

# CZECHS AND SLOVAKS IN SVALBARD: ENTANGLED MODES OF MOBILITY, PLACE, AND IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** *The article is an anthropological study of how Czech and Slovak nationals reflect on their lives, work, and explorations in Svalbard. We ask what kind of Czech and Slovak “presence” in Svalbard can be documented ethnographically, and what can we learn from people’s stories about the context in which their lives unfold. We profile four people as representing modes of relating to Svalbard (the globetrotter, the home-seeker, the pragmatist, and the sportsman), and complement this with a summary of findings distilled from the data created through various methods. Pre–COVID-19 pandemic, there were a few hundred Czechs and Slovaks who travelled to Svalbard every year, thanks to its accessibility, but also because of other reasons: research, tourism, and employment in the service industry. In line with studies contesting delineated identities such as “tourists” or “researchers”, we discuss factors resulting in practical repercussions of visiting and/or settling in Svalbard. Citizenship and residential status, type of employer and work contract, and language competence have implications regarding the living possibilities and personal rights of Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard. Mapping ethnographically the lives of these people in Svalbard confirms some findings of earlier studies on tourism, transnational identity, and lifestyle mobility. Czechs and Slovaks come to Svalbard attracted by the place’s appeal, which ranges from the Arctic environment and adventure, through tempting job opportunities, to establishing a potential “home” there. Relatively young, educated, skilled, and affluent Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard develop notions of place and identity shaped both by global processes and local specificities.*

**Keywords:** *Svalbard, Czechs, Slovaks, mobility, identity, tourism, place*

## Introduction

Svalbard is a locale that embodies numerous paradoxes of our times (Saville 2019). This Arctic archipelago is an epitome of entangled cross-scale changes (Hovelsrud et al. 2020), which are increasingly becoming crises.<sup>1</sup> It is known for warming up faster than the rest of the planet, drawing the attention of scientists (Hanssen-Bauer et al. 2019; Moreno-Ibáñez 2021), politicians (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2015–2016; Westgaard-Halle and Eskeland 2020), journalists (*BBC* 2021; Kennedy 2021), and tourists (*Deutsche Welle* 2019). In the pre–COVID-19 pandemic world, it was also an example of overheating (Eriksen 2016) as related to tourism (Saville 2019; Saville forthcoming). The industry was growing fast, changing life in the few small settlements (Hovelsrud et al. 2020; Vlachov in preparation), trying to find a way to create synergies with, rather than clash with, environmental management (Kaltenborn et al. 2020; Viken 2020), and altering human–environment relations (Kotašková forthcoming; Andersen forthcoming). Zooming into the “capital” of Svalbard – the town of Longyearbyen – issues related to escalating social inequalities and the dominating discourse of Norwegianization (Sokolíčková forthcoming) were pronounced before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the area in March 2020, and has only gotten more visible and urgent since then (Zhang et al. in preparation).

This article investigates how the lives of Czechs and Slovaks unfold in contemporary Svalbard. Anthropological fieldwork (Watson 1999) enabled us to generate data that we scrutinize to understand the ways in which our participants reflect on their mode of being in Svalbard, and on their reasons for visiting and/or settling in Svalbard. The purposes for choosing the narrow focus on Czechs and Slovaks living in or visiting Svalbard are multiple. First, the interest in the Arctic is growing globally and the Czech Republic forms a part of this trend, having recently also unsuccessfully applied for observer status on the Arctic Council (MZV 2021). Our perspective, however, is different from

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that of political scientists; the point of departure is not to argue about why any national presence in Svalbard is important (Padrtová and Trávníčková 2017) or worrisome (Pedersen 2021), but to explore what kinds of Czech and Slovak modes of being and travelling exist there.

Second, a part of the data we present in the article arose from fieldwork conducted in Svalbard by one of the authors, who at that time was an undergraduate student with a vivid interest in the locale but was limited in language competence. Using only the Czech language (and taking advantage of the compatibility with Slovak language) was a limitation in terms of skills, but it also was a positive factor regarding access to participants. Without any previous assumptions about the importance of the ventures of Czech and Slovak nationals in Svalbard, or about our own work, this article aspires to be an example of humble ethnographies (Saville 2021).

The article is structured as follows. After setting the stage and introducing the locale, a methodological section follows which is dedicated to explaining how we generated the data that serves as the basis for our analysis. We then present four ethnographically documented modes of relating to Svalbard, and complement this with an analysis of the data section. We are interested in factors that shape the lived experiences of our participants visiting or living in Svalbard, and scrutinize how their identities are formed in this process, where they collide, and how they interact with place. The pandemic is a context that turned out to be decisive both when it comes to making some issues more visible, and as a game changer *sui generis*. The last section of the article then presents a discussion of the findings and issues emerging from our research.

## **A Brief History of Svalbard and Longyearbyen**

The relatively large archipelago of more than 61,000 km<sup>2</sup> is situated between 74° to 81° north latitude, and from 10° to 35° east longitude in the Barents Sea, about halfway between northern mainland Norway and the North Pole. The territory was discovered in the late 16th century by the Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz. During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, Dutch, British, French, Russian, Danish, and Norwegian settlers inhabited the archipelago temporarily to work as sealers, whalers, trappers, and walrus hunters (Avango et al. 2011). Whaling faded out in mid-19th century, and a few decades later large coal deposits were discovered (Arlov 2003). The end of the 19th century can also be seen as the start of tourism on Svalbard (Viken 2020).

By the turn of the 19th century, Norwegian, British, and American interests in the no-man's territory started clashing (Hacquebord and Avango 2009; Avango et al. 2011). World War I created a rupture and Norway, an independent nation-state since 1905, took advantage over the powerful European countries recovering from the conflict. Norway succeeded diplomatically in drafting and signing the Spitsbergen Treaty in 1920, which came into effect in 1925 (Arlov 2020). The document, nowadays known as the Svalbard Treaty, has no analogies whatsoever; its goal was to ensure peace and environmental protection through Norwegian governance, granting citizens of countries that ratified the treaty the right to access Svalbard. It bans activities with warlike purposes and protects the rights of signatories in terms of fishing, hunting, and gaining mineral resources (Svalbard Treaty 1920).

Czechoslovakia acceded to the treaty in 1930 and Czechia, its successor state, considers itself bound to the treaty (MZV 2021), as does Slovakia. It was Norway and the Soviet Union that established the costly coal mining industry and kept it running, and during the 20th century several settlements were founded on the archipelago (Arlov 2003). Longyearbyen was one, founded in 1906 by American “cruise tourist” John Monro Longyear. Ten years later the Norwegian mining company Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (called only Store Norske since 2020) bought the town (Hovelsrud et al. 2020).

