

Why It Did Not Work: Structural Problems Behind Unsuccessful Return Migration in Latvia

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This paper is based on research analysing cases of unsuccessful East–West return migration. Specifically, it examines returnees’ expectations, needs and challenges that shape the decision for re-migration or double return migration. Qualitative data were collected from 2020 to 2022 through 16 in-depth biographical interviews. The analysis applies narrative thematic and discursive approaches, focusing on specific word choices and discursive forms. Although subjective and personal factors largely influence the narrators’ mobility, the article highlights the structural factors underlying their unsuccessful return-migration experiences. The research question is: What structural problems have determined returnees’ decisions for double return migration? The results depict return migration as an emotionally driven decision motivated by a sense of belonging, a duty to Latvia, a desire to contribute and institutional encouragement to return. Differences in communication culture, work environment and power relations emerge as key structural challenges contributing to double return migration or leaving the homeland. In analysing the factors prompting narrators to reconsider their return and to leave Latvia for a second time, the study concludes that, during their migration, the interviewees have adopted new values that render them outsiders and make them unwilling to adapt.

Keywords: double return migration, unsuccessful return, reintegration, Latvia

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Latvia, like other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, experienced significant migration outflows. The Latvian diaspora is estimated to exceed half a million people (Hazans 2020) – which is considerable compared to Latvia's population of less than 2 million. Return migration is seen by some as a potential solution to a diminishing population and declining labour force, in the hope that the migration from Eastern European countries will be temporary (Hazans and Philips 2011). However, others expressed their suspicions that the nature of East–West migration might not be as temporary as predicted (Krings, Bobek, Moriarty, Salamońska and Wickham 2013). Such doubts also arise when many citizens are prepared to migrate again – two-thirds of recent returnees consider leaving (Hazans 2016a), and within 3–4 years after return, about a third of returnees leave Latvia (Hazans 2020).

Over the past decade, a significant body of research has been dedicated to understanding the motivations behind return migration. Despite diverse forms of return mobility, return migration in Latvia is more associated with the end of the migration cycle and permanent return (Lulle, Krisjane and Bauls 2019). This overlaps with the migrants' willingness to return: Latvians often define their mobility as temporal and explain it by achieving specific objectives, such as improving their knowledge, opportunities and quality of life. The important motives for returning are the lack of family and friends in the host country, longing for Latvia and the desire for children to live and study in Latvia (Zača, Hazans and Bela 2018). Some are attracted by decreasing wage differences and improved job opportunities in Latvia (Apsite-Berina, Manea and Berzins 2020).

Although migrants wish to return home, scholarly evidence suggests that returnees experience reintegration challenges. Moreover, even if motivated by concerns related to quality of life, which draw attention away from the affective and emotional aspects, returns are very much related to imaginaries (Grosa 2022; Saar and Saar 2020). Returnees often check whether they have made the right decision and compare their opportunities in their home country with those abroad. They weigh their attachments to places and individuals in both countries and maintain transnational ties (White 2022). Hence, with the challenges they may face, the return to the home country is unstable – a situation which may push returnees to give up and re-migrate. The component of double return in cases whereby returnees are committed to resettling permanently in their home country has been understudied.

This research takes a deeper look at the case of Latvia, studying unsuccessful return cases and focusing on the structural reintegration problems that negatively affect returnees' decision to settle in Latvia. Due to the initial hope of the respondents to stay permanently in the home country and their disappointment at not being able to reintegrate, followed by a change of mind and return to the host country, this return attempt is here called an 'unsuccessful' return migration. I also use White's (2013) conceptualisation of 'double return' migration: when analysing migrants who return to their homeland hoping to settle but then change their minds and return to settle abroad, the researcher coined the term 'double return' migration, emphasising returnees' sense of 'returning home' to the foreign country (2013: 77). The term 're-migration' is used, emphasising the repeated leaving of the home country, which may or may not be a return to the previous host country.

This study focuses on unsuccessful returns to Latvia and delves into the self-reported experiences of returnees. It adopts a qualitative approach to understanding cases where return migrants to Latvia changed their minds and decided to return to the host country. It used interviews to gain in-depth insights into the complexities of return migration problems in Latvia. With a theoretical overview and analysis of the empirical data, I answer the research question: What structural problems have determined returnees' double return migration decision?

The studies of unsuccessful returns are particularly significant because, even if migrants feel very closely tied to Latvia until their return after an unsuccessful attempt, about half of the narrators lose faith in return and

are strongly determined to integrate into the host country. The paper contributes to the literature on returnee integration problems and double return migration, a topic that has been understudied and warrants further attention.

Theoretical background

A widely used approach in sociology is to analyse return migrations through classical migration theories. The neo-classical and the new economics of labour migration theories view migrants as individuals who, via migration, maximise their earnings; however, return migration is considered a failure or a pre-planned strategy (Cassarino 2004). Structuralists criticise economic theories by pointing out that they downplay the role of state and structural factors, like inequalities in resources and immigration policies.

