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# Sensory Dislocation and Transnational Ties: Exploring the Forced Immobility of Older Russian Speakers in Finland Amidst COVID-19 Restrictions

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 travel restrictions were especially distressing for migrants, whose transnational lifestyles and networks often rely on travelling, even in older age. Drawing on 20 interviews, this study analyses the effect of COVID restrictions on the transnational lives of older Russian migrants in Finland. The study highlights the importance of physical co-presence in transnational relationships, showing that older migrants suffered from ‘sensory disconnection’ caused by forced immobility. In Finland, participants typically maintained narrow social circles dominated by kin relations. Amidst the pandemic, they sought comfort through nature and gardening, sensory-rich practices akin to Soviet-era *dacha* practices. Yet, the inability to reconnect physically with their country of origin, particularly for practices such as visits to cemeteries, emerged as a substantial source of emotional distress. Connection with deceased kin was an integral part of their transnational network. The findings suggest that maintaining transnational visits is key to the well-being of many older migrants.

## 1 | Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the significance of physical co-presence and touch in social interaction (Durkin, Jackson, and Usher 2021). It also underscored the existence of ‘fragile transnationalism’ as seen in crisis responses that scaled back transnational spaces and processes, reverting to nation-state-centred policies (Nehring and Hu 2022). As governments worldwide implemented restrictions to curb the spread of the virus, these measures disrupted longstanding social norms and challenged taken-for-granted habits, particularly among those accustomed to mobile lifestyles (Martin and Bergmann 2021; Skovgaard-Smith 2023). The spatial restrictions specifically targeted older people, aimed at protecting them from the serious

health outcomes of the virus. By curtailing freedom of movement and social activities, these restrictions also raised alarms about the potential psychological ramifications on the mental well-being of the older population (Breheny and Stephens 2023) but have also brought to light the ageist attitude that inherently labels older individuals as ‘vulnerable’ (Fraser et al. 2020). The restrictions were especially distressing for migrants, whose transnational lifestyles and networks often rely on travelling between the countries of destination and origin, even in older age (Bolzman, Kaeser, and Christe 2017; Buffel 2017; Levitt 2003).

For many of transnational families, mobility and the ability to engage in cross-border visits have been integral to maintaining familial bonds and providing essential care and support

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(Baldassar 2007). These mobile lifestyles of migrants have been shown to persist and even become more important at older ages (Bolzman, Kaeser, and Christe 2017; Buffel 2017; Horn 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the profound importance of these visits, revealing their essential role in maintaining familial connections over geographical distance (Merla, Kilkey, and Baldassar 2020, Simola et al. 2023).

During the pandemic, the digital platforms were seen as crucial in compensating for the absence of face-to-face interactions, and many older adults started to use digital means more than before (Cabalquinto and Büscher 2023; Sixsmith et al. 2022). In transnational families, digital communication had already become commonplace for daily intergenerational interactions before the pandemic (Baldassar 2023; Baldassar and Wilding 2020). However, in many regions, unreliable internet connections persist, and disparities in access, along with varying levels of digital literacy, place additional stress on users, underscoring the broader global inequities in digital connectivity (Cabalquinto 2023). Despite growing reliance on digital technologies, many migrants continue to view the physical co-presence as a necessity, especially during times of crisis or significant life events (Baldassar 2014; Mason 2004; Skovgaard-Smith 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic represented such a crisis, yet it simultaneously imposed lockdown measures that restricted physical co-presence, which caused considerable distress for many transnational families (Simola et al. 2023). Thus, the disruption of routine habits by the COVID-19 crisis presents a research opportunity to enhance our understanding of the significance of physical visits in transnational families.

In this article, drawing on interviews conducted with Russian-speaking migrants aged over 65 in Finland, my aim to shed light on the sensory aspects of maintaining transnational connections and in explaining the importance of the physical visit. For this, I draw on ongoing discussions about the embodied experiences of migration (Baldassar 2008; Bascuñan-Wiley 2021; Webber 2023). Additionally, this work contributes to debates on the significance of place and physical presence in commemorating the dead (Jonsson and Walter 2017; Maddrell 2016; Sakti 2023), demonstrating that visiting graves in the country of origin is an important way of maintaining transnational connectedness for older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland.

For this article, I examined three aspects of the experiences of older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. First, I analysed the pandemic's impact on their lives and the coping mechanisms they employ within the destination country. Second, I explored the acute sense of immobility experienced by the study participants, aiming to understand the underlying reasons why not being able to travel was so shocking for them. Third, I have illustrated how the transnational social networks of older migrants extend beyond the living and include continuing bonds (Klass et al. 1996) with the deceased and show how these bonds are bound in place.

