

Transnationals and the “Wall of Czechness”: expats and their self-perception in the Czech Republic

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* 1. Introduction

Transnationals. Mobile professionals. Privileged migrants. Expatriates. Expats. These labels are all used to describe one set of people, a group of migrants that arguably do not receive as much attention as other migrant groups in current academic literature. Whilst much of the focus in academic literature is focused on illegal migration, such as the very well-known book *“Illegality, Inc.”* by Ruben Andersson (2014), it is important to note that these current studies on migration give a “...skewed notion of ‘who migrants are’, leading to rather particular and limited notions of migration processes as a whole” (Fechter, Walsh, 2012, 10). This study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by exploring spaces and the experiences of expatriates, a topic that has largely concentrated on post-colonial contexts. Additionally, it seeks to shift the focus from the common examination of expat women as spouses to a more nuanced understanding of women who relocate independently and engage in the process of place-making. The objective of this research is to examine how expat women in Prague perceive their identities as foreigners living abroad.

2. Methodology

This research utilized two primary methodological approaches: semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations. The semi-structured interviews were employed to provide deep insights into participants’ perspectives, capturing how they interpret their experiences analytically and relationally, which aids in understanding their worldviews (Madden, 2010). A total of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted, while two participants who could not coordinate a meeting time instead responded to the questions in writing. The interviews followed a conversational format, featuring open-ended questions and allowing for follow-up queries to ensure comprehensive exploration.

The study focused on women who moved to Prague independently, aiming to understand how they settle into life in the city. This group was distinct from other expatriate groups, such as English teachers or university students, due to the absence of institutional support for social integration and the unique motivations driving their move. These differences were reflected in the data collection process, which was informed by the researcher’s personal experience of arriving in Prague without

an established social network and navigating the challenges of settling in alone.

2.1 Research limitations

Ridgway and Lowe (2022) highlight the importance of reflexivity when researching expat migrant groups, emphasizing how the researcher's positionality can influence the findings. Various studies underline that being part of an expatriate community can offer both advantages, such as a deeper connection with participants (Walsh, 2007, in Ridgeway & Lowe, 2022, 1079), and challenges, such as differences in socio-economic status that may impact research (Fechter, 2007). This study also acknowledges similar limitations and reflections. One key limitation was the lack of a consistent focus on a single location, which resulted in a relatively superficial understanding of the physical spaces within the research. Although a more detailed ethnographic study could have enriched the work, the aim was to examine patterns and themes relevant to women's experiences of moving to and navigating Prague.

The focus of this research was specifically on the gendered aspects of expat experiences, not accounting for other demographic factors such as race, age, ethnicity, or nationality. While incorporating these elements could have strengthened the study, the participants primarily came from Europe or the USA, with one exception, limiting the diversity of representation. The decision to center on gendered place-making was intentional, aiming to understand how women establish their sense of belonging in Prague without excluding certain groups. Additionally, the study's scope was constrained by the researchers' limited time, as full-time work necessitated conducting interviews and observations after hours. However, since all participants were also working women, it is unlikely that more time would have significantly altered the data collected.

3. Definitions: *Expat vs tourist vs local*

In existing academic literature, much attention has been drawn to defining exactly who expats are. However, finding one definition is rather difficult, as there are many ways of approaching this definition. One way to approach the definition is by highlighting three essential characteristics of this group: the type of assignment, the duration of the stay, and the purpose of moving (Harrison et al., 2004). On the characteristic of temporality, Fechter and Walsh (2012) identify three types of expats: First, the long-term expats: people who settle down with their families in the host country; then there are the middle-ground expats: who will be relocated soon; and finally the lifestyle migrants: who are "...pursuing particular lifestyles and cultural interests while returning regularly to their home countries to engage in income-generating activities" (Fechter, Walsh, 2012).

Furthermore, temporality is used to distinguish between an expat and a migrant; expats are able to differentiate themselves as a "different kind of migrant", as a migrant is "...expected to stay, while an expatriate is expected to return to their home country" (Fechter, Walsh, 2012; Cranston, 2017).