Analysing push and pull factors, Gmelch (1980) implies that social-patriotic and familial-personal factors influence the decision to return more significantly than economic-occupational ones. Although classical theories elucidate legitimate aspects of mobility, the perspectives seem too one-sided to analyse contemporary migrations' great complexity adequately (Castles and Miller 1998: 23) as they do not provide a meaningful understanding of the freedoms of human action and a realistic understanding of migration according to modern capabilities. Thus, de Haas (2021: 18) suggests mobility dimensions such as the instrumental (migration as a means to achieve an aim, like higher income or better education) and the intrinsic (the value of the migration experience in and of itself, such as the joy of exploring new places or the social prestige linked to proving oneself).

Another distinction is made between those migrants who intended their migration to be temporary and those who intended it to be permanent; however, most migrants do not have a definite plan and keep open the possibility that they will go home one day (Gmelch 1980: 138). Brettell (2003[1997]) calls hope and nostalgia elements of the cultural ideology of return migration in Portuguese society: an intention to return is fundamental to the entire process. Lulle (2017) refers to the Latvian migrant's need to belong and the idea of return as the most powerful driving force. The continuous internal dialogue of belonging shows the complexity, polyvocality and discursivity of the migrant's state of mind.

Return preparedness is a crucial element of a successful, sustainable return and acknowledges that, despite a substantial degree of preparedness, returnees often go through a complex process of re-adaptation in their home country. This process can be multi-phased, long-lasting and impacted on by diverse individual, social and structural factors (Cassarino 2008). Psychological preparedness is increasingly emphasised, stressing the complex sociocultural, emotional, ideological and political ramifications of the nexus between return migration and psychosocial well-being (Saar and Nase 2021; Vathi and King 2017).

Researchers reveal that the relationship between migration and integration depends on motivation, migrant education, culture, livelihood (de Haas and Fokkema 2011), satisfaction with living standards, working conditions and life in general (Koroļeva 2021). The migration intentions can change due to contextual factors such as discrimination, social exclusion and limited access to the labour market (de Haas, Fokkema and Fihri 2015). Migrants who feel marginalised, lack a sense of belonging and have differences in values, beliefs and practices are thus more willing to leave the country (Gherghina, Ploeanu and Necula 2020). Lietaert and Kuschminder (2021) propose the concept of multi-dimensionality, which underscores the holistic nature of reintegration and involves an intersection of economic, social, emotional, physical, psychosocial and political domains.

Studies in migrant psychology show that re-entry into the original culture can be even more challenging than emigration: returnees suffer from cross-cultural re-entry shock; their experience and skills gained abroad may not be evaluated (Adler 1981). Returnees must readapt to the home-country environment to learn new

ways of behaviour and thinking (Furnham 2019). As critical factors influencing overall well-being and adaptation, acculturation studies mention financial problems, academic stress and identity conflicts (Pacheco 2020). In analysing Turkish returnees' readjustment, Kunuroglu (2021) found that sociocultural adaptation to the local context is lower for returnees with a higher sense of belonging to the host country or broader European context.

Migration can strengthen or weaken cultural links and contribute to new cultural awareness and identity development (Sussman 2007). How the migrants view themselves and where they draw the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' does not converge with the receiving society's views because, in contrast to most people's lives in their places of origin and destination, immigrants' lives straddle two or more national societies (Shams 2020). If the Latvian population's attitudes towards otherness and cultural diversity are often unclear and negative (Kaprāns, Mieriņa and Saulītis 2020), returnees' cultural belonging and identity often are more fluid, open and confident and their attitudes more inclusive (White and Grabowska 2019). They feel the loss of those people, experiences and cultural environment to which they are already accustomed abroad.

It is highlighted that returnees need to re-establish a sense of control; the adjustment means an adaptation to work, an interaction with homeland citizens and an adaptation to the environment and culture (Black, Gregersen and Mendenhall 1992: 744). The success of adaptation is closely linked to professional integration and assessment (Zača *et al.* 2018); additionally, a sense of professional identity plays a crucial role as an influential mediating variable, bridging the relationship between post-return conditions in the home country and the work atmosphere (Andrianto, Jianhong, Hommey, Damayanti and Wahyuni 2018).

Among the factors still mentioned which hinder integration are the legacies of the communist period, such as specific labour-market and cultural characteristics, mistrust in institutions and scepticism towards government reintegration programmes (King, Lulle and Buzinska 2016), continuing wage gaps between CEE and Western Europe, gender inequality and employers' reluctance to hire returnees (White 2022). Integration in Latvia is even more complicated for low-paid returnees (Zača *et al.* 2018).

These unsuccessful returns, together with subsequent double returns stemming from the challenges of fitting in and meeting essential needs in the home country, have received little attention. Most researchers think that, in contemporary migration, return should be viewed as an unsustainable and unsettled process and part of intra-European mobility (White 2022); returnees can be involved in different forms of mobility while engaging in reintegration processes (Anghel, Oltean and Silian 2022). However, White (2011, 2013, 2014) discusses both double return and the motivations and strategies of migrants who return to Poland – hoping to settle but then changing their minds and returning to settle abroad. She points to returnees' social insecurity and dissatisfaction with their home country's government and state politics (White 2013, 2014); returnees have problems accessing suitable jobs, feel disillusioned and miss their homes abroad. Failed return helps to reduce transnationalism and opens up opportunities for migrants to simplify split lives, rethink priorities and concentrate on integration abroad. In their study on Ghanaian returnees from Canada, Kyeremeh, Kutor, Annan-Aggrey, Yusuf and Arku (2023) highlight, as the main reasons for double return, the integration challenges for children, business failures, economic hardships and poor infrastructure and services in the home country.