The article is structured as follows. First, I will establish the study's background by reviewing the recent literature on transnational relations at later life and introduce the framework of migration and senses. Subsequently, I will introduce the data and methods of the study before proceeding to results. Finally, I will

discuss questions of transnational networks and the meaning of physical visits from the perspective of sensory experiences.

## 2 | Transnational Relations at Later Life

The combination of increased mobility and longer lifespans has made ageing away from one's country of origin increasingly common (Ciobanu, Fokkema, and Nedelcu 2017; Torres and Hunter 2023). Migrants' lives are shaped by transnationalism, which can be described as keeping feet in two worlds at the same time (Levitt 2003) but also as being absent and present simultaneously (Horn 2022). In this situation, people need to balance between their family responsibilities and relationships in their countries of origin and destination (Baldassar 2007). Belonging to the so-called sandwich generation, taking care of both one's children and parents (Grundy and Henretta 2006) transnationally often results in highly mobile lifestyles. Transnational activities manifest in various forms, ranging from physical travel to countries of origin, to the sending of remittances and gifts. They can also encompass more abstract expressions such as longing, nostalgia or imagined co-presence (Baldassar 2008; Horn 2022).

Social relations have been shown to be important for health and well-being (Tay et al. 2013). Feeling a sense of connection, or sense of belonging are considered a basic need (Baumeister and Leary 1995) and crucial for the meaningfulness of life (Lambert et al. 2013). Conversely, social disconnection is considered to be a global problem, as many people suffer from loneliness and social isolation as they struggle to belong (Allen et al. 2021).

As both migration and older age are shown to be associated with narrower social relationships, older migrants may have a higher risk of social isolation and loneliness (Delaruelle 2023; Ramos and Karl 2016). They can be at greater risk of social disconnection as they often rely on their close kin's support in daily life, rather than having wider local networks in the destination country (Pan et al. 2021).

Analogous to migration, ageing can also 'dislocate' people, whereas their own generation is diminishing and the lives of the younger generation feel unfamiliar (May and Muir 2015). Old age often involves introspection and a heightened awareness of mortality, which can trigger existential loneliness—a profound sense of emptiness, disconnection or isolation stemming from contemplation of life's meaning and one's place in the world (Bolmsjö, Tengland, and Rämgård 2019). For older migrants, reaching older age may intensify feelings of cultural loss and deepen their sense of alienation in the destination country, triggering existential loneliness (Olofsson et al. 2021). For older individuals, the place may hold a greater significance in shaping their sense of identity compared to younger generations (Scharf, Phillipson, and Smith 2003). Ageing can also cause new desire to return to one's 'roots' (Zontini 2015).

Maintaining transnational social connections can compensate for the lack of local social contact in the destination country, thus strengthening social support networks and enhancing overall well-being (Bilecen, Çatır, and Orhon 2015). Return visits to one's country of origin are 'deeply relational practices' (Baldassar

2023) that facilitate a sense of belonging and may diminish feelings of social disconnection and protect from loneliness (Bascañan-Wiley 2021; Klok et al. 2017). The absence of transnational connections might result in weaker support and increased marginality in later life (Zontini 2015).

Buffel (2017) found that older migrants often longed to return to their country of origin, but ‘aged in place’ as they had family or strong community ties in the destination country. Travelling and maintaining transnational relations are very important ways to maintain multiple place attachments and a transnational sense of belonging, and migrants often continue to travel to their countries of origin at an even older age (Buffel 2017; Zontini 2015). However, poor health and frailty as well as the poor economic situation that can come with advanced age might eventually restrict mobility (Bolzman, Fibbi, and Vial 2006; Zontini 2015). Fantasies of return—imagined returns—can also maintain a sense of transnational belonging in situations in which actual physical visits are no longer possible (Bolognani 2016). Sensory practices and remembering are integral for imagined returns and maintaining sense of connection (Baldassar 2007, 2008).

### 3 | Migration and Senses

There is a growing but still modest field of studies exploring the sensory experiences related to migration and transnationalism (Bascañan-Wiley 2021; Webber 2023). Mapping the field, Bascañan-Wiley (2021) shows how senses, such as touch, sight, sound and smell, are integral to the experiences of migration, which encounter in the new country and return to the country of origin. The author argues that migration prompts a ‘dislocation’ at the sensorial level, whereas returning or visiting the country of origin can bring about partial sensory reconnection (McKay 2005; see also Baldassar 2008).

