

# State crisis response versus transnational family living: An online ethnography among transnational families during the pandemic

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## Abstract

Transnational family living refers to the situation of maintaining relationships across national borders. It is dependent on a certain degree of flexibility from the state. As part of the crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this flexibility was revoked. As a result, existing mobility inequalities became more visible than ever: while travel restrictions came as a shock to many, they created an additional challenge to those who had been struggling in the past. All persons engaged in transnational family living had to find ways to navigate the new situation. Our project is based on policy review and online ethnography taking Norway as a case. We discuss how individuals tried to maintain cross-border and mixed-status family lives during the first year of the pandemic, reacted to the borders closing, and found solace and advice from others in similar situations. The COVID-19 pandemic and the travel restrictions that followed have exposed vulnerabilities associated with transnational living and revealed to those involved that their arrangements were conditioned by the non-interference of the state. Our article engages in the discussion on the complexity of transnational family living and uses the case of the pandemic and the sudden state intervention in mobility regulations to expose the hidden parts of the puzzle that sustain the contemporary attributes of transnationalism.

**Keywords:** borders, COVID-19 pandemic, online communities, transnational family living

## 1. Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe in the spring of 2020, many families, and, in particular, couples where both parties were European or from other visa-free countries,

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were able to ‘live in two countries’ without taking border control or immigration regulation into consideration, since border control was essentially not exercised upon them. This also meant that they did not need to make their family relationships ‘fit’ into the boxes provided by the state (for a review of research on how families are defined in family migration policy, see [Bonjour and Cleton 2021](#)). Those who cross borders with less privileged passports have long known that they will have to travel with all kinds of documentation to be able to pass through.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, one of the first measures governments employed to halt the spread of the virus was to close borders ([Kenwick and Simmons 2020](#): E41). This meant that many Norwegian citizens travelling, studying, or just living abroad chose to return home. For transnational families and mixed-nationality or mixed-status partners not willing or able to return, the coming months were to become a trial in waiting, hoping, and making plans that could be (and were) changed, postponed, or cancelled at the last minute. Even after the initial panic, border restrictions and different iterations of travel bans continued to affect global travel throughout 2020 and 2021. The emergence of new variants has been met with sudden restrictions, such as those targeting travel from southern Africa in late 2021. As of 2022, travel-related industries are still struggling, and costs have increased. In addition to issues such as delays in visa processing, this affects transnational families in many ways.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected people’s lives not only as a serious global health crisis, economic threat, and a trigger to deepened social inequalities but also as a force shaking up daily routines. The relative flexibility of peoples’ day-to-day lives has found its boundaries because of crisis management on the global and local levels. In this sense, it is the response that renders the situation a ‘crisis’ and not the event ([Bilgin 2017](#): 56). As Janet Roitman pointed out, ‘the term “crisis” no longer clearly signifies a singular moment of decisive judgment; we now presume that crisis is a condition, a state of affairs, an experiential category’ (2014: 21), especially when crisis is used as a political strategy bringing societal categorisations ([Salazar 2021](#): 21). Thus, the pandemic exposed existing crises in the form of mobility inequalities: while travel restrictions came as a shock to many, they have created an additional challenge for those who have been struggling in the past. The states that have previously used their borders and apparatuses of control as instruments of discrimination and triage ([Balibar 2012](#): 82) engaged in the process of levelling down mobility rights. This affected people engaged in transnational living across the socio-economic spectrum and thus, they resulted in a levelling down of rights, where the previously privileged layers of society found themselves in the situation of a shared (or analogous) struggle with those for whom the borders have been tangible all along. This meant that under COVID, new groups had to learn the ropes (see also [Charsley and Wray 2023](#)) in order to navigate between familial obligations, emotional needs, and governmental restrictions.

Based on policy review and digital ethnography, this article discusses how transnational individuals with a variety of privileges and citizenship statuses—often within the same family circle—tried to maintain cross-border and mixed-status family lives during the first year of the pandemic, how they reacted to borders closing, and how they found solace, comfort, and advice from others in similar situations. On a conceptual level, the

article deals with the question: How did the pandemic expose how reliant the transnational family living is on non-intervention of the state?

## 2. Transnational family living

In their recent article on what they term ‘transnational living’, [Carling, Erdal and Talleraas \(2021\)](#) pointed to the transnational social field of migrants and non-migrants leading transnational lives. They define transnational living as ‘having sustained and similarly significant attachments, interactions and presences in two or more societies separated by national borders’ ([Carling, Erdal and Talleraas 2021: 3](#)). The authors discussed this framework in the context of migrants and non-migrants, taking the interesting perspective of discussing transnational living as an alternative to migration. For instance, in border regions such as some of those between Norway and Sweden, cross-border living and cross-border family life are the rule, rather than the exception.

