RETURN MIGRATION POLICIES IN THE CONTEXT OF INTRA-EU MOBILITY[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Free mobility of labour within the EU has led to unique opportunities for the exchange of skilled labour and knowledge transfers. Citizens of (mostly post-enlargement) EU Member States have made use of this opportunity to generate an additional or higher income and gain international experience. Nowadays, with a shrinking pool of qualified workers and looming demographic challenges, the consequences of emigration for sending EU Member States have become more evident. Moreover, despite the relatively good economic situation and growing wages, return migration is much smaller in scale than anticipated. For instance, there were more than 2.5 million Poles living abroad in 2017, including 7.5% citizens of working age residing abroad within the EU. In the years 2008-2011, between 23% and 32% of Polish emigrants returned to the home country, yet many re-emigrated again. Similar trends are discernible among the other countries in the region. Brexit and its potential consequences for migration and mobility rights have moved the discussion on potential returns back onto the agenda.

Realising the potential benefits of return migration (investments as well as transfer of skills and knowledge), governments are therefore considering their options to attract back citizens to the home country – some more pro-actively than others. Against this background, a recent ICMPD project report[2] has investigated return migration and return policies as well as concrete measures aimed at facilitation of the return process in more than 10 countries, with the focus on instruments aimed at attraction, facilitation and reintegration of returnees.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT RETURN MIGRATION?

Despite the growing attention around return migration within the EU, limited research has been conducted to understand return migration dynamics and the effectiveness of relevant policies and programmes. There is also no consistent, universally accepted definition of the terms "return migration" and "returnees", particularly since the term is often associated with the (involuntary) return of rejected asylum seekers to their country of origin. In the intra-European context, migrants may return permanently at certain points during their economically productive life, for retirement, or temporarily before migrating again. Return can constitute an element of complex, individual biographies of mobility, as the last country of residence before return is not necessarily the country of initial emigration. Indeed, this absence of definition creates confusion when assessing needs, possibilities and estimates of the size of returnee populations, and makes it generally challenging to conduct relevant research.

1 The policy brief describes return migration and return related policies in the context of legal migration with the focus on intra-EU mobility. It does not refer to return of irregular migrants and relevant policies in this field.
2 K. Hahn-Schaur, J. Segeš-Frelak et al., Return Migration Background, Practice Examples and Policy Options for Intra-EU Mobility – Focus on Poland.

Nevertheless, there are some general characteristics of return migrants that can cautiously be inferred from existing research. While many migrants claim that they have return intentions (and many hold on to this "myth of return" for their whole lives), the number of those that actually return is notoriously lower than those who make such claims. Regarding the timeframe, most return migration occurs within the first two years after arrival in the country of destination and decreases significantly after 5 years of stay. Regarding the life cycle and age of return migrants, there seems to be a u-shaped curve, as both young and retiring emigrants are more likely to return. Existing research shows that reasons for return are not clear-cut: Some emigrants who have successfully integrated into the destination country may still return, while others who are less successful and could be expected to return actually remain as migrants in the destination country.

RETURN IN THE POLICY CONTEXT

Figure 1: Diverse approaches to return policy
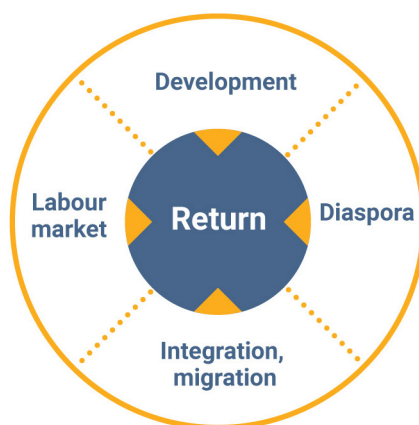
Source: Authors

Countries do not usually have a stand-alone **comprehensive return policy** – rather, it tends to be an **element of other** policies, for example, **diaspora policies** (Figure 1). While diaspora policies generally have a wider scope than return policies, they overlap in their outreach to (potential) returnees. For example, in the case of **Ireland**, return is incorporated into a broader diaspora policy presented in the policy document "Global Irish. Ireland's Diaspora Policy". Although Ireland currently does not pursue a policy of actively attracting emigrants to return, the aim is to facilitate the process for those who wish to return. At the same time, the document states that the Irish government will remove obstacles to return linked to general domestic policies.

