


# The manifestation of structural and individual-level factors for the nature of transnational family relationships: case study on Czech migrants in Sweden

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## ROLE STRUKTURÁLNÍCH A INDIVIDUÁLNÍCH FAKTORŮ PRO PODOBU TRANSNACIONÁLNÍCH RODINNÝCH VZTAHŮ: PŘÍPADOVÁ STUDIE ČESKÝCH MIGRANTŮ VE ŠVÉDSKU

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### Abstract

In this article I analyse the role of historical circumstances and individual-level aspects in the transnational relationships of Czech pre-1989 political émigrés and post-1989 migrants in Sweden and their homeland-based relatives. Using a qualitative analysis of ten life history ethnographic interviews, I look at the momentum of transnational relationship initiation, discussing the role of the political and technological obstacles and developments on the one hand, and of the voluntariness/ forcedness of the migration act and the “license to leave” on the other hand. I conclude that the structural factors which project themselves into relationship initiation strongly influence the nature of the transnational relationship throughout its course, although in different ways for the pre-1989 and for the post-1989 migrants, respectively. The article is based on the outcomes of a Master’s dissertation research conducted in 2012 as part of the International Migration and Ethnic Relations programme at Malmö University, Sweden.

**Key words:** transnationalism, families, Czech migration, license to leave

### Abstrakt

Článek se zaměřuje na roli historických okolností a aspektů individuální povahy v transnacionálních vztazích českých politických emigrantů z období před rokem 1989 a českých migrantů, kteří zemi opustili po roce 1989. Analýza vychází z deseti narativních etnografických rozhovorů s českými migranty žijícími ve Švédsku a jejich příbuznými v zemi původu. Sledován je moment započetí transnacionálního vztahu; konkrétně role politických a technologických

překážek a vývoje na jedné straně a dobrovolnosti/ nucenosti aktu migrace a tzv. „povolení k odchodu“ na straně druhé. Uzavírám, že strukturální faktory, které se projevují ve způsobu, jakým je vztah započat, silně ovlivňují podobu vztahu během jeho následného trvání, ale odlišnými způsoby v případě předrevolučních a porevolučních migrantů. Článek vychází z výsledků magisterského diplomového výzkumu uskutečněného v roce 2012 v rámci magisterského studijního programu International Migration and Ethnic Relations na Malmö University, Švédsko.

**Klíčová slova:** transnacionalismus, rodiny, česká migrace, povolení k odchodu

## Introduction

The nature and effects of the migration flows in and out of today's territory of the Czech Republic in the 20th and 21st centuries have been characterized by the recent political-historical developments associated with the collapse of the Communist regimes in the former „Eastern bloc“. Drawing on transnationalism theory literature as well as on research into the effects of migration on the transformation and nature of family practices, this article analyses how the political circumstances of emigration from two different political regimes operating in the (former) Czechoslovakia and the (later) Czech Republic, respectively, influence the way transnational relationships between migrants and their left-behind relatives are initiated and how the effect of these circumstances combines with that of individual-level factors. The narratives of a small sample of Czech migrants in Sweden and their homeland-based relatives are used as a case study. While the article derives from a broader analytical material covering the initiation, maintenance, as well as transformation practices surrounding family transnationalism, the main subject of the current analysis is the combined role of the structural factors and individual-level factors acting *at the time of the migration act* for the social phenomena taking place in the transnational social fields of families divided by national (and ideological) borders. The theoretical-methodological framework derives from transnationalism theory, which conceives of migration phenomena in their complexity, looking at both/ multiple ends of the transnational social fields in and between which migrant lives oscillate [1]. This way transnationalism-based scholarship aims to avoid the interpretative bias typically brought about by approaches conceiving of migrants as *immigrants*, creating an image of “permanent rupture, of the uprooted, the abandonment of old patterns and the painful learning of a new language and culture” [2, p. 1]. The research has been designed so as to grasp the lived reality of a sample of family units spread across various ends of the transnational fields to an extent which the available time and financial resources allowed. This was largely enabled by the “ethnographic interviewing” technique employed in the course of data collection which enabled a rich analysis of the collected narratives that would not have been achieved were narratives per se the only data source [3].