Transnationalism emerged in opposition to methodological nationalism in migration studies and has been conceptualised by various scholars in their attempts to capture the multiple involvements of migrants in the context of two or more countries ([Portes 1999](#); [Faist 2000](#); [Vertovec 2001](#); [Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002](#); [Levitt 2003](#)). One does not need to be involved in migratory movement to find oneself deeply engaged in transnational living ([Carling, Erdal and Talleraas 2021](#)) or maintaining transnational family relationships ([Bell and Bivand Erdal 2015](#)). Transnational living depends fundamentally on international travel and communication. Not only geographical distance and questions of physical transport, but also the cost and availability of ever-developing communication technologies, as well as the border policies of two or more countries, affect the ways transnational living is possible ([Leifsen and Tymczuk 2012](#)). This means transnational living is inherently precarious in ways that remaining within national borders is not. However, for many, and for long periods of time, this precariousness can be almost invisible. In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, seamless transnational family living, with its rhythms and patterns developed over a course of years and even decades, has suddenly stumbled upon unprecedented drawbacks, as the sudden changes in the law had profound implications for the most intimate aspects of daily life. The arbitrary character of, and the pace at which these changes arrived, along with the fact that these were not organically developed along with other policies, were unprecedented, and this was one of the many grounds for the activation of the groups among which we have conducted ethnography for the purpose of this study.

As Balibar noted, borders are polysemic in that ‘they do not have the same meanings for everyone’ (2012: 81). An obvious distinction in Europe is that European Union (EU) free movement regulations imbue European borders with different meanings for Europeans and non-Europeans. These differences can extend to family members, as EU free movement law recognises a wider definition of the family and has fewer restrictions than much national legislation ([Staver 2013](#)). Furthermore, borders ‘give individuals from different social classes different experiences of the law’ ([Staver 2013](#)). Such differential experiences have, more recently, been described by Chauvin et al. in their study of the class and mobility of same-sex couples with mixed legal statuses and transnational living

arrangements. They found that the couples with more resources ‘experience law in a more distant way’ (2021: 440). Part of this invisibility is the fading into the background of the state. Unless the state exercises its power to control movement, one may not think about this power existing. The pandemic reminded many people that transnationalism has in no way replaced the nation-state. Surveying the practices of controlling both internal and international movements in Canada, Macklin observed that ‘the choice to refrain from exercising control is not the same as the absence of control. In my view, the measures adopted because of COVID-19 undermine the very idea of mobility as free movement and bring into view an alternative picture of mobility as permitted movement’ (Macklin 2022: 26).

This observation also resonates with a recent broader critique of migration studies and transnationalism. Scheel and Tazzioli (2022: 3) proposed a new definition of a migrant ‘as a person who, in order to move to or stay in a desired place, has to struggle against bordering practices and processes of boundary-making that are implicated by the national order of things’. In this definition, not every person who lives outside of the country of their citizenship is a migrant, but they can be constituted as such when the state’s power over movement is exercised against them. For some, this happens constantly, but, for others, it may almost never occur. In the case of family migration, it could even mean that citizens living inside their own country will face the bordering powers of the state, through what Charsley and Wray called ‘experiential migrantization’ (Charsley and Wray 2023). We do not intend here to shift the focus entirely to the role of the state in shaping and changing the arrangements for transnational family lives. We do, however, propose a closer consideration of the relationships between the macro and the micro level, through examining how the situation of crisis can lay the groundwork for new entry points for the state to exercise power over individuals and the methods individuals employ to counter these.

In this article, we concentrate our analysis on the situation when the national borders suddenly become tangible and the separation turned out to be a matter of national restrictions and complex regulations, rather than individual practicalities. As Skovgaard-Smith points out, pandemic border restrictions created both ‘an intensification and reconfiguration of existing mobility inequalities’ (2023). Yet, different layers in the society have varying resources to contest the rules and stand up to the authorities. As we will show in the following, social class and resources did come into play regarding those who were able—or were given the opportunity—to speak their minds. For some of the individuals and their families in our data, the pandemic was the first time they experienced borders as real hindrances. They were, perhaps, less prone to accept the new pandemic order of things than others (e.g. with less secure visa or residence statuses in Norway) who already knew of the risk of being denied mobility. For others, the pandemic regulations added an extra hindrance into already very complex obstructions. Thematically, our article focuses primarily on how those affected portray their experiences in the context of a social media community. De Hart and Carella (this issue) examined a similar group in the Netherlands but with a stronger emphasis on their external advocacy.

After outlining our methodology, this article will begin with a review of the rules and regulations governing entry and stay in Norway and how these rules and regulations were quickly and repeatedly changed during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3. Method: policy review and digital ethnography

For this study, historical versions of the Norwegian immigration rules were accessed through the database Lovdata Pro, which has a function for following versions of individual sections of legislation over time, thus making it possible to track which categories of family members were permitted to enter the country at various points in time.