Skipping the period during which Longyearbyen was a predominantly Norwegian company town with a minimal number of international residents, seeds of major changes came with the opening of the airport there in 1975. That made the island of Spitsbergen accessible year-round and resulted in the political decision to support tourism development (Næringsdepartementet 1974–1975). In the late 1980s, tourism became a promising industry in Svalbard while the international research activities became more prominent there (Hovelsrud et al. 2020). The decade of 1980s is also the most distant point in time that some of our participants, especially those involved in scientific projects, can recollect.

Research activities started to develop systematically in the 1960s in Svalbard (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2015–2016), but it was the opening of University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS) in 1993, and its fast expansion after 2006, that changed life in Longyearbyen. In the pre-pandemic world, the website of UNIS informed that the institution accommodated almost 800 students yearly.

Since the late 1980s when the settlement had about 1,000 mostly Norwegian inhabitants (Næringsdepartementet 1990–1991), Longyearbyen has

developed into a modern town of about 2,400 residents, economically dependent on the Norwegian state as it has always been in the past, but also relying on global tourism (Vlakhov et al. forthcoming). About 35% of permanent residents who are not Norwegian citizens mostly work in the spheres of research, tourism, and related services (personal communication with an employee of the Norwegian Tax Administration Svalbard, August 2020; Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2015–2016). The offer of services such as healthcare and education is limited in Svalbard, while a social security system for Svalbard residents does not exist at all, all due to Svalbard having a lower income tax than mainland Norway. These limitations mean that the town attracts mostly young, physically fit, and employable people.

### **The Past and Present of the Czech and Slovak Presence in Svalbard – Or is There Any?**

Linking the Czechoslovak – now the Czech and Slovak – presence to Svalbard is somewhat paradoxical. People from an inland area of Central Europe have no firm geographical or historical bond to the high latitudes, even though some solitary polar adventurers were attracted by the region, such as Austro-Hungarian explorer Julius Payer (Payer 2019 [1872–1874]). Together with others, he is currently portrayed as a representative of the “Czech footprint in the Arctic” (MZV 2021, 2). Payer’s name now marks a house in Longyearbyen purchased by the University of South Bohemia in 2016 that was recently renamed the Czech Arctic Research Station. Also famous is Josef Svoboda (born 1931), a tundra botanist now living in Canada whose name is incorporated in the title of the Czech research infrastructure being recently developed in Svalbard (Czech Arctic Research Station 2020).

Czech scientific infrastructure and activities in Svalbard drew the attention of Norwegian political scientist Torbjørn Pedersen, who commented with a slightly demeaning tone on the Czech “national posturing” there:

Czech researchers from the University of South Bohemia operate what they refer to as the Czech Arctic Research Station, initially two steel containers and a flagpole sitting on the shore next to the former mining town of Pyramiden. Over the last few years, the Czech station has been expanded to include a house in Longyearbyen and a field camp in Billefjorden, all decorated with Czech flags and an explicit national affiliation (Pedersen 2021, 9).

As more people travel to Svalbard in general (from 6,000 visitors in the 1970s to more than 140,000 visitors in 2019, according to Visit Svalbard, personal communication, and Saville, forthcoming), Czechs and Slovaks are no exception. Pre-pandemic it was possible to reach the archipelago within six hours from Prague, paying about 8,000–14,000 CZK (300–540 EUR) for a round trip.

To speak about a Czech and/or Slovak community in Svalbard would be an exaggeration. While there are some pronounced minorities in Longyearbyen, such as the Thai minority (ca. 140 people; personal communication with an employee of the Norwegian Tax Administration Svalbard, August 2019) or the citizens of the Philippines (ca. 100 people; same source), Czech and Slovak residents are scant. In August 2019, there were 15 citizens from Czechia and five citizens from Slovakia in the local population registry.

While the scientific activity of people affiliated with Czech research institutions in Svalbard is being commented on, the growing influx of travellers from Central Europe (in pre-pandemic times), or the few who decide to settle down in Svalbard and become permanent residents remain unnoticed. The question remains as to what kind of presence of Czechs and Slovaks can be documented ethnographically in Svalbard, what their reasons for travelling to and/or settling in Svalbard are, and what these people's stories tell us about the multidimensional identities they develop in Svalbard. Czechs and Slovaks living in or visiting Svalbard are not a representative sample of Czech and Slovak populations in general. Their mobility is grounded in their lifestyle preferences: they are relatively young, educated, and affluent, corresponding well with the specificities of the place.

## Methodology

This article is based on anthropological fieldwork experience and data generated by two authors. Zdenka Sokolíčková spent 24 months in Longyearbyen from 2019–2021, while Eliška Soukupová visited Longyearbyen for four weeks in the summer of 2019. The four weeks of fieldwork was part of a bachelor's thesis project by Soukupová with the title (in English translation) *Czech "Arctic Explorers": Anthropology of Tourism in Svalbard in the Context of Globalization* (Soukupová 2020), conducted under the supervision of Sokolíčková.

We are drawing our analysis upon data that we created independently from each other. The results we present in this article combine our intersecting

research interests about the motivations and identities of Czech and Slovak nationals who visit Svalbard and/or live and work there. Some of the processes contributing to the accelerated speed of change in Svalbard (such as the impacts of climate change, or the growing industry of tourism) were a significant context of the fieldwork there up to spring 2020. Only Sokolíčková experienced the pandemic-related crisis in the locale in 2020/2021, and followed its impacts on the participants whose stories are narrated in the article.

Formalized research methods used during the fieldwork in Longyearbyen were semi-structured and narrative in-depth interviews, and participant observation. Soukupová also used an online questionnaire to reach out to a larger group of Czechs and Slovaks who had visited Svalbard in the past. Apart from the final set of questions asking about age, occupation, and number and length of stays in Svalbard, the interviews of Soukupová included questions about the motivation for coming and staying in Svalbard, and about the expectations, impressions, and observations regarding the impact of tourism on the place, as well as reflections over one's own engagement with the place. In the case of researchers, Soukupová asked questions regarding researcher and tourist identities. The interview guide of Sokolíčková consisted of questions regarding feelings of "home", motivation for coming and staying, and perceived changes in environment and society during the stay(s).