## Czechs abroad: historical context

Mostly as a result of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Czech out-migration approximately 2 million people outside of the Czech Republic declare to have Czech origins [4]. Compared to the mostly economic pre- and inter-war emigration, the movement out of the country during the two World Wars and from the 1948 communist *coup d'état* up until the 1989 Velvet Revolution was primarily motivated politically. Czech out-migration after 1989 has been driven by a series of reasons including economic, love, study as well as lifestyle [cf. 5]. This article studies two historical Czech migrant cohorts. The first are Czech political émigrés who have fled communist Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989 (“pre-1989”). Calling themselves *exiles*, these migrants stress the political, as opposed to economic, motivation of their migration act, conducted by breaching state restrictions on movement out of the country, e.g. by way of breaking off a permitted holiday trip or crossing the border illegally (see [6] for a detailed discussion). Their life in exile until 1989 was characterized by the impossibility of return under the threat of political persecution to themselves or to their homeland-based relatives, associated with a strong motivation to adapt to the host society and develop new social and familial networks there, as contact with family in the homeland was limited due to both political and technological reasons and subject to strong self-censorship [7]. The second cohort is Czech migrants who have left the Czech

Republic since the 1989 democratic turnover (“post-1989”). This cohort do not perceive their acts of migration as definitive, but instead as potentially temporary and reversible and thus they also handle them – (repeated) return migration is common and the motivation to “integrate” into the host society and to build up new networks is not as strong as in the case of the pre-1989 émigrés. One of the preconditions as well as consequences to this is also the ability to maintain frequent contact with the homeland-based kin and friends thanks to a range of available telecommunication means.

## **Family transnationalism: Analytical background and research question**

The presented analysis takes the historical distinction between the two Czech migrant cohorts' migration circumstances as a ground for questioning the migrants' similar and variegated perceptions of and nature of their transnational familial relationships. The key research question posed, “to what extent does the structural context of one’s migration, the private-life aspects of one’s migration act and the associated practices determine how one’s transnational family relations are initiated?” targets both the broader politico-historical determinants as well as the more subtle and less easily generalizable factors pertaining to inter-personal relations within families. The aim here is to pin down the intertwining effects of phenomena taking place on both the macro- and micro-level plains.

The analysis is anchored in transnationalism theory, the ever-more popular theoretical approach among migration scholars [8]. This has developed from the acknowledgement that the common perception of the migrant as primarily an alien in a foreign, (hostile) and perplexing society of the host nation-state, in which s/he struggles to make a living and 'assimilate/integrate', is misleading [9]. The departure argument here is twofold. First, migrants live their lives in multiple nation-state contexts, contributing to the flow of social, economic and political influences between multiple “transnational social fields,” and enabling the “maint[enance], renew[al] and reconstit[ution]” of “linkages between different societies” [2, p. 11; 1, p. 1007, 1009]. Second, these transnational engagements may in fact reinforce the migrant individuals' or communities' sense of belonging and responsibility towards both the home and the host societies, instead of disrupting them, as is still often being proclaimed by migration scholars and politicians alike [see 10; 11; 12 for a discussion of opposing findings on this topic]. My approach builds on the strand of transnationalism which recognizes the interrelatedness of individual (micro-level) cross-border activities - “transnationalism from below” - with the wider (macro-level) historical, social and economic determinants, i.e. “transnationalism from above” [13]. Here, attention has been paid to various forms of economic and political transnationalism – the transnational flows of financial resources and transnational political activism [see for example 10; 14, p. 221-294; 15; 16]. However, I focus on some of the more mundane “transnational practices” conducted by migrants and their home- and host-country connections – here, family relatives – and use the migrants' common perception of them as 'normal' and negligible as a prism for my analysis [cf. 10]. However, even though my study is primarily based on a micro-level approach - an in-depth examination of the narratives of a small group of individuals - my key aim is to juxtapose the individual experiences against the wider historical frame as well as the findings of other scholars made in different parts of the world, in order to be able to achieve a comparative result which could be used as guiding tool for further research in this field.

