

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FOURTH WAVE OF RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MIGRATION TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC: TRANSNATIONAL APPROACHES, BELONGING, AND IDENTITY STRATEGIES

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Abstract: This study focuses on the internal transformations of identity and belonging within the Russian-speaking migrant community in the Czech Republic, with particular emphasis on the case of the vocal ensemble “Russian Soul.” Drawing on theoretical frameworks of transnationalism (Basch, Glick Schiller, Blanc 1994), mobile identity (Vertovec 2009), translocational positionality (Anthias 2006), and hybrid subjectivity (Hall 1995), the author explores how everyday cultural practices, internal competition, and external political conditions shape identity strategies in a migration context.

Methodologically, the article adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining analysis of online communication, a questionnaire survey with 61 respondents, and autoethnographic observation within a cultural collective founded by the researcher herself. This design allows for the identification of subtle shifts in systems of loyalty, symbolic boundaries, and mechanisms of cultural capitalisation that often remain overlooked.

Special attention is given to the fragmentation of the ensemble as a symptom of broader diasporic dynamics – where collective belonging gives way to individual positioning strategies. The case illustrates how culture can shift from a vehicle of solidarity to a space of negotiation, and how identity becomes a flexible resource under conditions of institutional uncertainty. This article contributes to the study of Russian-speaking migration in Central Europe by offering empirical insight into the everyday identity dynamics of small cultural initiatives.

Keywords: *transnationalism, cultural identity, Russian-speaking diaspora, migration, belonging, hybridity, vocal ensemble, autoethnography.*

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Introduction: Migration and the Transnational Paradigm

The Russian minority in the Czech Republic occupies a particularly complex and ambivalent position as a result of recent geopolitical developments – above all, the Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. On the one hand, it constitutes a historically rooted and culturally active segment of Czech society; on the other hand, it is increasingly perceived through the lens of political conflict, which significantly shapes both its public image and everyday experience. This study attempts a careful and sensitive analysis of the past decades of this community’s life, taking into account its historical trajectory, transnational ties, and transformations of cultural identity in the context of broader societal change.

In this research, I use the term *Russians* to denote a diverse group of people who have been living long-term or permanently in the Czech Republic and who identify with the Russian language, cultural heritage, and identity – regardless of their current citizenship. This usage follows the concept of “Czech Russians” introduced by historian Ivan Savický in relation to interwar emigration from the former Russian Empire (Savický 1999).

According to current data from the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ 2024), individuals with citizenship from Russian-speaking countries constitute one of the largest foreign-origin populations in the Czech Republic – after Slovaks, Ukrainians, and Vietnamese. It is important to note, however, that the ČSÚ does not track Russian-speaking residents as a distinct category. Despite this, there remains a lack of in-depth analyses of this group’s integration strategies, cultural embeddedness, and everyday experiences within a transnational context. To understand the present situation of Russian-speaking migrants, it is essential to place their presence within the historical framework of Russian immigration to Central Europe. Historically, migration from the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation can be divided into

several waves, with the first and fourth waves having the most significant impact on the Czech context.

The first wave, following the 1917 revolution and the subsequent civil war, consisted primarily of pre-revolutionary intellectuals, military officers, and political opponents of the Bolshevik regime. Many of these émigrés found refuge in interwar Czechoslovakia, where President Tomáš G. Masaryk supported the “Russian Aid Action,” which enabled them to continue their educational and cultural work (Savický 1999; Polian 2003). The second wave, occurring from 1945 to 1947, included prisoners of war, members of the Russian Liberation Army, and others who found themselves outside the USSR’s territory.

The third wave, linked to the post-1960 normalisation period, involved emigration by members of the cultural and academic elite from the Soviet Union. While Czechoslovakia, as a member of the Eastern Bloc, was not the primary destination for these migrants, some individuals arrived through personal connections—particularly international marriages—as confirmed by recent ethnographic studies (Zavorotchenko & Šulc 2021; Drbohlav 2010; Přidalová 2018).

The fourth migration wave, which emerged after the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s, was driven primarily by economic and educational factors. This wave is marked by a high level of social and professional diversity. According to Drbohlav (2010) and Sládek (2014), its participants demonstrate strong integration capabilities while maintaining their cultural and linguistic identity.