Data collection and analysis

This article uses 16 biographical interviews with returnees conducted between 2020 and 2022. Only those returnees who had returned to settle in Latvia permanently but had changed their decision due to structural problems and made a double return (had returned abroad or were ready to leave shortly) were invited to participate in the interviews. Subjects were sought by following media reports and contacting them personally,

asking for recommendations and contacts for acquaintances and addressing social network users by posting invitations to participate in interviews on various Facebook groups.

Altogether, 8 men and 8 women, all Latvians, were interviewed. In 6 cases, participants returned to Latvia as entire households. For 3 participants, the time spent abroad before return was nearly 5 years; the largest duration abroad was 20 years, while the average was 10. The participants represented various social backgrounds and ranged in age from 23 to 51 years. Of the interviewees, 11 held higher education qualifications. Almost all returnees, even those living elsewhere, sought work or were employed in Latvia's capital – Riga – or its surrounding areas. One family, however, chose to settle in another city – in the countryside.

The research was conducted ethically, adhering to the requirements of the Personal Data Protection Regulation and the Code of Ethics of Latvian sociologists. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and their rights, including the option to withdraw from the interview at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To protect confidentiality, all individuals and locations mentioned in the paper have been anonymised, with pseudonyms assigned to participants. The interviews were conducted in Latvian, and the quoted passages in the article are translated.

The research design and method of analysis are narrative, illustrating the selectivity of experience and enhancing awareness of social and contextual aspects through the continuous interaction of human thought with personal, social and material environments (Butler-Kisber 2018). The individual return experience is explored through the subject's self-assigned meanings. In the thematic analysis, the content is the primary focus, with minimal attention paid to how the narrative is told, the conversation's micro context, the role of the interviewer, transcription and considerations of a real or imaginary audience (Riessman 2008). I use thematic analysis to explore topics that reveal the narrators' wishes, needs and difficulties through single-voice narration.

The dialogical or discursive analysis is applied to dialogically produced or performed themes that reveal the relationship between returnees and the external context, conflicts and power relations. Discursive structures are particularly effective for detecting complex social relationships (Vitanova 2013); the approach helps to assess institutional and power discourses and to connect events with broader contexts (Souto-Manning 2014). When analysing discursive themes, I paid close attention to speech form, discursive structures and narration strategies. The macro context, which reveals the social context and power relationship within the narrative, is essential.

In the tradition of thematic analysts, I interpret the data by considering the purpose of the study, the narratives of experience as a source of data, insights from other return-migration studies and the previously discussed theories.

Findings

The narratives in this study show that feelings of patriotism and national belonging play a crucial role in return migration. At the same time, more is needed for the returnees' long-term stay. There are sociocultural adaption problems and cultural shock: returnees initially feel a honeymoon-like euphoria; however, this phase is followed by a sharp emotional drop, disappointment, confusion and an unwillingness to align. Already in the culture-shock phase, the participants changed their decision to settle and left the country: in 9 cases during the first year, 4 more participants left Latvia in the second year and only 3 participants remained longer. Adeline lived in Latvia for 5 years:

In the beginning, there is that period when you have those rose-coloured glasses. It seems that I am already happy from the fact that I am already there, such a little speck of dust, but I am in my country, and this is what I wanted! (...) The reality of life quickly opens your eyes. (...) You realise that you can no longer provide the normal, everyday life that you had in [country]; you cannot transfer it to Latvia because the economic situation in Latvia is completely different. (...) When I arrived, I felt [with energy] I could open a company there! I knew I could; I could do it! My wings were not broken. But there [in Latvia], somehow, they broke quickly.

Before returning, participants feel well-informed, familiar with the situation and ready to fit in quickly and easily. However, return is unexpectedly challenging; there are problems with social acculturation and reintegration, divergent approaches and thinking, indifference, resistance, a lack of contacts and a lack of understanding of the local system. The participants feel that they are perceived as a threat and that getting the desired position will be much more complicated than expected.

If participants previously had the impression that they would be welcomed, the reality of return requires significant adjustment. Contrary to the initial assumption that returnees would be welcome in Latvia and easily find employment, they often face intense competition for roles that match their skills or else they must create such opportunities themselves. They come to realise that many of their expectations are based on wishful thinking and that they are required to find ways to adapt and fit in.

Aspects of belonging and cultural identity

The study shows that an emotional desire to return home is accompanied by a wish to enjoy Latvia's nature and culture and a willingness to send children to a Latvian school. Participants revealed that children's needs, quality of life and educational opportunities are significant return drivers. Parents feel responsible for their children's Latvian language skills and cultural experience.