## **Research design, method and empirical material**

The empirical material comes from semi-structured life history interviews, conducted in all but one case in the participants' homes and accompanied with discussions reflecting on the materiality present there, in accordance with what Baldassar et al. [3] describe as a “truncated” form of ethnography or an “ethnographic interview.” Ten interviews of 2-6 hours were carried out in total; four of them with pre-1989 émigrés, four with post-1989 migrants and two with the homeland-based relatives of a pre-1989 and a post-1989 migrant, respectively. Data collection took place in February-April 2012 as part of my Master's thesis research. Snowball sampling was applied to recruit research

participants after I had established some primary connections through my own social networks and through a Czechoslovak countrymen association. The conversations were naturally combined with “limited naturalistic participant observation” associated with the time I spent with the research participants beyond the interviewing itself, and accompanied by photo-taking to complement field notes [3]. The loose conversation scenario contained, among other topics, questions on how the migration decision and act had taken place; who had been involved in the planning; and potentially, how the relatives had found out about it, if undisclosed in advance; the migrant's understanding of the scope of his/her „family“ and their relationship and communication practices before and after migration; or the used transnational practices, such as communication, exchange of objects and visits. Most of the time stories were told spontaneously by the participants as a question was asked, so the most important task was to steer the conversation in a suitable direction so as to cover most of the areas of interest. The interviews were analysed qualitatively using an inductive discourse analysis approach in order to produce a list of analytical concepts deriving from what aspects of the relationships arose as significant from the participants' own descriptions as well as from what was hinted at but remained untold.

Sweden was chosen as an example of a Western European country with a relatively numerous Czech diaspora from both the pre-1989 and the post-1989 periods (5812 Czechoslovakia-born and 1361 Czech Republic-born individuals lived in Sweden in 2011 [17]). The Czech emigration to Sweden (EU member state) has been made easier by the 2004 accession of the Czech Republic to the EU, removing the work visa obligation and the necessity to obtain Swedish identity documents and qualification certificates for new migrants. The travelling distance of Sweden from the Czech Republic makes it impossible to commute from one country to the other for work, which to a certain extent balances out the starting conditions for the two migrant cohorts in terms of the necessity to commit to life in one country or the other as the “daily norm”.

Bearing in mind the small size of the sample, the analysis has to be approached primarily as exploratory; as such, the results are non-generalizable to larger populations. However, the parallels with and distinctions from other existing research outlined below do shed a light on the ways family transnationalism could be approached in more comprehensive research initiatives.

## Discussion

The discourse analysis yielded two key categories of individual-level factors which proved central for the individual experience of the migration act as such and at the same time as crucial in determining the nature of the migrants' transnational family relationships later on. These are the *license to leave* and the question of the *voluntariness vs. forcedness of the migration act*. In the following discussion I will first explore the role of the structural factors, here summarized under one broad analytical category as *historical circumstances*, and then explain each one of the three individual-level categories, elaborating on the interplay of the micro- and the macro-level aspects in the migrant experience.

### Historical circumstances

The historical – political – circumstances under which the pre-1989 migrants fled the homeland provide many possible explanations to why misunderstandings and tensions characterized (some of) their relationships with homeland-based relatives. The pre-1989 migrants viewed their emigration as a finite decision, which increased their striving to blend in the host society and establish a new *home* there fast (in comparison with the post-1989 migrants). The decision to migrate was either quite abrupt or not shared with the relatives in advance of the leaving, in order to prevent disclosure to an unwanted party (a Secret Service informant) but also to avoid relatives' dissuasion. The families thus did not have the time to compare views and come to a consensus – instead, the left-behind kin could often feel offended for not being consulted on the issue, as the following quote suggests.

My parents never forgave me. They like to see me, they care about me, but they still take really badly that I left them. (...) (Věra, in her 40s, pre-1989)

The combined influence of the (sometimes divergent) opinions the migrant and his/her relatives held of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia and of their shared or discordant interpretations of the separation situation sometimes led to a controversial – though perhaps unexpected – split between the relatives at the opposing ends of the transnational field, which further affected their relationship:

Jindřich: [The only possibility to speak openly with the relatives was] when my mother came [for a visit], and then you basically avoided any such kind of discussion [about the life in Czechoslovakia and in Sweden], because I don't know, it was hard to speak with them, [even though] my family, I mean my side of the family, the people were politically quite aware, (...) they were against the regime, right, because we had been quite damaged by the communists. [Zdena's] mother was never really interested in politics...

