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Defining transnational families across countries and time: an analysis of academic discourse on the phenomenon between 2003 and 2023

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized, digital world, the way family is conceptualized and practiced is becoming highly diversified and complex. This article investigates the evolving concept of transnational families (TNFs) and aims to elucidate the similarities and differences in how 'transnational' and 'family' are understood in the academic literature across various contexts. The study is based on an analysis of academic publications on TNF from 2003 to 2023, conducted by a multidisciplinary and multilingual team across several small and medium-sized European countries (both EU and non-EU) with diverse migration histories, family policies and family norms. The analysis reveals varying levels of interest in TNFs and diverse thematic focuses across different contexts over time. It identifies two distinct approaches to conceptualizing TNFs and notes that research continues to primarily focus on dyadic relationships, rarely delving into complex familial networks or addressing non-heteronormative family forms. This highlights the need to further reflect on the ways that globalization and superdiversity are (re)shaping traditional concepts of family and home across different contexts.

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Introduction

Transnational families (TNFs) constitute one of the salient family forms in the era of superdiversity, which have received increasing academic interest in recent decades (Baldassar et al., 2014). The growing interest follows Glick Schiller et al.'s (1992) seminal work on transnational migration, which drew attention to migrants' multisided social embeddedness. This approach challenged previous assumptions about localized lives, turning attention to migrants' diverse social practices spanning distant places. The growing number of publications on transnational migration can therefore be linked to the radically transformed scale of mobility, the development of digital technologies and

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a recognition of the importance of ‘multifaceted networks and translocal spaces created by migrants through modern modes of communication and travel’ (Van Dijk, 2002, p. 174).

The development of this paper was inspired by discussions held by a group of scholars participating in the COST Action ‘Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe’ (TraFaDy)¹ that encountered difficulties in defining transnational families in a multidisciplinary manner and in a multinational context. Despite many adhering to the definition of TNFs as families separated by distance for some or most of the time, yet connected by a sense of ‘familyhood, even across national borders’ (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 3), interpretations of what the term ‘transnational family’ means still varied (Čapo, 2023). Therefore, we decided to do a broad literature review around the conceptualization of TNF in the international literature between 2018 and 2023 (Budginaitė-Mačkinė et al., *forthcoming*). Complementary to this general overview of the literature, we did a second literature review, covering a longer period and deliberately focusing on smaller European countries that receive less attention in the international academic debates on TNFs compared to other larger ‘receiving’ (e.g. the UK, Germany) and ‘sending’ (e.g. Poland, Romania) countries.

Our multilingual, interdisciplinary team comprising researchers from sociology, psychology, anthropology and social work examined academic discourse on TNFs in six countries: Belgium, Iceland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal and Serbia. By including six small states with distinct prior migration histories, our study facilitates specific observations and comparisons, revealing similarities and differences in research on transnational families. While we support calls to (re)discover analytical tools that are ‘not coloured by the self-evidence of a world ordered into nation-states’ (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 324–325) and to use a ‘transnational lens’ for studying cross-border migration (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, p. 1002), we also recognize the need to acknowledge the differences among academic traditions in migration scholarship across countries. These differences may be related to varying levels of engagement in transnational scholarly exchanges and diverse understandings of ‘transnational’ (cf. Vertovec, 1999) and ‘family’ (cf. Trost, 1988). The variation in how TNFs are understood, pertaining to the era of superdiversity central to this Special Issue, is the focus of this article.

In selecting countries for review, we considered geographical diversity, including both EU and non-EU countries from different European regions and variations in family policies and norms, including the extent/size of family networks and functional solidarity.² This consideration was important given that intensified cross-border mobility and increased entanglement in global processes have contributed to the diversification of family structures, challenging the – in western context – common perception of the nuclear family situated in a single locality as a norm. Historically, most of the selected countries transitioned from being ‘emigration countries’ to ‘immigration countries’ at various points in time throughout the twentieth century, driven by industrialization and economic growth (e.g. Geddes et al., 2020; Skaptadóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2020). The exceptions are Lithuania, which only began attracting migrants in the last decade (EMN, 2023), and Serbia, which continues to be primarily a country of emigration.³ From the preparation of this article, all countries except Serbia had positive net migration⁴, despite differing historical migration patterns (e.g. Geddes et al., 2020) and recent fluctuations⁵ (see Figure A1 in the Appendix).

While we begin with analysing publications from authors affiliated with universities in the six selected countries, the scope of research covered extends beyond these boundaries.

As detailed in one of the subsequent sections, a significant portion of TNF research in some of the selected countries has an explicit transnational focus. However, the extent of such a transnational focus varies by country, with study of the transnational phenomena becoming a 'transnational' endeavour in some, and remaining largely a 'national' endeavour in others. Our goal is twofold: first, to identify the commonalities and divergences in the research focus between different contexts; second, to reveal the ways transnational families are conceptualized in the reviewed academic literature and reflect on the potential implications that varying levels of internationalization of scholarship on TNFs may have on academic discourses within and beyond the selected countries.

Theoretical background and research methodology

Previous reviews of academic research on transnational migration point to the unidirectional assimilationist paradigm inherent in classic migration research (Basch et al., 1994), taking rootedness in the nation state as the norm and seeing practices across national borders as 'out of the ordinary' (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, p. 1007). Furthermore, in classical family research, family is often seen as a geographically bound 'domain represented by a household' (Baldassar et al., 2014, p. 160), regarding geographical proximity as an indispensable prerequisite for caregiving. Following such understanding, migration can be seen as deviating both literally and symbolically from the sedentarism norm and leading to the fragmentation of family structures. Relationships between adults and their dependent children (often referred to as 'left behind') are commonly perceived as particularly strained by geographical separation (ibid, p. 166).