Mary is a mother of three. The family has returned so that the eldest can start school in Latvia:

Right now, everything is focused on our children. I also chose [school in Latvia] because it greatly focuses on Latvian traditions, folk songs and lifestyle. We are here so the children can practice the Latvian language and live in that culture.

Are you also doing something abroad to maintain children's Latvian identity?

I do it tirelessly [a listing of measures]. I also chose [country] because there was a Latvian [diaspora] school. That's important to me. (...) We celebrate national holidays even more actively than [people] in Latvia.

Most participants never intended to leave Latvia permanently: apart from accumulating financial capital, in many cases, it is also about acquiring knowledge, skills and expertise. For some, the desire to return has been long-standing, driven by a sense of duty and guilt for not returning sooner. Before returning, narrators were confident in their abilities and hopeful of finding work. When the opportunity to return emerges, there is joy about the decision to return home, as John illustrates:

It took us about 5 years to decide; in 2018, we sold our house (...). We thought: we have been in [country] for 17 years; let's go and see. The feeling is fantastic; it's the feeling of home. It wasn't hard at all; it was a gradual decision. (...) I could contribute and benefit in terms of structural changes, training and patient treatment. I had the feeling that I knew everything here. (...) I used to come here [to Latvia] in the summer

and went to the hospitals to visit patients with my colleagues (...) I was absolutely sure that I would get a place in academic medicine; (...) that with my knowledge, position and recognition and having led [diaspora organisation] for several years, there would be support.

Migrants observe differences in the social environment and communication cultures; misunderstandings and confrontations arise from different attitudes and perceptions. They aim to be heard, to be active decision-makers and believe recommendations from the diaspora are often blocked as ‘outsider’ criticisms. Emmy says that she was encouraged to return by her willingness to actively engage in policy-making and her curiousness in evaluating herself and seeing her place in Latvia: ‘I had already moved so much (*laughs*) and, in each place, I re-created myself; those reasons for returning were more personal to me – I wanted to understand who I am in Latvia (...); what are my value and place?’

The independence that comes from a good education and international expertise is also an obstacle for the narrators: they are less willing to accept the existing rules and conformism and to meet society’s expectations. Their criticism and language can be straightforward and sharp, simultaneously realising that their opportunities in Latvia decrease with every public confrontation. Narrators admit that, if there is a desire to try to return again after some time, ‘self-censorship, (...) avoiding stepping on a rake’ is necessary. Several participants, such as Emmy, assumed that the returnees’ independence causes mistrust and scares others because ‘your professional survival depends not on how you behave in Latvia; you can always return to your career abroad. Therefore, even if you were quieter, you wouldn’t be accepted because you are not controllable’.

Returnees often find that socioeconomic changes are less significant than imagined, as John says: ‘I was sure, I had great hope, that a miracle had happened in Latvian politics. (...) I thought this was the time for reform, but I was wrong’. While successful sociocultural and professional integration in the host country motivated their return, it distanced them from locals in their home country. The sense of marginalisation causes doubt about returnees’ belonging, values, beliefs and practices, as they experience discrimination related to unfair local practices and unequal access to resources. Returnees identify with a broader perspective and highlight issues of xenophobia, homophobia, ageism and other prejudices in Latvia.

Inclusion in schools

Integrating children into the education system poses significant challenges for returnees (Grosa 2022). Thirty per cent of respondents with minors mention obstacles such as the difficulty in finding schools or kindergartens and their dissatisfaction with school environments or attitudes (Hazans 2016a). In this study, inclusion problems in schools are indicated by all families with children. Problems arise due to the heavy workload, the reluctance to accept children with different educational backgrounds, unreadiness to teach Latvian as a foreign language and a rigid evaluation system. Relocation stress can also affect children’s health. Respondents emphasise these challenges as being very significant and, along with others, they lead returnees to reconsider double return, as Adeline says:

It was tough for our 9-year-old child to integrate into the education system: he has difficulties switching to the Latvian language; if, before, in [country], it took half an hour for him to prepare his work at home, the preparation for the next school day [in Latvia] goes on almost until midnight. Studies and the after-school music and sports programmes created an abnormal load for him. He had everything in one big avalanche – new environment, classmates, language barrier, a lot to learn, going to school and coming back independently. It caused him health problems and he had to attend sand therapy. The first year, he lived only with the idea that he would go back.

The critical point comes when a child born in Latvia is not given a place in a kindergarten. Adeline feels tired and sad as the family income is insufficient for a private kindergarten:

It was a significant need at the time because I really couldn't afford to sit at home. (...) But to be honest, maybe that was just one of the reasons I mentioned but I also really wanted to double return – maybe because I already have [list of relatives] here [in the host country] and friends I keep in touch with regularly.

Lack of interest in returnees' reintegration

Returnees view state support as largely formal and have generally not utilised it; however, they express a need for genuine interest and practical assistance. The lack of attention to their reintegration and foreign-acquired expertise has left them feeling undervalued and unappreciated as agents of change and valuable employees.