In the current context of the 2020s, however, the position of Russian-speaking migrants has undergone a profound transformation following the Russian Federation’s military invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This event not only exacerbated social tensions and triggered manifestations of Russophobia but also initiated a new wave of emigration from Russia, which some authors refer to as the fifth migration wave (Inozemtsev 2023). This wave is characterised primarily by people fleeing mobilisation and seeking a safer environment for life and work.

This study is also shaped by the author’s personal experience—I moved to the Czech Republic in 2009 from the city of Samara (Russian Federation). In 2017, I founded the vocal ensemble Russian Soul, which brings together members of the Russian minority in Prague. The internal dynamics of the ensemble, along with tensions caused by external political developments, served as an impetus for a deeper exploration of the cultural and social aspects of this community’s musical life from the perspective of music anthropology. In the

spirit of Clifford's (1988) concept of "insider research," the author's personal involvement allows for a more sensitive understanding of the complex identity structures within the studied group. Being aware of the potential risks related to the lack of analytical distance, I rely on a reflexive research approach and techniques of methodological distancing, as formulated by Warren (2000) and Hirschauer & Amann (1997).

Aim of the Study

The aim of this article is to identify and analyse the specific features of the fourth wave of Russian-speaking migration to the Czech Republic through the concepts of transnationalism, identity, and belonging. Particular emphasis is placed on cultural practices and integration strategies within the community, with a vocal ensemble serving as a case study of a cultural institution operating within a diasporic field. This research is part of a long-term ethnomusicological study of the "Prague Musical Worlds" (Jurková 2014).

Theoretical Framework: Transnationalism, Belonging, and Hybrid Identity

This study is grounded in the paradigm of transnationalism, which in recent decades has become one of the key approaches to the study of migration and diasporic communities. The concept of "transmigrants," introduced by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Christine Blanc-Saltsman (1994), refers to migrants who maintain regular contact with their country of origin even after resettlement—whether through communication with relatives, political engagement, cultural practices, or economic ties. These actors do not operate within a binary opposition between the "old" and "new" country but live and act "here and there" simultaneously, thereby challenging the traditional notion of identity as being bound to a single national space.

Transnationalism as a theoretical framework for migration and identity began to significantly evolve in the 1990s. In this context, Stuart Hall (1995) introduced the concept of hybrid identity, describing contemporary individuals as "translators" who navigate between various cultural frameworks, linguistic systems, and historical experiences. These actors do not enter into a single, stable identity but instead construct fluid and contextually conditioned forms of self-identification.

The concept is further expanded by Appadurai (1996) through his idea of “diasporic public spheres” and by Floya Anthias (2006) with the concept of “translocations,” where belonging is shaped across geographical, cultural, and social dimensions. Guibernau (2013) emphasises the emotional dimension of belonging as a bond to a group or place under conditions of fragmentation and uncertainty.

In the empirical part of this study, the above-mentioned concepts are used as analytical tools to interpret the experiences of Russian-speaking migrants of the fourth wave of immigration to the Czech Republic. The analysis of the vocal ensemble as a case study demonstrates how identities and forms of belonging are transformed in response to the social context, the media image of “Russians in the Czech Republic,” and the current geopolitical situation.

Methodology

This study draws on three different sources of data, providing a comprehensive view of the Russian-speaking minority in the Czech Republic. The first source consisted of long-term observation of online platforms (Telegram, Facebook, etc.) where Russian-speaking migrants actively interact. This online ethnography made it possible to capture language styles, communication patterns, and cultural preferences within the Russian-speaking community.

The second source was data collected through a questionnaire survey conducted between 2022 and 2024, distributed both electronically and in person within the broader community. The questionnaire included a total of 14 questions (13 closed-ended and one open-ended) and focused on respondents’ attitudes toward integration, belonging, language identity, and the perception of “home.” The sample consisted of 61 respondents out of 92 approached and was constructed according to the principle of theoretical sampling, common in qualitative anthropology. The criteria for inclusion were: long-term residence in the Czech Republic (at least 10 years), active engagement in public or community life, and the ability to reflect on one’s own cultural identity. The reluctance of some individuals (25 people) to participate in the research was likely influenced by the tense socio-political situation following 2022.

The open-ended questionnaire responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis. A coding framework was gradually developed, which included main thematic categories such as “belonging,” “language practices,” “relationship to home,” and “discrimination.” Each response was coded

through two independent readings, and the interpretative notes were then compared.

