Moving Through Social Networks: The Case of Armenian Migrants in the Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings attention to the role of social networks in the migration of asylum seekers and explores how the embeddedness of the migrants in social networks both facilitates and constrains their mobility in different phases of the migration process. It reconstructs the migration paths of eight Armenian migrant families who arrived in the Czech Republic as asylum seekers during the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century. By examining the narrated stories of the Armenian migrants it shows that social networks formed an important context for employing various migration strategies in all phases of the migration process, and that the meaning and character of migrants’ social networks changed over time. In the initial phase of decision-making about migration as well as on their journey, it was mainly weak ties of random acquaintances that played a dominant role. The position of the migrants in those networks was rather insecure. They held a little control over the information they received, but in these vulnerable situations they had to rely on their weak ties, which strongly influenced their mobility. In the arrival and settlement phases the social context of the refugee camp hindered the cultivation of social ties outside the migrants’ circle on one hand, and facilitated development of bonding ties among the migrants on the other. Bonding social networks enabled inclusion of the Armenian migrants into various social spheres especially at the beginning of the settlement process. However, the bounded character of these networks was also recognized as excluding them from access to resources of the dominant society and preventing their social mobility in later phases of their settlement. Thus, bridging networks that provide access to certain resources of the dominant society were sought.

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INTRODUCTION

A social network perspective on the study of migration has gained prominence in the past two decades among migration scholars (e.g., Brettel, 2000; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Massey, 1987; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). Social networks play an important role in understanding contemporary migration processes as the world has become increasingly interconnected in transnational social spaces or fields (Pries, 1999; Faist, 2004; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). However, migrants’ social networks are typically studied in a context other than that of forced migration (Horst, 2006; Crisp, 1999). In light of the social network perspective, forced migrants acquire some degree of agency and decision-making capacity that does not fit into the discourses of forced migration, which perceives their behaviour mainly from the determinist point of view (Crisp, 1999). However, Castles et al. (2003: 32) argue that social networks intervene in the process of formation of forced migration and that they can be vital to people who are in need of searching for safety outside their country of origin. In this paper, I bring attention to the role of social networks in the migration of asylum seekers and demonstrate how they enable as well as determine the paths of forced migrants.

I present findings of a case study of migration paths of several Armenian families who arrived in the Czech Republic as asylum seekers in the 1990s and the beginning of the second millennium. I describe how the migrants’ social networks operate in various phases of the migration process. More specifically, I deal with the ways in which the embeddedness of the migrants in social networks works in both facilitating and constraining their mobility and how the migration strategies are negotiated within those networks. By focusing the present study on this particular case, I want to first illustrate how the social networks function in various phases of the forced migration process and how their meanings are interpreted by the migrants. Thus, contrary to the structural approaches to migration that have been dominant in the migration research in Europe since the second half of the twentieth century (Brettell, 2000; Bruff, 2007), I intend to depict the migrants as agents who despite their embeddedness in a certain socio-political context develop their migration strategies in the interaction within this context. Second, most of the migration studies focus only on particular phases of the migratory process which neglects many of its aspects and, consequently, important contingencies of migrants’ agency are disregarded (Breckner, 2000; Demuth, 2000). In order to get a more complex understanding of
the migratory process, I set each of the migration phases within the context of the other phases. Finally, I want to bring attention to forced migration in the context of the transformation of the post-communist countries, as many of the Armenian migrants left the country in reaction to the profound political, security, and socio-economic changes following the dissolution of the Former Soviet Union (FSU). They arrived in the Czech Republic soon after the fall of the Iron Curtain when they experienced emerging and dynamically changing asylum and migration policies. These have developed from the initial *laissez faire* to much more restrictive practices (Baršová and Barša, 2005) following the general trend of migration policies in Europe.

**SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE MIGRATION PROCESS**

The social network approach allows insight into how migration happens and how it is perpetuated (Massey et al., 1993). According to Boyd (1989), the theoretical framework of social networks provides an alternative analytical perspective to an “oversocialized” view of migration offered by deterministic theories of social structure that portray migrants as passive agents whose migration is the sole result of macro-societal forces and “undersocialized” economic theories that view migration as driven only by individual wishes and calculations. In this perspective migration is understood as a contingent social product resulting from the interaction of both macro- and micro-level factors. The social network approach does not deny the agency of the migrants in the whole migration process but it also reflects their embeddedness in certain interactive social, political, and cultural contexts that influence their conduct.

In migration research, social networks have been conceptualized predominantly as kinship and community relations (Boyd, 1989; Massey et al., 1993; Tilly, 1990) or the so-called *strong ties* of close relationships and frequent contacts (Granovetter, 1983) that are characterized by a high degree of trust (Tilly, 2007). However, this narrow understanding of social networks neglects the importance and effectiveness of other types of social relations (Wilson in Krissman, 2005: 21) that are not based on kinship or common ethnic origin. These so-called *weak ties* (Granovetter, 1983) that one has with co-workers, neighbours, or passing acquaintances can also be important resources for the migrants.

The participation of individuals in social networks is considered a source of *social capital*. It has been defined as “the sum of resources, actual or
virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119). Portes emphasizes the ability of individuals to benefit from participation in social networks (1998: 6) and thus he points out that the gains do not come automatically and there are certain factors that play a role in the working of social networks. For example, the social position in the networks of social relations can influence the ability of individuals to benefit from participation in social networks. Hence, different categories of (potential) migrants (e.g. men and women, young and elderly) can have different opportunities to access and use social networks (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Hagan, 1998).