The absence of a familiar material culture can create a feeling of sensory dislocation (Bascañan-Wiley 2021). Migrants adjust to new environments, but they also shape their new environments to make them feel ‘at home’. Cooking familiar dishes, decorating with familiar style and objects are part of homemaking practices that are sensory in nature (Webber 2023). In addition, returns to ‘homeland’, both physical and imaginative, generate sensory experiences, both familiar and new, as the countries of origin also change (McKay 2005). As not all migrants can return, remembering and recreating familiar sensory experiences through tastes, sounds and touch can help one to mitigate the sense of dislocation (Bascañan-Wiley 2021). Others may not want to remember the traumatic past and aim to avoid such sensory memories.

For many, visits to one’s country of origin still play a particularly important role in maintaining transnational kinship relationships (Mason 2004; Simola et al. 2023; Skovgaard-Smith 2023). Migrants typically report physical co-presence as the most important aspect of their visits: seeing, touching, doing things together with others, receiving hospitality and providing direct personal care (Baldassar 2007, 2008). Visits are seen as a regularly occurring necessity, and they are remembered and anticipated in-between the visits (Mason 2004). Additionally, there are specific key moments, such as weddings, deaths, funerals or religious occasions, which many migrants and their relatives in the country

of origin see as important times of physical presence (Baldassar 2008; Mason 2004).

## 4 | Data and Methods

### 4.1 | Participants

The data of the article comprise 20 interviews with Russian speakers aged 64 years a in Finland, collected in 2021 the capital region of Finland. Of the 20 interviews, three were conducted by phone, one through Skype and the rest face-to-face. Four interviewees were born in the 1940s and the rest in the 1950s, the youngest being 64 and oldest 83 years old at the time of the interview. Two interviewees did not want to state their exact age but answered that they belonged to the target population (over 65 years of age). Five of the interviewees were men and 15 were women. Their stay in Finland ranged from 4 to over 30 years (mean 18 years). The interviewees were found using the interviewer’s existing networks, followed by use of the snowballing method. The inclusion criteria were age 65 or older, living in the Helsinki area and speaking Russian as their first language.

### 4.2 | Interview Protocol

The aim of the research was to collect data on how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected older Russian speakers’ lives, and how they coped with the restrictions. In the interviews, the participants were asked to discuss their reasons for migrating to Finland, their lives before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the pandemic and related restrictions had changed their habits and lifestyles. Interviews were collected by a native Russian-speaking research assistant, who also transcribed them with the help of automatic transcription software. A certified professional translator then translated the interviews to English. I primarily used the English translations for the analysis. However, to preserve nuance and ensure accuracy, I have cross-referenced the key sections and terminology in the original language, which I am proficient in.

### 4.3 | Research Ethical Considerations

The research design and conduct were aligned with the Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice and Procedures for Handling Misconduct and Fraud in Science by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2024). The research participation was based on informed consent. Participants were given detailed information about the study, its purposes and processing of their data. They were told that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their consent at any stage of the research. All participants gave their written consent to participate. All handlers of the data signed a data processing agreement which set out the conditions for personal data processing, confirming that they aligned with the Finnish Data Protection Act and the EU General Data Protection Regulation. All data were carefully pseudonymized, and no personal data were stored. All analysis was of pseudonymized data, and no personal data were included in the article. In this study setting, the Research Ethics Committee

in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Helsinki does not require ethical pre-review of the research.

#### 4.4 | Data Analysis

I analysed the data with thematic content analysis to identify and categorize the recurring themes present within the data (Ritchie et al. 2013). For coding, I employed a hybrid approach that combined both inductive and deductive reading of the data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). With the first round of reading, I used inductive approach to derive general themes from the data. In the subsequent round of analysis, I concentrated on the specific research inquiries of the current study directing attention to the themes of experiences of coping with the restrictions in Finland, and the narratives on forced immobility due to the travel restrictions.

Given the centrality of physical co-presence in these narratives, a subsequent round of analysis was deductive, conducted through the theoretical lens of migration and senses. This approach was employed to interpret and contextualize participants' narratives on coping mechanisms and immobility within a theoretical framework. The inductive/deductive hybrid approach allowed me to bring out the perspectives of the participants while simultaneously facilitating a more theory-led analysis (Proudfoot 2023). The analysis was conducted with the help of ATLAS.ti version 23 (ATLAS.ti 2023).