Our dataset includes interviews with almost all Czech and Slovak residents (excluding children) of Longyearbyen as of August 2019 (ten interviews). These people are employed in tourism (guides, bartenders, chefs, waiters, or waitresses), or they work as researchers, or technicians providing support to scientists. We also conducted interviews with 39 Czech and Slovak non-residents. The group includes 9 people who came to Svalbard primarily for a seasonal job in sectors such as research logistics, maintenance, or film production. We also interviewed 13 people who came to Svalbard on a fly-in/fly-out basis because of engagement in scientific activities (as students and researchers) and 17 people who declared their trip to Svalbard was not work-related.

We received the online questionnaire from 4 seasonal workers, 18 people involved in scientific activities, and 12 visitors to Svalbard with no work experience there. The data gathered through the questionnaire was an important complementary tool for the bachelor's thesis. Because of limited compatibility with the qualitative data that both authors gathered in person, the results of the questionnaire are presented here only in terms of statistics (e.g., age average or length of stay). In total we were in touch, personally or through email, with

83 nationals of Czechia and Slovakia who either lived or visited Svalbard in the year 2019, with the vast majority of our interlocutors (over 90%) being Czechs.

We transcribed and coded the interviews, and we analyzed them in the section “Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard: what we have learned from encounters in the field”. A crucial factor in our work was nevertheless the intense contact with our key participants, whom we met repeatedly in Svalbard, and the generosity of the people who enabled us to take part in their everyday activities, be it at work or in their free time.

The ways our own lives got entangled with other Czech and Slovak nationals we met during our fieldwork in Longyearbyen are manifold. They range from rather formal one-time meetings taking just a half an hour, through more intense encounters followed by occasional phone calls and emails, to regular contact including family time spent together and even partnership. For Soukupová it was her first fieldwork experience abroad, in an unknown but attractive location. The research was conducted under the guidance provided by Sokolíčková, but Soukupová spent most of the time in the field on her own. Sokolíčková contributed with following up on the stories of the key participants entangled in the research topic while she was living in Svalbard with her family.

Our materials thus consist of quantitative data collected though an online questionnaire (in this article used only as a statistical backdrop), formal transcribed interviews, and written and audio field notes taken after informal gatherings. But also included are elusive memories and interpretive contemplations of both authors, as related to the topics uncovered during the fieldwork. After we started to analyze our materials “on a rolling, iterative basis, shuttling back and forth from different sources over the course of the research” (James 2013, cited in Saville 2019, 577), we decided to first introduce the reader to four types of micro-universes of Czechs and Slovaks who encounter Svalbard in different modes. These narratives are inspired by Zygmunt Bauman’s (2006) types of postmodern personalities – the tourist, the flâneur, the player, and the vagabond. While Bauman discusses general postmodern archetypes, we choose to narrate the actual stories of three Svalbard residents and one non-resident. We characterize these as a globetrotter, a home-seeker, a pragmatist, and a sportsman. The choice of these characters is justified by three factors: (1) They represent different modes of interaction with Svalbard that can be documented ethnographically among Svalbard residents and visitors regardless of their country of origin; (2) They consist of individual stories and are as such unique, but we also see them as typical within the pool of our participants, meaning that



we present them as individual profiles with distinguishable common traces; 3) All four participants belong to those people that we have met repeatedly in Svalbard and stayed in touch with throughout the pandemic.

We derive the labels of globetrotter, home-seeker, pragmatist, and sportsman from the most apparent features about their engagements with Svalbard, as presented in their own narratives. In the case of the globetrotter, the most crucial aspect that came out from interviews was the aspect of constant mobility and a sort of restlessness. The home-seeker represents people who cannot “let go” and whose emotional bond with Svalbard makes them uneasy if unable to live there. The pragmatist also declares a strong affection towards the place, but their reflection over life and work in Svalbard is rational and not idealized. The driving force of the sportsman’s interest for Svalbard is the joy of physical outdoor activity in the Arctic environment. Anonymization is challenging when working in small settlements. We have sent the manuscript to the selected participants mentioned in the “Why Svalbard” sections and asked them to comment on the way we frame their statements and narrate their stories, and to give us consent, which they did, amused and flattered as they were by the article.

## **Four Modes of Encountering Svalbard**

### *Why Svalbard I: The globetrotter’s adaptability<sup>2</sup>*

Dan was a complete novice when we first met him about two months after he arrived in Longyearbyen. He is an adventure-seeker in his late twenties; he has life experience in another Nordic country and came to the idea of moving to Svalbard through an acquaintance. “When I was reading about it, it seemed to me like a unique place where you can experience a lot of extraordinary things. So I thought I’d like to try it out. We live our lives only once [laughter]”. He supposed it would be difficult to get a job here, but he was offered one instantly. One day toward the end of the dark season, his plane landed in Longyearbyen. “I realized I am not at all experienced enough to live in this environment. And that’s also what I like: I have to adapt to a completely different extreme than I am used to”. It took him a month to find his way and decide whether he wanted to stay or not. Dan felt the one-month period of adaptation to Svalbard was quite lengthy by his standards – he has been moving around the globe a lot and it

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<sup>2</sup> All information and quotes in this section come from two interviews with the author (12 March 2019 and 20 April 2020) and from later informal meetings.

never took him “that long” to get used to a place. He arrived there directly from Southeast Asia, from being in beach “mode: I was drinking from a coconut with a straw and suddenly I am here in the darkness [laughter]”.

When asked about his feelings of attachment and belonging to Svalbard, Dan chuckles: “I think I will start considering myself a local once I buy a snowmobile”. When we met again one year later, he was a proud snowmobile owner, but he still did not label himself a local. “It’s hard to tell what a local person does. [...] Since the place is governed by Norway, to know Norwegian is an important asset. [...] As long as you don’t speak Norwegian, you can’t fully be part [of the community]”. Yet he states that he “fell in love with the island and is now convinced that he wants to stay longer, although not all year round”. He also points out that what keeps him here is the nature and not “the drinking culture”. “You need to be connected to nature in order to be happy”. He was socializing with other Czechs and Slovaks a lot, but also had international friends.

Dan initially experienced how tense the housing situation was in town, both in terms of high demand and high prices, but after a while his employer offered to rent him a decent flat. “I just need a bed and a shower. [...] One of the reasons I am here is for a good salary, and I manage to save [money] on this that I can invest in quality outdoor clothes, equipment, and gaining skills”. In spring 2019, Dan thought the decisive factor would be how well he coped with polar days and nights, and the relative isolation and small size of the town. He felt that for his career it was important to speak Norwegian. In spring 2020, he confirmed that working for a large company with branches worldwide holds many doors open for him, and sticking with the company could enable him move around the polar regions. His motivation to learn Norwegian somewhat faded as he realized seasonal work in Longyearbyen does not require it. Polar day, isolation, and the size of the settlement turned out not to be a problem. For the dark season, which is the slow season for tourism, he headed south anyway.