The research on social networks in the migration process has been criticized as too static, focusing only on their existence, operation, and persistence and neglecting their dynamic nature (see, for example, Boyd, 1989; Hagan, 1998). However, it is important to study how the character of the networks, their importance and role, as well as the migrant’s position in them changes over time. Thus, in my research, attention has been paid to these changes in various phases of the migration process. Analytically, inspired by Demuth (2000) but not following exactly his terminology and conceptualization, the migration process is divided into several mutually interlacing phases: (1) the initial phase, (2) the migrating phase – the journey, (3) the arrival phase, (4) the sojourn/settlement phase, (5) the continuation of a journey, and (6) the return phase. The migration researchers have focused on the role of social networks in various phases of the migration process. They acknowledged their importance especially during the decision-making process (Ritchey, 1976; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; Crisp, 1999) and in the arrival and settlement phase (Portes and Sesenbrenner, 1993; Hagan, 1998; Horst, 2006), but less has been written about how social networks work during the journey, continuation, and return phases. In this paper, I focus on the role and meaning of social networks over the various phases of the migration process. I separate the migration phases analytically but they must be read as interwoven and impacting each other.

The concept of social capital is often understood in a positive sense as it highlights mainly the benefits one gains from participation in the networks of social relations. While the finding that social networks provide opportunities to access desired resources and achieve certain goals is crucial, the possible limitations and constraints resulting from the
embeddedness in some types of social networks should not be disre-
garded (Portes and Sensebrenner, 1993: 1322). Thus, participation in
social networks can be interpreted as both enabling and constraining
depending on the perspective of the actors and the goals to be achieved.
In this paper, I take into account this ambivalent character of social net-
works and I especially pay attention to how their meaning is interpreted
from the perspective of the migrants.

Although social networks operate in different types of migration with
varying degrees of choice in similar ways, remarks should be made on
the specificity of social networks in forced migration movements. Social
networks can be interpreted as enabling asylum seekers and refugees to
gain some control over their life, either through the very process of emi-
gration or during the settlement process in the destination countries
(Crisp, 1999; Williams, 2006). Having the possibility of using social net-
works to find an opportunity to flee a crisis situation in a country of ori-
gin can be fatally important to forced migrants. Moreover, due to
restrictions to crossing between so-called safe and unsafe countries,
social networks can be crucial to overcoming these borders. However,
due to the emergency of the situation forced migrants are often found
in, they may have less room for verifying the information gained
through social networks or checking the trustworthiness and security of
certain types of social networks. Thus, forced migrants are more suscep-
tible to enter social networks that put them into a dependent status
and diminish the possibility of “control over their mobility”, to use
Morokvasic’s term (2004). The control over the mobility of many asy-
lum seekers and refugees nowadays can be to a greater or lesser extent
in the hands of smugglers during their journey (Koser and Pinkerton,
2002) and in hands of state officers and care providers after arrival in
the destination countries (Williams, 2006). In this paper, I consider how
different types of social networks enable or constrain the control over
mobility to be held by the migrants during the various phases of the
migration process.

MIGRANTS FROM ARMENIA TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC:
REMARKS ON A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before presenting the methodology and results of the case study, several
remarks on the historical context of migration from Armenia to the
Czech Republic should be made. The Soviet regime’s politics of territo-
rial nationhood and ethnic nationality, despite its contrary intentions,
have contributed significantly to the outburst of nationalism in the former Soviet Union in the end of the 1980s and consequently to the collapse of this political formation in 1991 (Brubaker, 2001: 233-234). Several armed conflicts emerged in the region which were severed by considerable economic, social, and political changes and socio-economic recession following the breakup of the former Soviet Union. As a result, a large part of the population was caught in a situation of constant fear and insecurity, a lack of basic products and possibilities to sustain themselves and their families, as well as a lack of prospects for the future. This was also the case for a considerable part of the Armenian population for whom these changes and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh (1988–1994), together with the consequences of the catastrophic earthquake (1988), meant the collapse of many important economic, political, and social institutions. It brought a significant deterioration of living conditions to the majority of the inhabitants and was among the main factors pushing them to leave their homes in search for safety (Dudwick, 1997; World Bank, 1996). Experts estimate that in the course of the 1990s around 1 million people left Armenia to live either temporarily or permanently abroad, most going to Russia and the Ukraine (around 80%), followed by Western European countries and the United States. Among the Central European countries, the Czech Republic and Poland were the most likely destinations and they gained importance, especially after 2000 (Dikici, 2002).

Most of the migrants from Armenia came as asylum seekers to the Czech Republic. Between 1991, when the first asylum seekers from Armenia went to the former Czechoslovakia, and July 2007, 3,320 asylum seekers from Armenia lodged their asylum application in the Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia until 1992). Asylum protection was granted to only 197 refugees from Armenia in the same period (MVČR, 2007a). Some of the migrants from Armenia whose asylum claims were rejected arranged a residence permit in the Czech Republic after a certain time spent in the country. According to the official data, 1,443 Armenian citizens lived in the Czech Republic in 2007, the majority of whom (77%) held the permanent residence permit (MVČR, 2007b). Previous research (Maroušek, 2001; Drbohlav and Dzuiová, 2007) suggests that the Armenian migrants living in the Czech Republic tend to be rather highly educated and prefer self-employment to employment – in 2007, 195 Armenian citizens were employed while 283 held a trade licence (Horáková, 2007).

For comparison, between 1993 and 2007, 81,597 asylum claims were lodged in the Czech Republic. The asylum seekers came mainly from the
Ukraine, Russian Federation (largely of Chechen nationality), Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Moldavia, Viet Nam, and Romania. International protection was granted to 2,219 refugees in the same period (MVČR, 2008). Besides Armenia, most of the refugees in the Czech Republic came from the Russian Federation (329), Belarus (292), Afghanistan (241), Romania (100), Ukraine (99), and Iraq (93) (MVČR, 2008). Many who applied for asylum in the Czech Republic (especially before its entry into the European Union in May 2004) later moved to Western European countries. They either considered the Czech Republic a transit country into Western Europe or after a prolonged and frustrating wait for a decision about their asylum claims, they realized that their chance for a positive decision by Czech authorities was negligible.