Zdena: Still, she never blamed us for leaving, whilst your mother did.

(Jindřich & Zdena, married, in their 60s, pre-1989)

Comparatively, through the prism of political circumstances the emigration of the post-1989 migrants was a matter of choice, which was not only reversible but could also be agreed upon with the kin to be left behind in advance of the act itself. The move could be thoroughly planned, conducted in phases or with a “trial” period preceding the final *moving* to the new country:

We ordered a truck to move all our furniture from the Czech Republic to Sweden... (Zuzana, in her 40s, post-1989)

Before moving to Sweden, I lived in [another EU country] for five years, so my parents knew what it would be like when I leave. (Alice, in her 30s, post-1989)

The known possibility of unlimited long-distance communication and relatively frequent mutual visits did contribute to making it easier for the homeland kin to get ready for and approve of the migration decision:

The first thing I did [when I moved], I arranged for the cheapest calls to the Czech Republic you could get. (David, in his 40s, post-1989)

(Differences in) political attitudes did not come out from the narratives as important for the overall nature of the post-1989 migrants' relationships.

This shows that macro-level factors played a key role in determining not only the way the migration act was conducted, but also the way in which the transnational ties unfolded afterwards. For the pre-1989 migrants' relationships the most important aspect of the historical circumstances were the political conditions under which they fled the homeland, limiting their chances to prepare the family for their leaving in advance and to maintain contact with them afterwards. Comparatively, for the post-1989 migrants' relationships the key aspect was the level of the technological development in both transport and communication, which gave both them and the left-behind kin the certainty that relationships could be maintained transnationally without much disruption, and thus enabled a much smoother course of the migration act. Quite clearly, both of these factors – the political and the technological conditions – played an important role for the relationships of both of the cohorts. While the lack of technological tools available was a crucial reason for the limited contact between the pre-1989 migrants and their left-behind kin, the virtual non-existence of political obstacles to cross-border movement played a key role in making the post-1989 migrants' migration decisions a matter of routine.

### **Voluntary or forced?**

The narratives stand proof to the view that the *voluntariness/forcedness* of a migration experience cannot be unquestioningly assumed from the historical context it is set in, which is an assumption which Burrell [18] draws on in her discussion on economic – *voluntary* – migrants versus – *forced* – war refugees and émigrés, interviewed as part of a research enterprise analogous to the one presented here. While it is tempting to view the sample analysed here as an analogous case, several of the narratives underline that interpersonal relationships are by far not a straightforward product of their historical context:

I didn't really want to [move to Sweden], I would have preferred to stay at home in the Czech Republic, because I had work there, I was used to being there (...) but my wife wanted to go home to Sweden, she wanted to give birth to her first child in her own environment, closer to her parents, and so on, so I accepted it (...), so we moved here together. (David, in his 40s, post-1989)

I don't know, we, children, we were never in the centre somehow. (...) I was really unhappy as a child and I felt quite excluded. So maybe because of that it was easier to leave both my parents and the communists. (Věra, in her 50s, pre-1989)

Both the findings on the role of the politico-historical circumstances and the above closely relate to the second factor I will discuss, being the 'license to leave'. It is this concept which captures the momentum where macro- and micro-level aspects collide in transnational family reality.

### **License to leave**

According to Baldassar et al. [3], "[t]he manner in which a migrant's decision to migrate and settle in another country is received by her family informs their negotiated family commitments." Introducing the term "license to leave" to denote the migrant's left-behind relatives' approval of his/ her leaving, the authors [3] emphasize the importance of hardly measurable shared understandings and dividing *misunderstandings* in determining the micro-level features of the migration experience. Whether or not the homeland-based relatives have granted the migrant a license to leave largely influences their mutual commitments. As such, it can thus serve as a key determinant of the later developed transnational communication and visit strategies in terms of both content and frequency, and the perceived 'quality' of the relationship in general. The narratives quoted above (Věra, Jindřich and Zdena) illustrate how barriers that the migrants felt stood between themselves and their homeland-based relatives as a result of their relatives' non-acceptance of the migration act could hardly be overcome. On the contrary, the following quote shows that a granted

license to leave could serve as a reinforcing factor for the strength of the relationship:

My mum said many times, we have a better relationship like this than we used to have! Since you moved away. I don't mind it at all. You are such a nice son, you send us photos, you call us and care about us. Well, then [while still living in the Czech Republic], I didn't care so much. I lived my life and came for birthdays, for Christmas. (David, in his 40s, post-1989)

The contrast contained in the following quote illustrates that the (non-)granting of a license to leave need not have a significant effect on the quality of the transnational relationship:

My parents still haven't gotten used to it after those six years that I have been away. Even before, when I was at the boarding school, they would constantly rather have me at home, but, well, maybe they'll finally get used to it... Since we call each other... maybe twice a week... you always maintain some kind of a thread of what's going on... When I was still at home, we were always used to, when my mum came from work, to sit around the table with a cup of coffee and chat, what happened at work and so on, so it's something similar. (Alice, in her 30s, post-1989)

The variety of constellations outlined here suggests that an analysis of a more extensive sample could identify an even broader range of experiences related to license to leave. Most importantly though, the analysis underlines that license to leave is not strictly associated with the political context in which a particular individual migration takes place, but can reflect strongly in the form the transnational family commitments take in the years following the migration act itself [3].

Further analysis, which focused on the practices of relationship maintenance and the role of material factors in these relations, revealed that the factors described above, all setting the conditions for how the transnational family relationships were initiated, had a significant effect on their nature ("quality") and temporality, which increasingly outplayed the effect of factors connected rather with relationship maintenance and transformation. While for some of the research participants the circumstances of emigration combined with the (non-)granted license to leave served as a grain of later feelings of guilt and unfulfilled responsibility towards the left-behind kin, for some this was a root of intensified communication. Similarly, while especially for the pre-1989 émigrés the migration act signified a breaking off of the material ties to the family in the homeland, for the post-1989 migrants moving abroad was accompanied by at least a few years of strongly felt material dependence on the parents left behind, a relation which has to a certain extent been conserved till the present.

## Conclusion

The macro-level historico-political circumstances of an individual's migration act, as well as the micro-level aspects of the existing relationship at the time of migration proved key for the nature and intensity of the relationship thereafter. While the structural political obstacles performing in the pre-1989 migrants' transnational ties could be overcome to a certain extent by long-distance communication (and visiting after 1989) and a reliability on a set of shared values and understandings in some ways, they did seem to contribute to a change in the quality of the relationship and the nature of the information, emotions and opinions exchanged with the family in all the relevant research participants so as to be more distant and mutually independent. For migrants whose family relationships were somewhat problematic already at the outset of the migration experience, this meant deepening the already existing misunderstandings and discordances. In comparison, as neither political, nor technological obstacles to mutual visits and communication were an issue for the post-1989 migrants, the structural context per se did not seem to affect their relationships in this way. If any, the effect can be said to have been rather the contrary – intensifying and strengthening.

Both the structural (here, the political/ historical circumstances) and the individual-level (relationship “quality” and strength) factors operating at the time of migration were shown as giving a central “tone” to the relationship as a whole. Both the perception of one's own migration as voluntary or forced and of whether the left-behind kin have granted one a license to leave have been shown as projecting themselves into the ways mutual commitments were interpreted later on throughout the course of the transnational relationship. It could be said that the influence of structural factors, i.e. political circumstances, but also technological obstacles to communication, was more strongly defining for the nature of the relationships of the pre-1989 émigrés than of the post-1989 migrants, in the case of which it could be more easily outplayed by individual-level factors (pre-existing “strength”/ “quality” of the relationship). However, as the political and technological circumstances of the post-1989 migrants’ migration acts allowed for more individual agency with respect to discussing the migration decision prior to leaving and to the amount of contact kept, they could in fact be seen to be as strongly defining as those that the pre-1989 migrations were set in. Even though the findings cannot be generalized on any level of abstraction, the theoretical concepts discussed here can be used as guiding analytical categories for a further analysis of the role of the structural and the individual in migrant lives, in line with King’s notion of the „double embeddedness“ [5] of migrant experiences in broader politico-historical contexts and in individual life histories.

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