The coding process combined both inductive and deductive approaches: the main thematic categories were defined in advance based on the theoretical framework (transnationalism, hybrid identity, diasporic networks), while subcategories and nuances emerged directly from the data. As part of the triangulation process, these findings were compared with data from ethnographic observation and online discussion groups.

The integration of various data sources was carried out using a thematic matrix, in which respondents' statements, observed practices, and digital interactions were linked within a single analytical unit. This method made it possible to capture deeper structures of meaning and behavioural patterns across different data sets.

The third data source was my close social circle, composed of members of the vocal ensemble *Ruská duše* ("Russian Soul"), which I founded in 2017 and with whom I maintained long-term, intensive contact. This ensemble represents a specific diasporic institution, whose functioning provides valuable material for analysing cultural identity and mechanisms of belonging. Data was collected through long-term participant observation, informal interviews, and the ensemble's internal documents. The analysis focused on transformations of identity, group dynamics, and the relationship to the geopolitical context.

The ethical and reflexive dimensions of the research were essential. The author acknowledges her position as an "insider" (Clifford 1988) and the risks associated with it—particularly the potential loss of analytical distance. Therefore, methodological tools of estrangement (Hirschauer & Amann, 1997) were employed, including the use of a research diary, regular consultations with external experts, and data triangulation.

The research placed strong emphasis on protecting participants and their privacy. Respondents were informed in advance that their answers would be used for academic purposes and gave explicit consent. All personal data in the questionnaire survey was anonymised, and participants' names were encrypted. In the case of members of the vocal ensemble *Ruská duše* ("Russian Soul"), all names have been changed in the text to preserve their identities and the confidentiality of shared information.

The following section presents an analysis of empirical findings with an emphasis on transnational practices, hybrid identity, and institutional involvement within the Russian-speaking community in the Czech Republic.

Key Characteristics of the Fourth Wave of Russian-Speaking Migration to the Czech Republic

The fourth wave of emigration from the Russian Federation to the Czech Republic has been analysed by numerous scholars, including D. Drbohlav (1999, 2001, 2010), M. Čepelák (2010), K. Sládek (2014), D. Bittnerová and M. Moravcová (2010, 2019), M. Moravcová (2023), and I. Zavorotčenko and I. Šulcová (2021), as well as O. Shevchenko and S. Lozovjuk (2022). These works help to outline the key social, cultural, and political features of migration to the Czech Republic within the broader Russian-speaking diaspora.

Socio-Educational Profile of Migrants

Many studies on migration to the Czech Republic note that migrants often come from larger cities and possess higher or specialised secondary education. They typically possess significant cultural and professional capital, which enables them to navigate the new social environment more effectively. The literature also highlights their capacity for social navigation and adaptation—that is, the ability to move between different cultural norms and institutions, adjust their behaviour and language to the new context, while simultaneously preserving their own cultural identity (Drbohlav; Zavorotchenko & Šulcová; Bittnerová; Čepelák).

Ethno-Cultural Diversity

Russian-speaking migrants of the fourth wave do not constitute an ethnically homogeneous group. Alongside ethnic Russians, the group includes Tatars, Jews, Mordvins, Chuvash, Armenians, and others. Bittnerová and Moravcová (2012) propose the term “Russian-speaking migrants” as a more accurate label that reflects a shared linguistic and cultural code.

Reasons for Choosing the Czech Republic

The choice of the Czech Republic is associated with its cultural proximity, strong educational system, accessible immigration infrastructure, and stable social conditions. Kopecká (2013) emphasises the growing number of Russian students, while Drbohlav (2010) highlights the importance of this migration stream in terms of its demographic and educational contribution.

Transnational Ties and Digital Mobilit

The active involvement of Russian-speaking migrants in transnational networks, as documented in research focused on the post-Soviet space (e.g., Shevchenko and Lozovjuk 2022), can be interpreted through broader theoretical concepts of transnationalism (Vertovec 2009; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). While these authors do not focus specifically on post-Soviet migration, their analytical frameworks make it possible to understand the dynamics of simultaneous affiliation with multiple social and cultural spaces.