A large number of the migrants from Armenia have settled in the locality of Brno, which is the second largest city in the Czech Republic with almost 400,000 inhabitants. At the time of this research (2005-2006), more than 300 migrants from Armenia lived in Brno and its vicinity, following Prague with about 400 inhabitants from Armenia. The location of two of the residential centres for asylum seekers (Zastávka, Zbýšov) and the integration centre for recognized refugees (Zastávka) in the Brno province could be among the reasons why many later settled in Brno and its surrounding areas. The migrants, due to very long procedures of processing their asylum claims, had spent considerable periods of time in those refugee camps. Rather than envisioning a “community”, it is preferable to imagine a complex web of social networks between those refugee camps and other localities in the city of Brno and its vicinity that emerged in the 1990s and connects them to other places in the Czech Republic, Armenia, and the rest of the world.

Emigration and the experience of dispersion form an important part of the collective memory of the Armenian nation. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, new diaspora communities of thousands of Armenians fleeing the genocide of the Turkish regime were established all around the world (Redgateová, 2003). As a result the social networks of the Armenians spread around many cities and countries and can be vital to those seeking temporary refuge or new life abroad. Moreover, the collective identity of a diaspora nation can influence the perception of migration as a solution to precarious life situations and the ways in which social networks of the Armenian migrants operate. Nevertheless, unlike in other European countries, migration from Armenia to the Czech Republic before the early 1990s was rare. In the course of the 1990s several attempts to institutionalize the Armenian community were
made mainly in Prague. However, these institutions do not have a substantial impact on the life of the Armenian migrants in Brno who tend to form and use rather informal networking strategies, often organized around extended families.

The extent to which the Armenian migrants living in the Czech Republic tend to rely on social networks of extended families and compatriots in the integration process is remarkable compared to other ethno-national groups of forced migrants. Although the data and research on various groups of forced migrants in the Czech Republic and their integration strategies with respect to social networks is quite rare, the few available findings (Maroušek, 2001; Uherek et al., 2005; Drbohlav and Dzúrová, 2007) as well as my observation suggest that the Armenian migrants follow specific pattern of reconfiguration of strong social ties in the migration process. Extended families tend to relocate more widely than is the case with other major groups of forced migrants, for example, refugees from the Russian Federation (Chechnya), Belarus, or Afghanistan. Members of the extended families often support each other and transmit social networks that can facilitate their integration in a new environment. Social networks are employed in the integration strategies in the labour market, as I will show further. Previous research suggests that the Armenian migrants living in the Czech Republic tend to be rather highly educated but are inclined toward self-employment in trade rather than to employment in the field of their specialization – in 2007, 195 Armenian citizens were employed while 283 held a trade licence (Horáková, 2007). The preference for self-employment was also occasionally observed among Afghans while, for example, refugees from Belarus prefer employment which they more often find in the field of their professional qualification. More comparative research in the long-term perspective is needed to indicate to what extent strategies and patterns of integration of the migrants can be explained by migrants’ belonging to ethno-national categories and other important social divisions such as social class position, age, or gender. However, this was beyond the scope of the present study. The next section deals with the methodology of the research and allows some basic characteristics of the informants to be drawn.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative research conducted with Armenian migrants who arrived in the Czech Republic between 1993 and 2002 as
asylum seekers and have subsequently settled in the city of Brno and its vicinity. Before conducting this research in 2005 and 2006, I worked as a fieldworker in a refugee camp near the city of Brno during 2001 and 2002 when Armenian migrants formed a large part of its inhabitants. I became acquainted with some of my later informants there. While many of those refugees left for Western European countries in hope of obtaining asylum protection (as the chance of getting it in the Czech Republic was negligible at the time), others stayed despite a negative decision regarding their asylum claims. Those who settled for a longer period of time in the city of Brno and its surrounding areas often engaged in particular entrepreneurial activities, namely green-grocery retail. This was specific to the Armenian migrants who became inhabitants of Brno and its vicinity since previous ethnological research that mapped the situation of Armenian migrants in several Czech cities showed that in other cities those migrants engage in different economic activities (Maroušek, 2001). This preliminary observation was among the factors that stimulated interest in exploring their migration paths.

The case for this study are Armenian families who arrived to the territory of the Czech Republic in the period after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 until 2004 and who at the time of the research lived in the city of Brno and its vicinity. I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with 12 members of eight households of the first-generation migrants from Armenia. The interviews focused on the life story of the family with respect to migration and were conducted in Czech in which informants were fluent. The selection method was based on the snowball principle and purposeful sampling. Due to limited information about the target group, I tried to maximize the variance of the sample group by including migrant households with different lengths of stay, legal status in the Czech Republic, and economic activity. The research findings are not meant to be representative of the Armenian migrants living in Brno; however, they provide important insight into various ways in which the social networks work in different phases of the migration process and the meanings migrants attach to them.

All of my informants came to the Czech Republic as asylum seekers and thus they have all gone through the Czech asylum procedure system, either with a positive or a negative decision about their asylum claim. It is not the aim of this paper to consider the individual histories of my informants with respect to their asylum application. Their involvement in the asylum system is an important distinctive experience, both a result
of working within social networks and also their formative aspect as I shall show further.

The informants came from larger urban areas in Armenia, mostly from the capital city, Yerevan. All applied for refugee status after their arrival to the Czech Republic, however, only two families were granted asylum protection. At the time of this research, the residence status of informants ranged from the very insecure tolerance visa, through long-term/temporary residence permit to a more secure permanent residence permit. In one family all the members obtained Czech citizenship. The informants were married and, except for one childless couple, they all had two to five children who mostly lived with them at the time of the research. The household they lived in usually composed of children, parents, and in three cases also one or two grandparents. Moreover, in one household the sister-in-law and the mother-in-law of my informant were also the members of a single household. I interviewed the adult members of the family who could communicate in Czech. There were five women and seven men among the informants and their age ranged from 30 to 55. Half finished high school in Armenia, the other half have either started or completed a university degree.

In the analysis of the informants’ narratives, I was looking for types of migration strategies in various phases of the migration process that the Armenian migrants depicted and the role different types of social networks played in them. Following the interpretative methodology, I focused on the meanings migrants attached to their migration strategies. Moreover, I tried to understand described strategies as well as interpretations of them in specific socio-political, historical, as well as individual and family contexts.