Our second set of data is based on social media communities that formed as transnational families bonded with each other in their search to maintain transnational family life under a global pandemic. More specifically, our data are from the first year of activities in the largest and most active Norwegian Facebook group, *Oss med familie eller kjæreste utlandet under COVID-19 2020* (Us with family or partner abroad,<sup>1</sup> a group created on 30 May 2020). As all three authors are themselves involved in maintaining transnational family lives, as former immigrants to Norway, having migrant families and/or family and loved ones abroad, the border restrictions were something we all followed closely for personal reasons. We were members of this large Facebook group and similar online communities from the start of the travel restrictions. This positionality was the starting point of our academic interest.

To systematise our interest in the social media communities, we asked the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) for review in the spring of 2021, and after dialogue with them on ethical research started our work in August 2021. Digital ethnography in large communities poses particular ethical challenges, connected among other things to anonymisation of data and protection of individuals who cannot be reached for consent. It was important that we found ways of accessing and analysing interactions on the Facebook group without disturbing daily life on the group, and for example, without giving the participants unjustified hope that we could help. We did not store personal identifiable data such as names or IP addresses. Since the group members spoke of family and loved ones that we could not expect to reach for consent, we also needed to be certain that we did not store information on such third parties.

We contacted the administrators of the group and received their approval. To officially notify the members of the Facebook group that the research was being conducted, the administrators further published<sup>2</sup> information about our project in September 2021. We could not be certain to have reached all involved in the threads and comments we analysed, and we must consider that some of those involved have been in emotional and/or financial precarious positions. Therefore, in the following section, we not only removed or replaced place and country names when appropriate but also paraphrased all quotations to avoid identification through online searches. This is in accordance with common digital ethnology practices (see also Boellstorff 2008; Murthy 2013: 31). The main language of the group was Norwegian (although some members chose to express themselves in other Scandinavian languages or in English), but all quotations are presented in English for the purposes of this article.

Being a part of the communities we study presents special challenges. It may, for example, lead to blind spots in critical analysis (Chavez 2008; see also Pustulka et al. 2019: 243 on the different aspects of insider/outsider positionality). However, having been part of the community for some time before delving into research did come with obvious advantages. Analytically, it enabled us to understand the background and dynamics of the

group. It made it possible for us to paraphrase and anonymise quotations while keeping them representative of the group dynamics and history. Conducting research on past debates on Facebook is not without its flaws. It is not uncommon for Facebook users to delete published messages or for moderators to delete unwanted posts and comments; in addition, the search function of Facebook itself is not the most accurate tool. Some of these weaknesses of our project are, again, diminished by the fact that we ourselves have been members of the group almost the entire time. This means we have had insights into the trends, topics, and conflicts of the group as it has developed, even before we started formal and more systematic research on the group.

Using a digital ethnography approach, we analysed the life of the Facebook group as a whole, including the offline activities the group fostered and the outreach into other platforms they took part in (e.g. participating in Twitter and Instagram hashtagging campaigns) (Hine 2015; Barassi 2017; Kozinets 2019). We have concentrated on the first year of the pandemic border restrictions, using data from the Facebook group formed from May 2020 to May 2021. We focused on how the communities arose, developed, and became an arena for mutual help, as well as how they were used as activist platforms.

#### 4. Rules and regulations

Transnational living for couples where one partner resides in Norway and the other resides elsewhere is affected by both Norwegian entry rules and the rules governing access to alternative locations where the couple might meet (be it the country of residence of the other spouse or a third country). The Norwegian entry rules were the main, though not the only, focus of the groups we studied. In non-pandemic times, they are made up of a complex set of immigration regulations, visa rules, and European free movement rules. These rules distribute the ability to cross the border into Norway differentially—from easiest to more tightly regulated—based on whether the person is a Norwegian national, a permanent or temporary resident in Norway, an EEA national (resident or not), a national of a visa-free country, or from somewhere else. The former four groups had the ability to come and go as they pleased, prior to the pandemic, although nationals of visa-free countries could only stay up to 90 days without seeking another form of permit. Persons from countries that require an entry visa might apply for either tourist visas or family immigration visas. Whereas tourist visas might be denied to close family members of persons residing in Norway due to a speculation that they could overstay—rendering family members as migrants without having ever left home (Scheel and Tazzioli 2022: 11–12)—family immigration visas would only be available to a small nuclear family circle. As such, the entry rules distributed the ability to lead transnational lives differently, depending on the specific constellation of relationships and citizenships of the parties.

All this changed in March 2020, when the lockdown was accompanied by a firm border closure. A 15 March 2020 regulation established that ‘aliens without permits in accordance with the Immigration Act’ were to be rejected at the border.<sup>3</sup> The bar included EEA citizens and their family members insofar as they were not already settled in Norway. This regulation left many families stranded on opposite sides of a hard border. Over the period from March until June, certain exemptions from this entry ban were added, in particular

for EEA citizens in accordance with free movement rules. In June, this was replaced by a temporary law<sup>4</sup> and a new regulation. This regulation, which sets out exemptions from the entry ban, was amended 24 times between June 2020 and March 2021.<sup>5</sup> During 2020, many of the amendments involved the adding of exempted categories. In January 2021, the trend was dramatically reversed and most of the exemptions were removed.