Political Motivation and Vulnerability

Since 2012, and especially after 2022, there has been a rise in politically motivated departures from the Russian Federation. Various analyses and observations point to increasing repression against anti-war activists, including those already living abroad. In the Czech Republic, groups such as the Prague Anti-War Committee are active in this context.

Discrimination and Public Perception

Since 2022, there has been a notable rise in anti-Russian sentiment, partially rooted in the collective memory of the 1968 invasion (Drbohlav 2001). This has led to discrimination, particularly in schools, where migrant children face stigmatisation (according to data from my questionnaire survey).

The Dilemma Between Integration and Remigration

Some migrants are considering re-emigrating to other European countries or to the Caucasus. Levitt (2001) refers to this phenomenon as “secondary transnationalism”—dynamic mobility within the global Russian-speaking diaspora.

A high level of social competence, networking activity, and political sensitivity thus characterises the fourth wave of Russian-speaking migration to the Czech Republic. My research seeks to complement existing knowledge by analysing everyday practices and forms of identity from a transnational perspective.

The Transnational Experience of Russian-speaking Migrants in the Czech Republic: Empirical Observations

Data collected during my field research in 2023–2024 indicate that a significant portion of fourth-wave Russian-speaking migrants in the Czech Republic live under conditions of what can be termed a “dual home,” maintaining property

and active connections both in the Czech Republic and in their country of origin. All respondents reported participating in the cultural life of both settings, following news in two languages, and engaging actively in both local communities in the Czech Republic as well as in digital diasporic networks. Approximately 10% of respondents stated that they regularly travel between the two countries.

This lifestyle corresponds with the concept of “transmigrants” introduced by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Saltsman (1994), who highlight that transmigrants not only cross borders but also actively participate in the social and institutional structures of both host and home societies.

A key aspect identified in my survey was linguistic flexibility. Many respondents— particularly young people and professionals—use at least two languages, Russian and Czech, in their daily lives, and English in their professional environments. This reflects a hybrid linguistic and cultural identity, aligning with Stuart Hall’s (1995) concept of multiple literacies and the migrant’s ability to “translate” across cultural codes.

Digital engagement also emerged as a salient feature of the transnational experience. Survey participants and interviewees actively communicate through diasporic online platforms: Facebook groups, local forums, and professional or thematic communities. These environments serve multiple purposes, from facilitating social adaptation to providing alternative support networks and avenues for political expression.

This form of digital participation relates to the concept of “diasporic public spheres” (Appadurai 1996), where migrants construct cultural belonging beyond the framework of the nation-state by using global channels of communication and meaning-making.

The theme of liminality—an in-between or borderline experience—also appeared repeatedly in interviews. One respondent expressed it as follows: “It’s like we’re always in between: no longer quite at home and not yet quite here.” These observations align well with the theoretical framework of the transnational subject (Clifford 1997; Ong 1999), who lives at the intersection of norms, identities, and politics.

Empirical Observations: Identity and Belonging

As mentioned above, data from my mixed-methods research show that a considerable portion of respondents live in conditions of so-called “dual home,” and that approximately 10% of respondents stated that they regularly move

between the two countries, thereby creating a stable cultural and familial space.

Their identity can thus not be reduced to a binary “Russian–Czech” opposition. Respondents freely combine, for example, the celebration of Orthodox holidays with participation in Czech cultural events, and engage actively in both Russian-speaking and local communities. Such practices reflect a flexible, multilayered sense of belonging.

This complexity and fluidity of belonging was particularly evident in the case of the vocal ensemble Ruská duše (“Russian Soul”), which split into two groups in 2024 over differing understandings of cultural identity and strategies of public representation. In response to the political context and the requirements of an international folklore festival, one part of the ensemble adopted a new name (referred to in the text as the Polonina ensemble) and performed at the festival under the Czech flag, since Russian affiliation was not welcomed. Nevertheless, their repertoire remained largely original, Russian, and targeted at a Russian-speaking audience, illustrating the pragmatic choice of symbols and the adaptive nature of public identity. The other part of the group chose to retain its original name and mission, but also participated in the mentioned festival.

The respondents’ linguistic practices further reflect hybridity: in everyday life, younger generations and professionals actively use Russian, Czech, and English. This multilingualism serves not only as a tool of communication but also as an expression of their capacity for cultural navigation.