Some states have established return policies as part of broader **migration strategies**. For example, the Portuguese "Strategic Plan for Migration" highlights the importance of focused strategies in support of the return of Portuguese emigrants. It states that in addition to being an "inherent duty of national solidarity", return also contributes to the retention and enhancement of national human capital.

There are also countries where return policies constitute a dimension of **multiple and overlapping policies, including talent attraction, migration and diaspora.** For example, in Lithuania, return has been included in the "Global Lithuania Strategy", which aims to promote the diaspora's involvement in life back in Lithuania and prevent the continuation of "brain drain". A 2016 Action Plan designed to reduce emigration and increase return migration speaks to broad target groups and includes measures aimed at promotion of entrepreneurship and creation of new job positions, attracting investors and talents in general.

In Latvia, return constitutes an important element of **development policies**. The National Development Plan of Latvia for 2014-2020 indicates as one of its strategic goals: "to encourage people to stay in Latvia and facilitate the return of Latvian nationals to Latvia". A previous strategic document in this policy area, "Plan of remigration support activities for 2013-2016" highlighted, among others, a need to support returnees in finding employment and re-integrating into society, as well as supporting returnee families through language and cultural classes, with additional support offered to school-aged children.

Spain remains the only country that has both **regional and national level return policies**. The "Return to Spain Plan" approved by the Spanish government in March 2019 aims to facilitate the return of emigrants who left the country during the economic crisis and who are now seen as a resource for the Spanish economy. The Plan builds on previous initiatives at a local level, such as those launched by the region of Castilla-La Mancha and the municipality of Valladolid, which are also currently ongoing.

Integration policies also play a role for return, as returning emigrants (and especially their families) may have similar needs to immigrants. For instance, the Portuguese "Immigrant Mentoring Programme" simply broadened their target group to include returnees too. At the same time, especially in countries experiencing significant labour shortages, we observe an approach to potential returnees from the perspective of labour market policies; such an approach, in turn, defines the type of support measures.

The **goals and target groups** of the policies also diverge. While a few countries pursue a welfare-oriented approach, i.e. supporting emigrants who are in distress situations abroad, return of emigrants has primarily received attention among policymakers and the private sector in the context of the global competition for talent.
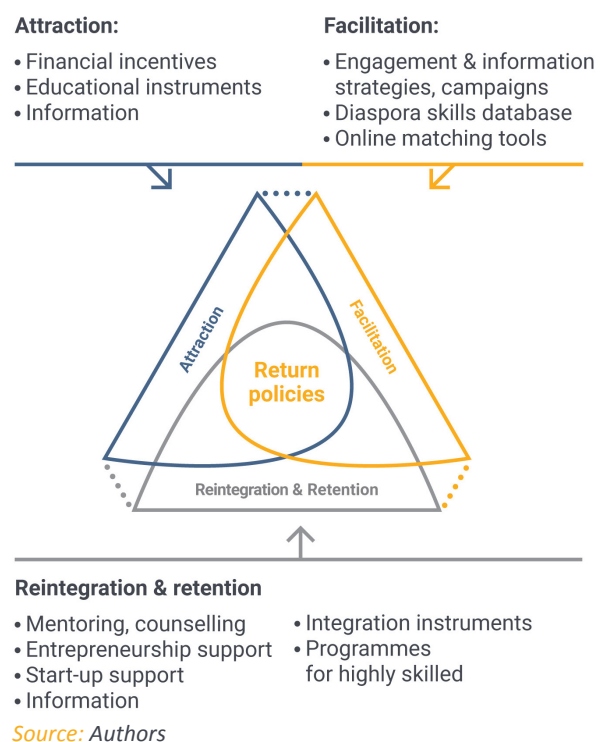
THE RETURN POLICY TOOLBOX

Return policies can be divided into: 1) policies aimed at attracting returnees; 2) policies aimed at facilitating return, targeting potential returnees (e.g. through information); and 3) policies aiming to ensure reintegration. As shown in the graph below (Figure 2), the abovementioned measures can overlap. For example, migrants may require information support prior to and after their return. Entrepreneurship support may attract emigrants to return, but also plays an important role in the reintegration process.