In general, the term tends to refer to "European or North American nationals who move abroad, mostly for work-related reasons, including to countries which were former colonies" (Fechter, Walsh, 2012). Yet, expatriates tend to be viewed as "...elite, educated, privileged and very mobile professionals who reside somewhere on the host-guest continuum between native and tourist..." (Norum, 2013; Cohen, 1977). On the one hand, expats generally do not learn the local, host countries language. They also have rather limited experiences of the host country's culture, and as such do not tend to socialize as much with local citizens (Balzani, Besnier, 2022). To cope with the strangeness of being in a new country, but aware of their temporality, expats are driven to create their own systems that isolate them from their local host community →

→ (Cohen, 1977). These systems are often referred to as “expat bubbles” (i.e. Mayberry, 2017).

Inadvertently, when defining the term expat, the role of race plays a large role in how this group of migrants is viewed. The above-mentioned factor of job seeking means that social scientists have focused on the ‘western’ migrant, and as such, can be seen “...performing a white identity” (Cranston, 2017). The importance of race, namely that of expats being associated with whiteness and privilege, needs to be addressed in more detail, and therefore will be the subject of the ensuing section, as it is closely tied to colonialism.

It is also important to note that expats themselves are not part of a homogenous group. With globalisation, and more people seeking jobs internationally without being “sponsored” by a company, hierarchies exist within this group as well. Jobs that can be considered “lesser-skilled”, such as non-managerial position in service industries such as fitness, beauty, spas, or even teaching positions, create situations where expats are living on “local pay” abroad (Fechter, Walsh, 2012).

Looking at the history of the term “expat”, as noted in the article by (Fechter, Walsh, 2012). many forms of current migration are a direct result of colonialism, and expats are no exception to this. Understanding how this group came to define themselves as expats is connected with colonialism.

In this colonial context, the people, in coming into contact with their local, colonial governments, considered themselves not as ‘tourists’, but as locals, creating the need to differentiate themselves from other migrant groups. However, these were primarily white, privileged men, who were sent abroad. The chapter then continues in stating that if one were to look at the history of where expatriates originated, one should look specifically to maritime port towns, which were economic hubs for colonial powers (Fechter, Walsh, 2012). Expats under colonialism were able to use this term to define themselves against the ‘other’: the local, the tourist, as well as the other migrant groups (Fechter, Walsh, 2012).

An expat is therefore someone who is defined by their temporality, their privileged status, and tends to be of European or Northern American nationality. Expats differentiate themselves from other migrants due to their privileged status from other minority migrants. At the same time, this isolation means that when they do interact with the locals, they can appear to act as tourists. The question there-in lies as to how the term expatriate is changing, and has changed, as well as how it is perceived and used in our current world. The above section did not consider the role of gender, either in connection to the colonial history of expatriates nor to their definition. Studies have been conducted on this aspect of expatriates (i.e. Fechter, Walsh, 2012). However, it is beyond the scope of this essay to look at this in further detail here. Given the above theoretical summary of the term, this essay would like to suggest that it is time to acknowledge that a wider definition of this label is needed, to encompass people who are of a different ethnic, social, and economic status (MacLeod, 2021). However, due to the connotations associated with the word, not everyone is wanting to use this term, as will be seen below.

4. Expats in the Czech Republic: being confronted with the “Wall of Czechness”

For the purposes of this study, rather interestingly, authors found that even in a country like the Czech Republic, who was never colonised nor a coloniser, Facebook is filled with groups called “Expats in Prague”, or “Women Expats in Prague”, etc. It is at this point authors would like to incorporate some of the findings from the research, conducted with expats in the Czech Republic. In interviews conducted, when asked how they label themselves here in the Czech Republic, many of the women had an issue with the term ‘expat’.

In the beginning it is necessary to add a brief note about the methodology of the research conducted. The focus has primarily been on semi-

structured interviews, each about an hour long, with expat women. The reason for doing the research with primarily women was due to the ease in which to find respondents: the closed Facebook group “Expat Women in Prague” is considered a safe space, where women can vent their problems, ask for advice on living in the Czech Republic, or ask for help regarding other, usually more private “women” matters. The following subchapter will focus primarily on the role of language, and how it influences the experience of living in the city. Tied to this is also the positionality of the respondents regarding the label “expat”, many of the women did not want to be considered expats, but rather as “foreigners”, or “migrants”. The following section will then address more specifically expats use of spaces in Prague.

4.1 Language

Q: So, do you think there's this expat bubble that's been created? Even like, for yourself? So you sort of want to stick with expats?