Participants see successful reintegration as a result of personal qualities, self-investment and luck. They critique media portrayals of return migration success stories, which are often created in the initial euphoria of return and tend to provide one-sided perspectives. For instance, Amelia's return was widely praised in the media, yet she faced financial struggles and lacked support. Her frustration stems from the media's focus on her achievements abroad and the fact of her return while ignoring her reintegration challenges. Participants emphasise the importance of a balanced portrayal of return migration that openly discusses both the successes and challenges which returnees face to provide more realistic insights.

Participants emphasise that the experiences of acquaintances' unsuccessful returns have a more significant impact on the diaspora than 'positive propaganda' stories; the diaspora is eager to hear what returnees genuinely think about their experience. Some returnees even avoid discussing their unsuccessful returns with the diaspora, fearing that their stories might discourage others from considering returning.

Working environment and willingness to contribute

The weakest and most dangerous point for participants is integration into the working environment. Finding a job and providing basic needs turns out to be unexpectedly difficult. The hierarchical work and communication culture, the situation that part of the salary is offered 'in an envelope' to avoid taxation and the high tax burden for small businesses are all mentioned. Narratives refer to the high-income inequality, social insecurity and insecurity of Latvia's work environment, as Oliver reveals:

If you have an above-average income level or have sources of income abroad, you have a very high standard of living in Riga. Wealthy people in Latvia have a really good life. However, as long as your income is low, you have a terrible life – very unsafe. I think that, for many people, the feeling of insecurity in Latvia is balanced by the feeling of the familiar environment – you orient yourself in that environment and you have some fictitious feeling of security. Contacts are very important in Latvia – one's connections. These factors both work for good in Latvia and show its systemic error.

The participants realise that the fact that they have low social capital in Latvia is a significant disadvantage. Amelia thinks that those who have always lived in Latvia can rely on acquaintances for various matters while, to get a job, 'you need contacts very much'; as Amelia now states, qualifications seem less important.

The social cafe was a tool; it gave me visibility. As I had a PhD in science and ran a circular economy model company, what I said carried weight. People trusted my words (...). You need contacts there to be

included or invited; you need to know people. I'm leaving now with a heavy heart: people got to know me because of the café. However, my recognition will be gone if I don't make myself known, living abroad for a few more years.

The narrators believe that the professional knowledge they acquire abroad is not valued in Latvia. Charlotte describes returning to her previous job as a 'resurrection from the dead'. After 4 years abroad, with a Master's degree and good work experience, she is offered the same position. She observes her employer's absolute ignorance about knowledge acquired abroad and feels 'fear from non-mobile colleagues: won't they lose their jobs if other migrants could also return?'

For highly skilled participants, migration means accumulating knowledge, professional experience and the ability to increase their competitiveness. They are confident about the value of their human and social capital accumulated abroad and hopeful about the opportunities to contribute to Latvia's growth; they believe that they will be able to 'make some contribution, some benefit in structural changes'. Professionals' willingness to be involved, listened to and considered are important topics. Participants claim that their suggestions or ideas are rejected, saying that returnees do not have the necessary positions to decide, are not in charge or do not understand the situation in Latvia. They feel a powerful stamp of outsiders, which allows their opinions to not be heard and recommendations to not be considered. Some, who have been well-paid professionals abroad, are advised to 'start by digging ditches' or first to prove themselves. It shows an underestimation of returnees' knowledge and international experience, as John states:

Sometimes Latvian politicians do not realise that the place has not been given to anyone in the Western academic environment. (...) If they think you will return and start everything from the bottom, I can say: 'Good luck!' No one will come back. (...) If you are a professor there, should you be appointed an assistant professor here? Well, (...) I don't understand it.

Emmy admits to 'hiding' behind bureaucratic arguments regarding transferring experience and recognising professional qualifications in governmental institutions. She stresses that the problem is not only that her professional experience acquired abroad is not appreciated but, even more importantly, that such cases make other professionals in the diaspora cautious about the possibility of a return:

[Professionals] do not want to return just to come back but want to contribute. They feel that they have gained professional experience and stability and want to be equal at this negotiation table. Lately, I have seen very few such cases in which it could be said: Oh, yes, it works there! They have significant and substantively good positions and ranks.

The participants support a horizontal management style, where the most important thing is the goal, a good idea, a contribution or a solution. At the same time, as John says, vertically hierarchical thinking is dominant in Latvia: 'We [society in Latvia] have a huge respect not for ideas but for positions'. It dissonates the desire of participants to help and advise not by climbing the career ladder in Latvia and being in a high position but by maintaining collegial relationships at all levels; Charlotte believes this is a fundamentally significant difference in perception and thinking. She reveals that, through living abroad, she developed the ability to appreciate differences and experiences as value, compared to the importance of 'being as high as possible in the structure of society', as is 'most often the case in Latvia'.

Almost unanimously, interviewees acknowledged that there are far more opportunities in the private sector; there is funding for returnees to start a business. At the same time, the participants dare not risk starting a business

because they believe that taxes and bureaucratic requirements in Latvia are too high. However, reprofiling and the private sector are almost the only solutions in cases where skills are too specific.

Conflicts with a 'system' and power relations

Participants mark locally conditioned social structures or, as they used to call them, the 'system', as lacking objective assessment, competition and meritocracy. They observe a prevailing desire in Latvia for people who follow the political will or their employer without question but prefer a less hierarchical and more open communication form. The 'system' demands adaptation, obedience and passivity, which the participants find unacceptable.