Attraction policies

Attraction policies aim to convince citizens living and working abroad to return to their country of origin, thus stimulating return migration. Among policies promoting return, engagement and information strategies play a prominent role (Table 1). They can promote an idea of return as a success story rather than a failure, which is important considering the social pressures returnees may be subject to; thus, they can also support reintegration. Campaigns can also promote a positive image of the country of origin/return in general. However, a challenge exists here, since studies have shown that some emigrants perceive such campaigns negatively, as showing an unrealistic image of the country.

Figure 2: Forms of support

Attraction:
• Financial incentives
• Educational instruments
• Information

Facilitation:
• Engagement & information strategies, campaigns
• Diaspora skills database
• Online matching tools

Reintegration & retention
• Mentoring, counselling
• Entrepreneurship support
• Start-up support
• Information
• Integration instruments
• Programmes for highly skilled

Source: Authors

Another type of attraction instrument is **financial incentives**. These can include preferential income tax (implemented, for instance, in Portugal), flat income tax (e.g., Malaysia, Malta), tax exemptions on imported cars, subsidies for buying a home, one-time re-entry subsidies and preferential tax schemes for highly-skilled workers. Other measures aimed at attracting returns are related to **education** and their introduction is closely connected with the issue of **brain circulation and global competition for talents,** such as through one-time re-entry subsidies for returning experts (e.g. Slovakia). The predominant goal is to attract back young professionals who could fill gaps in the labour market.

Facilitation instruments

After emigrants have made the decision to return, there is a **range of policy instruments** that **facilitates** their return**. Information and communication activities** (websites, hotlines, etc.) are crucial to **increase return preparedness** and many EU countries have engaged in these kinds of activities. Many EU countries have been involved in information and communication related activities. As an example, the "Crosscare Migrant Project" in Ireland provides information for those planning to move abroad and for those planning to return, particularly on how to (re-)access social services. In the case of Lithuania, the IOM Vilnius Office in cooperation with the Lithuanian Ministry of Interior established the Migration Information Center to provide counselling in a one-stop shop. Similar activities are provided by the Polish Return Portal *Powroty* that was launched by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy already in 2008.

International examples in the area of engagement and information strategies demonstrate new opportunities provided by digital media for the effective targeting of return migrants. Through "digital engagement", government institutions today can not only provide information to the public, but also have the opportunity to actually communicate with (potential) returnees, answer questions, facilitate the return process and actively guide them along the way. In order to reach the goal of targeting the right emigrants/returnees with the right information and, ideally, facilitating their return, it is crucial to conduct thorough (market) research, which can shed light on the characteristics of the potential target groups and enable selection of the right media channels and tools for engagement. International good practice points to the importance of real engagement and individually tailored support implemented together.

Table 1: Examples of return measures

Tool	Advantages	Disadvantages
Cross-Cutting		
Engagement and Information strategies and campaigns	• Key element of the success of any other instrument • If well-designed, addresses different types of returnees • Information and various tools can be brought together and presented as an attractive package • Cross-cutting relevance from attracting (potential) returnees to facilitating their return and reintegration • Concrete impact	• Cost depending on scale and duration, appropriate budget is crucial for success • Risk of negative perception of (image) campaign ("false portrayal") • Relies on participation of employers and potential returnees alike – risk factors if not well-designed • Necessary to regularly maintain, update, advertise ("dead" websites/channels can be damaging)

