

COVID-19 and return migration to the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The area of return migration is attracting considerable interest, not least because of the surge in returns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The characteristics of recent returnees and their motivations have yet to be established. This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on return migration to the Czech Republic and offers one of the first investigations into the realities of return in this particular case. The present study is expected to contribute to our understanding of the role of transnationalism and migration networks in return migration. We also want to highlight the uneasiness between the voluntary/forced migration dichotomy when it comes to discussing recent events. Feelings of being stranded and of helplessness were also common for many (voluntary) returnees at some point during their pre-return phase. Data were collected during the first half of 2021 and the responses were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The results broaden our understanding of return migration in this specific case and highlight the importance of taking the multiplicity of returnee characteristics into account.

Key words

return migration, transnationalism, networks, COVID-19, Czech Republic

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Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has affected migration and mobility in unprecedented ways. With frequent disruptions to air travel and borders being closed or carefully monitored, many migrants asked themselves whether they should return “home” or stay in their respective countries of residence. For others, the imminent loss of jobs and related issues speeded up their decision to return. This change in plans, migration trajectories and life aspirations took place at different stages of their life cycles and influenced their preparedness for return within a short timeframe. While some returning migrants might have decided to re-migrate since, for others the return marked an abrupt change in their mobility.

Migration due to COVID-19 has been covered by various authors and will possibly continue to be studied. Several case studies include returns to South Asia from the Gulf States (Kumar et al. 2020; Bhagat et al. 2020; Khanna 2020). In the European context, Paul (2020) discusses the responses of Eastern European governments and the divergence in their strategies after summer 2020; unlike the initial policy convergence in the region, subsequent responses had little in common aside from trying to prioritize re-opening economic activity. Sommarribas and Nienaber (2021) focus on the legal aspects of migration governance in the EU and Norway and on the vulnerability of third-country nationals. They also argue that further research is needed to understand the economic, social, political or psychosocial perspectives that influenced the measures taken during the pandemic and how they influenced migrants. Šantić and Antić (2020) estimate that globally, tens of millions of migrant labourers have returned to their respective countries of origin since the beginning of the pandemic. A similar survey to ours was undertaken by Stoychev (2020) for a case study of Bulgaria; while the situation in Bulgaria is not comparable to the Czech Republic (in terms of the overall number of emigrants and the number of returns), there are some insights about the aspirations of those returning that can be applied to both Central and Eastern Europe. Stoychev (2020) surveyed emigrants from Bulgaria; about half of them planned to return or had already returned to Bulgaria. Economic factors such as disposable income or unemployment played paramount roles in their decisions.

In a broader framework, Drbohlav and Pavelková (2021) discuss the possible outcomes of the pandemic on foreign workers and the influence of state policies on migration flows. Our present study will attempt to contribute new knowledge about the Czech context and contribute to a broader understanding of return migration during the pandemic. So far, there is only anecdotal evidence about the recent wave of return migra-

tion to the Czech Republic. Therefore, we attempt to analyse data from different sources: Czech embassies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Czech Republic, and semi-structured interviews with returnees. We attempt to shed light on the extent of return migration due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper also aims to inquire about aspirations and motivations for returning and the returnees' future migration plans. Furthermore, we want to discuss these returns in light of the current pandemic and contribute to expanding an understanding of return that goes beyond the voluntary/forced dichotomy. The paper proceeds as follows: First we will discuss the theoretical framework of return migration, drawing on the approaches of integration and transnationalism. We also discuss the distinction between forced and voluntary migration and whether this dichotomy still stands under the circumstances of the global pandemic. Subsequently, we present the methods used for this paper, including the interviews. Finally, we present our findings, which take into account the lived experiences of the returnees.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is based on two well-established dichotomies within migration studies. These dichotomies are explored below and form a certain basis for our research focus. As a result, the interviews were adapted to explore the validity of these dichotomies and to clarify the established narratives explored below.