Bryceson and Vuorela's (2002) work showed how TNFs, despite being physically separated for extended period, maintain a sense of familyhood that transcends national borders. Practices to maintain this bond include digital communication, various forms of care, return visits, and/or remittances. Bryceson and Vuorela emphasized the elective character of these ties, indicating that membership is not simply determined by blood but regulated by social values. Such a way of conceptualizing families recognizes individuals' continued 'sense of collectivity and kinship' despite geographical dispersion (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 13). Hence, it contests the traditional family model as a geographically situated nuclear family and so acknowledges new ways of doing family.

There is a growing recognition that the boundaries of familial life undergo transformation over the life course (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Diversity of experiences in transnational families is also increasingly acknowledged (Bonizzoni & Boccagni, 2013). Researchers demonstrate that migration does not have to lead to a decline of support within families (Baldassar et al., 2007). Virtual forms of care and care provided effectively by extended family and other direct kin are also gaining attention (Baldassar et al., 2014). Reviews of public discourses in so-called 'countries of emigration' show that family lives that do not correspond to the 'ideal' of a nuclear family in a single household in one country archetype can be framed as 'troubling' despite the increasing diversity of family forms and practices (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018). Given these diverse normative approaches, it is relevant to examine how transnational families are conceptualized across different contexts over time to determine the level of recognition accorded to diverse family structures and practices in the context of migration.

This article draws on an analysis of academic publications on TNFs from 2003 to 2023, collected from Belgian, Icelandic, Lithuanian, Luxemburgish, Portuguese and Serbian national research databases and international academic databases. The national databases covered include FRIS research portal (Belgium/Flanders), Icelandic Research Information System (IRIS) (Iceland), eLABa (Lithuania), A-Z.LU, ORBI.LU, LISER.LU (Luxembourg), Repositórios Científicos de Acesso Aberto de Portugal (Portugal), eNAUKA (eHayka) and COBISS (Serbia). The international databases include Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus.

We collected publications on ‘transnational families’ from national databases using English and local language keywords for geographically separated families. Our search focused on peer-reviewed publications and PhD dissertations, excluding conference abstracts, reports, media articles, and MA theses. An initial search with ‘transnational famil*’ yielded significant results from Belgium (Flanders) (211), Lithuania (165), and Luxembourg (151), but fewer from Portugal (20), and minimal from Serbia (2) and Iceland (0). Given the limited results in Serbia and Iceland, we expanded our initial search terms to capture the emerging debate. In Icelandic research databases, searching with ‘transnational’ AND ‘famil*’ (instead of ‘transnational famil*’) yielded 28 results⁶, 7 of which were included in the review. In Serbian databases, adding ‘migrant famil*’ to the search terms (in addition to ‘transnational famil*’) yielded 30 publications, with 7 included in the review. These additional searches did not significantly alter the overall trend but allowed us to include the emerging discussions in these countries.

It should be noted that when reviewing the retrieved publications, we often encountered articles that, while using the term ‘transnational family’, did not define it or focus specifically on it. Consequently, we grouped the results into three categories: those articles that used the term and discussed the issue, those that implicitly focused on transnational families even if not using the concept explicitly, and those deemed irrelevant. After removing duplicates and irrelevant publications, 155 publications were included in the review from the national databases, either focusing specifically on transnational families or referring to the phenomenon while focusing on another topic. Out of these publications, 54 were retrieved from the Lithuanian national database, 48 from the Belgian (Flanders) regional database, 28 from Luxemburgish, 11 from Portuguese, 7 from Icelandic and 7 from Serbian national databases (see [Figure 1](#) below).

As a second step in data collection, we expanded our search to include the recognized international databases (WoS and Scopus). This additional data collection ensured that we did not overlook significant studies emerging in the institutions in the selected countries and allowed us to capture further relevant scholarship on transnational families of migrants moving from and/or to these countries, thereby broadening the research scope. After conducting searches using the term ‘transnational famil*’ and subsequently removing duplicates and irrelevant publications, we identified 1377 publications. A further refinement to identify publications related specifically to transnational families from and/or in the selected countries, based on searches in titles, abstracts, or author affiliations, yielded 60 publications. After removing 18 duplicates for publications which were retrieved during searches in national databases, we added 20 publications for Belgium, 14 for Portugal, 4 for Lithuania, 3 for Iceland, 1 for Luxembourg, and none for Serbia. The results of the screening process are presented in [Figure 1](#) and the total number of publications is presented in [Figure A2](#) (see Appendix).

