

FOCUS: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MIGRATION

'Where is my Home?' Czech Migrants' Return during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lucie MACKOVÁ, Ondřej FILIPEC, Barbora FRLIČKOVÁ

Abstract. This paper explores the realities of returning to the Czech Republic during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the transnational migrant networks have been disrupted for many migrants. Some of them had to use the help of the nation-state, such as the information provided by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs or repatriation flights, to return to the country of origin. Moreover, their migration plans and trajectories might have been cut short and altered during the pandemic. This paper draws on 135 surveys with the returnees who returned to the Czech Republic between February 2020 and May 2021 and discusses their characteristics. It looks at the factors that made migrants return to the Czech Republic, describes their socio-economic situation compared to the previous country of residence, and other aspects of their post-return experience. Finally, it sheds light on the characteristics of those who claim they would have stayed abroad if there had been no pandemic.

Keywords: *return migration, repatriation, migrant networks, COVID-19, Czech Republic*

1. Introduction

Return migration is one of the less understood parts of the migration process, yet for many migrants, return forms an essential step in their migration trajectories. It represents both a temporal and spatial process.¹ The time aspect means that people return after different periods of time spent abroad. It is also worthwhile looking at their trajectories after return and their intentions for staying

¹ Ben Page, Anastasia Christou, and Elizabeth Mavroudi, "Introduction: from time to timespace and forward to time again in migration studies," in *Timespace and international migration*, eds. Ben Page, Anastasia Christou, and Elizabeth Mavroudi (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017).

in their countries of origin. The geographical aspect involves the distance between the country of origin and the previous country of residence. The bigger the distance, we can assume that the more well-thought the return has to be due to the costs of returning. At the same time, we can inquire whether people are willing to return to their 'home' towns or villages or whether they prefer another place of residence after returning to their respective countries of origin. The return motivations also play a role, especially regarding the forced and voluntary dichotomy of migration.² While return can be viewed according to the preferences of individual migrants as a failure or success, it might be too simplistic to view return in those terms.³ The return to the countries of origin can sometimes be seen as a fulfilment of original intentions and sometimes as a consequence of revised intentions.⁴ The return motivations and attitudes towards migration may change over time. Even more so, during the pandemic, previous reasons for staying or leaving might have lost their relevance.

There is an added layer of complexity to return migration caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020. It has been shown that pandemics such as this one can shift mobility patterns, for example, by increasing cross-border returns.⁵ At the same time, the policies of sending and receiving states have left some migrants stranded, unable to return. Hence, border closures and travel restrictions have left many migrants in a state of uncertainty. Some scholars have even started arguing that the 'age of migration' was starting to be over with the temporary suspension of mobility.⁶ For many returnees, this represented an abrupt shift in their mobility pattern, and the pandemic might have somehow speeded or altered their decision to return.⁷ Return migration has various definitions, but it can mean 'the movement of migrants back to a country

² Hein De Haas, "A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework," *Comparative Migration Studies* 9, no. 1 (2021): 1-35.

³ Hein De Haas, Tineke Fokkema and Mohamed Fassi Fihri, "Return migration as failure or success?," *Journal of international migration and integration* 16, no. 2 (2015): 415-429.

⁴ David Bartram, Maritsa Poros and Pierre Monforte, *Key concepts in migration* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014).

⁵ Susan Martin and Jonas Bergmann, "(Im) mobility in the age of COVID-19," *International Migration Review* 55, no. 3 (2021): 660-687.

⁶ Alan Gamlen, "Migration and mobility after the 2020 pandemic: The end of an age," Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2020.

⁷ Lucie Macková and Ondřej Filipec, "COVID-19 and return migration to the Czech Republic," *Český lid / Czech ethnological journal* 109, no. 1 (2022): 123-144.

of origin, following an absence of at least one year.’⁸ Return is also important for the receiving states, especially if they have a large migrant population abroad. However, return migration is difficult to quantify as states often do not count citizens returning to their countries of origin.⁹

This paper attempts to address the issue of return migration to the Czech Republic during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide a glimpse into the motivations and realities of return for migrants coming back. We will discuss the Czech returnee characteristics based on the survey and look at the relevance of the overall pandemic situation for their return. To do that, we will use different techniques, including correlation analysis and multivariate regression models. Next, this paper will discuss return migration during times of crises, and then it will focus on return migration to the Czech Republic and its significance, including some information about repatriation flights provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, we will present the methods of this analysis and the results of the survey carried out among the returnees to the Czech Republic, which might give us some insights into the reality of return for many returnees from that period. In the survey, we inquired about the situation connected with COVID-19 and its influence on the decision to return from abroad. However, we also inquired about the broader transnational aspects of the returnees’ situation, the role of mobility and networks and paid particular attention to the individual characteristics of the returnees.

