationships established after migration were more often described as "just friends" or merely "acquaintances." Their post-migration ties tended to be based on selective affiliation with people who shared similar life histories and recognized the men's skills and competencies, yet they were perceived as lacking the depth, loyalty, and emotional intensity of the "true" friendships of their youth.

When discussing their social relations, our interviewees distanced themselves from both women and Finns, neither of whom were considered potential friends. The feeling of no longer being attractive to women as potential partners was experienced as a symbolic loss of participation in

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masculine competition, particularly in relation to other men, such as Finns. At the same time, they differentiated themselves from migrants “of color,” positioning themselves as more respectable migrants. Yet, the men did form social relationships in homosocial groups, like men’s clubs, where a shared language, shared memories, a shared Soviet past, and shared cultural references, such as knowledge of the same Soviet films or literature from the Soviet school curriculum, helped create a sense of familiarity.

Men’s friendships also function as arenas for reaffirming class status and masculine worth through professional and practical competence. At their meetings in the men’s club, highly educated men deliver talks on history, science, and mechanics, while working-class participants, in turn, gain recognition through their practical expertise in repairing items or advising and assisting others. Within these groups, the interviewees made moral distinctions based on their education, expertise, and everyday technical skills, allowing them to construct class-based masculinities. Although most participants stated that they had few or no “true” friends in Finland, their new relations and acquaintances nonetheless played a crucial role in helping them sustain and perform masculine ideals rooted in Soviet cultural models.

The war in Ukraine has further complicated the formation and maintenance of social relations among men. This finding became evident when we analyzed the RASTI interviews and observation data. We found that the different ways in which men discuss or choose not to discuss the war in Ukraine have shaped the social relations of our respondents (Asikainen & Pietilä 2025). For instance, the war in Ukraine was not discussed in the men’s club where we conducted our observations, as such discussions would potentially disrupt the comfortable atmosphere of the club. If discussed, the war was mostly talked about with people who shared similar views. Some had also broken ties with close friends or stopped attending social clubs if views on the war differed. Many respondents told us that since 2022 (some already since 2014), they had become more careful in using the Russian language in public places, the only language many of our respondents used fluently and the mother tongue of all of them.

Conclusion

This paper provides insights into how older Russian-speaking men negotiate their social relations after migration. Although older men reported experiencing loneliness less often than women in

the same age group, feelings of loneliness had increased among them by 2022. After migrating to Finland, older men formed homosocial networks based on familiar aspects of “Soviet” culture, shared interests, and the recognition of professional or practical skills. They typically do not view Russian-speaking women of the same age, Finns, or other migrant groups as potential friends, and the men often distance themselves from them. Building boundaries between “us” and “others” allowed the men to protect their challenged masculinities from external competition and devaluation. Selecting and restricting contacts is another strategy for enacting assertive masculinity. Drawing boundaries with “others” helps the research participants negotiate their status and cope with social isolation by presenting the act as their own choice. Moreover, Russian-speaking men view their relations after migration as less close or less deep, having only formed “true friendships” in their youth, during the Soviet times, when they had more resources. Although limited in number, older men’s social relations play a crucial role in affirming their respectability and masculinity.

Overall, we found that our participants valued a calm and comfortable life in Finland in their old age. Therefore, they tried to avoid conflicts, whether by avoiding difficult political discussions to not jeopardize the few social connections they had, not using the Russian language on the street, or even cutting ties with people who had different views about the war.

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