Integration vs. transnationalism

Return migration is a phenomenon that has been increasingly gaining attention in the academic literature over the past 10 years (Carling – Petersen 2014; White 2014; de Haas – Fokkema 2011; Jeffery – Murison 2011). It represents a broader trend in migration studies to look at migration stages not just from the receiving country's perspective, but also to discuss them from various other angles, including the countries of origin. It has been argued that migrants are influenced by attachments to their country of origin and country of residence, in other words, by transnationalism and integration. Carling and Petersen (2014) find that it is the relative strengths of these factors that is decisive for return migration decisions. By presenting an integration-transnationalism matrix, they argue that the highest likelihood of return is for people who are weakly integrated and strongly transnational. They also find that economic resources have no clear effect on return migration intentions. However, other authors state

that economic factors are important for influencing return migration (e.g. Mortet – Nadi 2021). This is in line with human capital theory (Sjaastad 1962) and models of cost-benefit analysis (Borjas 1990), which stress that people migrate to places where they might expect the highest return on investment. However, this only partially explains the migration flows that sometimes also take place to destinations with lower salaries, lower costs of living and lower costs of other amenities (Graves 1976; Faggian – Royuela 2010; Rodríguez-Pose – Ketterer 2012).

The role of social networks, therefore, is another factor that shapes locational decisions (Haug 2008). In this regard, Vertovec argues that *“migration itself can be conceptualized as a process of network building, which depends on and, in turn, reinforces social relationships across space”* (Vertovec 2002: 3). Crescenzi et al. (2016) define social networks as encompassing *“a variety of social relations including partnering, parenting, family, friends, business networks and so on”*. Such relations thus influence individual decision-making when it comes to return migration as well. Reasons related to family or friends are another important factor motivating return to the country of origin. Sometimes the need to take care of an elderly parent or a desire to see one’s children be close to their grandparents are important in the decision-making (Macková – Harmáček 2019). The length of stay in the host country, the age at the initial migration, and the life cycle stage all influence the process, e.g., whether one is single, or a parent with young children, or retired (Erdal – Ezzati 2015). In general, the majority of people who move tend to be young adults (Szczepanikova – Van Criekinge 2018). However, this is not necessarily true for return migration, and returnees come back during different stages in their life cycles, which is also in line with return migrant typologies (Cerase 1974) that show, e.g., “return for retirement” as valid strategies.

This paper discusses the lived realities of returnees. Therefore, with hindsight, we might be omitting some important factors that influenced the returnees’ decision to return because we are looking at decisions made several months prior. However, we still discuss the relative strength of transnational attachments, both in the previous country of settlement and in the country of origin, and their effect on the decision to migrate. Next, we turn to discussing the blurred division among such migration flows and the ways migration trajectories can be disrupted by sudden events.

Forced vs. voluntary migration

Giddens (1984) has developed structuration theory, which reconciles structure and agency, showing how the activity of humans influences differ-

ent patterns of human organisation. Hence, individual decisions are influenced by structures (e.g., in organisations) and in turn, individual agency influences those structures. Human agency is paramount to the decision to migrate or return, and it is reflected in the policies that respond to people's movements (Faist 2000). Bakewell (2010: 1694) refers to agency as *"the capacity for social actors to reflect on their position, devise strategies and take action to achieve their desires"*. Structural factors, on the other hand, represent the situation both in the countries of origin and destination (e.g., unemployment or government policies). The global pandemic is another important factor that has to be taken into account when discussing return migration.

The decision to migrate (or return) is located on a different scale from that of voluntary vs. forced migration, and often the boundary between them is blurred. As de Haas (2021) argues, *"It would therefore be just as unrealistic to depict migrants as victims desperately fleeing situations of destitution, oppression and human misery as it would be to depict them as entirely rational and free actors who constantly make rational cost-benefit calculations."* This is connected to the notion of a returnee's preparedness as proposed by Cassarino (2004). In this case, it includes both the willingness to return and the readiness to return. However, to move from the former to the latter requires mobilizations of various resources, including social capital. We understand social capital as *"features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit"* (Putnam 1993). In migration studies, this may include networks in both the countries of origin and destination. Clearly, readiness to return goes beyond the free choice model. Cassarino (2004) proposes that return should not just be seen as a voluntary act by the migrant, but also a sign of readiness.