2. Return migration during times of crises

Return migration patterns differ during the COVID-19 pandemic from the ‘normal’ situation. While some migrants might have lost their jobs or revised their migration intentions and plans, others might have been stuck due to border closures despite the wish to leave. Gamlen argues that during crises such as the pandemic, some people may be more prone to move, whereas others may be less likely.¹⁰ It can also lead to a period of unpredictable and fast-changing migration flows, which will also include return migration. Historically, mobility also led to the spread of infectious

⁸Marta Bivand Erdal, "Timespaces of return migration: the interplay of everyday practices and imaginaries of return in transnational social fields," in *Timespace and international migration*, eds. Ben Page, Anastasia Christou, and Elizabeth Mavroudi (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017), 104.

⁹ George Gmelch, "Return migration," *Annual review of anthropology* (1980): 135-159.

¹⁰ Gamlen, "Migration and mobility after the 2020 pandemic: The end of an age."

diseases such as the black plague in the medieval period and cholera pandemics during the nineteenth century.¹¹ More recently, the 2003 SARS-CoV-1 pandemic spread via international air travel, as did the 2009 influenza A(H1N1).¹² Many responses by the states, such as the use of quarantine or border controls, have been used effectively to combat these global threats.

Motivations of return have to do with the circumstances in both home and host countries, reflecting the logic of push and pull factors.¹³ In relation to the time element, some authors have suggested that under 'normal' circumstances, there can be three types of returnees.¹⁴ The first type represents temporary migrants planning to return once they have achieved their objectives. The second type is those planning permanent migration forced to return due to external factors (such as an economic situation or the pandemic). The third type represents those planning permanent migration who choose to return because they can not adjust to the country of destination. Globally, under the circumstances of the pandemic, it seems that the second type of migrants could be overrepresented due to the nature of the situation. Another typology is proposed by Battistella.¹⁵ The first type is the return of achievement (voluntary return). Second, the return of completion is similar to the first type but is not voluntary because the migrant would have liked to stay longer after completing a contract or a secondment. The third type is the return of setback (a hybrid voluntary/forced return). In this case, due to complications, the migrant has to return before the return project is completed. Finally, the return of crisis takes place due to situations such as political upheaval, environmental disaster, or others. Return due to the pandemic could fall into the category of the return of setback or return of crisis.

Decision-making about return on the individual level takes place due to a combination of factors and is influenced by gender, life cycle stage, employment situation, and many others. Some factors that influenced return motivation in a study by

¹¹ Eugenia Tognotti, "Lessons from the history of quarantine, from plague to influenza A," *Emerging infectious diseases* 19, no. 2 (2013): 254.

¹² Richard A. Stein, "Lessons from outbreaks of H1N1 influenza," *Annals of internal medicine* 151, no. 1 (2009): 59-62.

¹³ Everett Lee, "A Theory of Migration," *Demography* 3, no. 1 (1966): 47-57.

¹⁴ Gmelch, "Return migration," 138.

¹⁵ Graziano Battistella, "Return migration: a conceptual and policy framework. *International Migration Policy Report Perspectives on the Content and Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*," 3-14. New York: Scalabrini Migration Study Centres, 2018.

Bastia included home ownership, partner's nationality, job stability and savings.¹⁶ Other studies focusing on migrant well-being found that cross-country differences in the intended return rate can be explained by the differences in the life satisfaction gains or losses of returnees.¹⁷ There has been research on lifestyle migration that can also be applied to the life cycle stage of migrants.¹⁸ As with any type of migration, return migration is gendered.¹⁹ Some research has shown that men seem more oriented to return than women.²⁰ However, all of this depends on the geographic context and during a crisis situation, the actual return migration rates might differ from the expectations.

Another important aspect of return migration is the level of skills of migrants. It has been shown that migrants with lower skill levels are disproportionately affected during layoffs during periods of crises such as economic downturns.²¹ Therefore, the role of skill levels or education (which is also connected to the socio-economic situation of the migrants) is especially important to be followed during and after the pandemic. For many migrants, the COVID-19 situation led to temporary or permanent job loss. Hence, many have decided to return to their countries of origin. Nevertheless, the conditions in both former receiving states and the country of origin (e.g. health regulations and precautions at the height of the pandemic) might have been quite similar.