John says that the closed 'system' means a misuse of power, resistance to change, innovation, and reform and a reluctance to relinquish control. He publicly challenges and criticises the 'system', questioning its transparency and pushing people to realise that post-Soviet arrangements still exist. John believes that he disrupts the 'system' balance, encouraging people to see its flaws and strive for meaningful transformation.

(...) there must be a meritocracy. That is what I have fought for. (...) I have no fear of competing and I am not afraid of losing if this person is better. (...) The fact that someone has been abroad doesn't mean he is better at once. It doesn't mean that. But it must be that there is an objective comparison.

Emmy is concerned that Latvia's reluctance to adopt foreign experiences and its determination to stick to previous practices 'can slow Latvian society's ability to talk about different things openly, generate new ideas, include different points of view and move forward faster'. Emmy emphasises that for 'a person who does not want to blend in somehow' but who will be an active opinion-maker, 'fitting in is a challenge'. Integration requires 'compromises with yourself and the culture of conversation you have learned outside'. She believes that Latvia still needs to learn that the exchange of opinions does not mean that opponents are the enemy and that discussion, objections and criticism are the formats in which co-designed solutions are reached.

Returnees feel obligated to highlight the system's failures; however, criticism brings conflict and pervasive resistance. Despite initial optimism, narrators are not surprised by their failure; they see that people in Latvia are often unheard and unappreciated. While acknowledging the system's flaws, returnees such as Oliver feel unable to change it. Ultimately, they chose to double return instead of adapting: 'I didn't have a place there because I didn't want to fit in'.

Admitting defeat

Little by little, the participants began to reassess the situation in Latvia and to think about whether return migration was a meaningful decision for them. On the one hand, their narratives express determination and show how the returnees try to fit in; on the other, as in Oliver's case, they show pain, disappointment and frustration:

I have the feeling of an open wound. (...) I feel terrible. On the one hand, it is terrible; on the other hand, I am very liberated and happy. (...) I don't feel like I've given up now and would say no, never again. I wouldn't. (...) I see that there is a need for development in a particular political party. Development takes time; the personnel there also need to gain experience and develop to become a resource that can be used to realise our political ideals. (...) It is the curse of democracy for all of us that, if we, as citizens, aren't actively involved, we must expect that someone else will be. It is our responsibility to participate. That's

the problem with it. I said I'm liberated; that's the feeling I have but, on the other hand, I also feel that it's not right.

The acceptance of failure and the decision to leave also come with a sense of release – the migrant can stop worrying and stop trying to prove something. Despite the loss, my interviewees are happy that they tried. ‘Many criticised me: “Why do you teach us from [country] [while] sitting there with your big salary? Come here and do it!” (...) I’ve tried, and it doesn’t work (...) I’ve done everything I could. (...) I have lost, absolutely’ (John). Some say that, even if the return were unsuccessful, the sense of longing, guilt and duty has disappeared, and it is possible to let go of a close attachment to Latvia and integrate into the host country.

Narrative strategies and language forms

The narrative dimensions of unsuccessful return migrations reveal three discursive dimensions (Fairclough 2006[1992]):

2. In the framework of return migration, the perception of returnees, in general, coincides with the diasporas and return-migration policy guidelines which suggest that it is necessary to cooperate, that it is important to return and to invest in Latvia. Otherwise, migration could be regarded as a loss of human capital and resources invested in education.
3. When the narrator returns with the idea that ‘I will help because I am asked and I have opportunities’, it turns out that it is neither necessary nor possible.
4. The textual level shows individual problems and the inability to obtain a position appropriate to the narrator’s knowledge and experience.

The interrelationship between the returnees and the sociocultural context is illustrated through the use of both single- and double-voiced discourse strategies (Vitanova 2013). The single-voiced narrative is primarily used to disclose the desires and needs of narrators. These themes are embedded into the common return-migration concept. The double-voiced discourse strategy in narrative themes is used to counter-state, compare and reveal institutional contexts and power relations and to point out the institutional problems which they see.

John’s narrative sheds light on power relations. Driven by a sense of civic duty to get involved, to help and to encourage a faster transition from post-socialist structures and mindsets to democratic relations, he encounters conflict with the authorities. He compares his efforts to obtain a position in Latvia to a battle: ‘to fight for a better Latvia’, ‘You fight with all your heart’, and so on. He believes that those who are committed to protecting the status quo – ‘representatives of the old [post-Soviet] system’ – still hold positions of power. ‘The giant surprise’, he says, ‘is that – I will tentatively call it a clique – when it feels threatened, it is very united. But they are not Latvia; they are just a few specific individuals.’

