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ATTRACT, FACILITATE AND RETAIN – RETURN MIGRATION POLICIES IN THE CONTEXT OF INTRA-EU MOBILITY

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Free movement of labour within the EU has led to unprecedented possibilities for EU citizens to improve their lives by moving to higher-income EU Member States. The consequences for Member States who are mostly origin countries have so far received little attention. Facing increasing challenges on their domestic labour markets, a number of EU Member States have started to develop policies in order to attract back citizens to the country.

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 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. Lithuania is a particularly striking example of these dynamics, as it is among the countries with the highest negative net migration in the EU. Both return and immigration are at a very low level with minimal effects on the labour market. Similar to Lithuania, Poland has experienced considerable emigration after accession. 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 country, yet many re-emigrated again. Emigration and improved economic development in both countries have resulted in labour market shortages and the necessity to attract skilled workers for a variety of sectors. In Poland, Lithuania and other EU migrant-sending Member States, governments are therefore considering their options to attract back citizens to the country – some more pro-actively than others.

Return in the policy context

Most EU Member States do not have a stand-alone and comprehensive policy to attract their citizens to return; such elements rather form part of other policies, for example diaspora policies. While diaspora policies generally have a wider scope than emigrant return policies,

they overlap in the outreach to (potential) returnees and providing services to actual returnees. The Irish diaspora policy “Global Irish” is a primary example in this regard. Other states have established return policies as part of broader migration strategies, as is the case for Portugal; whereas in Latvia return constitutes an important element of its development policy. Integration policies also play a role; returning emigrants and their families partially have similar needs to immigrants. In other countries, return policies constitute a dimension of talent attraction, migration and diaspora policies, for example, in the case of Lithuania. Spain is among the few countries that have emigrant return policies at both national and regional (local) levels. 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 address various stages of the return process. Attraction policies aim to convince citizens living and working abroad to return to their country of origin, thus stimulating return migration. As part of this set of policies, engagement and information strategies play a prominent role. Another instrument is financial incentives, including preferential income tax (e.g. Portugal), flat income tax or a one-time re-entry subsidy for returning experts (e.g. Slovakia).

The perception of emigration 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 the lack of opportunities. In these cases, 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 among the diaspora and 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.

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 kind of 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.

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 planned platform “Service Labour Mediation” will facilitate matching jobs with potential returnees. It will also offer the assistance of a so-called mediator for targeted support for the sector of employment and at locations of future employment. 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 aims at attracting Lithuanian graduates of foreign universities.

Reintegration support refers to a broad gamut of support offered to emigrants once they are back in their country of origin. This type of support includes counselling, tailored advice and general 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, therefore entrepreneurship programmes are an attractive part of reintegration programmes. They can include preferential access to loans, training to create a business plan and on financial management skills, as well as support in the bureaucratic steps necessary to start a business. For example, in Ireland, the “Back for Business” mentoring programme targets returning emigrant entrepreneurs with the aim to address the specific challenges for them, namely networking and re-establishing contacts.

Effectiveness of return policies

Despite numerous practical and legal measures, effective attraction and retention of returnees remains a challenge in practice. Return measures are usually implemented on a relatively small scale and limited in time and as such tend to have limited effects. In most cases this is because states have limited capabilities to retain returnees in the country: returnees might face “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 on their effectiveness difficult. And finally, there is a lack of accurate, comparable and up to date information on this type of migration because of varying definitions on the terms return

migration and returnees. Nevertheless, the existence of a return policy has a signalling effect to emigrants that they are welcome to return. The experience and practices of EU Member States show that mainstream and return policies should be coherent 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, i.e. labour market activation, housing and support at school. At the same time, better linking diaspora and return migration policies will facilitate return and re-integration while strengthening links with the diaspora and using its developmental potential.

**The article 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.*

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