SOCIAL NETWORKS OF THE ARMENIAN MIGRANTS IN THE COURSE OF THE MIGRATION PROCESS

In the following section, I discuss how the social networks of the Armenian migrants work through the phases of the migration process drawing on the analysis of the qualitative interviews and using knowledge of migration policies and practices from literature as well as my own experience as a non-governmental organization (NGO) field worker in a refugee camp. The findings are predominantly organized discussing the particular phases of the migration process, however, I do not use
separate subsections for all of the above depicted migration phases as the migration process is in reality not so straightforward. Neither are the stories of the migrants, thus the organization of the text is not always necessarily chronological. Various phases often overlap and can repeat in one migration trajectory and so I try to organize the text in such a way that it highlights a certain interconnectedness as they were discussed in the narratives of my informants.

“Initial” phase: to leave or not to leave and where to go?

Ritchey (1976) suggests that social networks work both as facilitators and constraints in the decision-making about migration. On the one hand, they facilitate migration by working as a source of information about ways of getting to the destination countries, the opportunities available there, and the vision of possible support in the initial adaptation process. On the other hand, people are embedded in a certain web of social relations and it can be difficult to withdraw from them. In the informants’ accounts on decision-making about migration, they described not only the severe socio-economic factors, the political situation, and fears connected to war situation, but also social ties to relatives, friends, and other acquaintances. Constraints on moving regarding the responsibility to care for elderly parents, which is among important social obligations in the family relations in Armenia, were often considered. However, the informants emphasized local and transnational social networks as particularly enabling, and in some cases even pressing, their migration. The social context of their lives in Armenia was described as an environment where migration was omnipresent. They faced a constant social pressure because their relatives, neighbours, and friends had been leaving which created a social atmosphere facilitating a decision to migrate. Considering migration as a strategy for survival was nothing extraordinary. According to a 1993 survey among inhabitants of the Armenian cities Yerevan, Gyumri, and Ashtarak, 70 per cent of its inhabitants expressed a desire to emigrate given the chance and 50 per cent of parents wished their children could emigrate (Pogosyan in Riddle and Buckley, 1998: 239). Thus, emigration was part of everyday life, either in reality or in thought. Mariam, a research participant who left Yerevan in 1998 with her husband and three children, expressed her thoughts about the situation: “...in Armenia only those who were invalid, old, stayed; those who had an opportunity to escape escaped; those who were in bad conditions so that they could not afford to take the journey had to stay, not that they wanted to stay but they had to stay” (female, 41 years old).
Obviously, not all who wish to emigrate are able to do it. Access to social networks is an important resource – it provides opportunities for choice about migration that people might not be able to make if they could not access the right networks (Horst, 2006). The information about destination countries, especially about stay and work opportunities, channelled to the Armenian migrants through both local and transnational networks of kinship, friendship, or random acquaintances directed them to certain destinations where they expected to find possibilities either for temporary survival or permanent livelihood. However, when looking back they perceived the character of the information they had at their disposal as very insecure, inaccurate, and often simply false. The informants described the image about the destinations and possible opportunities for living there as very blurred: “...we heard that there exists certain refugee camps in Czech and that it is possible to go there with a family and work there and at least survive. You know but it was a dark tunnel, you do not know what will happen with the whole family when you go there” (Gochar, female, 43 years old).

However limited, the information gained from social networks was the main source of knowledge about the possibilities of exile identified by the Armenian migrants. In the situation of acute crisis, when the decision about migration is to be made in a limited time period there might not be many opportunities to verify the information gained through social networks or to access knowledge through other channels. Moreover, as Koser and Pinkerton (2002) note, knowledge from social networks is more likely to be trusted by potential forced migrants than information from official institutions due to low levels of trust in formal institutions among those who were forced to flee their country of origin.

**Arrivals and disillusionments**

Narratives of unfulfilled expectations in exile were common among many of the stories told by the Armenian migrants. Informants frequently acknowledged that the information they gained from social networks and the expectations provoked by them largely departed from the reality they experienced. Ghosh (in Crisp, 1999: 6) suggests that the information potential migrants receive about a particular destination is often distorted due to exaggerated stories of migrants’ success as well as due to the information transmission process in which the story is usually magnified even further. Emil depicts the information he had at his disposal before he left his city, which was destroyed by the earthquake in 1993, and the precarious situation he faced in Germany where he went
to earn money to sustain his family that had stayed in Armenia: “...at that time they told us fairytale tales that you will get 20, 30 marks per an hour, plenty of work (...) And there? No work, no such miracles existed, you know, I spent all I had in my pocket (...) and then I saw that to be able to stay you had to go to a camp” (male, 50 years old).

Another factor that contributes to the migrants’ disillusionment can be labelled information obsolescence. This problem applies especially to the information about policies concerning foreigners, asylum seekers, and refugees in the destination states and the situation in the labour market (e.g., the availability of jobs). As Appadurai notes, in today’s ever changing world with constant shifts in needs of international capital and the needs generated by production and technology and with frequent shifts of nation-state policies on refugee populations the groups that are on the move “can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long, even if they wish to” (Appadurai, 2001: 258).

This mismatch between the information about the opportunities for living and the actual situation at the destination after their arrival was often accounted for in the narratives of the Armenian migrants: “When we were coming here they told us that everything would be alright, you know easy, the papers, you would get everything immediately, and we came here and everything was the other way around (...) Therefore we had to go to the camp...” (Armen, male, 45 years old). Armen reflects on the situation upon his arrival with his wife Mariam and three children to the Czech Republic in 1998. Due to rising unemployment it became more difficult to obtain a job there and thus also a residence permit (which is linked to a work permit) than it was in the previous years referred to by their acquaintance. Applying for asylum was then the only possibility to avoid returning to an indeterminate situation in Armenia. Furthermore, the migrants also faced frequent changes in the Czech asylum and foreigners’ legislation. Vazgen depicts the situation they faced with his wife when they arrived to the Czech Republic in 2002.