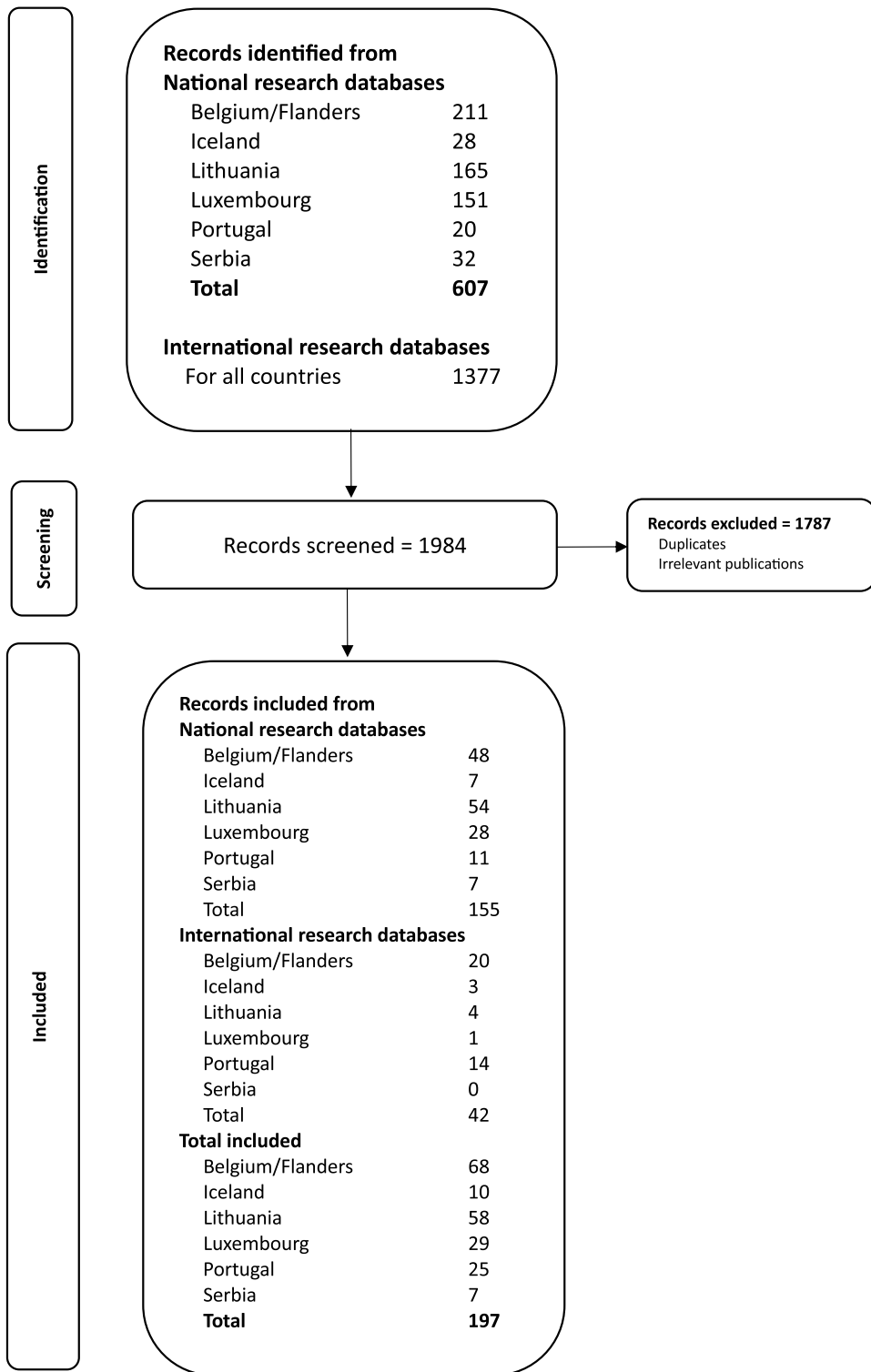


Figure 1. Flowchart of study selection process.

We used Zotero for managing and processing the bibliographic data of the identified references and utilized a shared Teams platform to code the extracted publications according to the thematic grid developed by the authors. The results of the initial analysis were summarized by each team member in the form of a short document (2–3 pages long), which served as a basis for discussing similarities and differences across countries over time. Multiple rounds of discussions were undertaken to identify both commonalities and differences and to reflect on overarching themes that encompass diverse understandings of TNFs.

We encountered several limitations during the process. National databases delivered results with varying accuracy. For instance, the Icelandic database yielded few to no results when searching for an exact phrase or keyword, even omitting articles containing the term ‘transnational family’, and the Flemish database produced varying numbers of publications with each search. It was also not always transparent which publications were included in the national databases, whether the priority was given to the source of funding or the affiliation of the authors. Some of the databases used in Luxembourg automatically integrated publications available in the international databases, which largely explains the limited additional publications found through WoS and Scopus searches. The Lithuanian national database yielded many hits, but many publications mentioned ‘transnational famil*’ only in references. Searches in the Portuguese database yielded a rather limited number of hits, but, compared to other countries, more additional publications were identified through searches in the international databases.

By complementing the searches in national (Icelandic, Lithuanian, Luxembourg, Portuguese and Serbian) and regional (Flanders/ Belgium) databases with international databases, we did not apply the exact same criteria in the same order. Considering that all publications available in national databases form part of the academic discourse in the country, searches in national databases used only keywords representing the concept of transnational families without using author(s) affiliation as a criterion for inclusion, resulting in a wider variety of affiliations. While this approach may seem a limitation of the study, it reflects the national academic context, which is internationalized to a greater or lesser extent. Searches in international databases (WoS and Scopus) first used the keyword representing the same concept in titles, abstracts and keywords only (not in the whole body of the publications), then additional keywords were applied to identify research on selected countries or by scholars from the selected countries.⁷

Our review encompasses publications from a range of disciplines and different research designs. In Serbia demography dominates, whereas in Lithuania, Portugal and Belgium, sociologists and, to a lesser extent, anthropologists and psychologists lead the research. In Iceland, research originates from anthropology, sociology, disability and education studies. In Luxembourg, TNFs are analysed within social work, political sciences, sociology, as well as educational sciences, psychology, linguistics, economics and law. Some studies in our sample examine TNFs from a historical perspective. In terms of methodological design, qualitative studies outnumber quantitative ones, with most primary data collected in a single location (either host country, or country of origin).⁸

Results

As the results section demonstrates, our examination of research on transnational families in selected contexts revealed differing levels of interest in and specific thematic

focuses on TNFs. The results section begins with an overview of interest in transnational families across countries and time, followed by a discussion on the extent to which research emerging in the institutions from the countries included in the study demonstrates a transnational focus. The last part of the results section highlights distinctive ways to study transnational families, shedding light on different understandings of ‘transnational’ and ‘family’.