The economic theories of migration are a useful explanatory tool for return migration (de Haas – Fokkema – Fihri 2015) when looking at it from these two different perspectives. Neo-classical economic theory sees return as a failure. If migrants usually improve their socio-economic status in their destination countries, it would be counterintuitive for them to return when they can expect to increase their earnings over the long term by remaining. De Haas (2021) further calls for moving beyond the assumptions of neo-classical economic theories of migration and the factors of "push and pull". Another approach, NELM (new economics of labour migration) theory, supposes that return migration takes place with the accumulated earnings, and that returnees can either retire or establish their own (family) businesses. In this way, migration can act as a form of insurance for migrant families. However, both economic theories work with voluntary forms of migration.

Erdal and Oeppen (2018) discuss voluntary and forced migration as a continuum, not a dichotomy. Similarly, Charron (2020) argues that migra-

tion flows are neither entirely forced nor voluntary. It is important to label migration as forced when it comes to asylum seeking and the role of states. However, it is important to decouple these descriptions from state systems of migration management and their role. For some labour migrants, the decision to leave may be forced by external circumstances, while for refugees, factors personal to them may affect their decision-making and aspirations to leave. Motivations and aspirations are thus important to future migration trajectories. Aspirations expand such decisions into the realm of subjectivity. People respond differently to different external circumstances and can migrate based on their capabilities. De Haas (2021) proposes a typology of migration based on aspirations/capabilities and mobility. His main argument is that all forms of migration can be conceptualised as a function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures. When high migration capacities meet high migration aspirations, the result is voluntary mobility. However, there are other forms of mobilities, including involuntary immobility (“feeling trapped”), acquiescent immobility, and involuntary mobility (refugees or “soft deportation”). Furthermore, this framework applies to return migration, which makes it suitable for our analysis.

In the case study at hand, there was an element of disruption, and it is clear that for some people the circumstances caused by the global pandemic made them return earlier than they had planned. At the same time, there was the element of human agency, as clearly not all migrants returned to their countries of origin and some wanted to stay put despite the pandemic. However, the migrants who stayed are not in the scope of our paper. This paper will enquire about the factors influencing their decisions to return and what the returnees (despite coming back from different countries) had in common – the experience of return during the pandemic. We will also turn towards the perception of voluntary vs. forced migration and how it has shifted during the pandemic. Furthermore, we will also inquire about the migrants’ transnational networks and how they had to be activated within a short time to ensure return preparedness.

Data and methods

There were three important data inputs that were mutually supportive of the complexity of the data gathered. The first important input was provided by the Czech embassies. At the beginning of May, we contacted all 88 Czech embassies (38 in Europe and 50 outside Europe) via email with a kind request to share our online survey. The survey served as a means to recruit participants for the interviews. Within a month (which is also the

legal period for response) only 55 embassies (approx. 62%) had provided answers, which varied significantly. Some embassies were helpful and shared the questionnaire on their social networks or website, provided contacts to Czech communities, and informed us about the context of repatriation and the status of the Czech community abroad. Other embassies declared limited options were available to them for how to help with our data collection. However, it is important to note that for the sake of consistency, embassies in countries such as North Korea were also contacted. Based on many factors, some embassies communicated in a very open, frank manner, while others used a rather formal attitude and referred us to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which was our second source of information.

In order to receive full data about repatriations, we contacted the Czech MFA through a request submitted according to Act 106/1999, Coll., on Free Access to Information, which establishes a legal obligation for a response. Based on this mechanism we received updated data on repatriations. However, it is important to note that repatriations were used mainly by tourists, and as mentioned by some respondents, the organisation was chaotic on both sides. Some repatriated citizens failed to send a notification to the MFA about their successful return, others booked repatriation flights but later used their own means of transport without cancelling, etc. Interestingly, one respondent who was unsure about taking the repatriation flight mentioned being “pressured” into taking it with her family so the flight would have enough passengers. Nonetheless, such cases seem to be exceptional, and the data from the MFA provided a quantitative focus on the repatriations.