### 5 | The Study Context: Russian Speakers in Finland

At the end of 2022, nearly half a million of Finland's 5.5 million population were foreign speakers (Statistics Finland 2023). Russian-speakers comprise the largest foreign language group in Finland, accounting for approximately 93,500 people (Statistics Finland 2022). This population is notably diverse in terms of reasons for migration, country of origin and ethnic background. A significant portion of Russian speakers migrated to Finland after 1990, originating from various countries of the former Soviet Union.

Among these groups are the Ingrian Finns, descendants of Finnish-speaking people who migrated from Sweden, including present-day Finland, to Ingria during the 17th to early 20th centuries. Ingria was situated between St. Petersburg and the Gulf of Finland in Russia and was annexed by Sweden from Russia in 1617 (Mähönen et al. 2015). Later the area was cut off from the Finnish peninsula by Russians, making Ingrian Finns an ethnic minority in Russian territory (Prindiville and Hjelm 2018). The Ingrian Finnish faced systematic persecution and deportation during Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union, leading to the dispersal of their community across Siberia, Central Asia and other peripheries (Reuter 2023). In 1990, the Finnish authorities initiated the Ingrian Finnish 'return' programme, which allowed residence in Finland for people who could show 'Finnish ancestry or otherwise a close connection with Finland' (Prindiville and Hjelm 2018). The right to return programme, which lasted until 2010, facilitated the migration of approximately 30,000

Ingrian Finns to Finland. This number constituted roughly half of the Ingrian Finnish population (Mähönen et al. 2015). Most of the participants interviewed in this study had Ingrian roots themselves or had moved as a spouse of a Finnish descendant.

Apart from Ingrian heritage, the main reasons for migration among the Russian-speaking migrants include work and marriage. Despite their close resemblance to Finns in appearance and culture, Russian-speakers still encounter prejudices and discrimination in Finland (Renvik, Jasinskaja-Lahti, and Varjonen 2020).

## 6 | Results

This section presents the study results, beginning with an analysis of how participants described their social networks and coping mechanisms in Finland during the pandemic. Subsequently, I delve deeper into the sensory experiences of immobility, highlighting the significance of physical co-presence in sustaining transnational social networks and fostering a sense of connectedness.

### 6.1 | Coping Mechanisms: Finding Solace in Nature and Gardens

Typically, migrants' networks in the destination country tend to comprise close family (Cela and Fokkema 2017), whereas their transnational networks are more likely to include friends and relatives (Heikkinen and Lumme-Sandt 2013). This was also the typical pattern of our research participants. In-line with this, research participants did not perceive the COVID-19 restrictions as significantly impacting their daily lives in Finland. After the initial shock, most of them continued to interact with their close relatives as usual without engaging in broader socializing, which had already been typical for them prior the pandemic. Several mentioned that their networks in Finland were so small that maintaining physical distance did not significantly alter their routines:

And here in Finland, it probably didn't change much. It's kind of okay. We communicate [общаемся] with our children. (Ekaterina, age not known.)

You know, unfortunately, I have a narrow social circle [узкий круг общения]. Mainly my children. My cousin lives in Russia. I only kept in touch with the closest people. A narrow circle. But it remained the same. The one I'm used to. (Olga, born in the early 1950s.)

Well, we didn't visit people's homes [в гости] much, but we don't visit people much in general. (Maria, born in the mid-1950s.)

Pan et al. (2021) report similar findings among Chinese migrants living in the Netherlands. They did not report reducing in-person contact with their children during the pandemic but restricted contact mainly with people not related to them. As many of our

interviewees explained, they did not have large non-kin networks prior to the pandemic, but they continued to rely on their children and grandchildren.

Interestingly, many respondents did not see COVID-19 regulations as having a strong negative effect in their everyday lives in Finland. In fact, several mentioned that they had more time for relaxing activities and recreational sports than before the pandemic. The common coping strategies during the pandemic were recreational walking and biking, and gardening in their garden allotment plots:

We could handle all the problems. We have a land plot not far from where we live, a seven or ten-minute walk away. [–] But there we could go out in the open, put up a sunshade and sit. The plots are far from each other, we don't gather [собираемся] there that often. So, we were by ourselves [мы отдельно]. We could relax in nature, read a book, or do some gardening. My wife really loves flowers, and I dig the beds. So, we also had time to go there. (Ivan, born in the mid-1950s.)