Level of interest in transnational families across countries and time

The search for ‘transnational families’ in the various contexts reveals a clear scholarly interest in TNFs among researchers based in certain countries, such as Belgium (Flanders) and Lithuania. At the same time, it points out the relative invisibility of TNFs in Serbia and smaller research interest in Iceland⁹, while Luxembourg and Portugal occupy intermediate positions along this spectrum (see Figure A2 in the Appendix).

Shifting from the general trends to the content of publications, we see that there are more differences than similarities between each pair of the aforementioned countries. To start with, the academic contexts in Belgium (Flanders) and Lithuania represent two distinct and divergent cases. Research on TNFs in Lithuania has primarily focused on the families of mobile Lithuanian citizens who moved to other EU or EFTA countries over the past two decades. Attention for this phenomenon peaked after the economic downturn in Europe (see Figure A2 in the Appendix), with a particular focus on the impact of the parent’s or parents’ migration on children remaining in Lithuania. Despite notable exceptions acknowledging transnational ties of foreign nationals living in Lithuania (e.g. Blažytė, 2017) or focusing on attitudes towards transnational care arrangements involving mobile citizens from neighbouring countries (e.g. Zumente-Steele & Mikėnė, 2018), researchers from Lithuanian academic institutions have predominantly dealt with Lithuanian families living across international borders during the analysed period.

By contrast, Belgian (Flemish) academia have seen a notable increase in research on TNFs over time (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). This research is broader in scope, encompassing a more diverse array of family types, types of transnational interactions and geographical areas. Firstly, the focus is primarily on families of foreign nationals in Belgium or those living elsewhere, rather than Belgian nationals living abroad (this aspect is addressed in more detail in the subsequent sections). Secondly, while some studies explore the impact of mobility on families, transnational care, intergenerational solidarity, and the maintenance of familyhood across geographical distances, a significant portion of the research concentrates on cultural/national heritage, identity, cultural preservation, transmission of values and partner choice among foreign citizens. Thirdly, the Belgian (Flanders) academic context particularly stands out for its emphasis on transnational adoption from a historical perspective (e.g. Candaele, 2023) and/or analysis of individual experiences of transnational adoption (e.g. De Graeve, 2015).

Screening the publications in the Luxembourg and Icelandic academic contexts reveals a broad geographical coverage as well. This pattern consists of studies focusing on migrant families (and their transnational ties, to a greater or lesser degree) within these countries as well as studies conducted outside these countries, with the main or sole criterion for their inclusion in the research database being the researcher’s affiliation

with an institution in the respective country. In addition to the variety of geographical areas covered, and unlike Luxembourg, publications on Icelanders living abroad are also present, albeit in small numbers.

Publications in the Portuguese academic database focus on transnational family ties of foreigners residing in Portugal, particularly between Angola and Portugal (e.g. Marinho, 2021), and the Philippines and Portugal (e.g. Cruz, 2018), as well as experiences of multicultural and multilingual children in Portugal and their connections with relatives in the country of origin (e.g. Oliveira, 2020). Although no publications on Brazilian transnational families were found in Portuguese national database, additional searches in international databases (WoS & Scopus) indicate some interest in the topic (e.g. Ferreira & Ramos, 2012). Despite the large Portuguese diaspora abroad, this does not appear to be a particularly strong research interest in the Portuguese academic context, even though this group is quite well researched by other scholars (e.g. scholars affiliated with Luxembourgish academic institutions such as Fleury, 2010 among others). Unlike its Belgian, Luxembourgish and Icelandic counterparts, Portuguese academia have also rarely researched transnational families in other geographical contexts, with the sole exception of fieldwork in Angola (e.g. Marinho, 2021).

In the Serbian academic context, while some studies refer to Serbian families as locally bound after migrating, they also examine the diasporic ties between Serbs living abroad (particularly within the EU and North America) and in Serbia (e.g. Antonijević, 2013). It is noteworthy that clear parallels exist between Serbia and Lithuania as both remaining 'emigration countries' for most of the studied period, but that they show a different scope of attention for the phenomenon. Firstly, more attention is given to the mobility of Serbian citizens (and earlier diaspora communities) and Lithuanian citizens than that of foreign nationals living in these two countries (and their transnational familial ties). Secondly, some studies in both academic contexts acknowledge that not all migrants continue to live transnational lives and may choose to return. While the only study on return migration found in the Serbian databases pertains to the return of older individuals to Serbia (e.g. Dragišić Labaš & Ljubičić, 2018), publications on return migration to Lithuania during the studied period primarily focus on the integration of returning children into the educational system and familial relationships of the working age populations, which can be linked to distinct migration trends in these countries.¹⁰

Overall, our literature review reveals varying levels of scholarly interest across different academic contexts. In addition, it indicates that the reviewed research spans different geographical areas, albeit to a varying degree, and underscores the heterogeneous application of the term 'transnational families', highlighting a lack of conceptual clarity in existing scholarship. The former issue is addressed in the following section, which reflects on the extent to which research in the selected countries represents transnational versus national endeavours. The latter issue is explored in the subsequent section, which identifies two distinct understandings of 'transnational families' within the reviewed literature.

Researching transnational families: a truly transnational endeavour?

While analysing initial search results, we had a series of discussions about whether we can speak of specific national academic discourses. While publications attributed to

Lithuanian and/or Serbian academic institutions demonstrate examples of a distinct Lithuanian and Serbian approach to research on migration and transnational families, this was not similarly observed in the cases of the Belgian (Flemish), Icelandic and Luxembourgish publications examined. Portugal falls somewhere in between.