We arrived here. And there was one friend from Armenia, you know, they have been here already for a long time, they said, you must go to the camp, it will be for free, it is calm there. (...) Because all these [ Armenians] were here in the camp but at the time, when they had arrived, ten years ago, until the year 2001 the valid law was that those who were in the camp and had all the negatives (...), could apply for a work or entrepreneurship [permit] on the territory of the Czech
Republic] (...) And now this law is no longer valid and it does not apply to us anymore. And they did not know about it ... (Vazgen, male, 30 years old).

The emphasis on their original aspirations for economic self-sufficiency and the somehow incidental but also inevitable entry into the asylum procedure, which does not allow the applicant to work for the first year of this process in the Czech Republic, was a salient feature of some of the Armenian migrants’ narratives. The problem of the migrants designing their plans based on information gained from informal networks and later facing changes in the laws and socio-economic situation that were not reflected by the acquaintances has emerged in all the phases of the migration process. It points to a somehow limited character of knowledge circulating and reproducing in the networks of the migrants.

To sum up, in the initial phase, social networks worked especially as facilitators of migration as they provided migrants with the knowledge that allowed them to imagine a life in exile and the organization of the journey. On the one hand, it helped them out of the unsafe situation in Armenia; on the other hand, this information was often found to be outdated and it complicated their situation in exile. After discussing the role of social networks for Armenian migrants in the decision-making process and some consequences of the interaction between the original information gained through social networks and the socio-political reality and its changes in destination places, I shall return to the anfractuosities of the journeys of my informants.

**On the journey to Brno – and back?**

The so-called journey phase is a process when migrants leave their homes and travel to a certain destination(s), settle there, or continue on after a certain time. The end of this phase can be hardly identified since one never knows when the time comes and he or she will want to/have to move further. Although in critical situations migrants usually have a limited time to plan their movement, the journey phase can open up opportunities for evaluation of conditions and possibilities both in the place of origin and destination and the costs and risks of their journey (Castles et al., 2003: 31).

My informants’ journeys to the city of Brno and its surrounding vicinity passed in most of the cases through refugee camps in different parts of the Czech Republic and in two cases also through several places in
Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands. In the migrants’ narratives of the journey, social networks played an important role by possessing knowledge about conditions in certain destinations, details of the asylum procedures, and advice about how to get through administrative labyrinths. Thus, they influenced the direction of the migrants’ further movement. While most of the informants travelled without any institutional support, some took use of more formalized channels, for example, a tourist trip to Prague with a travel agency. Except for a few informants who followed already settled relatives or friends in the Czech Republic, the Armenian migrants’ narratives presented the final or temporarily stable place for settlement in Brno as “discovered” only on the journey. They were directed there more or less by random acquaintances they met on their migration path or they were halted by the impassability of the borders to Western Europe due to a failure of smuggling networks. I come back to Emil who depicts how he and his wife and two children who joined him in Germany got to the Czech Republic after the asylum claim in Germany was dismissed: “... and they gave us a negative answer and said: ‘you have to move’. Where shall I go? The pockets were already empty, we did not have anything, you know? And there was one Armenian, he gave me an address and he said that in Czechia camps also exist and you could move there. So we came here” (male, 50 years old).

It was noted that the Armenian migrants perceived their future after migration as very insecure due to the limited information they had at their disposal before they left their homes. Some of them used social network migration strategies to diminish the risks posed to their families by migration with very insecure prospects (Massey et al., 1993: 449). In this case, household members subsequently set out for the journey with men being the vanguards who went to seek the possibilities for migration for the rest of the household – typically women and children. In other cases the younger part of the household (a couple and children) left first and when they were sure about the convenience of the conditions in the destination they brought their elderly parents. Both the persisting problematic living situation in some regions in Armenia and the notion of a “good family” that sticks together are among the factors influencing the follow-up migration of Armenian migrants. Almost all of the families of the informants were followed by relatives – especially siblings and parents – to Brno who joined their households or formed one of their own. In one case, the informants were those who followed already settled relatives. Those who follow can benefit from the knowledge about administrative procedures, searching for a job or housing.
and getting oriented to the new social environment that their predecessors acquired even if the possibilities of support are often not as extensive as expected by the migrants.

In exile social networks also both motivate and constrain the mobility of the migrants. Although often already living in Brno for a long period of time, many of my informants expressed their desires to continue their journeys. Frustrations about physical separation from social networks of relatives were among the main narratives about plans for setting up another journey in order to either return to Armenia or to move to another country. However, strong social ties were perceived not only as a motivation for return but also as its constraint. The presence of children in the family was considered as the main constraint for return by the informants. Given the inclusion of children in the Czech society, especially through the socialization in the Czech educational system and the lack of skills or disposition for living in Armenia, the informants feared that their children would not be able to survive and succeed in Armenia.

...13 years the kids studied here, now if I myself decide, take them and go back to Armenia, it will be very difficult for them there with that Czech mind (...) so a foreigner in a foreign country, it is like between two stones. He cannot decide. Here or there? He wants there, the family pulls him, but here he cannot leave the children and go. So, one still stays between two stones, wants to leave but can’t, wants to stay, but also can’t. So, the life goes on like this... (Alexander, male, 45 years old, 3 children).

Members of the networks of relatives thus may have different opportunities or constraints for choice about migration, including the return, which depends on the culturally conditioned obligations and expectations ascribed to their roles in the family. The narratives of constraints for return also considered the obligations of the parents to stay with their children and support them. This rule was perceived as culturally specific with reference to what the informants have seen as a more individualistic way of relationships between parents and children, attributed to the Czechs.

...the first two or three years I wanted to go back but now I don’t want to anymore. Because every parent takes care of his children. In our country, in Armenia, you know, we have to take care of our children until death. In our country, it is such an internal law, you know, you have such a law in your heart. I can see that my children like to be
here, they study and I am calm... (Gagik, male, 45 years old, 4 children).