And now I have begun to walk more, begun to ride my bicycle more. My last trip lasted four hours, and I covered 56 kilometres. [laughs] And I started gardening more, and I have a small vegetable garden. (Svetlana, born in the mid-1950s.)

The coping strategies reported by participants during the pandemic centred heavily on physical exercise and immersion in nature, with many highlighting the importance of their garden plots as meaningful spaces for activities. Previous research acknowledges gardening as a multi-sensory and embodied experience, known for its therapeutic qualities and ability to address existential alienation (Bhatti et al. 2009; Tilley 2006; Wagenfeld 2009). Similarly, outdoor activities are considered to be sensory and intensely embodied experiences (Allen-Collinson and Leledaki 2015) that enrich everyday lives and promote well-being, especially among older individuals, due to their sensory stimulating nature (Orr et al. 2016).

The significance of gardening plots and immersion in nature in participants' coping mechanisms during the pandemic resonates with the Soviet cultural narrative of *dachas* (summer cottages), which are regarded as being integral to Russian cultural heritage (Caldwell 2019). *Dachas* traditionally serve as rustic dwellings primarily used for gardening and foraging for mushrooms and berries, offering a retreat from urban life. Although the *dacha* symbolizes 'active rest' and was vital for food provision during the Soviet times among older generations, its importance has waned among younger people (Caldwell 2019).

The act of gardening provides sensory stimulation through different senses, possibly analogous to the sensory experiences participants once enjoyed at their *dachas*. Tending to their garden plots evoked familiar practices associated with 'active rest', nature and food provision, reflecting a continuation of cultural heritage in their new environment. This can be interpreted as fostering

a feeling of continuation and autonomy to ease their sense of alienation during times of crisis.

Some of the older participants referred to surviving Soviet repression and food shortages, depicting the COVID-19 experiences as rather minor compared to the situation in Soviet times. There were no problems or shortage 'in our Soviet understanding' as Svetlana (born in the mid-1950s) explained. Or as formulated by Yelena (born in the early 1950s): 'We had survived empty shelves in Russia'. Thus, COVID-19 was not felt with panic or despair, but as something that one needs to endure. This resonates with recent findings by Leinonen and Era (2024) on how Finnish older adults associated the pandemic crisis era with their wartime memories and other crises, thus reinterpreting the present through the collective memories of the past.

## 6.2 | Sensing the Immobility

Even if their everyday lives did not change that much, nearly every interviewee expressed strong negative feelings, sorrow and anxiety, about not being able to travel to their countries of origin. They explained that the biggest effect of COVID-19 in their lives was the travel restrictions, which prevented them from travelling abroad and their friends and relatives from travelling to Finland:

It was difficult without Russia, the fact that I could not go there. The rest of the stuff did not bother me, and therefore, I don't know, it was kind of easy. (Raisa, born in the early 1940s.)

Physically, things were also fine because I had opportunities to exercise. That is important to me, of course. The only thing that depressed me was that I couldn't see [увидеться с] my daughter. As a result, we kind of lost three trips [together]. Usually, it is during this time that we go abroad at least three times. [–] I am afraid that the most difficult period for me will begin now in November because in the last seven years we have never spent Christmas or New Year's in Finland. It seems to me that this is the most 'melancholy time, so charming to the eye [referring to Alexander Pushkin's poem 'Eugene Onegin']'. (Svetlana, born in the mid-1950s.)

For many, regular visits to Russia had created a strong sense of continuation and connectedness, which was now interrupted:

Because I still feel that I am Russian. I still go [езжу] there regularly, every other month. I would always go there, and in summer I would go there for a month. [–] And now there is the pandemic, and the most terrible thing [самое страшное] for me is that I can't go there. (Raisa, born in the early 1940s.)

For all the interviewees, not being able to see their ageing parents, children or siblings living in their countries of origin was deeply painful. The absence of visits was attributed to the embodied

experience of not being able to physically touch and embrace loved ones:

I am not bothered by solitude [одинокчество] in and of itself, especially with our communication options, but the absence of loved ones, when you cannot touch and hug [дотронуться и обнять] them, especially my daughter, with whom I have a very close relationship, this, of course, really depressed [утнетало] me. (Svetlana, born in the mid-1950s.)

As Svetlana mentions, although daily communication through digital means was adequate and something she was used to, she felt the absence of physical touch deeply, highlighting the limitations of virtual interaction in fulfilling the need for tangible connection.