He worked in catering services, but soon started considering becoming a guide. He worked as a shore excursion guide in the summer of 2019, taking cruise ship tourists on easy hikes around Longyearbyen. Just before the COVID-19 crisis hit Svalbard, Dan finished the basic Svalbard Guide Training Course and signed freelance contracts with two major companies in town. When the pandemic started Dan was waiting for the situation to clarify, supported by the unemployment aid that the Norwegian Work Agency provided to laid-off workers. He set himself a deadline in late May/early June 2020 to decide what

to do next. He believed many other globetrotters who were in a similar situation did the same. Leaving for good was not an option, and Dan was convinced he would be back for the high season at some point. In spring 2021, there was no job to come back to in Longyearbyen. He was frustrated by the chaotic situation in Czechia and had no concrete plans to return to Svalbard. “I will wait until it settles down a bit and then I will see”.

### *Why Svalbard II: The home-seeker’s resilience<sup>3</sup>*

Adam needed a break after his studies and came to Svalbard for a summer job. He found the nature breath-taking.

I missed the place awfully. [...] I left but my mind was still here. The next summer I thought, “I need to come back, just for a week or so, to process everything here, and then I can move on as planned”. And then the plane landed, I saw the rocks and felt like, ‘Oooh, I am home’ – it almost scared me a bit [laughter]. [...] And then when I was leaving, I was full of impressions. I had the feeling I have to formulate my thoughts somehow into one sentence that I can easily recall. Because when you land in Oslo, everything disappears. When you see the trees and the city, Svalbard is suddenly just an idea, like when you read a book but a long time ago. And what came out was that I had to move up here for sure.

Adam is highly qualified and has a university degree, but since it was not possible to find a job where he could use his expertise, he started guiding. When asked about his motivation to live here, he thinks aloud: “I have always been looking for ... I used to live in [a big European city], which I found small and boring so my plan was to move to a larger metropolis”. But when he saw the strange little town where people from 53 countries get along, he felt Longyearbyen was actually the most cosmopolitan place he’s ever lived. “Maybe I am a typical example – somebody who meets the Arctic once and can’t let it be”.

Adam stays all year round and feels that identifying with the place and considering oneself local always needs to be contextualized. Compared to seasonal workers, who arrive every year for a certain period of time, his universe seems more connected to location. But only recently he realized he needs to “synchronize his feelings” about actually settling down in Svalbard. Adam does

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<sup>3</sup> All information and quotes in this section come from an interview with the author (5 July 2019) and from later informal meetings.

not exclude the possibility that he will live on the island in ten years, but given how unstable both his job and his housing situation are, he admits planning is difficult. In his early thirties, he doubts that he can continue long-term with the same physically demanding job he has now. “But I cannot imagine moving away from here. After a long time this is the first place ... I don’t feel the need to travel anywhere else at all”. Sokolíčková: “And what makes this place so special to you?” Adam: “I don’t know. There is something about it. It’s in the middle of nowhere, but at the same time it is a focal point”. Strangely enough – according to Adam – he is very interested in what is going on in the community, which he never experienced in his earlier homes. He does not speak Norwegian and jokes about his laziness, but he realizes there is a “bubble of Norwegians” in Svalbard you never can enter without knowing the language.

Adam has focused mostly on his work, and he has not been meeting many other Czechs and Slovaks. He doesn’t feel much of a difference when meeting a Czech person compared to meeting people from other countries.

Wow, there is another Czech over there, let’s introduce each other, he is Czech, me too, and it’s always like ‘well, hi’, ‘well, hi’, and we gaze at each other like idiots for five minutes. I don’t engage in this. The Czechs I met here I did not specifically seek out, but rather I met them through an activity. [...] I live next door to the Czech research station, but I have never been there. Like what am I going to do? Just knock and say, “Hi, I’m Czech”? That idea hasn’t crossed my mind once in the three years I’ve lived here.

During an informal conversation we had at a later point, Adam corrected this statement, and said that he became more aware of and acquainted with other Czechs and Slovaks in town.

During the coronavirus lockdown in spring 2020, Adam was patient. He believed he could wait for a year or so to see what happens. He expected many people enjoy the sunny spring on the island and leave in the summer, but for the summer he planned to stay “home” in Svalbard. Throughout the year of the pandemic Adam managed to keep working despite the drastically limited numbers of tourists coming to Svalbard because of the global situation.

*Why Svalbard III: The pragmatist's immersion<sup>4</sup>*

Petr visited the archipelago for the first time in the early 2000s, left, and returned many times, eventually settling down with his international family about eight years ago. He is in his late thirties and has a stable job as a scientist.

As I always say, we are all tourists here. Just some of us for a somewhat longer time. Somebody for a few years, others for a few days, others again for a few decades. All in all there are no locals here. And I am here now because of work. [...] But of course I like Svalbard. That's why I keep coming back. [...] If I feel at home anywhere – then it's in Svalbard.

In Svalbard, Petr switches between several partially interconnected local sub-communities: the international “tribe” of researchers, the subculture of parents with small children, the small network of Czech and Slovak friends, and the people gathering around his favourite sports activity – floorball. He acknowledges there is the de facto criterion of staying for six months in a row there if you are to be considered a resident in Longyearbyen, “but it's not that easy because there are people who spend a lot of time here and still they are not part of the community. I think the language makes a difference. [...] There is a clear segregation when it comes to the Norwegians and the foreigners”. His Norwegian is fluent.

When asked about how he relates to the place and reflects on its developments, he clearly sees that if environmental consciousness is given precedence,

the easiest thing would be to move everybody away from here. Our CO<sub>2</sub> footprint per capita is higher than anywhere in the world, even higher than in Qatar. [...] But people want to live here, some are here almost as locals – not quite, but almost – and geopolitically, the Norwegians want to have something here. Maybe in 20 years, when ships will be going over the North Pole to Asia, the harbour has to be here.

When Petr speaks about Svalbard, he seems confident about having the necessary local knowledge in order to get things done and live a smooth life: “You need to know the right people”.

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<sup>4</sup> All information and quotes in this section come from an interview with the author (3 March 2019) and from later informal meetings.