To resume, the journey phase was perceived by the Armenian migrants as a highly risky enterprise with barely predictable outcomes. Their “ending” in certain destinations were thus interpreted as rather a contingent result of many factors where the social networks, especially weak ties formed on an ad hoc basis during the journey, operated as important sources of knowledge that directed the migrants to their destinations. Some of the Armenian migrants perceived their journey as unfinished as the social ties pulled them back to the homeland. However, social networks also bound them to the exile as the obligations contained in the family relationships did not allow them to return so far. Thus, some of the migrants felt caught in a trap between here and there and were very uncertain about their future. Their frustrations question the celebratory accounts of transnational relations welcoming possibilities of having multiple identities and of disintegration of boundaries between host and home societies (e.g., Vertovec and Cohen, 1999: xvi).

After discussing the role of social networks in the course of the journey phase, I shall focus on the working of social networks in the course of settlement in the Czech Republic and Brno respectively. I discuss how migrants’ social networks are interpreted as both enabling and constraining with respect to inclusion to the Czech society.

**Arrival and settlement in Brno**

In the arrival and settlement phases an entry/rejection and inclusion/exclusion are negotiated in the interaction of the migrants and the receiving society (Demuth, 2000). However, the migrants’ position vis-à-vis the institutional structure of the receiving society is very fragile and insecure (Penninx, 2004). In this situation, social networks can be an important source of empowerment which enables migrants’ access to the resources of the receiving society. However, as I shall argue further, social networks work both as an inclusive and exclusive element, as the embeddedness of the migrants in certain networks both opens and restricts access to certain resources. In this phase, new social relationships are established and new social networks are created while “old” or persisting networks are being transformed. Some informants whose journey did not lead directly to the Czech Republic and Brno went through the arrival and settlement phase one or more times in other places.
Nevertheless, in this part of the paper, I focus only on their arrival and settlement in the Czech Republic and Brno and its vicinity.

Drawing on a quantitative survey with 30 Armenian immigrants living in Prague, Drbohlav and Dzurová (2007: 88) propose that Armenian immigrants in the Czech Republic show a “clear assimilation strategy within Czech society in various areas of life.” However, an in-depth inquiry suggests a more nuanced picture of the settlement patterns of the Armenian migrants living outside the capital city. While many of the Armenian migrants living in Brno perceived their settlement and inclusion in their new homes as quite successful after all, others have been struggling with various barriers preventing their inclusion. Moreover, the long view focusing on the process rather than the state of adaptation of the Armenian migrants reveals that the settlement path has not been straightforward. Rather, it unfolds a complexity of factors that interact and operate in both facilitating and impeding their social inclusion over the various phases of the settlement process. The next section focuses on the establishment and process of social networks in the settlement of the Armenian migrants in Brno.

**Establishing new social networks: opportunities and limitations of a refugee camp**

Before scrutinizing how the social networks work in the process of arrival and settlement in the destination community, I shall first outline how they are established in the new environment. The Armenian migrants who came to the city of Brno and its vicinity in the beginning of the 1990s were among the first Armenians living here and there has not been any established community organization of Armenians. Although most informants knew someone in the Czech Republic before their arrival, it turned out that they could not rely on significant support from those friends or acquaintances in adapting to the new environment. Most of the Armenian migrants recognized that the possibility of receiving help with finding jobs or housing, which they had expected either from earlier migrants from Armenia or Czechs whom they knew in advance, was rather limited. Thus, building new social ties was an important strategy for enhancing their social capital.

The so-called refugee camps, that is, the reception and residential centres for asylum seekers, where the asylum seekers from Armenia stayed after lodging their asylum claim, is an important social context for the formation of social networks. Asylum seekers in the Czech Republic are
obliged to stay in a reception centre until identification and first interview are conducted which takes up to one month. Afterwards, they wait for the decision about their asylum claim in a residential centre or if they have enough resources they can live on their own. The waiting period was totally unpredictable when informants went through the asylum procedure. Most of them stayed in the asylum centres for several months and years before they were able to rent their own living space outside the camp.

What was specific about the social context of the refugee camp with respect to the building of social networks? On the one hand, it is a segregated space which provides its inhabitants with limited opportunities for establishing new social ties with a variety of social actors and thus inclusion into diverse social spheres. On the other hand, it is a space of intensive social interaction with a limited range of people facing similar situations and problems which makes this environment conducive to the formation of the so-called bounded solidarity (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993) or bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). Here, it is important to note that most of the informants lived in the refugee camp (mainly Zastávka near the city of Brno) when asylum seekers from Armenia formed a large part of its inhabitants in certain periods during the 1990s and the beginning of 2000. Thus, in the beginning of their stay in the Czech Republic the refugee camp facilitated the formation of social networks within the circle of the Armenians; however, it also hindered the cultivation of networks of relationships outside this environment. Only after having lived in the refugee camp for a long period, but especially after the migrants had left it after several months or years, they entered other social environments that could provide them with more opportunities to broaden their social networks. Work places and living spaces were typically depicted as locations where bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) was formed. However, depending on the character of these contexts, different opportunities and constraints for access to resources facilitating their inclusion into structures of dominant society emerged.

Migrants’ social networks: both inclusive and exclusive elements

With respect to social inclusion into the Czech society, the newly established networks among Armenian migrants worked in various ways. Foremost, in the narratives of the informants, social networks were interpreted as providing access to specific knowledge that was considered important for their inclusion into the receiving society, including, for example, how to get a job or obtain a residence permit.
...in that camp there were some people from our country who had come already a month before us, who already spoke some words [in Czech], we asked them how they had searched for a flat through the advertisements, or where had they worked, those who worked asked this person, this Czech, to look for something for us, some flat... (Alexandr, male, 54 years old).