Furthermore, older age created an additional anxiety of immobility. Older participants were concerned about whether their physical health would last long enough to visit their homeland again after the pandemic:

We are all waiting. I, too, can't wait for everything to end. If only I have enough health and strength to go to Russia again. (Antonina, born in the early 1940s.)

On the other hand, given the older age of the participants, their parents and relatives were often nearing the end of their lives. Some interviewees had missed a funeral of their own parent or a sibling, and many were worried about not being able to attend funerals on time, due to travel restrictions:

And for me it was very stressful, not accompanying my mother on her final journey [не проводила в последний путь]. Even though, at the same time, I had visited her a month before and had been looking after her for a long time. But this moment that I didn't spend— it's like a self-inflicted wound [это как укор себе]. (Olga, born in the early 1950s.)

As in the previous literature, the longing for physical co-presence is particularly pronounced during significant life events, such as funerals. Simola et al. (2023) found parallels in their participants' experiences of grief, suggesting that attending funerals arises from a desire for a final 'physical' encounter with a deceased loved one, as well as for the mutual support and care shared among remaining family members (see also Mason 2018, 11–17; Sakti 2023). In our data, besides being present at funerals, the physical encounter also played a crucial role in remembering those who had already passed away, a point I will address next.

### 6.3 | Transnational Networks Extended Beyond the Living

Transnational networks have conventionally been defined as involving the *living* relatives and friends residing outside one's country of residence. However, Sakti (2023) notes that a 'person's sense of personhood is not only tied to their individuality but also

positioned within a web of kinship ties and reciprocal relations between the dead, the living, and the social and cultural worlds in which they live'. Moreover, Heikkinen and Lumme-Sandt (2013) found in their study of older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland that their research participants' transnational networks also encompassed the dead. Affiliation with the dead emerged as a pivotal element of transnational connections in our data too. Remembering the deceased was a bodily practice that necessitated co-presence in the cemetery (see also Connerton 1989).

In-line with this, our study participants viewed visiting cemeteries as a commitment and an integral part of trips to their country of origin. Several of our interviewees also expressed anxiety and sorrow at not being able to visit the graves of their loved ones:

I can't go to the cemetery to my parents [к своим родителям], indeed to everyone, to my husband and to my nephew and sisters, to brothers, to all of them. So that's how things are for me. (Antonina, born in the early 1940s.)

We made annual trips to Russia, twice a year, usually for the New Year and in the summer. [–] You take a vacation for yourself and go to your native places, visit the cemetery to see your parents and relatives, and always nourish yourself both from them and with them [и всегда подпитываешься и от них, и с ними]. This was in December, and we hoped to see each other in the summer. We didn't manage it in the summer. (Yelena, born in the early 1950s.)

In these transcripts, visits to the cemetery are discussed as moments of being with the deceased, as if seeing them in person.

Research on 'deathscapes' highlights that mourning, grief and bereavement are 'experienced within space' (Maddrell 2016). Certain places, typically cemeteries, are linked with remembering the deceased and serve as important places of remembering and sensing a continued bond with the dead (Jonsson and Walter 2017; Klass et al. 1996). Moreover, culture shapes where mourners are expected to locate their dead and the rituals related to remembrance (Jonsson and Walter 2017; Maddrell 2016). In the context of migration, deathscapes get new meanings as different cultures have their own traditions and beliefs about death and remembrance, which may not only differ but can also be in direct conflict with the established traditions of the destination society (Hunter 2016).

Earlier anthropological texts describing the rich customs of mortuary and memorial practice in Russia help in interpreting the importance of visiting graves by our research participants. According to Warner and Adon'eva (2021, 62), in Northern Russia 'death and the dead are a more familiar and more physically evident phenomenon of everyday life and a more frequent, visible and tangible subject of personal concern than is often the case today in Western societies'. The authors (p. 47) further elaborate that in the Russian traditions, the dead are believed to persist in their existence at the burial site, underlining the

continuing bond between the living and the deceased. This is reflected in still ongoing traditions of sharing food and drinks with the deceased at the grave plot, to which Yelena's choice of word 'nourishment' (подпитываешься) can also refer to. Warner and Adon'eva (2021) argue that memorial practices illustrate the idea of the 'material' persona of the deceased, a specific 'corporeal' presence that is in the grave even if the soul 'has flown away' (p. 44). This sentiment resonates with the yearning for co-presence expressed by our study participants. Thus, cemeteries are important 'deathscapes', where the continuing bond with the dead is felt and maintained.