S: Oh yeah, for sure. Because we feel much very different from Czechs...

Q: Why?

S: Language thing, I think? Well for me it's not a problem...

Q: Yeah, because you speak Czech?

S: Yeah but look, maybe it would be different but because my husband speaks just English, we communicate mostly with the people who speak English. And since a lot of Czech's don't do, we are separated from them (personal communication, 15 July 2021)

The above was a conversation I had with S (all the names here and below are shortened to keep respondents anonymous), a Russian native who has lived in the Czech Republic for the past 12 years. She came here for her university studies, which she in fact did do in Czech. As such, it was interesting to hear her take on how, despite speaking the language, she felt like it is a factor that separates her from the locals. This same sentiment was echoed

in a conversation with another respondent, K who also happens to be Russian. Having moved here with her whole family when starting her university studies, she felt that:

K: Like this is what happens to me in the Czech Republic. I speak fluently Czech, I have like no problem speaking it, but still, doesn't matter how good my Czech is, people still would ask oh, I think I can hear an accent, so you are actually not from here, where are you coming from? This is, every, especially when I was studying this was like an ongoing discussion, every new person I met... (personal communication, 15 July 2021)

In other cases, where the ladies themselves have not yet learnt the language, they often time feel the frustration when getting into situations in which they cannot communicate. In the case of T, who works for an international company where she conducts most of her work in English, she was telling me her frustration when her Czech colleagues speak Czech between each other, leading to feelings of frustration, even though it is against company rules to speak Czech in the office.

Not knowing the language can also be a barrier in one's personal life. T was telling me about how she would like to officially take Czech language lessons so she could do her driving license here. M, on the other hand, was telling me about an incident which left her in the hospital in Brno for two weeks, where she was dependent on Google translate to communicate with the nurses. Google translate was not however a good enough source everyday Czech phrases, and she ended up feeling confused, and rather embarrassed.

External circumstances, such as a Czech partner or wanting Czech residency, can lead to a person needing to have at least a basic grasp of the language (though having a Czech partner can also mean foregoing the language exam, as seen above). Therefore, in some ways an expat woman does not need the language to get around and function in the city, as pointed out by X, having foreign friends and working for an international company means staying in an “expat bubble”. However, learning

→ the language can be a useful tool for integrating into Czech society.

Some respondents presented the perception that language is not necessarily needed to live in the Prague. However, on the other hand, a number of respondents perceived not knowing the language as frustrating and “not having a voice”. The level of difficulty of the language makes it hard to learn it, but without learning it, expats can feel excluded from Czech society. This was presented in several ways when talking to respondents.

In one case, the use of the Czech language in the workplace was brought up, where there appears to be a divide between the international and Czech departments. In one conversation I had at an expat women bowling event hosted by the Girl Gone International group, a woman from Bulgaria mentioned that her Czech colleagues are quite “cold”, and that whenever they were in the company’s kitchen she would greet them with a typical “hello” without receiving a response. However, when she started saying the Czech “ahoj”, she broke through some of that aforementioned metaphorical wall and received a “ahoj” back, though not much else. She was surprised that when greeting in English, she was met with no response, but in Czech she would at least have some sort of response, though it did not initiate a deeper interaction with her Czech colleagues. X also mentioned that most of her interactions with Czech people is within the workplace, where despite the official language being English, some of her Czech co-worker’s do not respect this, and speak Czech amongst themselves.

And yeah, and also like the work I will say in the workplace, that is more culture shock come from because I usually interact with Czech people inside a workspace. [...]. I don’t know whether it’s just a one extreme example, or just this group of people. But it’s quite often they gossip in front of you using Czech. And then you can catch some words, and they’re talking about you. And it’s super rude. And also I feel like not being respected and not too international here. It is the international standard, you

speak in English and it’s a workplace guys. So, this thing, I find it super weird.

X, personal communication, 15. 01. 2023

This adds to their feeling that one is excluded in the country they are living in and creates a feel of ‘otherness’ for expats in Prague.

Another space where the language barrier was seen as an issue in administrative settings, such as visits to the foreign police, the immigration office, a visit to the doctor, the post office, or when attempting to get a driving license. The frustration over these situations was often brought up in the Expat Women in Prague Facebook group (a closed group where women can ask questions or share experiences), whereby women were asking for Czech speakers to accompany them to these official visits. Tanja also depicted the desire to learn the language, so that in situations, like at the post office, she could rely on herself, instead of feeling confused.