When kindergartens and schools closed in March 2020 because of the pandemic, Petr left the island with his family, taking advantage of having relatives nearby, which makes childcare easier. Later that year they came back to Longyearbyen and worked mostly from home, but Petr was able to conduct some fieldwork in collaboration with the Czech Arctic Research Station. In early 2021, the family left again for a longer period, but with the intention of moving back before the school year started.

*Why Svalbard IV: The sportsman's curiosity*<sup>5</sup>

Josef is a sporty medical doctor in his sixties. He contacted us himself, opening his email with the following statement: "I am planning to visit Svalbard for the fourth time in April 2020 and every visit stirs questions in me, ever more questions and rather fewer answers. This regards all the layers of life there, from the social microclimate to the global context". We met Josef only virtually, as he was unable to participate in the (cancelled) Svalbard Ski Marathon due to the coronavirus crisis, and has stayed in irregular email contact ever since.

When applying for an amateur skiing competition in Norway several years ago, Josef saw a banner on the side of the webpage that featured a landscape he could not believe was from this planet. He remembers what he thought in that instant: "I have to visit that place". He discovered the otherworldly images were from Svalbard, and he came for his first ski marathon there in 2016. He returned twice for trips with dogs, sailing, and even balloon flights.

Every time Josef comes back, he is astonished by the cultural and natural richness of the place and community. He admires trappers and people capable of overwintering, feels that learning more about the history and political development of Svalbard is fascinating, and cannot find the right words to describe the nature he experiences in Svalbard. "I have discovered a place where I can endlessly return". He always tried to avoid snowmobiles because this means of transport "does not match the place – when people can get somewhere through a natural movement, with dogs or on skis, they should have the right to get there, but scooters are too invasive. ... That's the downside ... I don't know ... Civilization also always happily brings to remote places what eventually can ruin it all".

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<sup>5</sup> All information and quotes in this section come from an interview with the author (23 April 2020) and from later email communication.

Chatting freely about his impressions, Josef admits he was surprised how warm it can get in Svalbard in April: “I took the hardest ski wax with me, and it was melting and around zero when we arrived. That was unpleasant”.<sup>6</sup> He also adds he is not sure he has “met a real Norwegian there”. Germans and Poles guided the groups he travelled with, they were served by a Czech bartender, and toured a private museum owned by an Italian resident, and he warmly recollects having a brief chat with Mark Sabbatini, an American journalist who has been covering news about Svalbard in English for the last 12 years. He remembers one more person who caught his attention, but we could not identify together who this “robust trapper with long hair accompanied by a huge dog, hanging around in the Fruene café” was. When he sent us a picture we discovered he was talking about Olaf Storø, a well-known local Norwegian artist.

Josef is aware of the vulnerability and ambiguity of tourism, which is in fact being hit hard by the coronavirus crisis: “People live there from tourism and at the same time they go there as tourists, so to speak“. In spring 2020, he was sure of coming back in a year’s time. Yet the situation did not allow him to pay Svalbard a visit in 2021 either and, in his last email, Josef wrote:

The European winter is slowly over, the day in Svalbard becomes eternal and also many plans are being eternally lost. The dream of having a glass of polar beer in Kroa is ruined, the flight tickets and accommodation cancelled, the participation fee for the Ski Marathon transferred to 2022. We will see. [...] I wonder what kind of paradoxes arose during your research – regarding people who are disappearing and only the most resilient manage to stay.

## **Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard: What We Have Learned from Encounters in the Field**

When analyzing our ethnographic data, we were interested in understanding the extent to which the presence we mapped ethnographically (1) says anything specific about the engagement of nationals from Czechia and Slovakia with Svalbard, and (2) teaches us something about modes of exploration, life, and work in Svalbard, without any necessary link to our participants’ country of origin.

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<sup>6</sup> The organizers have been considering moving the event to the third week of April as the weather patterns in late April have recently proven to be too unpredictable.

Free access to the archipelago for citizens of the Svalbard Treaty signatory parties, plus the support of tourism and scientific activities, makes Svalbard attractive and accessible for many, Czechs and Slovaks included. In the four biographies presented above, there are hardly any traces of a strong national identity or pride, which is in line with Vlachová's (2019a) findings about the relatively low national identity and pride among younger, educated, secular, and cosmopolitan people. Instead, our participants highlight the cosmopolitan and international aspect of their life, work, and explorations in Svalbard.

Cohesion among Czechs and Slovaks living and working there does not extend beyond informal networks of friends, and also the town's population is very transient (with a turnover of 25% every year, the average length of stay is four years). Such networks and mechanisms of mutual help, thanks to language intimacy, can nevertheless be crucial in the case of an emergency. The networks work well among the nationals of both countries, as "the feelings of commonality with Slovaks [...] are based not only on the similarity of their cultures and the west Slavic languages that Czechs can understand, but also on unproblematic relations in recent history and the sharing of wider geographical and political space" (Vlachová 2019b, 64), despite the fact that "from 1918 to 1992, Czech national identity was also formed in contrast to the Slovaks and Slovakia" (Vlachová and Řeháková 2009, 255).

Our study says little in favour of the need to investigate further what it means to be "Svalbard Czech" or "Svalbard Slovak"; family life is almost inexistent and there are no formal local ethnic networks or organizations (cf. Dutkova-Cope 2003), only loose and informal small connections among Czechs and Slovaks living in Svalbard. In Longyearbyen, the unique legislation in theory enables people to disregard where they come from. Yet this is not quite the case, and we discuss below the impacts of residential and citizenship statuses in Svalbard. The facts of being or not being a resident in Svalbard, and also being or not being Norwegian (thus not specifically Czech, Slovak, or something else) have substantial implications regarding one's possibilities, rights, and obligations in Svalbard.

When Soukupová started approaching her research participants in the summer of 2019, the aim was to reach out to Czechs and Slovaks engaging with Svalbard in one way or another, without a clear focus on differences between residents versus non-residents in this regard. In fact, we worked with four interim categories of (a) residents, (b) seasonal workers, (c) scientists, and (d) tourists. We were aware the categories were only partially functional, not static



and impermeable, see Saville's (2019) discussion. There are indeed Czechs and Slovaks who came first to Svalbard as tourists, then returned for a seasonal job, and eventually stayed as residents. Scientists, too, fall into the categories of both residents and seasonal workers (such as students, or fly-in/fly-out researchers and technicians). In addition, scientific research in the Arctic sometimes includes activities perceived as straightforward scientific (e.g., sampling on glaciers) just as much as activities more related to the logistics of larger Arctic research (e.g., coordination of transport), which again could qualify as seasonal work. The categories mentioned above thus served us only as an initial tool for exploring the field.