The third important source of information was the interviews. In May and June 2021, we shared a request to complete a short questionnaire with 65 Facebook groups that unite Czechs abroad in different regions or countries. In total, the Facebook groups provided us access to 245,100 group members. In this way, we identified 73 respondents, of whom 24 agreed to participate in further in-depth research. However, despite our repeated requests, and even despite offering financial remuneration to the respondents, just nine people participated in the interviews. This might be due to the amount of time that passed between the online survey and the interviews. For some returnees, their circumstances might have changed, and they might have re-migrated or found new jobs with additional time pressures. Due to the low number of respondents, the authors decided to emphasise qualitative data, and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were carried out online through the Zoom platform. This enabled us to interview people who live in different parts of the Czech Republic. Most of the returnees were living in cities or towns. The interview was semi-structured, with approximately 12 questions which were carefully

formulated in reference to the theoretical literature. We also posed additional questions with the aim of extracting more information about the respondents' lines of thinking. In total, we interviewed nine people – four men and five women. Their ages ranged from 26 to 47 and the time spent abroad ranged from 15 to 96 months. All except one (returning from Sri Lanka) had returned from European countries. It is important to stress that different countries might vary in their provision of welfare and services to migrants. We will discuss those differences in one of the following sections. In our sample, five respondents had a partner (four of them had children), and four were single. There is a large heterogeneity in our sample which allows us to integrate different returnee perspectives. However, all of the returnees in our sample are skilled, meaning they either have tertiary education or work in a highly specific, competitive sector. Most interviewees got jobs shortly after their return (or were close to finding one) and none had to worry about their current financial situation. As we used self-selection for our interviews, it is clear that the countries covered are not representative of Czech returnees. However, they offer interesting perspectives about return and its significance for these individuals.

Table 1 Interviewees' profiles

Respondent name	Gender	Age	Country of emigration	Months spent abroad	Return to Czechia
1	M	29	Switzerland	20	01/09/2020
2	F	47	Switzerland	39	05/11/2020
3	F	27	Estonia	96	18/09/2020
4	M	26	Estonia	26	14/06/2020
5	M	32	Belgium	30	30/04/2020
6	F	31	Belgium	42	09/05/2020
7	F	40	Sri Lanka	15	04/04/2020
8	F	29	Denmark	24	07/10/2020
9	M	36	Ireland	72	20/03/2020

Findings

Overview

COVID-19 may be considered one of the most major events for return migration since the fall of communism. Unfortunately, the total extent of the phenomenon is unknown, as there are no official statistics and any estimations could only be based on partial data provided by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA 2020a; 2020b). It is important to note

that the official data about repatriations organised by institutions does not include data on returnees who used their own means of transport. As a result, the data of the ministry merely reflect the scope of state assistance to Czech citizens abroad. From the MFA we know that between 18 March 2020 and 13 April 2020, there were in total 17 repatriation flights serving 2,435 Czech citizens. However, it is important to note that repatriation flights were primarily intended for tourists or temporary residents and thus do not match our target group. This means an unknown number of citizens matching our criteria used their own repatriation transport. Among our interviewees, there was one person who had taken a repatriation flight and two who had considered taking official transport to repatriate.

The repatriation flights covered various destinations in Asia and Latin America. In Europe, the MFA organised “repatriation buses”. However, many private companies contributed by preparing special repatriation connections. This was also the case of the Regiojet company, Umbrella, Uchytíl or Noble line, which provided connections from “hot spots” like Paris, London, Frankfurt, Brussels, Amsterdam, Bern, Berlin, Dresden, Innsbruck, Munich, Zurich, St. Gallen, Geneva, Vienna, Lausanne, Basel and other mainly West European destinations (MFA 2020b). The repatriation flights and buses may have strengthened the role of the nation state for compatriots abroad and signalled the readiness of the state to accept the returnees.