As the interviewees could not visit the graves, they often found substitutes who would do so on their behalf. Using the designated substitute is also found in the description of memorial practices by Warner and Adon'eva (2021, 62):

That is the worst thing. I could not go to [city name omitted] at the end of August, where I go every year to see my friend of 60 years. She lives there, and we go to my dad's grave to put everything in order. It didn't work out this year. She and her 93-year-old mother went there to clear off the leaves. (Marina, born in the early 1950s.)

It's bad that I can't go to Russia. Usually, I went to Russia twice a year. [—] I: As a tourist? Galina: No. My parents are buried there in the cemetery. In spring and autumn... But my classmates live there, and they tell me: 'Don't worry. Everything is fine.' [—] They say that they still go to their relatives and check on everyone's (graves). Everyone, everyone, everyone. (Galina, born in early 1950s.)

The seasonal rhythm of visits to the cemetery is intertwined with Orthodox Christian traditions. Specific days and periods are observed for paying respects to the deceased and following these traditions rhythms the annual visits to the participant's countries of origin. Interestingly, in another part of the interview, Galina mentions that she only goes to the cemetery, not to the monastery, as she is not 'such a believer (верующий) to go to the monastery'. Thus, emphasizing cemetery visits is more about familial and ancestral connections than religious ritual. Visiting a grave involved engaging in physical and sensory activities akin to gardening, such as raking leaves and tidying the plot. These actions may foster a profound sense of connection and demonstrate the ongoing care for the dead. The COVID-19 restrictions interfered with the maintaining of these traditions of connection, thereby underscoring their significance through their absence.

Moreover, the importance of visiting cemeteries can be interpreted in the framework of life course and the process of physical ageing. Old age is often associated with growing engagement with existential contemplation, reflecting on one's life journey, and dealing with questions of meaning and purpose (May and Muir 2015; Olofsson et al. 2021). This stage of life may also bring about changes in self-conception and a heightened awareness of one's mortality (Sakti 2023). For many older individuals, visiting

cemeteries can become a tangible expression of these existential reflections, and they may find solace in the continuity of tradition and the sense of connection that comes from honouring family ties and cultural heritage. Coupled with the Russian cultural beliefs in the continued presence of the dead in the cemetery, the inability to visit can evoke a profound sense of distress and sensory disconnection.

## 7 | Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the 'fragile' nature of transnationalism (Nehring and Hu 2022); it ruptured taken-for-granted assumptions and questioned habitual practices, especially in relation to mobile lifestyles (Martin and Bergmann 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian origin migrants in Finland, regardless of age, were used to the unfettered mobility provided by the dual residency rights between the neighbouring countries. Many of them lived lives 'keeping feet in both worlds' (Levitt 2003) travelling frequently until the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic closed the border and shook up their habitual mobile lifestyles. The travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic highlighted the vital role of physical co-presence in maintaining transnational belonging and connectedness.

Our interviews on the coping strategies of older migrants revealed their resilience in adapting to life in their destination country, which the COVID-19 restrictions did not alter much. When public places were closed, they continued to find solace in nature and in their garden plots, which closely resembled the survival strategies associated with the *dacha* culture from the Soviet era. These coping mechanisms align with the multisensory 'therapeutic' nature of immersing oneself in gardening or spending time outdoors and can create a sense of cultural continuation. Moreover, they often maintained a narrow circle of social ties in Finland, primarily consisting of close kin (see also Heikkinen and Lumme-Sandt 2013). Even if they were accustomed to staying in touch with a broader transnational network digitally, the inability to travel and visit had a significant negative impact on them.

The forced immobility prompted our research respondents to delve deeper into their routine habit of travel, an aspect often taken for granted, which would likely have not surfaced in an interview under normal circumstances. The discussion on the sorrow of not being able to visit one's country was articulated as the inability to touch their loved ones physically, to be present among relatives, at funerals, and at grave sites. Even if using digital means was common for the research participants, it alone could not replace the sensory connectedness created by the physical co-presence.

This talks to the growing scholarship on the role of senses in migration, belonging and home making (Bascuñan-Wiley 2021; Webber 2023). In this literature, home-making and familiarity of a place is tied to the bodily engagement with sights, smells, tastes and touch of something familiar (Webber 2023). The absence of familiar senses of home can make one feel out of place, sensorially 'dislocated' (Bascuñan-Wiley 2021). The in-person visits to see relatives, friends and familiar places can provide a sense of reconnection, which can compensate for the lack of social connection in the new destination country (Bilecen, Çatır, and

Orhon 2015; McKay 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the mobile lifestyle, casting uncertainty on whether one would ever truly be able to connect with their loved ones again.