The COVID-19 pandemic made the boundary between residents and non-residents more pronounced. In the case of our Czech and Slovak participants, according to the strict travel regulations in place by the time of this article's submission, only residents were allowed to enter Norway from abroad. They could travel further to Svalbard after a 10-day hotel quarantine on the Norwegian mainland, and presenting a negative virus test at the airport before boarding a plane heading to the High Arctic (status as of 30 March 2021). The person we name the pragmatist – being part of the local system, with a stable job and a connection to the Norwegian mainland – could travel (although with limitations) and was the least vulnerable. The home-seeker cautiously stayed in Svalbard and did their best to survive the crisis with the limited resources available. The globetrotter will not consider coming back before the chances are high enough that a pre-coronavirus lifestyle can be maintained. The sportsman has to renounce their dreams; international tourists are not expected to return to Svalbard en masse anytime soon.

Residency is thus one of the most significant factors that impacts the lives of Czechs and Slovaks in Longyearbyen during the pandemic, together with the type of employer and work contracts they have. A stable job in science and a Norwegian employer means the most security and freedom. A stable job in tourism and a Norwegian employer means limited security, yet still enough manoeuvring space for resilience. A seasonal job in tourism implies little flexibility and, even if formal residency might enable the globetrotter to return, the situation is too unpredictable and work conditions too precarious to take the risk. The sportsman, despite the wish to come back to Svalbard and support the ambiguous tourism industry economically, has no manoeuvring space whatsoever and has to accept the improbability of returning to Svalbard in the near future.

On the following pages, we first present our findings related to the residential and citizenship statuses of Czechs and Slovaks living in and visiting Svalbard, then we move on to an analysis of our data regarding their lives and identities connected to the specific place, and to hierarchies of power, before moving on to the discussion section.

### *Residents*

The majority of adult Czech and Slovak residents living in Svalbard (both in total and among our participants) were male, and their average age was 35. The motivation of the Svalbard residents to move to and stay in Svalbard were manifold, but the one mentioned most was an interesting job opportunity, sometimes accompanied by a lucrative salary. This makes Czechs and Slovaks a typical example of non-Norwegian migrants to Longyearbyen (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2015–2016). It is a group of people who have travelled a lot before and they enjoy discovering new places. A common feature was also the desire to escape a fast-paced modern lifestyles full of endless possibilities – some of them flee from the stressful need to choose among too many goods/hobbies/schools/shops/places/etc. and waste their lives commuting.

The size of the settlement is seen as positive: “This is just an aquarium, but an extremely beautiful aquarium” (personal communication with a Czech guide, 15 July 2019). Services available do not play a decisive role, but sports facilities such as a sports club or fitness centre are popular among Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard. It was often mentioned that life in Longyearbyen means you accept living in a “bubble” or a “cocoon”, and feel detached from what is happening in the outside world (e.g., as many have told us, people living in Svalbard tend to ignore news that is Svalbard irrelevant). However, the pandemic was a game changer in this respect.

Another typical motivation is the prospect of living a life closer to nature, Arctic nature and landscapes in particular. This is a common preference among Longyearbyen residents (Kaltenborn 1998; Longyearbyen Lokalstyre 2013). There are segments of the population for whom an accessible and attractive natural environment does not play a major role when considering settling down in Longyearbyen, such as migrants from Thailand (Jensen 2009), or more recently the Philippines (Sokolíčková submitted for publication). According to our experience, Czechs and Slovaks are closer in their views regarding Svalbard to Norwegians, people from Nordic countries and other Europeans such as

Germans, but a study of reasons for coming and staying among the various groupings in Longyearbyen's population has yet to be undertaken.

Several of the current Czech and Slovak residents came only to work for a few months but eventually stayed much longer. All our participants with residential status see Longyearbyen as their temporary home and they are aware of the local limitations related to life expenses, job opportunities, or services such as healthcare and education, as well as local limitations related to them being non-Norwegian. These people perceive Svalbard as an easily accessible place if choosing the High Arctic. Primarily or secondarily, they all have jobs that are available in Svalbard thanks to the high level and speed of international mobility.

### *Non-residents*

The group of seasonal workers living in Svalbard was diverse and included both people coming back repeatedly and first-time visitors. People we met were staying for various periods of time, between two weeks and six months. They worked as drivers or skippers or were part of a film team. This group was also predominantly male, with an average age of 46 years among our participants.

In the group of scientists we included senior/junior researchers and students without residential status. Most were affiliated with the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Czechia. Students who came in order to collect samples/data necessary for their research often were in Svalbard for the first time, and the length of their stay was about two to three weeks. Junior and senior researchers were often re-visiting, in some cases for their thirtieth time, and they stayed from two weeks up to three months. These participants were predominantly female, with an average age of 38 years among senior scientists and 25 years among early career scientists. Longyearbyen is rarely the place where they spend most of the time, and they often move around the island using the Czech research vessel *Clione* or they settle in Petunia Bay at the Czech research base Nostoc. When asked about their motivation to come to Svalbard, the rational interest in natural science comes first, often combined with the pull factor of accessibility in terms of transport. For the students, experience with Arctic fieldwork is an important driver.

We identified tourists as people who declared no work-related motivation to visit Svalbard, which was also determined by the fact the fieldwork took place in July when no business trips (such as company meetings, team building events, or conferences) take place in Svalbard. In 2019, 564 guest nights of Czech nationals

and 238 guest nights of Slovak nationals were registered by Visit Svalbard (personal communication with Visit Svalbard employee, 30 March 2021).<sup>7</sup>

Interviewing tourists was hectic, as they often had little time for interviews in their travel schedules; the length of their stay varied between eight hours and eight days. The camping site near the airport was a convenient place to advertise our research project with a small flyer; Czech and Slovak visitors use the camping site a lot in the summer, as it is much cheaper than accommodation facilities in town. The group we interviewed stretched across age categories, from young adults to elderly people. Our participants from the tourist group were predominantly male, with an average age of 38. A substantial number of our participants were attracted by Scandinavian/Nordic landscapes and Svalbard was a natural step on their discovery path. They were looking for adventure, extraordinary locations, and unique nature, and fitted therefore in the profile of average Svalbard visitors (Saville 2019; Viken 2006). Yet we also met people who came in order to “take a few pictures”, who “just bought cheap flight tickets” or were accompanying a partner, but otherwise being uninterested in Svalbard themselves. One participant was keen on urbex activities (exploration of manmade structures, e.g., abandoned industrial ruins). Only one person mentioned seeing a polar bear as the main attractor; the vast majority humbly admitted they would love to see one, but they were able to appreciate the beauty of the environment even without spotting the “Arctic icon”. Accessibility and good infrastructure was a key factor for choosing Svalbard.