Outside Europe, Czech communities seem to be relatively small and well-integrated in the Middle East, Africa, Asia or Latin America. Due to the considerably high number of Czechs living in the USA, Australia and Canada, flights from these destinations were not surprising. This is also the case for Vietnam and Thailand, where many people with links to the Czech Republic live. In Vietnam, there are approximately 206,000 people who studied in Czechoslovakia during the communist era¹ and Thailand is very popular among Czechs as an alternative living destination (Czech Radio 2020). While Czech communities are present in Latin America and the Caribbean as well, such destinations are also tourist hotspots.

Well-being and family ties before and after return

This section illustrates the individual experiences of the returnees. The factors influencing their return (apart from the global pandemic) fall un-

1 It is important to note that such people often do not have Czech or Czechoslovak citizenship, due to citizenship policy restrictions. Members of the 60,000 strong Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic have family links to Vietnam.

der two categories, the circumstances in their country of origin and the circumstances in the country of settlement. Often, these two are related. In the circumstances of the global pandemic, some countries performed better and others worse. Decision-making in connection with the pandemic may have been limited (e.g., the circumstances in both countries might have been similar, or it may have been difficult to foresee how the situation would develop), but this uncertainty clearly influenced other aspects of the respondents' lives. Resources in the country of destination played an important role, but for many returnees, quality of life and well-being represented important factors for their return (cf. Lietaert 2021). When discussing the economic factors, respondents mentioned quality of life; for example, when comparing life in the Czech Republic to life in Switzerland, Respondent 2 stated: *"When moving, the salary goes down, but as far as the quality of life is concerned, it remains the same."* This was echoed by Respondent 1: *"In Switzerland, everything is 3x more expensive, so when you return, the standard of living will remain the same."* Others complained that the return represented a decline in their income. For example, Respondent 9 stated: *"I went down financially, returning to lockdown was like returning to the dark."* On the other hand, he mentioned that he did not want to stay in Ireland and *"do nothing"*.

Standard of living and overall well-being are related to the environment for residency. Paradoxically, for some the return represented a better living situation (some people returned to their own property), while for others, living arrangements were more difficult:

It was one of the positive things, that we would finally be in our own apartment. (Respondent 5)

When it comes to housing, it's for the better. There was a room in Brussels; here I have an apartment. (Respondent 6)

I can live both here and there. I have what I need in both countries to be able to live without the help of my family. But here we have a small apartment and there it's a large house. So I feel more at home there. (Respondent 7)

For others, the housing had to be shared, e.g., with their parents, which could have been seen as a problem. While one returnee viewed it positively, another preferred her privacy and lived in a cottage away from the family home.

I was afraid to go back to my parents' after living on my own for 10 years. It's different when we call each other and then suddenly live under one roof. But in the end, it turned out better than expected. The comfort of living and that they allowed me to be at home after such a long time [and they enjoy it themselves] changed the whole situation. (Respondent 3)

I was with my family, at home, I did not have to pay for housing. I was at home, but I didn't have the privacy I needed. Then I moved to the cottage to write [my thesis] in peace. It was as if I were in Denmark... (Respondent 8)

Circumstances differed based on returnees' life stages, but families played an important role for all of the returnees and represented an important incentive to return. For example, Respondent 2 mentioned that being back and close to family was paramount to her return:

It was such a pressure, if anything happened to the health of my 75-year-old mother, I just wouldn't [be able to] solve it from Switzerland.

Other returnees mentioned parents sharing their worries with them, which played a role in their decision-making.

I wasn't afraid, but my parents were scared of what was happening. (Respondent 8)

It was difficult for my parents, they were worried about me. So it also made my decision easier. (Respondent 6)

The physical distance between family members was not that important as long as people had the prospect of seeing each other in the future. However, the exceptional situation of the pandemic with its widespread insecurity made the precariousness of the emigrants' life situations more visible. Feelings of responsibility towards family members grew even stronger and could have been the "tipping point" influencing their return. For transnational families of couples from different countries, the decision-making was even more difficult: „*We lose one family and we gain another.*” (Respondent 7)

This division, and the split lives that such people lead, are connected to the transnational aspect of migration and return (White 2014). Some people had kept their apartments in the Czech Republic while working abroad,

so it was not so difficult for them to return, but in one case a returnee had left behind a single-family house in Sri Lanka to return to the Czech Republic. However, in that case the returnee was still planning to go back to Sri Lanka, and having two properties in two different countries kept her options open. Many returnees live simultaneously “here and there”, sharing their networks across “transnational social fields” (Basch et al. 1994). Next, we explore the transnational networks the returnees had access to before and after their return.