To interpret these observations, I draw on established theoretical approaches. According to Montserrat Guibernau (2013), belonging is an affective bond to a group or place that provides stability under conditions of uncertainty and social fragmentation. Floya Anthias (2006) adds that under global conditions of inequality, so-called “translocations” emerge. These are dynamic linkages between different spatial, cultural, and social contexts that allow us to understand migrants as agents of multilayered and processual identities, rather than as static members of national communities. Such translocational connections also appeared in my research.

In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah (1996) describes belonging as a temporally and spatially conditioned, multi-level process that relates partially to ethnic or national anchoring but primarily to the dynamics of everyday relationships that transcend cultural and geographic boundaries. This approach helps to explain the practices of my respondents, who create networks of affiliation across

both diasporic and local environments. Arjun Appadurai's (1996) approach to "diasporic public spheres" further explains the role of digital platforms as spaces for identity formation beyond the framework of the nation-state.

The materials from my research thus show that belonging in a transnational space is not fixed. It is shaped through everyday practice, under the influence of political conditions, personal experiences, and institutional settings. This type of "hybrid belonging" requires analysis as a dynamic and multilayered process, confirming the relevance of transnational theoretical approaches to analysing contemporary migration phenomena.

Main Results of the Questionnaire Survey

This chapter presents the empirical findings based on a questionnaire survey conducted between 2022 and 2024 among members of the fourth wave of Russian-speaking migration in the Czech Republic. The research assumes that even long-settled migrants maintain complex relationships with both their country of origin and the host society, and their lives unfold within transnational fields (Levitt – Glick Schiller 2004).

The data collection was designed to capture not only the basic demographic characteristics of the respondents but also their attitudes toward integration, cultural belonging, language competence, and institutional ties. The questionnaire survey was complemented by ethnographic notes, long-term participation in selected community activities, and biographical insights, which allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of the data. This section of the work analyses individual thematic areas with an emphasis on the plurality of migration experiences and the dynamics of identity negotiations.

Family Migration and Ethnic Self-Identification

72% of respondents stated that they migrated together with family members. This indicates that migration is perceived as a collective life project. Regarding ethnic identification, 98% of respondents identified as Russian, while 2% reported another or mixed origin (e.g., Tatar or Jewish), which points to a high degree of ethnocultural consolidation despite long-term residence outside their country of origin.

Education, Employment, and Level of Integration

Respondents demonstrated a high level of education: only one person had vocational secondary education, while three held a PhD degree. This supports

previous studies (Drbohlav 2010; Kopecká 2013) highlighting the specificity of the fourth wave as highly qualified.

Most respondents are professionally active—either employed or self-employed. Women outside the labour market are economically secured through their husbands' income. The subjective perception of integration varies considerably: approximately 30% of respondents consider themselves fully integrated, 10% as minimally integrated, and the remaining respondents as somewhere in between.

It is important to note that language and cultural codes play a more significant role than formal ethnicity. Russian remains the primary means of communication, even among respondents with a high level of integration.

Language Competence

No respondent rated their Czech language proficiency at zero; 30% reported basic knowledge (2–3 points on a five-point scale), while another 30% declared advanced proficiency (5 points), including the ability to communicate in writing. This trend can be interpreted as a result of growing awareness of the importance of language for social mobility and daily participation in the host society.

Transnationalism and Future Plans

80% of respondents expressed an intention to remain permanently in the Czech Republic. The remaining 20% are divided between individuals leading a transnational life (10%) and those considering relocation (10%). These results confirm the relative stability of the migration project. Key factors maintaining ties with Russia include language, family relationships, and cultural traditions. Nevertheless, 30% of respondents reported no direct contact with their country of origin, while the rest visit Russia regularly. This diversity of practices reflects the varied forms of transnationality (Levitt – Glick Schiller 2004).

Institutional Engagement

According to my data, 30% of respondents participate in formalised associations. The absence of institutional affiliation among the remaining 70% suggests the predominance of individualised adaptation strategies and possibly a degree of distrust toward organisations as intermediaries of belonging.

Experience of Discrimination after 2022

Verbal attacks against migrants from the Russian Federation, restricted access to banking services, and heightened public suspicion became more prominent following the launch of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

General Summary

The questionnaire section of the research revealed significant internal differences within the Russian-speaking community, which is often perceived as a homogeneous group. The analysis underscores the need to move beyond simplified notions of migrants and to understand them as active agents of transnational processes, whose identity, integration, and value orientations are shaped through a complex interplay of personal, cultural, and institutional conditions.