Two of the most notable liberalisations affecting transnational family lives during 2020 occurred in July and October. Starting 15 July 2020, the following groups who had a relationship with a person residing in Norway (whether citizen or foreigner with a residence permit) could enter: (1) spouses, cohabitants, or registered partners, (2) children or stepchildren under 21, (3) parents or stepparents of residents under 21, and (4) romantic partners in a relationship that has lasted 9+ months and included at least one physical meeting.<sup>6</sup> Starting 21 October 2020, the family circle allowed entry was further extended in the ascending line (grandparents and step grandparents) and descending line (grandchildren and step grandchildren), and the 21-year age limit to count as children was removed. Furthermore, romantic partners could bring their own minor children. Additionally, Norwegian citizens living abroad could bring the same circle of family members home with them for visits, likely in consideration of the Christmas holidays.<sup>7</sup> These liberalisations were significant in the sense that they created new categories of family members that do not exist in Norwegian immigration law. Cohabitants, for the purposes of immigration law, must demonstrate two years of cohabitation; thus, the partner category was significantly broader. Immigration law also has very limited provisions for grandparents and parent/child relationships where the child is no longer a minor. This implies a recognition of a broader range of transnational lives than the nuclear family model most present in immigration law.

On 28 January 2021, following the increasing spread of and concern over the so-called ‘alpha COVID-19’ variant, almost all the exemptions that had been added during 2020 were revoked, leaving only (1) spouses, registered or cohabiting partners, (2) minor children or stepchildren, and (3) parents of minor children or stepchildren.<sup>8</sup> These restrictions remained in place until July 2021, when the borders were again opened to grandparents and romantic partners from selected countries. By September, when Norway lifted pandemic restrictions domestically, anyone with specific electronic proof of their vaccination status and who otherwise had a visa or did not require one could enter the country. This still left out family members whose country of residence did not issue an accepted proof of vaccination. The full set of entry restrictions was only lifted in late November 2021.

In relation to the admission rules, there has been a shifting set of regulations concerning quarantine after entry. Provisions regarding who is required to quarantine, for how long, and where they may do so, have shifted over time and generally in a more restrictive direction. Starting on 6 November 2020, a negative COVID test was required for most travellers.<sup>9</sup> Towards the end of the period, the use of compulsory hotel quarantine in the case of ‘nonessential’ foreign travel was extended to groups that could previously quarantine at home or in the home of family members (including partners), with only narrow exemptions for parents with an agreed visitation schedule following divorce. Interestingly, the government has been more willing to consider journeys within Norway for the purposes of family visits as ‘essential’,<sup>10</sup> while such journeys crossing international borders

have more often been deemed ‘nonessential’.<sup>11</sup> The quarantine rules added significant practical obstacles to transnational lives since they ruled out brief trips and involved significant cost that only the relatively wealthy might be able to handle.

## 5. Analysis 1: Bonding and protesting

Judging from the media coverage at the time the government closed airports and ports in mid-March 2020, both government officials and the public imagined the restrictions on mobility to be short-lived (NRK 2020). The country was under immediate threat, and news feeds were filled with horrifying pictures from Italian hospitals that resembled war zones. It was a state of emergency. Public debate was rife with references to the war—that is, Second World War, the war the Norwegian imagination considers ‘The War’. This analogy started with the authorities: Prime Minister Erna Solberg announced to the press on 12 March 2020 that ‘There will be more restrictive measures than we have ever had in peaceful times in Norway’ (Røed-Johansen and Torgersen 2020, authors’ translation). Another concept launched early on by the authorities and echoed throughout Norwegian media was the concept of contributing to the national *dugnad*, a concept referring to communal help. The word and concept of *dugnad* itself are commonly (and falsely) held to be a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon, often used (and misused) in political rallying to encourage volunteering for a common good. In her televised speech to the nation on 18 March 2020, Prime Minister Solberg used the concept three times (Prime Minister’s Office 2020). The idea was to encourage a sense of communal thinking—each and every citizen would have to make sacrifices for the common good, stopping the virus in its tracks and saving lives: ‘We must all for a period of time change how we live our lives so that those of us that cannot survive the virus should not lose their lives’ (authors’ translation).