Alexandr depicts not only the strategy of accessing knowledge, but also identifies types of social actors who provide access to desired resources. In the narratives of the informants, these actors were predominantly the members of the dominant society who could nevertheless be reached predominantly through other Armenians who had already managed to establish trustful ties with them. Migrants’ social networks were thus also interpreted as providing access to the members of dominant society. They were difficult to reach directly as the informants reflected on the lack of trust they have experienced in dealing with the Czechs. The Czechs were depicted as those who were able to mediate a job or rent a flat since they, unlike the Armenians, have been recognized as trustworthy by the providers. Armen explains how he was able to rent a shop for the green-grocery retail that he runs together with his wife: “...through an Armenian, he knew that Czech and through her (...) we met the owner and we settled it. Without her, the Czech would probably not have given it to me. When some Czech says that this person is decent, good then the owner is fine, you know, that you do not cheat or such things...” (Armen, male, 45 years old). In this respect migrants’ social networks were interpreted as enabling, facilitating inclusion into the structures of the dominant society. They worked as bridges that connect them to the members of the dominant society who possess the desired resources and allowed their participation in different social spheres of the receiving society.

However, migrants’ social networks were at the same time interpreted as constraining, excluding them from the participation in the structures of dominant society. The embeddedness in migrants’ social networks and lack of opportunities to access other types of networks was perceived as a barrier for inclusion by the Armenians. As Hagan (1998) points out, the social context in which the migrants live has a significant influence on their inclusion since from the long-term perspective it is important whether the social context facilitates or hinders cultivation of networks of relationships outside the immigrant community. For example, Armen and Mariam, a middle-aged couple with three children, reflected on both the positive and negative sides of their living in a sanctuary house in
Brno where they moved after their asylum claim was rejected and they had to leave the refugee camp. Most of the inhabitants of the sanctuary house were also Armenian migrants when Armen and Mariam moved in. The sanctuary is run by a local NGO and it is meant to offer migrants an opportunity for temporary housing until they are able to find their own housing. Nevertheless, Armen and Mariam had lived there for several years already. While they appreciated that they lived among their compatriots when they moved in, over time they increasingly began to perceive their living there as a constraint on their inclusion into the dominant society. The social context of the sanctuary house, analogous to the refugee camp, did not provide opportunities to establish ties outside the circle of the Armenian migrants that could facilitate access to certain resources: "...when you live in a normal house with the Czechs, you have totally different opportunities, other friends (...) you talk to some, you talk to others, thus you learn something here, something there and you will integrate more easily in such an environment, I would say..." (Mariam, female, 41 years). Another couple with four children, Gagik and Anna, who obtained asylum protection after several years of waiting, had already lived in a refugee centre for six years without a stable job and habitation at the time of the research.

Furthermore, the ambivalent character of migrants’ social networks was recognized especially with respect to inclusion into the economic sphere. In the initial period of their stay in the Czech Republic, especially while living in refugee camps, the Armenian migrants took every opportunity to work both regularly or irregularly in the secondary labour market. Short-term jobs on construction sites, on fields during harvest, or in factories were often mediated through social networks that were considered the most fertile source of job opportunities. However, many of the informants noted that they also searched jobs on their own due to lack of vital social networks. These were established gradually and led most of them to entrepreneurship, an alternative to low-paid and insecure work in the secondary labour market. Although a few have found stable employment, entrepreneurship was the predominant pattern of economic incorporation of the Armenian migrants in Brno. Emil comments on an upward mobility of the Armenian migrants in Brno who arrived to the Czech Republic in the early 1990s: “All begun at construction sites. Twenty crowns per hour of work. Then, slowly, slowly they had improved, left the camp, rented flats... Now few of those who immigrated at that year [1993] remained at the construction site, all are in business, all do such better jobs, you know (male, 50 years old, running a grocery store with his wife “helping” him informally).
As mentioned above, most of the Armenian migrants living in Brno and its surroundings run their own business, especially green-grocery stores and kiosks. Drbohlav and Dzúrová (2007) note that Armenian migrants are overrepresented in entrepreneurship activities in the Czech Republic compared to migrants from some other countries. Although the entrepreneurship activity is quite widespread among migrants in the Czech Republic because of the structural and legislative factors – it is rather easy to acquire a trading licence which then facilitates obtaining a residence permit in the Czech Republic while getting an employment position and permit is much more complicated (Hofírek and Nekorjak, 2007) – the business activity is also reproduced among the Armenian migrants through their social networks that work in both an inclusive and exclusive way.

Rindoks et al. (2006) summarize various functions of social networks in migrants’ economic activities. They can provide financial resources, lower costs of business operation, facilitate cooperation, disseminate information, and make hiring of employees more effective (Rindoks et al., 2006: 18). Social networks facilitated Armenian migrants’ entrepreneurship activities in several ways. According to the informants, dissemination of information through migrants’ social networks were the most important factors enabling their businesses. Those who run small stores acknowledged their inspiration and support for this activity with other Armenian migrants living in Brno who provided them with the knowledge necessary for starting their own business in an unfamiliar environment. Moreover, a store site, so difficult to obtain according to the informants, was passed on to the newcomers who were looking for one to start new entrepreneurship from Armenians who arrived before them. Other functions of social networks were also observed but they were limited to extended (transnational) family networks predominantly. These include diminishing the costs and risks of their businesses by engaging family members without employment contracts, financial support, and mutual cooperation in the same business.

The character of the social networks of the Armenian migrants was nevertheless also conceived as constraining their mobility on the labour market. In their narratives, some of the informants reflected on their confinement to the limited networks formed by the Armenian migrants in the work sphere. Their narrow scope prevented them from access to more desirable jobs corresponding to their qualifications. For example, Alexandr depicts his perception of the situation of the Armenian migrants in Brno:
...there are doctors or engineers or directors of factories among Armenians living here, but here, in a foreign country, they hardly find a job in their field, everywhere you need acquaintances so that everyone finds what he needs (Alexandr, male, 54 years old)

All the Armenians here sell vegetables or have stores (Armen, male, 45 years old) ... so when several Armenians do that, you can’t go to ask someone else we have to ask among ours (Mariam, female, 41 years old).