Transnational aspects of return and networks

Some respondents shared aspects of their lives transnationally even after the return. Whether that included calling friends or sharing family photos, some remain deeply tied to both countries. The transnational aspects of the returnees’ daily lives are aptly illustrated by the following quote: *“I am kind of an amphibian. I can deal well with the transitions [between countries].”* (Respondent 8) All respondents mentioned maintaining contacts both in their country of origin and in the countries of settlement; for many that included frequent phone calls and other means of keeping in touch through social media. However, this also extended to a helping hand with getting back to the Czech Republic.

I had very good relationships with my colleagues in the workplace. Thanks to that we got a car... flights were not operating at that time... and we were able to go home. (Respondent 5)

Another returnee appreciated the social networks she had in the Czech Republic, and while acknowledging that her colleagues and friends (in Switzerland) were also helpful, she turned to her friends in the Czech Republic when facing a challenging life situation.

It was all about the social circle. I was dealing with a big crisis, and it was something else to deal with it with people whom I have known all my life. (Respondent 2)

It is clear that people have to make choices when it comes to their daily lives and the contacts they sustain. They can be both involved in their local communities and continue to be in touch with people in their countries of origin. As stated by Respondent 3, the processes of integration and transnationalism went hand in hand:

I have to choose whether to go for a beer with my Estonian friends or Skype with someone [in the Czech Republic]. It is not a problem. On the contrary, this experience makes me humble ..., in general, it makes it easier to establish contacts. (Respondent 3)

However, leaving the country of residence usually leads to a change in the frequency or intensity of contacts with people there. All of the returnees kept in touch with people in their former countries of residence, but the intensity of the contacts differed. One returnee described the difficulties inherent in moving and leaving networks behind.

From personal experience, it takes a year or two for a person to put down roots a bit. Towards the end we had made contacts, but we had to disrupt them [e.g., with neighbours, people from the kindergarten, our son's relationships with his friends, with friends from the playground in the community]. We do not have that many ties in the Czech Republic. (Respondent 5)

Another respondent mentioned more positive feelings towards his return.

I remember positive feelings, almost euphoria [when returning], such a hope that everything will be better, that I have people I can rely on here, that I will communicate better at the office. (Respondent 1)

The respondents kept their networks (or social capital) in both countries and re-activated them when they wanted to move. Moreover, the networks in both countries were helpful during the pandemic with the practicalities of moving.

Comparing the practicalities of life “here and there”

Returnees mentioned different experiences with the bureaucracies of different states. It is important to note that these results reflect the individuals' experiences related to their previous migration experience, which might still affect their understanding of different state services. Unsurprisingly, those coming from countries perceived as having less bureaucracy (Estonia, Switzerland, Denmark) mentioned that the Czech experience was more problematic. On the other hand, returnees from countries such as Sri Lanka and Belgium mentioned the same level of bureaucracy or a marked improvement when returning.

Is it easier with state administration here? It's the same, but corruption is present in Sri Lanka. Here the trend is to start dealing with some matters online, there is more corruption. In Sri Lanka, my husband handles it, here I do. (Respondent 7)

It occurs to me that communication with the authorities in Belgium was rather difficult. Everything was changing so fast we did not know [what was about to take place]. (Respondent 6)

The Belgian political and administrative system is so confusing, no one knows what is and is not valid, [it is] total chaos. The return was refreshing. (Respondent 5)

The returnees from Estonia were rather disappointed with the Czech state administration and its lack of digitalization.