To start with, researchers affiliated with Belgian (Flemish), Luxembourg, and Icelandic academic institutions often studied diverse family groups unconnected to the Belgian, Luxembourg or Icelandic contexts, respectively. Research encompasses intra-EU and EU-EFTA mobility (e.g. Polish families in Finland, Tiaynen-Qadir & Matyska, 2020) and non-EU nationals in the EU (e.g. transnational ties of Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese and Antilleans in the Netherlands, Rooyackers et al., 2016; Eritrean refugees in Italy, Belloni, 2016). Studies also investigate family ties maintained across geographically distant locations, such as Ecuadorian adolescents with parents in the US and/or Spain (e.g. Jerves et al., 2020; Verdezoto & Llanes, 2020), Ghanaian children with parents abroad (e.g. Cebotari et al., 2018), or families in other contexts, such as Lebanese in Syria (e.g. Shaery-Yazdi, 2021).

Some of the differences in geographical coverage outlined above can be attributed to varying migration patterns (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). Other explanations for this pattern warranting examination include diverse academic traditions, national particularities (e.g. concerns about depopulation in Lithuania and Serbia), variation in research funding opportunities, the internationalization of higher education, availability of temporary research stays, and the degree of interconnectedness among researchers across borders. Additionally, levels of internationalization of the academia (e.g. hosting international researchers) and a pressure to publish in English contribute to differing publication language patterns (English versus national languages). While most of the reviewed publications in Belgium (Flanders), Iceland and Luxembourg are in English (with some exceptions in Flemish, German and French), most publications in Lithuania and Serbia are in the national languages, with research in Portuguese academic context falling somewhere in between (in English and in Portuguese).

Overall, this underscores the increasing difficulty of discussing national discourses within an academic landscape that is increasingly 'transnational'. However, this trend is more pronounced in some contexts than in others. Although theoretical ideas and methodological innovations circulate across contexts, the lower internationalization of higher education sectors and the predominance of research in national languages in some of the countries studied can make the exchanges less intensive (and more unidirectional) compared to others. This variability shows the importance of the particularities of the national and institutional contexts within which research on TNFs emerges, challenging assumption that studying transnational families is already a truly transnational endeavour in all academic settings.

Researching 'transnational' and 'family' across different contexts

Over the course of our review, two distinctive ways to studying transnational families were identified, relating to different understandings of what is meant by 'transnational'. The first primarily focuses on integration issues in a single locality (host country) rather than transnational ties. It examines TNFs as families with a mixed background or a background different from the majority population, with a particular focus on their

‘integration’ or the social processes affecting family members living in a host country without much interest in their transnational ties or transnational practices (e.g. Gunnþórsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020; Kirsch & Gogonas, 2018; Lecoyer, 2017; Wu, 2022). The conceptualization of TNFs embedded in the second is concerned with transnational family relations and family practices. It studies TNFs as geographically dispersed families, which continue to communicate actively and maintain shared family practices despite geographical distance. The presence of these two ways to studying ‘transnational families’ is a common feature of research on TNFs emerging in and/ or focusing on Belgium (Flanders), Iceland, Luxembourg and Portugal contexts. The second approach is more visible than the former in scholarly inquiries in Serbian and Lithuanian academia.

While families with at least one member originating from or relocating to a different country inherently possess transnational family ties, research examining *TNFs as families with diverse background(s) (first approach)* is not interested in the transnational dimension of the family life. Instead, it examines how they navigate life within a single nation-state, specifically the host country, emphasizing their adaptation or integration, without considering how their transnational ties may impact their experiences of living in the host country. The prevalence of this approach might be attributed to the ‘continued potency of nationalism’ in migration research (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 326). We consider that referring to geographically dispersed families as transnational without examining their transnational practices detracts from the importance of their continued multisided social embeddedness.

Research focusing on the connections between the sending and receiving countries where family members are dispersed understand ‘transnational’ in ‘transnational families’ as *family members living in two or more different countries (second approach)*. Without necessarily addressing transnational family ties, it may examine other types of linkages and flows that cross national boundaries. In this way, research on transnational families belongs within the broader field of transnationalism. It can encompass various forms, including emotional and affective transnationalism, economic, socio-cultural, religious, political transnationalism, transnational social spaces, and so on.

This strand of research predominantly focuses on the perspectives of mobile family member(s) residing abroad (e.g. Antonijević, 2013; Cruz, 2018; Duplan, 2023; Hoffmann et al., 2022; De Winter & Valk, 2018; Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir, 2020). To a lesser extent, researchers examine these families from the viewpoint of individuals living in their country of origin who have family members abroad (e.g. Gedvilaitė-Korđušenė, 2014; Grassi & Vivet, 2015). Nonetheless, there are also notable exceptions within the literature that employ multi-local methodologies, some of which examine several perspectives simultaneously (e.g. Drotbohm, 2009; Marinho, 2021; Mazzucato et al., 2017).

Research on geographically dispersed families often lacks specification regarding which relationships are covered by the term ‘family’, either from the researchers’ perspective or that of their research participants.¹¹ However, when specified, the focus tends to be on the impact of parental migration on minor children and experiences related to long-distance parenting. This includes examining relationships between the minor child in the country of origin and the migrant parent(s) abroad, family cohesion (e.g. Timmers et al., 2022), connectedness (e.g. Marinho, 2021), long-distance parenthood

(e.g. Grassi & Vivet, 2015; Timmers et al., 2022), effects of separation on parental (e.g. Mazzucato et al., 2017) and children's well-being (e.g. Cebotari et al., 2018; Verdezoto & Llanes, 2020), children's feelings of emotional ambivalence (e.g. Jerves et al., 2020) and their behaviour (e.g. Giedraitytė & Bieliauskaitė, 2010). A smaller subset of research extends its scope to include the connections between adult children and their parents in later stages of life. This area of research explores topics such as return visits (e.g. Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir, 2020), filial obligations (e.g. Fleury, 2010), care expectations and norms (e.g. Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2014), and the circulation of elderly care across national borders (e.g. Krzyzowski & Mucha, 2014; Timmers et al., 2022).

