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Romance on a global stage: relationship sequences between French men and Russian women

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Romance on the global scene: relationships between French men and Russian women

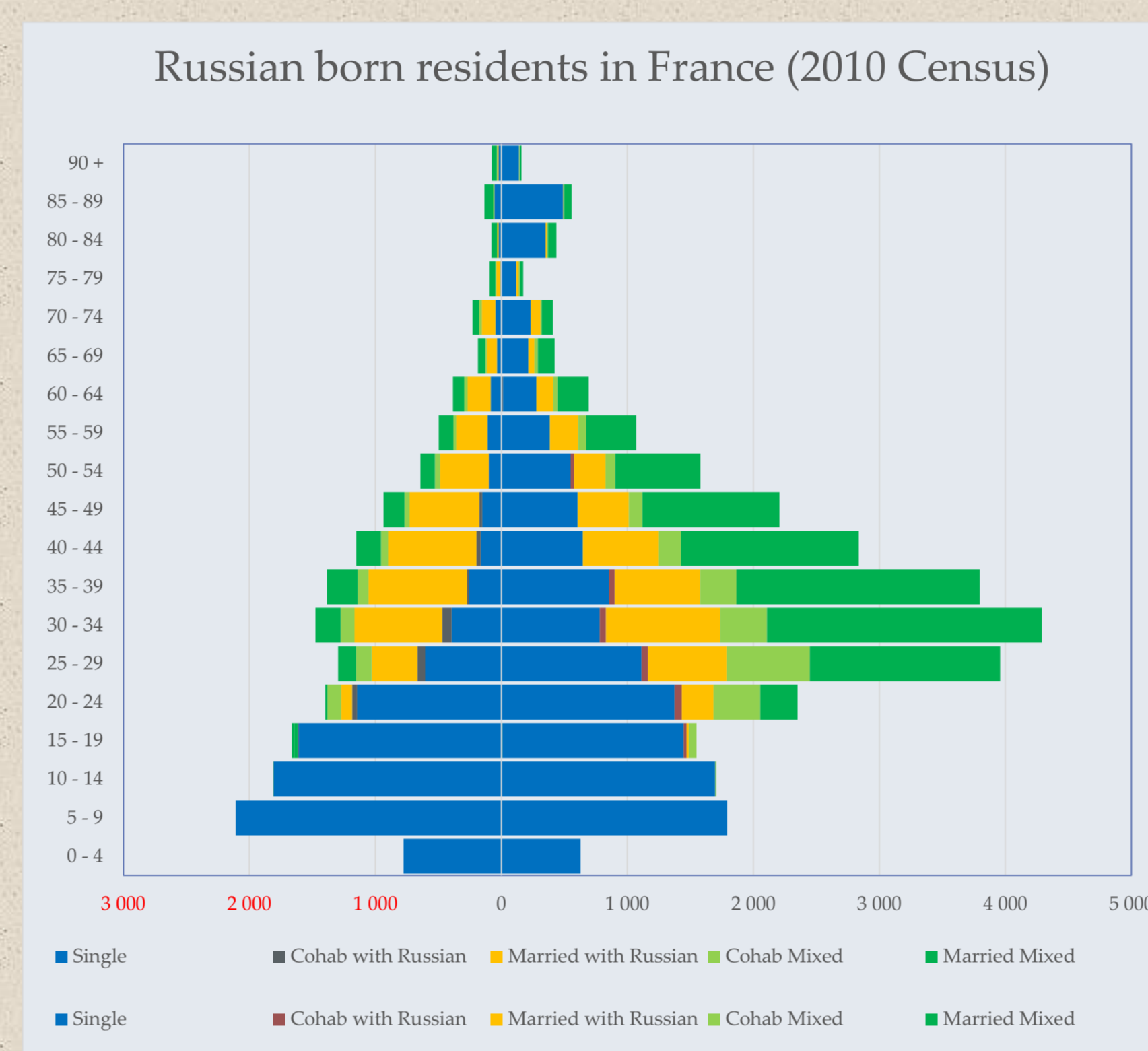
Background

Each year, close to 1000 Russian spouses marry French husbands in France. They form the third group behind Moroccan and Algerian spouses. More Russian women marry French men in Russia before migrating into France. At the 2010 Census, 11 700 French-Russian married couples lived in France of which 10 100 (86%) were Russian women with French husbands.

Who are these wives and who are their husbands? How did they meet? What are their motivations? How do they action “gendered geographies of power” (Pessar & Malher, 2001)? French literature is limited (Giabiconni, 2008). Elsewhere, these questions are in debate. (Heyse, 2010; Levchenko & Solheim 2013).

FRANCE 2010 CENSUS

Russian born female immigrants are mainly single (blue) having migrated with their parents (median age of arrival 14 years), or spouses in mixed unions (green). Female spouses outnumber by far male spouses in recent marriages.