While the data obtained through the questionnaire does not claim statistical representativeness, it suggests potential directions for further research—particularly in the areas of digital belonging, emerging forms of civic participation, and the transformation of family structures in the context of migration.

The Ensemble as a Field of Identity Contestation

Since its founding in 2017, the ensemble Ruská duše (“Russian Soul”) has operated as an independent cultural initiative, bringing together migrant women of various ages and professional backgrounds. For these women, participation in the collective represented not only creative self-expression but also the formation of a sense of belonging to a diasporic community of Russian-speaking migrants. Over time, however, the ensemble evolved from a rehearsal space into a complex arena of symbolic struggle over power, visibility, and recognition. In the following section, I will outline the key moments related to identity and belonging, with all participant names anonymised.

For an extended period, the ensemble was composed of women who identified as Russian and fully supported its mission—namely, to preserve and promote Russian cultural heritage through music—and its outward “Russian” symbolism. The arrival of new members—whom I will call Eva and Zhanna—marked the beginning of a latent fragmentation. These newcomers brought skills, ambitions, and pragmatic calculations that disrupted the informal norms established by the “old guard” (Věra, Gula, Dina). The tension between these two factions—“new” and “old”—grew in proportion to the shifting internal

balance of influence and changing external conditions. Each group interpreted the ensemble's cultural mission differently, leading to distinct identity regimes: from instrumental pragmatism to value-based principled positions.

For example, Eva openly proposed changing the ensemble's name for economic reasons—her business relied on Ukrainian clients. After 2022, Zhanna invoked the political inappropriateness of the word “Russian” in the ensemble's name. Both arguments reflected a reevaluation of identity as a strategic resource that should be adapted to circumstances. In contrast, the founder and the “core” of the ensemble regarded the name as inseparable from its mission and cultural memory—that is, as an expression of identity grounded in a long-term, non-commercial commitment.

Belonging as a Tool and a Boundary

The sense of belonging within the ensemble gradually became more conditional over time. Members remained loyal as long as participation in the collective provided emotional and social fulfilment. However, as external circumstances shifted—economic, professional, or geopolitical—belonging was increasingly perceived as a negotiable category, with group solidarity giving way to individual benefit or survival.

The case of Dina, who became economically dependent on Eva, illustrates how material conditions can transform not only individual behaviour but also power dynamics within a group. By becoming a spokesperson for a new behavioural line, Dina contributed to a shift in group dynamics: older members, previously loyal to the founder, began to defer to a new informal centre of power.

Identity Politics in a Migrant Context

The rejection of the founder's leadership by the collective during her temporary absence marked a symbolic point of no return. The ultimatum (“You may stay, but only on our terms”) represented not only a struggle for organisational control but also a redefinition of cultural orientation. The group prioritised internal comfort and easier management over artistic or identity-driven missions. This case reflects a broader trend seen in migrant communities, where cultural projects—originally intended as platforms for value-based cohesion—are transformed into spaces of strategic mobility, especially under conditions of instability and lack of institutional support (cf. Hall 1995; Ong 1999; Vertovec 2009)

Hybrid Identity and the Limits of Transnationalism

The case of Ruská duše shows that hybrid identity—as described by Stuart Hall—does not necessarily lead to synthesis, integration, or harmony. On the contrary, the crossing of cultural codes, national imaginaries, and personal strategies can reveal fault lines where previous forms of belonging lose their unifying power. In times of crisis, the central question becomes: who has the right to define collective identity, and on what grounds?

The eventual split within the ensemble and the creation of a new group (referred to here under the pseudonym Polonina) represent an act of symbolic rupture. It demonstrates that notions of culture as a neutral space cannot withstand the pressures of everyday practice. Where once there was a unified space of belonging, a new institutional form arises—with a different orientation and a new relationship to memory, naming, repertoire, and mission.

Carriers of Memory and Belonging: The Musical Practice of the Ensemble Ruská duše

The musical activity of the vocal ensemble Ruská duše (“Russian Soul”) represents a significant cultural practice through which members of the community articulate their identity, sustain collective memory, and actively participate in the public sphere. In line with the aim of this article—to analyse integration strategies and forms of belonging among the fourth wave of migration to the Czech Republic—music is not viewed as a secondary element, but as a key medium of transnational rootedness.