As weeks passed and it became obvious that the restrictions would be longer lasting, transnational families had to reorganise their lives to accommodate the situation. While some simply had to postpone or cancel airline tickets and summer holiday plans, others were facing bigger decisions, such as settling on where to stay while the pandemic lasted. They also started to discover that they were not alone in struggling; they found each other online. Several groups were formed on Facebook for people with similar interests with regard to travel restrictions. The group we followed soon filled with questions from individuals separated from loved ones across borders:

Hi everyone, I wonder if anyone else is having the same problem as us: I haven’t seen my girlfriend since December, that’s 6 months. I’m Norwegian but she is Spanish, living in the UK. She was coming here this summer but her plane ticket was cancelled. She has a new ticket but now they say girlfriends cannot come. Is it possible to try to enter and hope you’re not stopped? I hope someone can answer! (June 2020, paraphrased)

The questions were personal and unique, but similar, in that they concerned Norwegians or residents in Norway unable to meet people who mattered to them. For a time, these online communities were most of all centred around self-help and mutual



comfort. Soon, however, they tried to reach out from their own limited ranks, attempting to appeal to the wider public. Over the summer, media posts critiqued the different, stricter rules for visits from family if you were a Norwegian citizen compared to an EEA citizen settled in Norway (Mæland 2020), or the fact that non-EEA family members were not subject to exemptions in the entry ban (Coward 2020). It was counterintuitive to many that state powers were exercised to a greater degree upon their own citizens than on these privileged non-citizens, though this stemmed from the fact that the EEA rules were not determined by Norway. The early summer months of 2020 were also the time when the slogans of what were eventually to become a small but global campaign were formed. ‘Love is not tourism’,<sup>12</sup> they argued, on all kinds of social media platforms as well as offline, stressing that, although travel restrictions could be a wise precaution under a pandemic, restrictions on leisure travel should not stop family from seeing each other. Hashtags such as #LoveIsNotTourism and #LoveIsEssential—implicitly arguing that family mobility is more important than ‘mere’ tourism—became popular among those missing their loved ones abroad, and were used across social media platforms, particularly on Twitter and Instagram (see also de Hart and Carella, this issue).

The hashtags were an important part of in-group community building as well as a way to reach out to the general public. Importantly, this was a way for people around the world to find others in similar situations and to find and share information on the ever-changing rules. During periods of softened regulations, people who were able to reunite with loved ones shared their experiences and gave practical advice; typical examples on Twitter and Instagram:

‘I landed in Canada today, yay! Bring proof of your loved ones’ citizenship even though it is not on the list of required docs, it is. I luckily had it #LoveIsNotTourism’.

In these kinds of social media posts, we see how an important part of the advice regarded what legal documents were needed when border crossing. In this case—a journey from Norway to Canada, through the UK—no such documentation would normally be required for citizens (for a discussion of the role of citizenship under COVID, see Bell, Staver and Tolgensbakk 2023). The online communities formed amongst transnationals under COVID soon filled, not only with advice on what precautions (quarantines, health regulations, and, later, vaccinations) to take when crossing borders but also on what borders were easiest to cross. This also involved, discussing different strategies for meeting their loved ones, including third countries. Before the pandemic, most of the transnational intra-European mobility, particularly within the Schengen area countries, was straightforward due to extensive air routes and no visa requirements. During the pandemic, it suddenly mattered which countries one travelled through, both in terms of what the destination countries allowed transit through and what specific airports, airline, and staff would allow travellers onto their next plane, and under what conditions.

At the same time, the hashtags were an opportunity to bond over being denied access to family and other loved ones. Across the globe, local hashtags, such as #strandedaussies, formed for specific issues in support to end the Australian entry ban and enable Australians abroad to return to their country, #sansValentin, used for a short period in France, or the Norwegian hashtag #slippossinn [let us in], rallying to enable family

members and partners to enter Norway. Whatever the country or specific border regulations they were trying to fight or have amended, individuals would often use both their local or specific hashtag and the #LoveIsNotTourism hashtag to strengthen the bond between a variety of local and specific groups and causes. The use of hashtagging as discursive community building has been discussed elsewhere, most famously in Zappavigna and her discussion of ‘searchable talk’ and affiliation via findability (Zappavigna 2011). Similarly, McNeill spoke of ‘performative community building’ (2020). For individuals in difficult life situations, searching through hashtags could engender a sense of togetherness. In some instances, it meant getting practical help in navigating and overcoming sometimes complicated and ever-changing regulations. For others, the community could not help, but at least provided a space of support. Hashtags are public displays of belonging and a way of connecting your own utterances to a bigger community in a manner visible to all. It means signing on to a bigger message and enhancing or broadcasting that message to all your own followers. The hashtag was a way of stressing the community’s main message: that travel across borders is not a luxury reserved for vacations; it can be much more than leisure. In the language of the pandemic, it should be deemed ‘essential’. At the same time, the hashtags built in-group solidarity.

The tone of the Facebook group we focused on was, overall, supportive and positive, with the smaller conflicts being over discussions of who were supposed to be the main focus of public activism. For many months, the group’s public messages regarded reuniting mixed-status partners. For those who wanted to focus on other parts of transnational family life, this was frustrating. The smaller group, *Vi som ønsker våre foreldre fra ikke EU-land på besøk* [We who want our parents from non-EU countries to visit], was formed 3 September 2020. The group started with 4 moderators and by 20 September they had more than 300 members.<sup>13</sup> Early during the formation of this second group, they spelled out the primacy of their cause over that of the first group by juxtaposing the right to see the parents (and for the grandchildren to see their grandparents) with short romantic relationships.