Other family relationships receive even less scholarly attention. Few studies address the relationships between minor children and their grandparents within the context of parental migration (e.g. Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). Similarly, dynamics of relationships between spouses or couples living in different countries (e.g. Dziekonska, 2021) and relationships between geographically dispersed siblings (e.g. Sampaio & Carvalho, 2022) remain less studied compared to parent-minor child and adult child-elder parent relationships. Despite the limited number of publications, these studies recognize the significance of extended family ties within the context of transnational families. Additionally, a particular strand of research on transnational family networks examines mobility and immobility in current refugee settings (e.g. Belloni, 2016). The importance of wider kin and non-kin ties is also recognized in studies researching migration intentions, revealing the decreasing importance of the latter and the increasing importance of the former over time (e.g. Van Mol et al., 2018).

While the term 'family-like relations' was not specifically used, some relationships in the migration context covered in the reviewed research can be reconceptualised as such. For instance, some studies highlight the importance of guardians and/or foster parents of minor children remaining in the country of origin after the migration of the parent or parents (e.g. Zumente-Steele & Mikéné, 2018). However, caregivers' perspectives and positions generally receive less attention in empirical research, confirming trends identified in previous research (cf. Bonizzoni & Boccagni, 2013). Only a few articles examined relationships with significant individuals who were not blood relatives but were considered 'more than just friends' (Vivas-Romero, 2020) or 'real deal' (Policarpo, 2016). Considering the growing diversification of personal life trajectories and the recognition of the importance of non-blood ties in the migration context, this area of research can be expected to develop further in the future.

It is noteworthy that reviewed research typically focuses on families of heterosexual couples, with the exception of a few studies (e.g. Barglowski et al., 2018; Dhoest, 2016; Vuckovic Juros, 2022). The latter studies show that migration can be empowering for individuals coming from countries without recognition of LGBT partnerships. However, these studies also reveal challenges in transnational family contexts when it comes to processes of 'coming out' and family disclosure (Barglowski et al., 2018). Transnational practices of married same-sex couples or couples consisting of same-sex partners raising children challenge traditional family notions, particularly in assisted reproduction and caregiving roles (Vuckovic Juros, 2022).

In sum, we identified different emphases in research on transnational families across different countries. Studies conducted by researchers affiliated with the Icelandic academic institutions differ from other countries in terms of family relationships covered.

Lithuanian research primarily focuses on nuclear families, while both nuclear and broader kinship networks are recognized in the Serbian academic context. When research examines transnational family ties, the focus is primarily on dyadic relationships between family members (underaged children-parents; adult children-elderly parents, couples etc.), rarely delving into complex familial networks.

Conclusions

Transnational families represent one of the numerous evolving family forms in the era of superdiversity. By tracing the changes in the understanding of transnational families in academic discourse over time across countries, this article contributes to the widening academic debate on family definitions.

The article illustrates how the scope of research on transnational families has expanded alongside the growing scale of the phenomenon, facilitated by advancements in international travel and communication technologies. Comparing key research trends on TNFs across selected academic contexts reveals a general trend in the advancement of the field in all countries. This trend encompasses the growth of migration research, acknowledgment of the significance of familial ties within migration processes, and the exploration of various aspects of family relationships. The countries examined in this paper are at different stages of development within the research field.

At the same time, national particularities significantly shape the thematic orientation of research at the intersection of migration and family studies, contingent upon the composition of immigrant and emigrant populations, national policy priorities, and related considerations. Political and public discourses may influence research emphases, depending on how countries are perceived or defined ('emigration' or 'immigration countries') and which issues are considered more urgent (e.g. initial focus on 'left behind children' in Lithuania, demographic challenges in Serbia and integration of Eastern European migrants in Iceland).

We identified two distinct understandings of transnational families in the academic literature we reviewed. The first revolves around families maintaining a sense of familyhood despite being physically dispersed across multiple countries due to international migration. The second focuses on families whose partners have different ethnic, cultural, or national backgrounds, and is not concerned with researching their geographically separated family ties. Although the TraFaDy network the authors of this article represent adhere to the first conceptualization of TNFs, we find the persistence of this duality noteworthy.

An emphasis on migrant families within a singular geographical context continues to prevail. Despite the acknowledgement that these families operate in bi-national fields (cf. Mazzucato & Schans, 2011), most attention still focuses on their interaction with the host country society and their integration (or its challenges). Furthermore, when research focuses on transnational family ties, they are rarely compared to family ties of non-mobile populations (remaining in the country of origin) or highly mobile families (where all or most family members move abroad). This is in line with the recent research by Bryceson (2019) pointing to a need to pay more attention to differentiating between bi- and multi-transnational families in researching TNFs.

While the growing body of research recognizes migrants' engagement in social practices spanning multiple nation-states, some studies persist in focusing solely on practices

and experiences pertaining to the environment of a single (host) country. This suggests the continuing influence of methodological nationalism in migration and family scholarship. By challenging the assumptions in research, policy and practice regarding migration as an ‘uprooting’ life event (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), the concept of ‘transnational families’ is distinguished from ‘migrant families’. Nonetheless, both concepts remain interconnected with it (Kofman et al., 2022), as a significant portion of publications adopt the perspective of the ‘receiving countries’ and focus on the experiences of families within the host country.