### *Entangled lives and identities*

We argue that the national/ethnic identity does not bear major significance for our resident participants, but being non-Norwegian does play a role. Recent developments in Svalbard, e.g., the closure of the local bank or the suggestion of the Norwegian Ministry of Justice to take away voting rights from non-Norwegians who have not lived in mainland Norway for more than three years will also impact Czechs and Slovaks living in Longyearbyen. These residents’ identities are largely transnational, meaning that they have ties and interactions linking them to other people and institutions beyond the borders of a nation-state (Vertovec 1999). What is interesting about the bond to Svalbard

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<sup>7</sup> The numbers only include people who use commercial accommodation facilities during their stay, thus researchers hosted by the Czech Arctic Research Station, or people using Airbnb are not visible in the statistics.

is that it cannot be considered as a link to a nation-state; our participants seem to have a strong place identity related to Svalbard, but not always to Norway. Their transnationalism can be understood in Steven Vertovec's terms as a type of "‘diaspora consciousness’ marked by dual or multiple identifications [...] of decentred attachments, of being simultaneously ‘home away from home’" (1999, 450). Vertovec (2001, 573) further claims "many peoples' transnational networks are grounded upon the perception that they share some form of common identity, often based upon a place of origin and the cultural and linguistic traits associated with it". There exists for Czechs and Slovaks visiting and living in Svalbard a bond with their respective native countries as places where their friends and relatives live or where they can speak Czech or Slovak, alongside a bond with Svalbard. The fact that they share this multiple identification with others in Svalbard further encourages them all to connect to each other. In the case of Czechs and Slovaks living in, working in, and exploring Svalbard, we see their identity in Svalbard as defined by their affinity with Svalbard, the status of their residency there, and by being non-Norwegian (often accompanied by not mastering Norwegian language). These factors impact identities of many people in Svalbard, which helps create numerous connections and networks among transnational migrants there.

Occupational identity is another important angle of our analysis. The backdrop for our reflections of the intersecting identities of our Czech and Slovak participants is Samantha Saville's (2019) article in which she examines collisions, collaborations, and confluences of tourist and researcher identities in Svalbard. According to Saville, "the categories of 'researcher' and 'tourist' are shown to be messy, fluid, and indistinct" (574). The aim of her study is to "critically consider the boundaries between researcher and tourist identities", and to "disrupt existing knowledge hierarchies" (ibid.).

In our investigation of how Czechs and Slovaks live in, work in, and explore Svalbard, the permeability of the tourist and researcher identities was an important aspect to consider. We have seen that some of our participants engaging in scientific activities are open to such a disruption of hierarchies: "I actually don't know if it is possible to separate [being a scientist and being a tourist] at all. [...] When you go somewhere, you have a look, learn something, feel where you are" (personal communication with a junior Czech researcher, 17 July 2019). Yet others disliked even being asked about whether their motivation to come to Svalbard was exclusively job-related: "I am not a tourist, I would take that as an offence" (personal communication with a senior Czech researcher, 13

July 2019). Most of our non-resident participants we categorized as seasonal workers admitted there was a touristic aspect to their trip. Based on our field-work experience when talking to non-resident seasonal workers from other countries, we assume there are fewer collisions between seasonal worker and tourist identities. While some who identify as scientists reject identifying as (also) tourists, despite the fact “scientific endeavours in Svalbard are strongly connected to tourism activities” (Saville 2019, 577), it is a legitimate motivation for seasonal workers to visit Svalbard if they are temporarily employed in the tourist industry, construction industry, or in research logistics as technicians (e.g., in boat maintenance).

Saville explains this kind of clash between tourist and researcher identities through a hierarchy of power and status:

There is a clear hierarchy of these scientific and touristic roles in Svalbard. Natural scientists operate with high budgets, enjoy a relatively prestigious position in the public consciousness, and have social power. Conversely, tourists are generally looked down upon as nuisances by residents at least, yet are an important source of revenue all the same (2019, 580).

Our findings add another dimension to this: it is not an improbable scenario that a non-resident natural scientist becomes a resident, and gets a job either in research/education or tourism, or that a tourist returns, this time to get employed in tourism or research. The factor of residency, and the factors of type of employer and precarity stemming from the type of work contract impact the type of occupational identity, and social status, while also having practical repercussions. Saville quotes her research participant’s ruminations regarding this topic: “The worst we know about is tourists. The best is people living here. In between you have visitors” (2019, 581). There are numerous nuances in between different types of identities, and our Czech and Slovak participants experience them and bear also the consequences of diverse, fluid, and impermeable identities related to Svalbard.

As we show in the four biographies and also in the summaries of findings about residents and non-residents, the identities of Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard are to a large extent typical for particular social strata. They are predominantly young, physically fit, educated, and affluent, “flexible specialists”, as Halcrafee (2012, 213) puts it, performing “a privileged form of mobility [...] between the two poles of tourism and migration” (Janoschka and Haas 2014, 1).

This profile fits optimally the specificities of the place where, in the light of the Norwegian government's strategy, people with special physical, mental, or economic needs present (in Mary Douglas's terms) a "matter out of place" (Ree 2021; Wiersen 2021).

In addition, Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard confirm that travel, leisure, work, and migration are not distinct phenomena, but they rather overlap as they also destabilize the notions of "home" and "away" (Cohen, Duncan, and Thulemark 2015). Relative affluence and the search for a better life (Benson and O'Reilly 2009) is also a rather common trait among the Czech and Slovak lifestyle migrants that we met in the field.