3. Return migration to the Czech Republic during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the Central and Eastern European region, there has been some research on return migration, especially to Poland.²² The interest in this issue has grown after

¹⁶ Tanja Bastia, "Should I stay or should I go? Return migration in times of crises," *Journal of international development* 23, no. 4 (2011): 583-595.

¹⁷ Maximilian Schiele, "Life satisfaction and return migration: analysing the role of life satisfaction for migrant return intentions in Germany," *Journal of ethnic and migration studies* 47, no. 1 (2021): 110-129.

¹⁸ Maarja Saar and Ellu Saar, "Can the concept of lifestyle migration be applied to return migration? The case of Estonians in the UK," *International Migration* 58, no. 2 (2020): 52-66.

¹⁹ Katie Kuschminder, "Interrogating the relationship between remigration and sustainable return," *International Migration* 55, no. 6 (2017): 107-121.

²⁰ Russell King and Aija Lulle, "Gendering return migration," in *Handbook of Return Migration*, eds. Russell King and Katie Kuschminder (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), 53-69.

²¹ Manolo I. Abella and S. K. Sasikumar, "Estimating Earnings Losses of Migrant Workers Due to Covid-19," *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 63, no. 4 (2020): 921-939.

²² Reiner Martin and Dragos Radu, "Return migration: the experience of Eastern Europe," *International Migration* 50, no. 6 (2012): 109-128. Violetta Parutis, "'Economic migrants' or 'middling transnationals'? East European migrants' experiences of work in the UK," *International Migration* 52, no. 1 (2014): 36-55.

Brexit. Apart from Poland, there have been other countries with studies focusing on return migration, such as Lithuania²³ and Estonia.²⁴ Some studies found that 'quality of employment' and job security help to guide people's migration decisions, including the decision to return.²⁵ In the Czech context, return migration occurred at various times during history - after the Second World War, after the end of the communist rule, and recently, after the economic downturn in 2008. However, the current situation during the COVID-19 pandemic might be unprecedented in many ways due to an unpredictable situation at the beginning of the crisis, border closures, and the significant role played by the state to bring the nationals 'home'. It seems that the role of the nation-state has been reinforced by the crisis as for many migrants "stranded" abroad, repatriation flights represented a chance to return to their home countries. Some research in the Czech milieu has focused on the return of compatriots from Ukraine.²⁶ However, there is less research on the current situation of Czechs working abroad and the impact of the pandemic.

There is no official statistic on the total number of Czechs living abroad. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated that there are about 2-2,5 million people abroad with 'Czech origin' and about 200-250 thousand Czech passport holders.²⁷ Another estimation is that of economic migration as calculated by the Czech Statistical Office: there are approximately 489 thousand Czechs working abroad, out of which 307 thousand are working in the EU, mainly in Germany (one third), Ireland, Austria and the UK. Outside the EU, about 57 thousand Czechs are working in the USA.²⁸ Approx. 56,600 Czechs cross the border daily, mainly to Germany (37,200) and Austria (12,800). On the other side, there is a limited daily migration to Slovakia (2,300) or Poland (1,000). From the time perspective, we can distinguish 1) short-

²³ Egidijus Barcevičius, "How successful are highly qualified return migrants in the Lithuanian labour market?," *International Migration* 54, no. 3 (2016): 35-47.

²⁴ Maarja Saar and Ellu Saar, "Can the concept of lifestyle migration be applied to return migration? The case of Estonians in the UK."

²⁵ Anna Cieslik, "Where do you prefer to work? How the work environment influences return migration decisions from the United Kingdom to Poland," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 9 (2011): 1367-1383.

²⁶ Luděk Jirka, "Návratová migrace, reemigrace nebo etnická návratová migrace? Potomci krajanů ze západní Ukrajiny až jižní Moldávie a jejich důvody migrace do České republiky," *Český lid / Czech ethnographic journal* 107, no. 2 (2020): 211-229.

²⁷ "Počet českých krajanů v zahraničí," MZV, accessed July 8, 2022, https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/vyrocní_zpravy_a_dokumenty/poskytnute_inf_ormace/pocet_ceskych_krajanu_v_zahranici.html.