The pandemic also revealed that it was not only the living relatives that one wanted to be with, but also those who had already passed away. Visiting cemeteries, tidying and maintaining grave plots were an integral part of the typical visit to their country of origin. The cemetery was a place to feel the presence of one's deceased loved ones. Cemeteries are used to establish a tangible connection with one's familial past and a sense of belonging to one's historical roots. As Warner and Adon'eva (2021) write, in Russian traditions, the deceased have been believed to continue their existence at the burial site. This also links to cultural traditions associated with visiting and maintaining grave sites, which differ between Finland and Russia.

Cemeteries may become even more important for migrants who carry a sense of not fully belonging in their countries of destination. Having a sense of belonging is important for one's well-being and meaningfulness of life (Lambert et al. 2013). As one of the interviewees put it, they 'felt recharged' after visiting their living and dead relatives, which gave meaning to life and could compensate for the lack of social contacts in the destination country. The travel restrictions left many feeling disconnected from their transnational social networks. Drawing on the migration and senses literature, this connection is essentially sensory, and the forced immobility created a sensory disconnection in our respondents' lives.

These findings support earlier findings of the importance of transnational visits to the well-being of migrants—including those in older age groups (Buffel 2017; Horn 2017; Mason 2004). Thus, migration and integration policies should recognize the importance of maintaining avenues for migrants to visit their countries of origin. Visits and transnational lifestyles should be seen as strengthening and contributing to well-being and feelings of belonging. Integration policies could recognize migrants' transnational connections as complementing often small social circles in the destination country, thus preventing older migrants from suffering from isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, health care and social support services should be tailored to meet the unique needs of older migrants, including support for the preservation and celebration of cultural traditions associated with death and remembrance within migrant communities. This may involve facilitating access to culturally appropriate funeral services and memorialization practices, even if they differ from the mainstream customs of the destination society (see also Hunter 2016).

## 8 | Conclusion

This study drew on discussions of migration and senses to understand the coping mechanisms employed by older Russian migrants in Finland during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the significance of transnational visits in their lives. It demonstrates that embodied practices, such as immersion in nature and gardening, were essential in helping migrants navigate the challenges of the pandemic. At the same time, the COVID-19 travel restrictions highlighted the sensory bonds that older

migrants maintained with their country of origin, emphasizing the emotional significance of transnational visits. Moreover, the study underscores the role of the deceased within transnational networks, revealing that physical co-presence at the cemetery was considered crucial for maintaining bonds with lost loved ones. Visiting these 'deathscapes' (Jonsson and Walter 2017; Klass et al. 1996) was important for fostering a sense of continued bond with the deceased. I argue that the pandemic's travel restrictions led to a 'sensory dislocation' (Bascuñan-Wiley 2021) in the otherwise mobile lives of these migrants, resulting in profound feelings of sorrow and distress.

Many participants in the study endured the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, clinging to the hope that its eventual end would restore their ability to resume their mobile lifestyles and habitual co-presence with their loved ones. However, the temporary lifting of strict border controls after the pandemic brought only fleeting joy, as their hopes for reconnection were terminated again. The violent escalation of the war instigated by the Russian state against Ukraine caused further upheaval in their lives, perhaps even more profoundly than the COVID-19 pandemic. With borders again closing, this series of crises has underscored the fragility of transnationalism, leaving them likely to experience an intensified sense of alienation amidst growing geopolitical divisions. It remains to be seen whether their mobile lifestyles can be once more re-created.

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### Ethics Statement

This study comprised an interview-based inquiry which, under Finnish regulations, does not require ethical review. In alignment with the guidelines of the University of Helsinki's Research Ethics Committee in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences and the criteria set by the National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, the research conducted adheres to the ethical standards of informed consent, respects participants' physical and psychological integrity and does not involve individuals under the age of 15 without parental or guardian consent. Our methodology did not entail the use of exceptionally strong stimuli, nor did it pose any increased risk of mental harm beyond the scope of normal everyday life or any security threat to participants or their close associates. As such, an ethical review is not a prerequisite for this type of study in Finland, and the need for an ethics statement from a committee is not applicable.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Materials detailing the data collection process, including the interview guideline and project description, are available in the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository at <https://osf.io/4zgef,10.17605/OSF.IO/4ZGEF>. These materials are publicly accessible under the licence CC-BY Attribution 4.0 International.

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