The return was more of a disappointment because of the communication with the authorities: They blame COVID-19, for example, for two months... In Estonia, it took us half a day to start working from home. (Respondent 4)

There was a feeling of absolutely zero cooperation on the part of the state in the case of return – documents, transfer of health insurance. Zero cooperation, arrogance and inconvenience. In Estonia, I helped returnees and those who relocated there. It's digitised, you can do it online in a few hours. I had a better starting position, but I came up against feelings of helplessness and frustration. In the end, it is "do it yourself", somehow it worked out. Zero incentives to entice someone to come back here. I rather felt that no one wanted me here. (Respondent 3)

Similarly, the returnee from Denmark was disappointed with the ease of communicating with the authorities in the Czech Republic.

In Denmark, I solved my taxes over the phone in English. [Upon returning to the Czech Republic] I had to spend four days going to the offices. Take how much time you waste by going there, and if everyone does that, it adds up to many days not spent at the workplace. (Respondent 8)

A returnee from Switzerland mentioned her point of view:

*Here [in the Czech Republic] we try to *uck the state, that's what we do, and we do not understand that the state is us, in reality. This is something I find very difficult to get used to. Those things are there for a reason. It remains stable for a long time – there it is a continuity, here it is chaos... the state administration is dysfunctional, professionals are not working there, and I believe this is connected with the political situation here, which is completely incomprehensible to me. (Respondent 2)*

Another respondent is not so critical and highlights the importance of belonging (i.e., being reintegrated) and trying to contribute to one's country of origin.

When someone asks me about it, I will say, 'Yes, there is a mess here in the Czech Republic, but it is our mess, and maybe it is up to us to do something about it in the future.' In Switzerland, though, everything works as it should – it's an amazing country, but I never felt like I was a part of it. (Respondent 1)

Some returnees had voted from abroad (for many, that was their only instance of contact with the Czech embassy), while others returned to vote. Some were also eligible to vote in their country of settlement, but Respondent 9, for example, indicated that he did not feel knowledgeable enough to do so in spite of the possibility – *"I didn't completely follow it in detail and I didn't have such an overview of it."*

Future migration trajectories

The disruption caused by COVID-19 brought up difficult choices in terms of further migration trajectories. For some, it speeded up the decision to return, while for others it put their migration experience in a new perspective. While one respondent (Respondent 4) admitted the situation as a whole had not influenced him too much, for others the pandemic was one of the major factors that made them return. The ease of travel between countries was put into question. Respondent 3 recalls that she had to re-think her migration choice when the possibility to spend Christmas at home became uncertain in 2020. This involuntary immobility is described as follows:

It is impossible to commute between countries, basically, when you feel like buying a ticket to get on a plane and spend a few days at home or vice versa. The decision was very difficult. (Respondent 3)

The specifics of the pandemic situation only affected some aspects, and while there were similarities (“*One sat at home both there and in the Czech Republic*”, Respondent 5), other things differed markedly across the countries.

Mixed feelings. I knew internally that I would do it [return] anyway in a while. I had to deal with it. The culture of the people here, including eating, the behaviour of the people, makes quite a difference. I got used to it during that year. I've learned to ignore things that I don't like. (Respondent 9)

Some respondents decided to work long-distance from the Czech Republic while waiting for their contracts to end in the country of residence. Others quit their jobs on the spot. Some respondents think about re-migrating and consider the appropriateness of their life stage for the move (e.g., when their children grow up, when their children are born, etc.). Some also take into account the portability of pensions and other benefits for their re-migration. This also influences their decisions about future migration.

I am five years away from the minimum Danish pension. I am still thinking about going to Switzerland if I manage to access the Danish pension. (Respondent 8)

I think I'll stay here now [in the Czech Republic]. Before I retire, I will go [live] there 100% for four years. After 10 years, there is an Irish pension. If I go now, my personal life, whether or not there will be a child, plays a role. There are several aspects that play a role in this. If I was completely about me, I would go for a year or two right now. (Respondent 9)

Importantly, while all of the returnees in our sample are considered voluntary returnees (there were no forced deportations), there was a large variation in how they perceived the voluntariness of their return. When asked to rank it (1 – forced return, 10 – completely voluntary return), Respondent 4 viewed it as “1 or 2 – I have been told to leave”. Respondent 5 viewed it more as “6 or 7 – at the end of the day, things would have been the same, but COVID-19 speeded up the process”. Others graded it in between, which meant that the pandemic played a role in their return and was one of the major factors in their decision-making. Respondent 6 claims: “If it were not for COVID-19, I would have stayed.”