²⁸ "Češi pracující v zahraničí v číslech," Ekonom, accessed July 8, 2022, <https://ekonom.cz/c1-66625980-cesi-pracujici-za-hranicemi-v-cislech>.

term migration which takes place daily with returns within days, 2) seasonal migration of seasonal workers with lower qualifications (UK, Ireland, France, Spain, Italy or Germany are popular among the Czechs) and 3) long-term migration of qualified labour which is potentially overlapping with our target group of people staying abroad one year or longer, who decided to return.

Table 1: Repatriation flights

Date	Destination(s)	Number of passengers
18.03.2020	Canary Islands (2 flights)	268
22.03.2020	Riga	25
23.03.2020	Rotan, Cancun	169
24.03.2020	Bogota, San Jose	92
24.03.2020	Panama, Havana	118
24.03.2020	Punta Cana	116
24.03.2020	Manila, Cebu	88
24.03.2020	Hurghada	100
25.03.2020	Hanoi	201
28.03.2020	Lima	130
29.03.2020	Bangkok	244
31.03.2020	Chicago	180
31.03.2020	Bangkok	83
03.04.2020	Colombo, Kathmandu	66
07.04.2020	Depensar	90
13.04.2020	Sydney, Auckland, Christchurch	327
	TOTAL	2 435

Source: Data provided by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) upon request

There are only raw estimates of the numbers of Czechs who have returned during the pandemic; some of them might have even re-migrated. The numbers in

Table 1 only represent a fraction of all realised returns as many returnees used commercial flights, trains or buses or their own means of transport. In our survey sample, only two people used help from the Czech embassy (such as receiving the information), and five (different ones) used repatriation flights provided by the Czech embassy.

4. Survey data and methods

As the primary tool for our analysis, we have carried out a survey of the Czechs that have returned to the Czech Republic since the start of the pandemic. First, we have joined selected Facebook groups where we have shared a link to our survey. Facebook has proven to be a valuable tool in recruiting participants for migration research.²⁹ In total, we have addressed and shared our link to 65 Facebook groups that unite Czechs abroad in different regions or countries. In total, Facebook groups provided us access to 245.1 thousand members of the groups. However, it is important to note that most of the groups were shared with Slovaks (due to language and cultural proximity) and that membership in the groups may overlap. We have also emailed 88 Czech embassies with a request to share our survey through their networks. Within a month, 55 embassies emailed us back. Some of them provided information about the situation in the respective countries and others shared the survey through their networks.

The survey was the primary source of the data. Within a month after publication, the survey identified 135 respondents that matched the criteria. Unfortunately, only 73 respondents (50 women and 23 men) fully completed all questions. The sample selection criteria were as follows: the period of time spent abroad (12 months or more), return to the Czech Republic within the past year (up to April 2021) and current residence in the Czech Republic. The average age of the sample is 31.9 years (30.6 for women, 33.7 for men). A relatively higher average age of the respondents is based on socio-economic factors as migrants require some time to finish schooling and they need some time to settle in the destination country. The average length of their stay abroad prior to return was 49.7 months (54.8 for men, 46.7 for women). Among the respondents, 97 returned to the same place

²⁹ Oleksandr Ryndyk, "The Language-Based Recruitment of Migrants to Online Surveys with Facebook Advertisements: A Comparative Assessment from Three Geographical Contexts," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 10, no. 2 (2021): 131-149.

where they had lived prior to migrating, while 19 “returned” to a different one. In our sample, 49 people migrated alone, out of which eight returned with a partner. Furthermore, 24 people migrated with a partner, out of which 12 returned with a partner (it is unknown whether it is the same partner since the time of emigration). Finally, four people migrated with a family and all of them returned with some family members.

Among survey respondents, approximately 25 % of people returned in March and April 2020. Data shows that returns were almost equally distributed in the following months after the coronavirus crisis outbreak, with slight increases in September and October 2020. This might be related to the outbreak of the second wave or the seasonal fluctuations in some industries. In total, four respondents returned before the outbreak of Covid-19 before March 2020. This is due to the fact that they returned back to the Czech Republic for a short stay but were prevented from going back to their destination. The distribution of returns in time is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Number of returns per month among survey respondents



Source: authors

To carry out our analysis, we have used the Pearson correlation coefficient (further as “r”) that measures the strength of linear correlation between two sets of data. We have used different statements from the survey to establish relationships between them and see what factors shape the post-return experience and to what extent this relates to the migrants’ experience prior to returning. The respondents evaluated on a Likert scale to what extent they agreed with a set of 24 statements (apart from other questions).