While TNFs can be regarded as migrant families (families that moved abroad), calling them ‘transnational’ without examining transnational practices causes the importance of their ongoing multisided social embedding to be overlooked. This tendency is perhaps most evident in research that focuses on foreign nationals residing in one of the selected countries (e.g. studies on linguistic diversity and challenges in educational system), and to a lesser extent in research on transnational families from the perspective of the so-called ‘sending countries’, unless attention is directed towards the families of returnees. This breaks with the notion of migration as linear and unidirectional, recognizing the temporariness of the phenomenon (cf. Baldassar et al., 2014).

Recognizing transnational families as a family form worthy of attention does not necessarily go hand in hand with reflection on the wide range of other emerging and changing family forms, some of which may also be geographically dispersed. While a few exceptions in our sample focus on non-heteronormative families and family-like relationships, most of the publications reviewed examine heteronormative families. Moreover, when transnational family ties are the primary focus of the research, there is a notable emphasis on dyadic relationships (minor children-parents and adult children-elderly parents) within so-called nuclear families, with single-parent or patchwork families rarely included or clearly articulated as a primary research interest. This may reflect the lingering perspective of the ‘Western’ (white middle class) family. The prevailing perception of the nuclear family in a single locality as the norm is challenged by scholars who recognize research conducted in other regions (cf. Baldassar et al., 2014; Bonizzoni & Boccagni, 2013) and by some studies included in the review. One noteworthy case that stands out in this regard concerns research on transnational adoption in the Belgian academic context.

Limitations and future research directions

Notwithstanding the increasing attention for this phenomenon in various academic disciplines and the growing internationalization of higher education and research institutions, the pursuit of a comprehensive definition of ‘transnational families’, including diverse understandings of both ‘transnational’ and ‘family’, requires further efforts. This relates to inherent limitations of our study, starting with the limited number of cases and geographical focus on Europe. Even if we aimed to ensure a diverse country selection, a larger study including more countries from diverse geographies is needed. Taking a country-level analysis as a starting point also created some challenges relating to the risk of reproducing the nation-state logic. While the inclusion of additional search strategies in international databases allowed us to transcend this limitation to some extent, the tension between national and transnational takes on researching TNFs

persists. Considering these limitations, our review yields several recommendations for future literature reviews and empirical studies.

A comprehensive analysis of academic discourses on TNFs and their interactions with various nation-state ideologies, migration regimes and family norms is warranted to elucidate the complex ways in which these factors influence each other. However, given the scope of such an endeavour, it may be necessary to focus on fewer cases to facilitate an in-depth analysis. Focusing on ‘smaller’ countries may offer significant advantages for such endeavours, as these countries can serve as ‘laboratories’ that provide insights into dynamics and processes within a more contained context. In contrast to larger countries, which are often subdivided into multiple regions with distinct policies (e.g. education, welfare etc.) that can influence transnational family lives in varied ways, smaller countries may offer a more uniform setting for analysis. Furthermore, expanding the geographical scope of cases analysed to include contexts beyond Europe and the Global North is essential to capture a broader range of perspectives. To trace the evolving understandings of transnational families across diverse contexts over time, it is also important to conduct a thorough analysis of the methodological approaches and research designs used in studying transnational families. Such an analysis would provide valuable insights into the potential implications that the different use of the concepts of ‘transnational’ and ‘family’ may have for both research and policies, and for the lives of transnational families themselves.

Going beyond the suggestions for future reviews outlined above, the examination of diverse understandings of TNFs would also be enriched by engaging in longitudinal and multi-local research projects, requiring large transnational research teams. As our review demonstrates, most studies directly focusing on transnational family ties are typically conducted in a single locality (more often in the ‘country of immigration’ than in the ‘country of emigration’) and tend to focus on a single perspective. The data collection ‘at the one end of the transnational spectrum’, as observed in earlier reviews (cf. Mazzucato & Schans, 2011), continues in current academic discussions in the analysed contexts. Incorporating multiple perspectives by including family members from different localities could also help to reflect on the implications of labels (e.g. ‘stayers’ vs ‘left-behind’) assigned to people affected by the migration of their family members. Multi-local designs provide a better understanding of the impact of the same migration decision on family members spread across multiple localities and would account for the effects of diverse family configurations (e.g. bi – vs multi-transnational; both vs single-parent abroad; one vs all adult children abroad families etc.).

Our review confirms that the temporal dimension of transnational familial relations remains understudied (cf. Bonizzoni & Boccagni, 2013) in the selected contexts. While financial frameworks and evaluation systems that prioritize international collaborations may provide opportunities to overcome the constraints concerning team composition and the financial constraints associated with implementing multi-local studies – as some of the examples in our review suggest – research designs that incorporate multiple data collection points across longer periods of time remain rare. Longitudinal research conducted over an extended period would offer more nuanced insights into changes throughout the family life cycle, allowing for a comprehensive examination of fluctuations in family membership and family dynamics over time. This would also enhance our understanding of the evolving (transnational) care needs and patterns of exchanges (cf. Bryceson, 2019) and provide a clearer perspective on how changing migration

decisions impact the understanding of what ‘transnational’ and ‘family’ mean at different points of time for different families.