The Facebook group *Oss med familie* stayed on as a relatively safe and supportive space, while public debate and activism was moved to the hashtag #slippossinn, the website by the same name, collaborative or individual letters to newspapers and authorities, and responses to public consultations [høringsuttalelser]. However, all of these were built on and sprang from the community originally formed on the Facebook group. On 1 July 2020, the group organised a demonstration in front of the Norwegian parliament (Larsen 2020). The group set up a website, organised a photo campaign, and conducted surveys to be able to communicate to the wider public the effects on the mental health of being separated from loved ones. As an emerging advocacy group, their activism was oriented towards gaining public awareness and obtaining political influence through social media (Johansson and Scaramuzzino 2019).

In addition to the narrow definition of ‘family’, one of the most notable difficulties that arose from the border regulations was the fact that the rules demanded that partners be married to be exempt from the initial general entry bans. This made it impossible for partners without marriage certificates (a type of relationship that is very common in Norway) to meet. Protests had an impact, and in the autumn months of 2020, Norway, like several other European countries, introduced exemptions for partners who could prove and

solemnly declare that they were in a relationship (Staver and Eggebo 2023). This created a sense of victory and relief within the Facebook group community: the hard work of lobbying had had results. However, the victory was short-lived. When new restrictions were imposed, partners abroad were excluded yet again (Sæther 2021). The community springing from the *Oss med familie* . . . Facebook group proved incredibly resourceful in finding ways to reach out and rally support for their cause. It is, however, uncertain whether it is possible to claim it successful. It seems that the #slippossinn activists had a say in the amendment to the regulations in the autumn of 2020, but it was not a lasting victory; with the emergence of the alpha variant, it was revoked with the stroke of a pen.

## 6. Analysis 2: Complexities of transnational family life

Families separated by borders, by choice, or by need, are everywhere. Maintaining these bonds requires some level of emotional care and effort, especially in terms of coordinating travel and visits. Yet, the emotional implications of living with the relative uncertainties of distance are under-researched (Carling, Menjívar and Schmalzbauer 2012: 196). The families affected by the pandemic regulations coming together in the Facebook group had very different backgrounds, citizenships statuses, and reasons for needing the help offered by the community. Some were used to struggling with bureaucracy and facing hard borders, but many of those most shocked by the sudden changes and most devastated by the hindrances they placed in the way of family life had never had to deal with such issues before. They were used to travelling almost freely around the globe as long as they had money since their Norwegian citizenship made most borders invisible. Others had exercised their rights as EEA citizens and were more used to dealing with EU regulations than Norwegian ones, independent of their nationality of birth.

It's five months since I saw my oldest son, my father, brother, sister-in-law, nieces and nephews . . . and it looks like it is going to be much longer to wait for those with family in Sweden. I miss them so much 😞. (June 2020, paraphrased and translated)

Swedish nationals in Norway have long enjoyed almost frictionless entry into the country due to the agreement concerning a common Nordic labour market that has been in place since 1954 and, in its current iteration, since 1982. For Swedes, a large migrant group in Norway, the border has had almost no consequences for daily life and many have commuted on a regular basis between the neighbouring countries. For these kinds of families split between Sweden and Norway (or other Scandinavian countries), the pandemic was their first encounter with a border interfering with family life. For the Swedish national above, five months must have felt like a shockingly long time not seeing part of her family residing on the other side of the border.

For other group members, their current family situations were already complex, but manageable, until the pandemic hit. In June 2020, a Facebook group member told her story of meeting the 'love of her life' online and maintaining relationship with him through frequent visits to him and his family in Belgium. Her sole parental responsibility

for minors in Norway made it unlikely that she would be able to see him again anytime soon.

For some of the community members, the pandemic came at a particularly inconvenient time. They were in the middle of applying for residency or citizenship, or they were recently married, applying for family reunification. Some had moved to an EU state specifically to take advantage of the more generous family reunification rights granted under EU free movement law:

A short version of my story. I bought a house in Italy last fall, since I believed that would make life easier. I have been in Senegal putting everything in place there for my husband and his family. If I had known, I would have stayed with them. I expected bureaucracy would be tough, but I had no idea how bad it would become once the pandemic hit. During these last months, my daughter in Norway had a baby. I could not go to her, or to my other grandchildren. Ever-changing COVID regulations and closed governmental offices are making everything impossible. I don't know when I will see them again. Please, everyone, keep on fighting! (July 2020, significantly shortened and paraphrased)

For this woman in her 50s, who was just in the middle of reconfiguring family life with a new husband and family in an African country, the choice to move to Italy may have been a question of meeting halfway between the countries and one of making the most of EU family reunification rights. She could reasonably have expected relative ease in keeping in contact with adult children back in Norway while figuring out how to build her new romantic and familial relationship. The pandemic put an abrupt stop to these plans, leaving her—like many others—stranded in a third country with fewer networks.