A legitimisation strategy such as argumentation, storytelling and quoting (van Dijk 1993: 264) is also used. For example, Emmy points to the diaspora and returnees as a necessary opposition and uses an argumentation strategy. Referring to migration research and quoting experts, she says that, when critical European-minded professionals emigrate from their home country, the risks of corruption increase: ‘When the woodpeckers fly away, a disease multiplies faster in the tree. (...) no one can effectively uncover its [social structures] internal ailments and help to get rid of them’. The argumentation shows self-awareness and the need to be like woodpeckers – to speak loudly and openly about the home country’s flaws. The argumentation strategy helps to legitimise the sharp confrontations – the narrators not only ‘have not learned to obey in the Soviet-style’ but also ‘do not think it would be right’.

To be convincing, narrators often use comparisons, particularly when referring to practices in other countries ('If we look at Western Europe or America (...)'; 'It would not be imaginable in Western countries that (...)'). Primarily, the comparison is used to point out that the fear of systemic change is not justified – similar issues and changes are already taking place in neighbouring countries and problems in Latvia are not unique. '(...) we [in Latvia] are not so different. Therefore, I would not like to stigmatise Latvian society as very conservative; we can also see it in Germany' (Oliver). A storytelling tactic is also used to provide samples of unsuccessful attempts by others to do something for Latvia.

The specific nature of the study justifies the use of the legitimising strategies: the interviewees are in a situation where they are supposed to explain their double return, discover the conflict and talk about what they would like to keep quiet about. Several narrators also use a positive self and a negative others presentation (van Dijk 1993: 264). They emphasise idealistic intentions and indicate their willingness to work for Latvia or a good idea without pay. This does not mean that the narrators are not interested in income; they have calculated their recourse and are ready to get involved in specific projects to which they can make a significant contribution. 'I thought it was obvious. You see that there are not enough resources and that that resource is you. You want to do it, it seems important to you and you do it' (Oliver). The narrators believe that the return of migrants as agents of change should be primarily supported and encouraged.

The systemic structures, the clique and sometimes public opinion that resist change are represented as negative 'others'. The 'system' calls into question the idea of selfless volunteering for Latvia's growth and does not give such an opportunity. 'They' is often used when discussing the government, the people in charge and the 'system' – e.g. 'They are opportunists that fit their mind to the circumstances. Mediocrity continues to hire mediocrity'.

My participants do not identify as part of the united group 'we, returnees' and are unaware of their affiliation with the diaspora until they return. Luca mentions that he was shocked by the fact that, when going back 'to his own home', he was called a 'stupid migrant'. He reveals his frustration and pain in his awareness that, back in his home, he is seen as an outsider. On the other hand, the use of 'we' has a common meaning when the participants are talking about Latvians living outside of Latvia, as Luca says:

(...) we would all return! If only we could live like here in [country]. Because in everyone's heart, as I talk to people here, everyone, well, everyone is drawn to Latvia. And there are those who say that they will never [return to Latvia] but that's because they know that Latvia will never be like here; that's why they say so.

However, the pronoun 'we' is always used when talking about Latvia – it is about 'our country', 'our institutions' or 'our history' but also the form 'we, Latvia' – as in: 'We, Latvia, grow'; 'We, Latvia, will never be like [Western European country]'. The narrators need to confirm that they are not outsiders. Even if they live in another country, they remain connected, care for and cultivate the Latvian cultural environment.

The narratives highlight the need to be needed. Unable to find a job and provide for themselves, many narrators, Like Amelia, conclude with disappointment: 'Latvia does not need me; I thought "Someone will need my education". Nobody needs it. It was a mistake; I realised it too late. Nobody in Latvia needs my skills'. Finding a suitable job to provide basic needs takes much work for the narrators, who point to the dilemma they face. On the one hand, they feel called to return; it is said that Latvia needs people to return, that Latvia needs both labour and the knowledge and skills which people acquire. On the other hand – not seeing anyone interested in returnees' reintegration and not being able to provide for themselves – they feel that the return migration policy is formal: 'No policy helps. At no point. How much I also read [about it] on social networks,

it's crazy! Nobody needs you in Latvia! Nobody. "You're needed", that's what they preach, but those plans don't work' (Benjamin).

Conclusions

The paper delves into the process of returnees' reintegration, examining why migrants who return with the expectation of successful reintegration ultimately choose to leave Latvia again. What structural problems hinder their intention to settle permanently?

The narratives reveal cases of instrumental mobility where the narrators are ready to return after achieving specific goals abroad. A strong desire to return, driven by a need to belong and contribute, underscores the migrants' deep connection to their homeland. The reasons for returning to Latvia align with the broader literature: social-patriotic and familial-personal factors are seen as significant pull factors. Like previous studies (see Barcevičius 2016; Fredheim and Varpina 2024; Saar and Saar 2020; Zača *et al.* 2018), powerful motivations for return migration include a longing to live in Latvia, a sense of belonging and a desire to send children to a Latvian school and immerse them in Latvian culture. Notably, the quality of life in the home country for returnees is often comparable to, or even better than, that abroad – an important factor for families with children. A less-frequently mentioned yet powerful motivation in this study is a sense of duty towards Latvia.