Thus, migrants’ social networks can be interpreted as both enabling and constraining with respect to social inclusion into the host society depending on the goals migrants want to achieve. This ambivalence was recognized by the migrants especially from the long-term perspective. While in the beginning of their stay in exile they acknowledged the enabling potential of migrants’ social networks, later on they recognized their embeddedness in these social networks as a barrier for their inclusion into structures of the dominant society. They stressed the importance of building bridging social networks with the members of the dominant society that were interpreted as not only enabling them to reach desired resources but also yielded feelings of belonging to their place in exile.

During the settlement phase, it was important for the Armenian migrants not to stay isolated from their previously existing social networks in Armenia or other places even though the maintenance of social relationships was limited due to its high economic costs. As I have mentioned above these continuing ties were perceived as a source of strain by some of the migrants who voiced uncertainty about where their future life should be located. Moreover, most of the migrants have been involved in some form of socio-economic support over the borders, especially with the relatives who stayed in Armenia. While the transnational theories often accentuate the flow of support from the migrants to the relatives who have “stayed behind” (Massey, 1998; Vertovec, 2001) in the case of some Armenian migrants living in Brno the support flowed in both directions depending on the possibilities of both sides. Those who proclaimed that they initially counted on staying abroad for a short time just to overcome the acute crisis in Armenia had often kept their property in their place of origin. In poor periods of their settlement in Brno they asked their relatives in Armenia to sell their property and send them the money gained from the sale which enabled them, for example, to start their business in Brno. Due to a limited amount of social benefits allocated to the asylum seekers by the Czech authorities, unless they had
a long-term, stable job the informants were hardly able to send remittances to their relatives in Armenia. As one informant explained to me, the Armenian migrants often found themselves in a difficult position: on the one hand there were the expectations of transnational support by the relatives who stayed in Armenia, reinforced by the images of wealth and welfare assigned to “Europe,” on the other hand there was a rather modest welfare support to the asylum seekers by the Czech authorities and obstacles to earn money by legal work. Emil explains why he started to work immediately after coming to the refugee camp even without a work permit as many others also did: “...back home, there is the family who thinks that since you are abroad in Europe (...) that here the money falls from the sky, they expect you to help them... (male, 50 years old).

To summarize, during the settlement phase, the Armenian migrants considered social networks very important for their inclusion into the structures of the dominant society. In the early phase of their settlement, weak ties formed on a situational basis (refugee camp), mainly within the circle of the Armenian migrants, were very vital for their orientation in the unknown environment. However, the bounded character of these networks turned out to be rather constraining especially in the later phases of their settlement and, thus, bridging networks that provide access to certain resources of the dominant society were sought. Transnational social networks of strong ties provided socio-economic support for some of the forced migrants, for others they yielded expectations that were hard to fulfil especially soon after arrival in the refugee camps in the Czech Republic.

CONCLUSION

The social networks of the Armenian migrants formed an important context for employing various migration strategies in all the phases of the migration process. In the precarious situations they faced in their places of origin, on their travel to destination countries, and during their settlement in the Czech Republic different types of social networks opened up certain possibilities for choice on the one hand and constrained access to desired resources and outcomes on the other hand. Over the various phases of the migration process different types of social networks were employed. In the initial phase of decision-making about migration as well as on their journey, mainly weak ties of random acquaintances and friends played a dominant role and the position of the migrants in those networks was rather insecure. They held a little
control over the information they received but in these vulnerable situations they had no other choice than to rely on them and so it strongly influenced their mobility. In the arrival and settlement phases, the social context of the refugee camp hindered the cultivation of social ties outside the migrants’ circle on the one hand and facilitated development of bonding ties among the migrants on the other hand. Bonding social capital, that is, social networks of compatriots enabled inclusion of the Armenian migrants into various social spheres especially at the beginning of the settlement process. However, the bounded character of these networks eventually started to be perceived also as excluding them from access to resources of the dominant society, thus preventing their social mobility in later phases of their settlement.

The findings suggest an enormous complexity of social networks through which forced migrants move and their limited ability to exercise control over their mobility that is often directed by social networks. Migrants’ social networks both facilitate and constrain their mobility and thus future research should devote more attention to the context within which social networks of the migrants are established and employed. It can also provide an important reflection of how the design of state policies in different domains and the ways they are put into practice influence the opportunities and constraints for migrants’ mobility and inclusion. For example, protracted staying in bounded institutions such as refugee camps may significantly hamper the capacity of the migrants to develop particular social networks that can be vital for their inclusion into the dominant structures of the receiving society.

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NOTES

1. The statistics were obtained from the Ministry of Interior (http://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/mezinarodni-ochrana-983545.aspx) and from the
Directorate of Aliens Police of Brno and Brno Province (e-mail communication). They include only inhabitants with Armenian citizenship, not Armenian refugees or migrants who already acquired Czech citizenship. Between 2001 and 2006, 153 Armenian citizens acquired Czech citizenship (ČSÚ, 2006).

2. Two Armenian community organizations (one of them not existing anymore), two print magazines (Orer, Nairi – last issues released in 2005-2006), and an Armenian Saturday School were established during the 1990s. An unsuccessful effort was made to establish the Armenian Apostolic Church that is considered a fundamental institution of Armenian diaspora by the Armenians.

3. I have noticed that Belarusian and Chechenyan migrants are often reluctant to form and maintain close social ties with their compatriots. Suspicion that anyone can be a potential spy of the political regime they have fled and that their relatives in the countries of origin might be threatened by what they say and do in exile make some of them very careful in establishing social networks with their compatriots. However, I have not observed such mistrust among the Armenian migrants whom I have studied. This might partly explain the differences in formation and employing of social networks of compatriots among these groups; however, more research would be needed to confirm this speculation.

4. The household usually composed of children (in one case without children), parents, and in three cases also grandparents. Moreover, in one household the sister-in-law and the mother-in-law of my informant were also members of a single household. Not all of the members of the household were present during the interview.

5. The expression of going to the camp is actually a metaphor of entering the asylum procedure.

6. A decision about a refusal of the asylum claim (remark by the author).

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