In a similar vein, for those in the process of applying for family reunification, the long process of handing in paperwork and waiting for answers was immediately halted when representation agreements were stopped. The halt in collaborations between embassies—and closed embassies and consulates—left these long-distance families, in effect, cut off from each other:

I was so happy when they said on the government press conference [the government held regular press conferences] that my wife could come visit—that is, as soon as her visitor's visa is ready. It's the French embassy in Phnom Penh that has handled all visas to Norway. I have talked to UDI so many times to be sure everything was in order. But now I got an email from the Norwegian embassy that the deal with the French embassy has been stopped. My wife has to hand in her application in Thailand. But the border is closed; she will not be able to go there. I'm desperate. Why can't they find solutions for us? (July 2020, paraphrased)

This became a common topic in the Facebook group: even after some mobility was possible, the issue of delays in all kinds of visa processes, combined with different limitations in different countries, made already-complicated family lives even more complicated. For many, the end of pandemic mobility limitations simply meant they had to start expensive and time-consuming visa application processes over again, as approved visas had run out of date.

Another recurring topic on the Facebook group was couples—married or unmarried—who had children to take care of in one or both countries. For some, the pandemic meant

they had to make the choice of either staying apart to be able to be with their children or moving the children (the last option was sometimes made easier due to the widespread use of digital school during the first year of the pandemic, though it might require the consent of the other parent). For others, the combination of visa limitations, mobility limitations, and responsibility for children became a never-ending puzzle:

I am a Norwegian citizen but have moved to Denmark. My wife is Russian, but applied for reunification with me here. She came on a Schengen visa, but then COVID came and closed everything. She needs to return to Russia because of her son, who has a health issue. But her visa is not valid anymore. Can she go home on her invalid visa? She will drive, through Finland. (June 2020, anonymised, paraphrased and translated)

The Facebook group gives insight into a range of family structures, many of which do not count as ‘family’ in the eyes of the state and, sometimes, not even in the eyes of society. Online boyfriends, adult stepchildren, girlfriends’ grandparents, long-distance wives, sisters-in-law, and others were significant others in the eyes of the group members. They tried to figure out their possible courses of action but had an increasingly difficult time navigating the changing regulations. Sometimes they found help and solutions from others in similar situations in the group. Other times, the only thing the community could offer was solidarity and the comfort of not being alone. Nobody was derided for longing for their loved ones during the deadly pandemic.

## 7. Discussion

Over the past 25 years, scholars have examined migrants’ transnational lives, families, and engagements from a bottom-up perspective, identifying transnational social fields and practices. One impetus for this strand of research was to move away from the state perspective in migration studies, though it is undeniable that states and state power structure people’s ability to engage in transnational living. As [Scheel and Tazzioli \(2022\)](#) suggest, transnationalism, in one sense, simply introduces another state. The pandemic can be seen as a window onto the power of the state to control mobility and movement and to structure transnational lives—also among people with more privileged passports, who had previously been allowed to forget that these powers were there and who had not been migrantised in struggles against state-bordering practices. As such, it exposed the dependence on the non-intervention of the state to maintain transnational family living across citizenship and migration statuses. The previously relatively seamless mobility of the privileged became recast as ‘permitted movement’ ([Macklin 2022](#))—no longer permitted when the crisis struck. Chauvin et al. found that couples with more resources (in the form of economic or cultural capital or both) ‘more easily experience their conjugal project as disinterested and disconnected from legal status acquisition’ (2021: 442), but the pandemic showed them to be connected after all.

To a certain degree, the group became a space where couples and family formations otherwise stigmatised in Norway were welcomed, for example, the Asian wives of Norwegian men or the African husbands of Norwegian women. Online couples and

homosexual couples were also active on the group wall and received the same number of reactions and comforting answers as others. Such minority groups were not the most vocal voices, particularly not in the community's outward actions, but, within the community, they were included. In short, the relatively white, middle-class, and resourceful community was able to include a diverse set of voices because of the common struggle to find ways of living transnationally with unfamiliar border restrictions.

The Facebook group became a site of struggle against state-bordering practices, but not in entirely expected ways. Family immigration rules do several things, including defining the circle of the family and the criteria for entry (Bonjour and Cleton 2021). Families that do not have to relate to family immigration rules can largely define themselves, but within the immigration context only certain relationships 'count' and they are circumscribed in particular ways. For instance, the parent-child relationship holds much more importance when the child is a minor and may cease to trigger reunification rights when the child turns 18. Much of the literature on 'the migrant family' (e.g. Strasser et al. 2009) addresses how couples or families that seek to obtain permission to live together represent their relationships in relation to specific societal norms and expectations, such as what makes 'a real marriage' (Eggebo 2013, Staver and Eggebo 2023). The transnational family living investigated in this article from a bottom-up perspective shows that families living transnationally who for the first time face the need for state approval to carry on do not engage in this kind of representation. Indeed, they make demands that would be almost anathema in immigration law, such as claiming rights for grandparents and unmarried partners. To some extent, then, the group took a role in challenging the definitions of the family (see also Westra, Bonjour, and Vermeulen, this SI), though not so much for immigration as for travel flexibility. During some periods of the pandemic, they achieved successes on entry for, for example, romantic partners who would not be recognised for family immigration purposes, where being married or having had a lengthy cohabitation period is required. These successes were short-lived, however, and the admission of romantic partners and grandparents has halted again when the alpha variant of the COVID-19 virus stoked new fears in January 2021. Again, transnational family living turned out to be precarious.