## Discussion

Mapping ethnographically the modes of being and travelling of Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard confirmed some findings of earlier studies on tourism (such as tourist preferences) and identities (such as transnationalism, lifestyle mobilities, or intersections and frictions regarding researchers vs. tourists). Czechs and Slovaks living in Longyearbyen do not form a delineated community as, for example, Cohen (1985) understands the term. It rather is a loose and partially deterritorialized network of friends and acquaintances (Amit and Rapport 2002). They know about and interact with each other, but only to a certain degree as globetrotters come and leave, while home-seekers and pragmatists are more stable. People who have a job-related interest in the Svalbard's Czech research infrastructure as technicians collaborate more tightly and they meet each other in their free time, while Czechs and Slovaks employed in the catering services also are likely to be acquainted. The same is valid about guides. All these very small groupings interact in an informal manner, but they can serve as important networks in case of any sort of emergency (such as housing shortages or need of short-term work opportunities). This might also be the case about other quasi-communities in Longyearbyen, such as people of Latinx origins, people from Thailand, or the Philippines, but each of them will probably bear specific traces. Ethnicity/nationality might not be the most influential factor of socialization and attachment in Svalbard; our study shows that residential and occupational status, work conditions, social class, age, ability, and relation to place play a major role. To understand mechanisms that foster interactional patterns among non-Norwegian groups of people living in Longyearbyen, further studies are necessary.

As Czechs and Slovaks residing in Longyearbyen are rather a new phenomenon, the level of them being inserted in local power structures and community networks is varied, and in most cases limited. Norwegian language competence is perceived as key for some aspects of life in town (with raising children in Longyearbyen as a significant factor), but some might still evaluate it as superfluous. The importance of mastering the Norwegian language for non-Norwegians, and the impact its knowledge has on their life, work, and travels in Svalbard is a fruitful path to follow.

When it comes to life in Svalbard (thus beyond the settlement of Longyearbyen), Czechs and Slovaks see their ability to move around the archipelago in various ways (e.g., by snowmobile, dogsled, or boat) as an important aspect of their experience. An appreciation for Arctic nature plays a crucial role for most of them, even though some only discovered their passion for the Arctic after they settled down in Longyearbyen, being originally attracted by a job opportunity. It would be interesting to further understand differences in experiencing and appreciating Svalbard, and relevant factors including language, culture, or social class.

The factor of residency plays a major role when it comes to the actual possibilities and rights of Czech and Slovak nationals in Svalbard (and their obligations such as taxes, which we have not investigated). The crisis triggered by the pandemic made these aspects more visible (e.g., in terms of eligibility for unemployment aid or travel restrictions, or access to early vaccination). More knowledge is needed about the phenomenon of residency in Svalbard (who is a resident, why, and for how long), the legal requirements regarding permanent residence (which needs to be elsewhere than in Svalbard), and how people in precarious employment conditions manage these kinds of limitations. In our study, we have documented another dimension to the interaction of research vs. tourism identities, namely there is an hierarchy impacting lived experience, ranging from stable jobs in science through comparatively stable jobs in tourism to unstable jobs in tourism.

The sportsman – whom we never met in the field, but only on the screen – disrupts the image of Czech and Slovak tourists that emerged from data gathered during the summer season (using the cheapest accommodation facility, staying for a short time, with superficial knowledge about the destination, visiting for the first time and not planning to come back). There might be Czech and Slovak visitors who return to Svalbard, prefer to stay for a longer period, and who declare a high level of genuine interest in the place. This could be a possibility, but it remains to be established in future research.



Our data contains hints about senses of place, “an overall or global concept of how a person relates to and feels attached to a place, [...] a complex affective bond to a place of variable intensity” (Kaltenborn 1998, 173) and attachments to place declared by Czechs and Slovaks living in, working in, and exploring Svalbard. They are attracted by the place’s uniqueness, the beauty of the environment, but also by the possibilities the place offers to them, be it in terms of work, social life, or travel.

Apart from Pedersen’s (2021) succinct characterization of Czech “national posturing” in Svalbard (see above), we know little about how Czechs and Slovaks whose lives unfold for varied periods of time in Svalbard reflect on their national identity and the (geo)political significance of their activities in Svalbard, and how they are perceived in this regard by others. Our observations from the field do not extend beyond the somewhat stereotypical image of Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard as being easy-going, flexible, hardworking, skilled, and a comparatively cheap workforce.

Finally, Saville’s (2019, 2021) writings that we quote in the article are highly reflexive. She refers to herself when writing the following: “There are also similarities in tourist and researcher motivations in coming to Svalbard. All share, to some degree, a romantic affinity with the character of the modern explorer, seeking to satisfy curiosity, escape the routines of everyday life for risky adventures, and in the process test their character” (Driver 2010, in Saville 2019, 581). It would be wrong to distance our observations regarding people living in and visiting Svalbard, including ourselves, from the representation of the curious explorers looking for (among other things) adventure. Also, the identities of the writing ethnographers are multidimensional, and our motivations to visit, sense, experience, and understand people and places are mingled.

## **Conclusion**

The article displays modes of Czech and Slovak “presence” in Svalbard. Pre-coronavirus, there were likely a few hundred Czechs and Slovaks who travelled to Svalbard every year, many of them to visit without any work-related purpose, but also numerous early career and senior scientists affiliated with Czech research institutions. The small group of Czech and Slovak residents in Svalbard seeks jobs in research, tourism, and the service industry.

Through four biographies, we narrate different stories of engagement of Czechs and Slovaks with Svalbard. Our subjects enhance and enjoy the

international and cosmopolitan aspect of Svalbard, but citizenship status, residential status, language competence, and type of employment influence their lives, even more visibly during crises such as the pandemic. Through telling Czech and Slovak people's stories about their adaptability, resilience, immersion, and curiosity about Svalbard, we show different ways of inhabiting Svalbard and also different ways in which Svalbard "inhabits" people's identities. The specificities of Svalbard, such as the distinct legislation, the accessibility of the archipelago, or the Arctic environment shape the types and influx of people who come there. We have few arguments to claim that the lived experience of Czechs and Slovaks in Svalbard is coloured by their ethnic/national identity, and our data – created before and during the pandemic – shows other impacting factors. In a broader context, we see a link between the social worlds of our participants and global processes that foster transnationalism and lifestyle mobilities. More locally, we see how different positions in various hierarchies of power (e.g., language, citizenship status, residence status, social class, age, ability, work) determine the lives of Czech and Slovak residents in Svalbard. Our study also presents findings in line with previous studies on issues such as tourist preferences or interactions between tourist and researcher identities. In the post-pandemic world, whenever both scientific and tourist activities in Svalbard rebound, not everything might continue as it was before. The Norwegian government is tightening the grip both regarding conditions for non-residents travelling to Svalbard (e.g., in terms of a possibly higher tourist tax, stricter rules for renting and using guns, or limited accessibility to Svalbard's vast outdoor areas), as well as regarding the conditions for residents without Norwegian citizenship living in Svalbard (e.g., in terms of voting rights, job opportunities, or the availability of services). These factors will likely also impact Czechs and Slovaks living in Svalbard, their notions of place, and their identities.

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