[...] I think it’s generally I have a feeling I need to improve really my Czech because I need to do paperwork sometimes, and I’m not comfortable, or, like in the post office they’re asking some questions [using a] word which I don’t know, and then I’m a bit confused, so, maybe just for my more comfortable life [...]

T, personal communication, 09. 09. 2021

These examples demonstrate that the feeling of needing the language, despite not speaking it, can make expat women feel like outsiders, unable to communicate in the local language, and, as depicted in the above two quotes, leaving expats feeling judged, confused, and unable to communicate their needs clearly. The inability of speaking Czech, among expat women, thus creates a feeling of “being limited” because they do not know the language and therefore cannot communicate clearly.

4.2 Differences within the expat groups

It was mentioned in the previous section that it is also important to remember that an expat group should not be considered a homogenous group.

Inadvertently, when defining the term expat, the role of race plays a large role in how this group of migrants is viewed. The above-mentioned factor of job seeking means that social scientists have focused on the ‘western’ migrant, and as such, can be seen “...performing a white identity”. The importance of race, namely that of expats being associated with whiteness and privilege, needs to be addressed in more detail, and therefore will be the subject of the ensuing section, as it is closely tied to colonialism.

Even from the ladies mentioned above, they all have very different jobs, backgrounds, and stories of how they got to the Czech Republic. Michaela, a Polish citizen who has been in Prague for five and a half years, was telling me about such an experience in her Czech language school:

Q: And umm, you mentioned the language schools.

Do you speak fluent Czech?

M: It’s not fluent, I would say it’s something around B2, so it’s...

Q: But was it easier to learn since you speak Polish, like on some level, or was it very, very different?

M: Well for sure it’s not the same when are starting learning totally new language, which you never heard before. And it’s like, totally, it’s not, if now I had to start learning English from the beginning, that would be totally different experience than learning Czech now. And, I had actually a lot of situations, especially in this school.

I remember my first lesson, I came there and I was like, in the middle of the semester, so the group knew each other already.

Q: Okay...

*M: And there was one guy from China, and he asked me where I’m from I said that I’m from Poland, and he’s like, what are you doing here? Like leave, go away, you don’t need to learn this language, and that was so, I felt really like I am teenager again in the school, in the high school, and someone is bullying me. (*laughing*, but you could tell it did hurt her)*

It is interesting here that there appears to be a dichotomy whereby there are the people from oth-

er Slavic countries versus the rest of the world. Given the “same” Slavic background, an assumption could be made that the languages are similar. *M*’s story shows how this can be presented in daily activities, where even though the person might be Slavic the languages across countries do in fact differ. Yet another foreigner, who is not himself Slavic, felt like he had a greater right to be in the class than someone who has similar roots.

Language therefore presents a key barrier between expats and locals. It can lead to feelings of frustration and isolation, and it is easier to socialise with people who understand and speak the same language as you. Within this expat group there also exists a differentiation between *where* you are from.

4.3 “Wall of Czechness”

Language therefore constitutes a rather important barrier, that expats perceive separate them from the locals. In a way, this could be considered a part of a metaphorical “wall”, which in an interview two respondents described:

K: [...], I also have some friends who live abroad, but basically yeah, I was never able to go through this wall of Czech... Czech people

G: Czechness!

K: Yeah, I wanted to say Czechness

*G: This wall of Czechness *both laugh**

K: I wanted to say that...

The “Wall of Czechness” mentioned by two respondents who were telling about their experienc-

→ es in the Czech Republic seems like an apt way to describe how expats feel that they differ from locals in the host country. The wall is constructed not just of language, but of many various elements: language barriers, legal barriers, special barriers, and most likely many more.

4.4 Addressing the label itself: using the term “expat”

When we posted into the “Expat Women in Prague group” and asked for volunteers to meet up and to talk about their experiences of being an expat in Prague, we had quite a few people reach out to us. One message really stood out to us, due to the explicit rejection of the term expat:

“Hi, I saw your post in Expat Women. The topic interests me and I would be happy to meet with you for a coffee. I should say though, that while I am not Czech, I don’t use the term “expat” to describe myself, in case that matters. Best wishes with your project! B.”