This finding contrasts with those of Apsite-Berina *et al.* (2020), who observe that re-adaptation among returnees is generally easy. Narratives reveal that returnees still feel the influence of communist and post-transformation legacies in Latvia, a significant factor pushing them away. Echoing White (2022), I find that returnees believe that change in their home country is frustratingly slow. Reintegrating migrants are deterred by workplace dynamics: hierarchical management styles are criticised, as returnees prefer a more egalitarian approach; there is frustration over jobs reserved for friends rather than allocated on merit, which fosters risks of corruption; and the widespread use of envelope salaries to evade taxes, simultaneously reducing employees' social security.

Although Latvia's return migration policy documents address potential returnees by encouraging their return and aim to assist actual returnees in reintegration (Kļave and Šūpule 2019; Prusakova, Bērziņš, and Apsīte-Beriņa 2021), participants feel that they were successfully targeted as *potential* returnees but received no support as *actual* returnees. They highlight that the return-migration discourse of policymakers and public institutions seems fragmented and overly formal. For them, return is a highly personal decision, motivated by cultural and emotional ties. As in Lithuania (Barcevičius 2016), participants believe that returnees in Latvia succeed in reintegrating only through personal qualities, self-investment and luck.

The narratives align with studies (Birka 2020; Fredheim and Varpina 2024; Prusakova *et al.* 2021) that underscore the importance of collaboration and the need to view Latvia as a dynamic, opportunity-rich environment. Participants also emphasised the need to actively engage in skills and knowledge transfer, thus contributing to the home country's development. Within the general framework, returnees' perceptions (both theoretically and before returning) reflect the prevailing ideology that feedback and cooperation with Latvia are needed and that returning is preferable (Kaprāns *et al.* 2020); otherwise, emigration would be seen as a loss of human capital and resources invested in their education (Suciu and Florea 2017; Zača *et al.* 2018).

Returning with broader experience and education, most interviewees are confident that Latvian employers will value their knowledge, seeing them as agents of change. They are prepared to apply the skills they have acquired abroad; in that sense, their return can be seen as a 'return of innovation'. Consistent with Cassarino (2004), my study has shown that local power relations, traditions and values strongly impact on returnees' capacity to leverage their migration experiences in Latvia.

In line with previous studies (see Hazans 2016a; Prusakova *et al.* 2021; Zača *et al.* 2018), the narratives show that major reintegration difficulties are related to securing a suitable job or position. Contrary to the expected synergies, participants encounter institutional indifference towards their knowledge, experience and ideas. They fail to obtain desired positions, struggle to realise their potential and cannot capitalise on the skills and expertise gained abroad. Financial challenges and identity conflicts negatively affect the returnees' well-being and adaptation.

Like King *et al.* (2016), my study found that recruitment practices in Latvia continue to rely heavily on personal connections rather than open advertisements. This creates significant barriers to knowledge transfer which, particularly for highly skilled returnees, is a primary goal of their return. As noted by Bela, Mieriņa and Pinto (2022) and supported by the study's analysis, from the perspective of double return migrants, major barriers to collaboration lie in institutional culture: a lack of strategic thinking, a systemic approach to collaboration and an inclusive attitude. Effective cooperation requires not only interest and initiative at the governmental level but also the recognition of international experience when hiring for positions within Latvia's public administration.

The narratives reveal perceptions of a closed and opaque 'system' characterised by a rigidly vertical structure, resistance to reform and competition among those in power, together with limited interest in innovations that could disrupt entrenched systems. Returnees believe that decision-makers frequently view them as a potential external threat. A lack of contacts, a reluctance to submit to the existing 'system' from lower positions and a willingness to critique the 'system' escalate the conflict.

The study does not confirm Hazans' (2016b) view that return is an option primarily considered by those underutilising their education or qualifications. Instead, cases of double return often involve returnees with significant initial integration into the host country, which may reduce their willingness to re-adapt and motivate their decision to leave again. Re-assimilation is not their preferred strategy – most narrators re-emigrate during the cultural shock phase, emphasising that re-migration is a conscious decision reflecting their unwillingness to adapt. They return to Latvia with new mindsets, expectations and demands, believing that the country needs greater openness to diversity, tolerance, inclusivity, international perspectives and fair competition, along with more transparent institutional processes, stability and respectful communication.

Existential challenges in Latvia are described as complex and even disheartening as they 'break the wings'. Adeline's statement captures this sentiment: 'We should have fought instead of running away, but a person is tired, weak and goes where they can find a little rest'. The narratives highlight internal dialogues among migrants and, similar to Kaprāns' study (2015), demonstrate the dilemma they face: on the one hand, migrants feel closely connected to Latvia; on the other, they feel that the country, especially the government, is indifferent to their return.

Statements like 'No one needs me there' underscore the reasons why most narrators no longer expect to return any time soon. As White (2013, 2014) also observes, some returnees in this study claim that they have 'let go thoughts of Latvia' and focus on deeper integration in the host country.

At the same time, the narrators stress that they do not want their experiences to deter others from considering a return. They view their own return attempt positively and believe that everyone should try returning. Their attempt at return migration has given them a voice in discussions about return migration issues while freeing them from the feelings of guilt and obligations toward Latvia, as well as from seeing their stay abroad as merely temporary. In most cases, this does not mean that they have severed ties with Latvia; rather, these connections have transformed into new goals and ways of engaging with their homeland.


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