Attraction		
Financial incentives	• Income tax break is a serious incentive to invest and possibly to return • Tax exemption on import reduces the bureaucratic burden faced at customs (personal belongings)	• Benefits depend on the characteristics of the recipient (more attractive for those earning more) • Tax exemption on the import of personal effects is unlikely to have substantial monetary benefits • Might create social tensions
Education-related instruments (e.g. scholarships)	• Supporting future specialists desired in particular areas to secure the needs of the labour market and promote innovation • Programmes often tailored to the specific needs of participants • Help in the development of scientific career by facilitating access to new scientific areas, methods, procedures and techniques	• High costs • Small target group • Without the appropriate conditions and attractive career prospects in the country of origin, the targeted participants are reluctant to return/emigrate
Facilitation		
Job Fairs	• Can bridge the gap between potential returnees and employers with face to face meetings • Clear impact for involved potential returnees • Government implementation: especially beneficial to small and medium sized companies (SMEs) – lack of resources	• Cost compared to limited impact may be too high – if there is no specific target group • Relies on participation of employers and potential returnees alike – risk factors if not well-designed
Online Matching Tools for Returnees	• Addresses one of the most prominent factors for reintegration, i.e. employment • Higher outreach compared to face-to-face job fairs • Concrete impact • Can bring information and various tools together in one place • Support for companies with limited resources	• Relies on usage of employers and potential immigrants alike • Needs to be regularly maintained and advertised • No incentives to sign up

Reintegration		
Tailored advice: Mentoring and individualised counselling	• Personalised information can directly remove individual barriers to return and reintegration • Addresses not only one sector, but a whole range of topics • Counselling can identify and target particular skills that are considered as a policy priority, such as entrepreneurship • Direct contact, empowerment approach and links to possibly other topics than the core service of the institution	• More resource-intense than simple (online) information provision • In view of potentially large caseloads, service intensity and quality may be limited
Entrepreneurship Support	• Investment and innovation • Support in overcoming a number of challenges related to return, including a lack of networks and/or capital, as well as familiarity with the functioning of local markets	• Resource-intensive initiative • Might create social tensions • Low success rate • Demand for combined offer of training and regulatory advice, social capital, and facilitated access to business funding and working spaces
Integration instruments including school education, language courses	• More limited target group: relevant esp. for wider diaspora with less strong ties to origin country; and/or family members of returnees • Can be combined with other integration measures as for other immigrants	• Returnees may have specific needs differing from other immigrants

Source: Authors

Some countries have also created measures aimed at connecting potential returnees with employers, such as jobseeker platforms, job fairs and diaspora skills databases. In Spain, the platform "Service Labour Mediation" is foreseen to facilitate matching jobs with potential returnees as part of the national return migration strategy. It will also offer the assistance of a so-called mediator for targeted support in connecting employers and employees. In Portugal, the "Global Professional Mobility Platform" is an online tool that fosters the recruitment of highly skilled Portuguese living abroad. In Lithuania, the NGO Global Lithuanian Leaders is implementing the "Talent for Lithuania" project, which is aimed at attracting back Lithuanian graduates of foreign universities. Indeed, digital platforms are increasingly helping to connect job seekers—from informal workers to highly skilled professionals—to suitable job opportunities. These platforms, which can aggregate vast amounts of data, accomplish three things. First, they make it easier to learn about available jobs and requirements; second, they reduce the cost of recruiting; and third, they allow individuals to market themselves to a wider audience. Compared to offline platforms, digital platforms significantly reduce time and money spent on the job search by both the job seeker and the employer, especially in the case of companies with limited resources. This is particularly relevant for (potential) returnees who are not present in the country of origin yet.

Reintegration support

Reintegration support refers to a broad gamut of support measures offered to emigrants once they are back in their country of origin. This type of support includes counselling, tailored advice and assistance related to employment, housing, education, welfare and generally adjusting to return. Returnees may need support not only in finding **employment**; they are also often interested in **self-employment** in order to make use of their skills and new knowledge gained abroad, and therefore **entrepreneurship programmes** are an attractive part of reintegration programmes. They can include preferential access to loans, training in creating a business plan and in financial management skills, as well as support in the bureaucratic steps necessary to start a business.