Methodology and fieldwork

Our study uses data of the French 2010 Census and marriage registration, as well as 671 files of French-Russian marriages at the French consulate of Saint Petersburg, including pre-marriage investigation notes.

Fieldwork observation has been done in matrimonial agencies, in France as in Russia, and 20 in-depth interviews have been analysed.

Main results

Russian born spouses are highly educated and so are their non-Russian husbands. Considering the wives' educational and sociodemographic characteristics, their husbands are much alike husbands of French born spouses except age: they are four years older. The age gap might suggest French men are ageing when they enter the global wedding stage.

A longitudinal study of St-Petersburg data shows no increase of dissolution risks for French-Russian marriages compared to French-French marriages. It also highlights a modern way of life on the global stage, using English as the common language, and internet matching before international romance or personal networks.

In-depth interviews suggest highly educated Russian born women marry French born husbands for gender reasons: demographical misbalance between the sexes and a local masculinity not enough desirable regarding the gendered norms push Russian women to look abroad where they think to find a “good” husband.

FRANCE CENSUS 2010

Russian born female spouses are highly educated. So are their French husbands.

Table 1 compares their real husbands with the ones they would have had if, with the same sociodemographic characteristics, they were French born. Their real husbands are slightly more educated and occupy slightly more frequently management positions, but the main difference between real and expected husbands is age: their real husbands are five years older than expected, bringing the age gap in the mixed French-Russian marriages at almost 7 years.

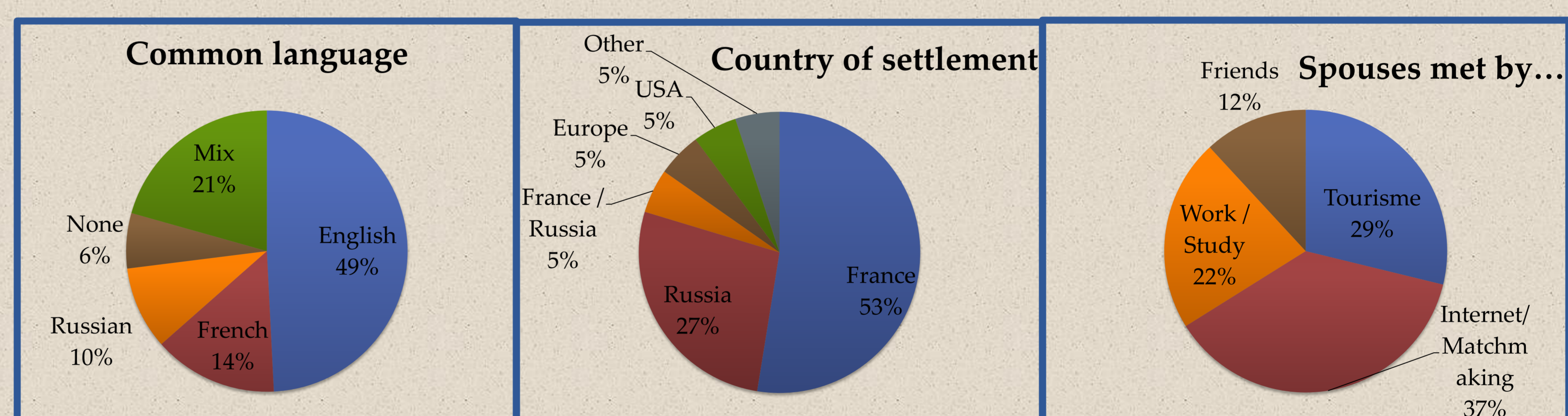
Real and expected husbands of Russian born female spouses married with non Russian husbands, France 2010

	Real husbands	Expected husbands
	n = 6 646	
Median age	44,7	39,8
University degree	42%	40%
Short term employment	3%	4%
Long term employment	62%	71%
Managers	42%	38%
Employees	8%	11%
Manual workers	12%	18%

ST-PETERSBURG 2012-2014

More than half of St-Petersburg mixed marriages intend to settle in France.

Half of the mixed marriages use English as everyday language. Less than half of the marriages met by internet or other international agencies.



Discussion

French-Russian couples increase since the collapse of soviet union and the NTIC development. Russian born female spouses rank third in recent French statistics of mixed marriages. Like Levchenko and Solheim (2013) in the USA, we find strong social homogamy between partners that are both highly educated. We also observe an important age gap between and a high proportion of housewives. It points to the hypothesis of men exchanging nationality, high income, education and status against female youth, domestic care and potentially sexual work. Yet, discourse analysis puts into light empowerment motivations of Russian women looking for better matrimonial opportunities. More research is needed to understand if the new international “arrangement of sexes” (Goffman, 1977) is recycling old patterns of domination or if it empowers women who would remain caught in local networks of male domination.

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