Notes

1. COST TraFaDy: <https://transnational-families.eu/>. This article is based upon work from COST Action ‘Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe’, CA1143, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).
2. For more details on these aspects see Albert and Heinz (2021), Bobić (2018), Coppée and Lahaye (2021), Eydal and Ólafsson (2008), Georgas (2003), Maslauskaitė and Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė (2021), Matias et al. (2021), Mirić (2022) among others.
3. Migration data for Serbia show a negative balance, with estimates from – 20,000 (Nikitović, 2019) to a range of – 5,000 to – 7,000 per year on average (Arandarenko, 2022) in the last decade.
4. Understood as difference between total number of people who moved in and those who left the country per year.
5. It is noteworthy that Portugal and Lithuania had a negative net migration balance until 2018. The former was established as an attractive country of immigration in the second half of the twentieth century, but was affected by economic downturn. The latter experienced a significant increase in the number of foreign nationals only very recently (EMN, 2023).
6. This search strategy led to a higher share of publications which were deemed irrelevant as some of them did not even focus on migration.
7. Both studies that referred to one of the countries and studies with at least one author affiliated with an academic institution in that country were included.
8. Few notable exceptions include, for example, Drotbohm, 2009; Marinho, 2021; Mazzucato et al., 2017.
9. This can be attributed to both the relatively smaller size of academia in Iceland (even compared to Luxembourg) as well as multiple shortcomings of the Icelandic databases, outlined when presenting the research methodology (see above).
10. The return of descendants of earlier Lithuanian diasporas was observed in the 1990s, and presently, it is post-2004 accession migrants who are returning. In contrast, Serbia continues to experience emigration, with limited instances of return migration at present.
11. For example, immediate and extended family (Tiaynen-Qadir & Matyska, 2020) or extended family (Shaery-Yazdi, 2021).

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Appendix

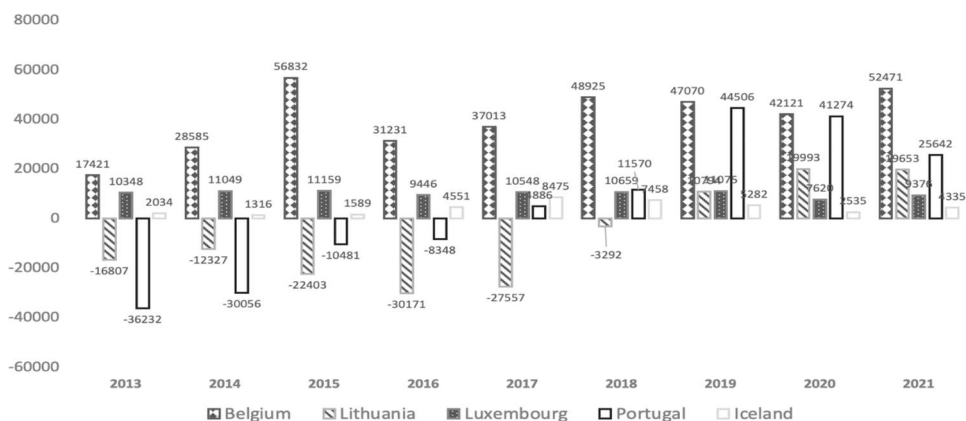


Figure A1. Net migration in Belgium, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal and Iceland, 2013–2021. Source: Eurostat [migr_netmigr]. Graph created by the authors.

Note: comparable data on Serbia not available in Eurostat.

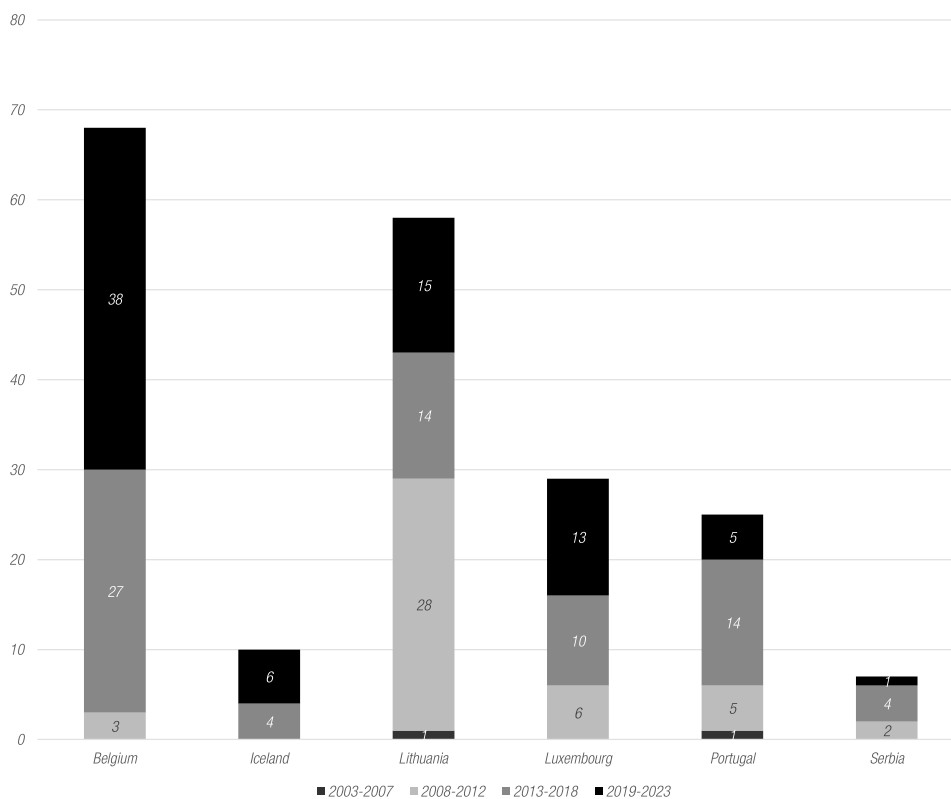


Figure A2. The number of publications included in the review by country and period of time. Source: graph created by the authors.