Governments are involved in various ways, be it as a funding body of NGO interventions or as a partner in a Public-Private Partnership. However, there are not that many initiatives tailored specifically to returnees, since they are often addressed by mainstream policies and are sometimes implemented in conjunction with other policies. For example, in Ireland, the "Back for Business" mentoring programme targets returning emigrant entrepreneurs with the aim of addressing specific challenges faced by them, namely networking and re-establishing contacts.

EFFECTIVENESS OF RETURN POLICIES

Despite numerous practical and legal measures in place across a number of EU Member States, **effective attraction and retention** of returnees remains a **challenge in practice**. Return measures are usually implemented on a relatively small scale, limited in duration, and as such tend to have limited effects and might not necessarily lead to addressing the "hard barriers" to return (such as bureaucratic requirements, unfavourable taxation or (lack of) portability of social rights), which can be overcome by political and legislative changes. Moreover, states have limited capabilities to retain returnees in the country: returnees might face difficult-to-address "soft barriers", such as limited labour market opportunities (including wage differences), a restricting business climate, or unfavourable educational opportunities – factors that actually led to emigration in the first place.

Furthermore, return policies **lack systematic evaluation**, which makes assessments of their effectiveness difficult. Finally, there is a lack of accurate, comparable and up-to-date information on this type of migration because of the abovementioned varying definitions of the terms "return migration" and "returnees".

Despite these challenges, some countries have still striven to adopt return policies based on an in-depth analysis of the identified problems and challenges faced by returnees. For example, in Ireland, a report commissioned by the Inter-Departmental Committee on Irish Abroad highlighted that emigrants perceive significant barriers in three areas: employment, mobility-related issues and housing. The report resulted in targeted recommendations to facilitate emigrant return, including addressing "hard barriers" within mainstream policies. The "Return to Spain Plan" was based on a research and consultation process on problems related to return as well as motivations behind the decision to emigrate and return.

Finally, the **perception of emigration, the country of origin** and return can influence both the decision to return and the reintegration process itself. Emigrants may feel like they were "thrown out of the country" due to a lack of opportunities and may harbour resentment, hampering return. On the side of employers and the broader society in the country of origin, return can be associated with failure and negatively influence native employers' perception of experience and skills gained abroad. Therefore, some countries have initiated activities aimed at promoting success stories of return among the diaspora and general society combined with information and branding activities to change the perception of the country of origin. An example of this is the "Work in Lithuania" project.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Return measures are usually relatively small scale, frequently project-based and their scope and outcomes are therefore limited. Nevertheless, the existence of a return policy has a signalling effect to emigrants that they are welcome to return. Based on the different experiences and practices of EU Member States, the following recommendations can improve the effectiveness of return policies:

- Improving the coherence of mainstream and return policies to form an effective package, since a multitude of policy areas are crucial for both the return decision and retention of returnees and their families, e.g. labour market activation, housing and support at school. This should be initiated by reviewing mainstream policies with regard to their accessibility for returnees, in order to then identify necessary additional measures to compensate for possible deficits of return migrants.

- Identifying and addressing "hard" barriers to return, i.e. the legal obstacles that hamper or disincentivise return, including inaccessible financial instruments, bureaucratic requirements, unfavourable taxation and a lack of social rights in the country of origin.

- Ensuring regional and multi-stakeholder implementation, keeping in mind that emigrants return to specific places, often cities and places of origin, and that policies at a local level play an important role. Close cooperation between all institutions is crucial for the implementation of effective, coherent and well-coordinated policies.

- Linking diaspora and return migration policies better in order to facilitate return and re-integration, while strengthening links with the diaspora and using its developmental potential (e.g. creating and strengthening existing international scientific and business networks).

- Involving the private sector more actively in order to attract and retain returnees more effectively. This can include various public-private partnerships aimed at job matching, internships for students and graduates, and outreach activities abroad.

- Promoting success stories and awareness raising among employers and the society to address the negative image of return, create a feeling of belonging and a more conducive environment for return.

- Expanding the evidence base around return migration as a precondition for effective return policies that can address persisting knowledge gaps and barriers to return.

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