We have also used multivariate regression models to look at the factors that characterize the returnees who claimed they would not have returned without the pandemic. We have used the following variables: age, gender, education, knowledge of the language of the host country (i.e., knowing the language of the host country at a proficient level), return (i.e., planning to return to the host country once the pandemic is over), lower income (i.e., having a lower income in the Czech Republic than in the host country) and social life (i.e., having a rich social and cultural life in the host country). Our dependent variable indicates whether the returnees would have stayed abroad if there was no pandemic. This variable has 73 observations. The dependent variable contains values from 1 to 5 (1 = do not agree at all; 5 = totally agree). We use seven independent variables. Variables of age (in years), gender (dummy variable), and level of education reflect the basic characteristics of our respondents/returnees. The other four variables - knowledge of the language of the host country, planned return to the host country, lower income in the Czech Republic, and richer social and cultural life in the host country - contain values from 1 to 5 (1 = do not agree at all; 5 = totally agree). The expected relationship between these four variables is positive. These variables have been selected based on previous research and studies.³⁰

While our dependent variable (no_covid_stay_abroad) is an ordinal variable (clear ordering of the categories - 1-5), we decided to apply an ordered logistic regression method. We estimate three regression models. The first model includes only three explanatory variables (language, return, lower_income); the second model is supplemented by the characteristics of returnees (age, sex, education); and we add the variable ‘social_life’ to the third model. We test the statistical significance of the explanatory variables and the direction of their effects on the dependent variable. The number of observations in all the models is 63.

³⁰ For example, Marta Anacka and Aleksandra Wójcicka. *Impacts of return migration in Poland*. No. 727072. Working Paper Horizon 2020 Grant Agreement, 2019.

5. Results

This section will look at the factors that influence the overall return experience. First, we will look at the socio-economic situation of the returnees based on the survey. A return to the Czech Republic had a critical impact on the decrease in income among the respondents. This was the case among 42.6 % of respondents, and about 20 % of respondents indicated that the impact was significant. On top of it, 40 % of respondents declared the return decreased their living standard. Pearson correlation here shows a moderate relationship ($r = 0.65$), and data shows that the economic impact of return is equally divided among men and women. People who reported a decrease in their living standard in the Czech Republic also stressed feeling better in the previous country of residence ($r = 0.44$). Nonetheless, despite the economic aspect being important (those who declared a drop in their income and living standard also claimed that they wanted to go abroad after the easing of restrictions), there might be other factors influencing return.

Friends and social contacts matter; those who claim to have more friends abroad than in the Czech Republic claim to be more likely to migrate again. The relationship between those variables is also moderate, with $r = 0.60$. Moreover, those who had already motivated someone to migrate in the past reported the intention to migrate again ($r = 0.44$). Looking at their previous stay abroad, those who said that they felt better abroad in a foreign country than in the Czech Republic also claimed that they had a much richer social and cultural life in their previous country of residence ($r = 0.63$). Here the nature of the variables is slightly questionable. Are they feeling worse in the Czech Republic because of poor social and cultural life or the opposite; because of having a rich cultural life abroad, do they report less satisfaction with their lives in the Czech Republic? However, from some point of view, the response is very logical, as life in the Czech Republic was marked by a lockdown and restrictions on the public at the time of the survey. People who had more friends abroad than in the Czech Republic reported feeling less safe in the Czech Republic ($r = 0.40$). This can show the importance of networks while migrating and upon subsequent return. Networks are crucial for returnee reintegration. Finally, those who reported a close relationship with a foreigner (partnership or significant friendship) claimed having a richer social and cultural life in their previous country of stay ($r = 0.53$).

The survey revealed differences between genders. Women responded more

often than men that they wanted to go abroad again after releasing COVID-19 restrictions. It seems that women talked about their foreign experiences with family and friends more positively than men, but men more often declared that they had persuaded someone to go abroad. Women were more likely to go back to the Czech Republic for short visits (e. g. during Christmas) while living abroad. Men reportedly made fewer return visits but declared slightly more active political participation while living abroad (e. g. voting at the Czech embassy³¹). Overall, women reported more often than men that they felt better in the previous country of residence than in the Czech Republic.