The ensemble’s repertoire has evolved over time. Initially, it consisted mainly of well-known Soviet-era songs—such as *Stary klion* (“The Old Maple”), *Ugloek Rossii* (“A Corner of Russia”), *Topolya* (“Poplars”), and *Moskovskaya Kadril* (“The Moscow Quadrille”)—evoking, in both performers and audiences, memories of childhood, linguistic familiarity, and a sense of shared historical experience. These songs were perceived as “sounding memory” and carried strong nostalgic and identificational potential. Later, the repertoire expanded to include folk songs, sacred music, and original compositions. One particularly significant piece was *Pchyolochka zlataya* (“Golden Little Bee”), which combines folkloric symbolism with an ironic tone, serving as a platform for reinterpreting traditional roles and values.

A qualitative shift in the ensemble's repertoire policy occurred with the arrival of new members with formal musical educations. This led to a shift in focus from external cultural presentation to a more thoughtful and in-depth approach. The ensemble became an intergenerational space where musical practices are used to transmit experience, traditions, and cultural continuity across generations.

The ensemble's performances are characterised not only by vocal delivery but also by a strong performative component—traditional costumes, stylised gestures, choreography, and explanatory commentary. In this context, the stage becomes a ritual space of cultural representation, and the concert becomes a form of cultural action rich in symbolic meanings (cf. Turner 1982). Song selection is carried out collectively, taking into account the meanings for the audience as well as the current socio-cultural context.

The audience includes both Russian-speaking migrants and members of the host society. Public reactions range from nostalgia and emotional resonance to surprise at the “authenticity” of the musical experience. For instance, during a Maslenitsa concert in 2018, audience members applauded, danced, and shouted “bravo.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, online concerts became a source of psychological support and symbolic unity during a time of isolation. Thus, musical activity fulfils not only an aesthetic function but also communicative, diplomatic, and integrative roles.

The ensemble's regular rehearsals serve not only as preparation for performances but also as a space for communication, the sharing of experiences, and mutual support. Music becomes a means of reflection and emotional self-regulation. In light of approaches in the anthropology of music (Turino 2008), Ruská duše can be seen as an example of a participatory musical practice in which aesthetics are inseparable from the social fabric of the community, collective memory, and the politics of cultural representation.

Thus, the musical practice of Ruská duše is not merely a form of cultural activity, but a medium through which identity is articulated, the community is sustained, and dialogue is carried out with a diverse audience. In this way, the ensemble functions as a cultural institution within the diasporic field—a space where music becomes simultaneously an act of belonging, a ritual of memory, and a practice of integration.

Final Reflections

This study focuses on a rarely explored aspect of the migration experience: the internal dynamics of a self-organised cultural collective in a politically sensitive and institutionally unstable environment. Using the example of Ruská duše, the research reveals less visible mechanisms of identity and belonging within the Russian-speaking migrant context. These processes are not merely the result of external pressure or the length of stay in the host country—they emerge actively in everyday interactions, in contests over symbolic and organisational control, and in economic dependencies within the diaspora itself.

This case study adds to the growing body of scholarship exploring how cultural institutions in diasporic settings function as both stabilising and destabilising forces in identity production. A key contribution lies in observing how cultural identity can become a matter of negotiation, strategic self-positioning, or even capitalisation—as demonstrated by pressures to change the ensemble’s symbolic name in response to business interests. The recorded phenomenon of the instrumental redistribution of loyalties and power within the group, due to economic and day-to-day dependencies, is also significant, illustrating how micro-social relationships can shape a community’s institutional identity.

This research shows that it is precisely in borderline, conflictual, and “crisis” situations that the contours of real relationship structures and hidden models of loyalty emerge, which would otherwise remain obscured under normal conditions. The proposed approach to analysing diasporic institutions as spaces of flexible and shifting identities offers a valuable tool for both migration research and rethinking theories of cultural belonging from a transnational perspective.

The combined use of participatory ethnography and hybrid belonging has proven fruitful in uncovering the complex and often contradictory forms of identity and social interdependence in the migration context. This methodological-theoretical synergy effectively captures cultural practices as dynamic arenas of transnational embeddedness and symbolic action.

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