It remains to be seen how the pandemic mobility restrictions will impact how transnational families organise their lives. We know from the Facebook group posts that many of its members made—or were forced to make—temporary changes in the way everyday life was upheld. Children were taken out of shared parental arrangements. Those who used to commute had to leave one or more countries behind. Some couples chose to meet in those European countries that stayed open for tourism, sometimes to get married in order to be able to continue their visits. For immigrants with limited networks in Norway leaving their jobs and apartments behind to be with family in their origin countries was a choice that will probably have long-term consequences.

Transnational family living depends on many conditions, some more tangible, like available and affordable means of transportation and communication, and others less so. But as the case of the pandemic shows us, it also relies fundamentally on the seal of approval from the states involved. In this article, we have applied Carling, Erdal and Talleraas's (2021) concept of transnational living as an alternative to migration in the context of the pandemic and the attendant reassertion of borders. We find that transnational

living can only remain an alternative to migration as long as the state allows it. For some transnational families, realising how reliant their living arrangements were on the state's tacit acceptance was a first in 2020. Some will not have a choice in how they live across borders. They have, and will continue to have, their income in one country and their loved ones in others. Others may reassess how they prepare for other crises. The pandemic amplified already known vulnerabilities and made unknown vulnerabilities visible.

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## Authors' contribution

All authors have contributed equally to this chapter. J.B. has had a special responsibility for analytical perspectives on transnational living, A.B.S. for pandemic policies, and I.T. for the ethnographic data.

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## Notes

1. The name was changed to 'Oss med familie eller kjæreste i utlandet' under COVID-19, 2020/2021 in February 2021. The group began as a public group but changed its settings in autumn 2020 to a closed group, allowing only members to read and post comments—although rules to become a member were never heavily guarded. The group grew quickly to a membership of 7,000 people during the most heated debates of 20/21. During its most active periods, particularly when travel restrictions were implemented, changed, or lifted, hundreds of posts and comments appeared on the group wall each month. Although presently almost inactive, the group still had 11,000 members in September 2022.
2. Together with a pdf describing our project and participants' rights, the administrators posted the following in Norwegian and English: 'Hei alle sammen/hi everyone. We have been contacted by a research group that will study the argumentation of those looking to cross borders during the pandemic. The research groups want to base this on our group and the discussions in the group during the first year it existed. They are planning to research how the group banded together, trying to get the government to understand the issues transnational couples, families and other relationships experienced when the borders closed. The research group has been allowed to conduct the research by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), and they wish to inform the group of this. What does this mean? In brief, the research group reads the content (posts and comments) of the group, from the first year it existed. The research groups promise to not store or quote anyone's name or

any personally identifiable information. Quotations will be paraphrased to ensure that the statement cannot be found by using the group search function. Attached is the information sheet from the research group. Please note it's in Norwegian only. If you have any questions, please email the research group. Admin/mods are positive to the research, as it can shed light on what situation the Norwegian government decided to put our families through during what is (for many of us) the most difficult time in our lives'

3. Forskrift om bortvisning mv. av utlendinger av hensyn til folkehelsen 15.03.2020 <https://lovdata.no/pro/HIST/forskrift/2020-03-15-293-20200315>
4. <https://lovdata.no/pro/lov/2020-06-19-83>
5. This is based on a search of historical versions of Forskrift om innreiserestriksjoner for utlendinger av hensyn til folkehelsen in Lovdata Pro. <https://lovdata.no/SF/forskrift/2020-06-29-1423>
6. <https://lovdata.no/forskrift/2020-07-13-1553>
7. <https://lovdata.no/forskrift/2020-10-20-2099>
8. <https://lovdata.no/forskrift/2021-01-28-233>
9. <https://lovdata.no/forskrift/2020-11-06-2248>
10. See, for example, the Minister of Justice defending her trip 'home': <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/a-reise-hjem-er-ikke-unodvendig-fritidsreise/72351392>
11. Specified 'essential' trips abroad for Norwegian residents as of May 2021 included only such trips as those to the birth of one's child or seeing seriously ill or dying relatives. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/flere-ma-pa-karantenehotell-og-innreiserestriksjonene-forlenges/id2838529/>
12. The search term first trended on Google in the early weeks of July 2020.
13. As of September 2022, the group had more than 2,100 members.

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