Those who reported a richer social and cultural life while living abroad also reported being involved in some political activity (e.g. voting) in their previous country of stay ($r = 0.40$). Both of these are connected with knowing the language of the country of residence really well (having a rich social and cultural life at $r = 0.50$ and being politically active at $r = 0.29$). Those who were politically active in the Czech Republic were also more likely to be more politically active abroad ($r = 0.38$) which means that being integrated into the host society (e.g. through participation in the elections) does not exclude being transnational in political activities (i.e., voting in the country of origin). A majority of respondents (69 %) claimed that they experienced discrimination while living abroad (men reported the case slightly more than women). Unfortunately, the data does not distinguish between the instances of positive and negative discrimination.

Now, it is important to look at the differences between those returnees who stated that they would not have returned without the pandemic and those who stated that they would have returned anyway and the global pandemic did not play a major role in their return.

In all of our models, we look at the factors that explain the variable 'no_covid_stay_abroad', meaning that they would not have returned if it was not for the COVID-19 pandemic. In all models, the variables 'language' and 'return' are statistically significant. It means that the returnees who would have stayed in the host country in a non-pandemic situation are those who know the language of the host country well and those who are planning to return after the end of the pandemic. The last variable in the first model means that those returnees whose income levels have lowered in the Czech Republic are those who intended to stay in

³¹ As many respondents had lived abroad for many years, some had the opportunity to participate in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies or in the presidential elections.

the host country longer. This explanatory variable is not statistically significant in any model. However, this can also be caused by a lower number of observations.

Table 2: Regression models

no_covid_stay_abroad	(1)	(2)	(3)
age		-0.008 (0.031)	-0.009 (0.031)
gender		-0.005 (0.460)	-0.009 (0.482)
education		-0.278 (0.252)	-0.232 (0.266)
language	0.435** (0.174)	0.456*** (0.179)	0.330* (0.219)
return	0.814*** (0.230)	0.825*** (0.243)	0.766*** (0.240)
lower_income	0.170 (0.161)	0.141 (0.182)	0.128 (0.173)
social_life			0.288 (0.263)
Number of observations	63	63	63
Wald chi2	21.84***	26.51***	27.16***

Source: Authors' calculations. ***Significant at the 1% significance level. **Significant at the 5% significance level. *Significant at the 10% significance level. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

The second model also adds age, sex and education, and while these variables are insignificant, they nevertheless show the direction of the model. The variables age, sex and education influence our dependent variable negatively. It shows that women, older respondents and less educated returnees are more likely to return to the host country after the COVID-19 pandemic. This might point to the fact that younger and more educated respondents might be faster at finding a job in the Czech Republic or it might be easier for them to get accustomed to the new environment.

The third model adds the 'social_life' variable that influences our explanatory variable positively. Returnees with rich social and cultural life in the host country are more likely to return after the pandemic. This variable is also statistically insignificant.

6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the issue of return migration to the Czech Republic during the COVID-19 pandemic. It looked at the individual characteristics of the returnees and revealed various factors that were connected with the pandemic and their perception of the situation. For many returnees, returning to the Czech Republic decreased their incomes and standard of living compared to their previous country of residence. Our findings show the importance of networks for migrants' well-being. Having more friends abroad than in the Czech Republic correlated with the intention to re-migrate and a rich social and cultural life in the host country. Moreover, people who had more friends abroad than in the Czech Republic reported feeling less safe in the Czech Republic. This can show the importance of networks while migrating and upon subsequent return. The COVID-19 pandemic also had an important impact on partnerships. Those who claim that they felt better abroad also claim to have had a relationship with a foreigner, including strong friendship or partnership, which is also linked to rich social and cultural life.

In our models, we look at the characteristics of returnees who would have normally stayed abroad without the pandemic. It seems that for many of them, re-migration still represents a plausible future migration trajectory. This can be even more likely for women, older returnees, and returnees with lower skill levels. Knowing the language of the host country at a proficient level is also linked with the likelihood of preferring to stay in the host country rather than migrating. Furthermore, the returnees who now have lower levels of income are those who would have liked to remain in the host country.

It would be interesting to compare our findings with the characteristics of those migrants who decided not to return to the Czech Republic and stayed abroad or carry out a more extensive longitudinal study that would select the returnees who have re-migrated since the time of our research. Return migration may not be seen as permanent and some scholars prefer the notion of open-ended return.³² The time will show how permanent the return might be for some, but certainly, the pandemic situation created an environment that altered many migrants' life trajectories and migration journeys. The pandemic situation represents a new status quo and it might be interesting to map further how the situation evolves for migrants, returnees and those who stay behind.

³² Selma Porobić, "Daring 'life-return projects' to post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Migration* 55, no. 5 (2017): 192-204.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our survey respondents and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic for providing valuable help and answers.

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