This means the significance of voluntary mobility has shifted more towards structural factors influencing people's decision to migrate. There-

fore, we observe a marked change in our understanding of the voluntary/forced migration dichotomy. The feelings of being trapped in the country of destination at some point also appeared in some answers, and the respondents dealt differently with those feelings. While some describe the haphazardness of the whole return process (e.g., the organisation of repatriation bus rides or flights), others left in a matter of hours or days, a manner frequently reminiscent of forced migration flows. The respondents discussed having been uneasy about the right kind of documents or tests to carry with them and about the situation possibly changing at the last moment. Others waited for the situation to calm down and left in the summer of 2020, when they had enough time to leave their jobs, end their rental contracts, or solve other practicalities.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to present a case study of the current return migration to the Czech Republic and to share some of the experiences of the recent returnees. How did the pandemic influence their return? Who are they, and how have they dealt with the realities of returning to the Czech Republic? How do they compare their current situation to their previous situation in their countries of settlement?

This paper has attempted to shed light on recent return migration to the Czech Republic. Using multiple data sources – interviews with returnees and data provided by Czech embassies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – we covered the broader context of returns during the pandemic. It is possible that for some migrants, the decision to return was well thought through and they would have returned regardless of the pandemic, while for others the decision was taken on a whim. Some respondents may have re-migrated after completing the online questionnaire or being interviewed. However, we wanted to show the individual returnees' motivations and what shaped them during the return process. The decision-making of the returnees under conditions of high uncertainty was unique to the current wave of returns during the pandemic.

A myriad of factors influences return preparedness, and we found a diversity of reactions in the face of the pandemic – some respondents and interviewees postponed their return to the Czech Republic to a later date (not necessarily at the start of the global pandemic), while at the time of the interview, others were still hoping to re-migrate to their respective former countries of destination once better conditions are in place. For many returnees, migration networks mattered, and the connections they had both in their country of settlement and in the Czech Republic played

an important role in their decision to return and their possible future plans to re-migrate. For some migrants, the exceptionality of the pandemic situation made them return in spite of a clear downward trend in their income. Many returnees are not yet eligible to receive pensions in their countries of residence, yet they decided to return after considering other factors. Therefore, socio-economic conditions might not be the most decisive factor in return migration. Structural factors (conditions in both countries) were just one part of the decision-making process, and individual agency also mattered for the returnees. Their social networks and life-cycle stages may have also played an important role in their return. When engaging in transnational social contacts, the returnees have attempted to stay in touch with both countries (or with even more countries if they had another previous migration experience), and for many such activities were not mutually exclusive. However, the returnees had to re-activate their networks within a short time to be able to return earlier than expected.

Furthermore, we have attempted to integrate the dichotomy of forced vs. voluntary return into these narratives. For the returns that we have surveyed, many people felt compelled to return due to uncertainty. Suddenly the benefits of their freedom of movement were restricted for weeks or months, and they were not sure about what would come. Feelings of helplessness and being trapped were not uncommon, and some returnees stated that the decision to return was more forced than voluntary (when asked to rank it). This is something that would be expected in other contexts, such as refugee flows, yet the pandemic integrates the reality of all types of returns. Both (in)voluntary mobility and involuntary immobility took place during the pandemic. At some stages, many migrants faced involuntary immobility (“feeling trapped”) in their host countries, and later on their decision to return had to be taken during a short time span. For many, it meant they had to return earlier than anticipated. The aspirations of these different migrants had to connect with their capabilities at the time, and the migration experience was cut short for many of them. The results of our study broaden our understanding of return migration in this specific case and highlight the importance of taking the multiplicity of returnees’ characteristics into account. Further research is needed into mobility and the restrictions on freedom of movement that took place during the global pandemic. It is also necessary to research different groups of returnees from different countries and how their migration experience has shaped their return processes. It would also be worthwhile to inquire about Czech migrants currently residing abroad and their return intentions.

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