In fact, all the lady’s the authors talked to explicitly rejected the term expat. Returning back to S, who has lived in Prague for the past 12 years, has worked in various jobs, she makes it explicitly clear that she does not differentiate between being a migrant and an expat. Sasha unwraps a lot of themes in her understanding of being an expat. Firstly, she alludes to the language barrier, which has already been discussed above. Secondly, she differentiates the fact that she has Czech citizenship, and is therefore now legally Czech, as a motive for not considering herself either a migrant or an expat anymore. Before obtaining citizenship, she did not distinguish the two, and rather considered herself a migrant. Thirdly, she highlights that her view, as a non-European, differs from someone who for example is European, and this could therefore differentiate one’s view on how they use and interact with the term expat. As her husband is from a country within the European Union, she states that her husband would never call himself a migrant. And yet, if she were to see a, for example,

Ukrainian, she would automatically consider him a migrant. In this last part, she even lowered her voice a tiny bit as we were talking, as if to not be heard or offend anyone.

An important element therefore appears to be legality, and the process through which one has to go through to get into the country, which will differ widely for someone who lives within the European Union (EU), versus someone who has to deal with visa applications and the immigration office. Fechter and Walsh (2012) in their introductory chapter to expats, find that expats tend to live further away from centre, and are generally separated from locals in that they “...I live in a generic ‘anywhere’ (or nowhere) of corporate-provided suburban comforts, schools, clubs and hospitals, derisively described as the ‘expat bubble’. They are not rooted in local and historical Shanghai, in the way that a settler should be.” Even here in Prague, the spaces that are used by expats differ from that of locals. In the above quote, language therefore plays an important part as well, the neighbourhoods themselves are considered “expat” neighbourhoods, with English being the main language heard in the areas.

5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates the existence the metaphorical “wall of Czechness” that expat women perceive as separating them from locals in Prague. The factors of language barriers and interactions with local Czechs contribute significantly to these perceptions. It is important to note that not all interactions are viewed negatively; however, the sense of separation fosters an “us versus them” mentality, placing expat women in a liminal space, as conceptualized by Turner (1969). This separation helps explain why these women actively seek out and create communities with fellow expats. The respondents’ hand-drawn maps further reveal that while no exclusive “expat-only” spaces exist, the women engage with diverse areas throughout the city. This finding underscores the importance

of perceptions, as they shape interactions with one's environment (Piekut, 2013). The presence of a metaphorical divide between expats and locals influences how expat women form networks and social ties predominantly within their own community of foreign residents.

This study provides insight into a specific subset of the expat experience by focusing on independent women who live and work in Prague for an extended period, separate from familial obligations. The theoretical exploration of the term "expat" revealed its complexities and inherent distinctions within the migrant group, including associations of privilege, education, and race (Leonard, 2010; Fechter, Walsh, 2012; Polson, 2015; Kunz, 2020). These nuances were also noted by the respondents during interviews, highlighting the term's layered meaning. While many online com-

munities remain labelled as "expat" groups, this calls into question the application and implications of the term. Therefore, further research is necessary to deepen the understanding of the expat experience, particularly in regions where this topic has been underexplored. Future investigations could focus on specific subgroups, such as English teachers, job-based expats, or international students, or could involve a temporal approach by examining experiences based on the duration of stay in the host country. Moreover, expanding the focus to include men's experiences or mixed-gender groups could provide a richer, more nuanced view of place-making among expats. By emphasizing the experiences of women in Prague, this study contributes to existing literature and underscores the need for continued and diversified research into the complexities of the expat experience.

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ABSTRACT

Transnationals. Mobile professionals. Privileged migrants. Expatriates. Expats. These labels are all used to describe one set of people, a group of migrants that arguably do not receive as much attention as other migrant groups in current academic literature. Whilst much of the focus in academic literature is focused on illegal migration, it is important to note that these current studies on migration give a “...skewed notion of ‘who migrants are’, leading to rather particular and limited notions of migration processes as a whole”. In the article authors address the topic of expats and migrants living in Prague, Czech Republic. First part of the article offers an overview of who expatriates are, as well as where this group fits in the context of migration and tourist studies. Empirical part of article provides outcomes of the series of interviews with expats and migrants reflecting on their role and their place in the Czech society, the role Czech language plays in their lives.

KEYWORDS

expats; migrants; migrant studies; anthropology

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