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What a manager wants: how return migrants' experiences are valued by managers in the Baltics¹²

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Abstract

In the past two decades, the three Baltic countries lost a significant portion of their population. A combination of low birth rates, aging population, and emigration contributed to the decline. In the Baltics, similarly to other Central and Eastern European countries, return migration is often portrayed as the magic solution to improve the countries' demographic trends, to reverse brain drain, and a way to turn migration into a source of net human capital gains. Policymakers and businesses may be responding to demographic shifts based on hunches. The lack of recent research contributes to the myths around returnees, entrepreneurs, and employers' attitudes. Finding and staying in employment is key in attracting and retaining return migrants. Yet, how experience from abroad is valued in the labour market is a missing piece in the puzzle.

This paper explores if and which foreign experiences are valued by managers in the Baltics. We present some of the first results of a large-scale, three-year Pan-Baltic study on return migration and brain gain. Using granular data from 67 interviews with managers and entrepreneurs in the three Baltic countries highlights manager's views on the value of experiences of return migrants. Thus, the study fills a gap in the existing literature and looks beyond statistics to explore narratives and experiences. The data about the now and plans for the future could help policymakers and the business community. Through this research, we learn about the

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experiences of employers and business owners; to help respond to today's opportunities and challenges.

Keywords: Return migration, Human capital, Baltics

1 Introduction

The three Baltic countries have lost a large proportion of their population, with Latvia experiencing the highest rate of depopulation in Europe between 2004-2014. Migration was a key contributor; many migrated in the post-Soviet era, pre-accession, and after accession to the European Union. By 2020, a combination of aging and migration resulted in shrinking populations and a labour market thirsty for more people to fill vacancies.

In research and policy, return migration has widely been seen as a form of brain gain, since returnees bring back a mix of specialized and professional experiences [1, 2]. In popular discourse, return migration has increasingly been mentioned as a magic solution for the woes of the demographic, social, and economic development of the region.

Employment opportunities and integration into the workforce are key to successfully attract migrants back and to sustainably retain returnees. Retention is a significant issue; in Latvia, about one-third of returnees leave again [3], in Lithuania more than a third of returnees planned to emigrate again in 2013 [4].

Experience from abroad is valued in the labour market, which employment rates and wage premiums indicate in the Baltics and beyond. Yet, which foreign experiences valued by managers in the Baltics remains an unexplored topic. This represents not only a gap in academic literature but also a gap for policy makers and businesses who seek to attract returnees to fill jobs and boost the population. Return migrants, in return, would benefit from this information to help them find employment and manage expectations. Thus, this is an important piece of the puzzle that can help policy makers and businesses evaluate their approach to integrating return migrants to the labour market.

In this paper, we ask: how managers/ entrepreneurs in the Baltics perceive returnees' experience abroad; specifically, which are the experiences they value. We will use qualitative interviews with managers and entrepreneurs in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

2 Context

2.1 Return migration in the Baltics

In the Baltics, return migration has been heralded as a partial solution to the demographic issues the region faces. Yet, Lithuania and Latvia have not registered a positive net migration in recent years. As of 2015, return migration is not compensating for the brain drain from Latvia [5]. For the purpose of this study we use the definition of return migrant as someone who spent at least three months abroad then returned to their home country, in line with similar research in the Baltics [6]. Of the three Baltic countries, only Estonia managed to reverse the trend and register positive net migration five years in a row, some of which is thanks to returnees.

Attracting return migrants is not the only challenge. Retaining returnees is a complex issue recognized by governments and businesses. Several regional and national initiatives were developed to assist the integration of returnees in all three countries. Yet, in Latvia, about a third of returnees leave again [3]. Integration into the labour market is a key factor to attract and retain returnees [7, 8].

2.2 Baltic labour market

The Baltic labour markets have transformed since the 1990s. A change from Soviet planned economies to market economies [9] was followed by accession to the European Union in 2004. In the years after, rapid economic growth was followed by an abrupt recession post-2007 [10, 11]. Migration increased, first due to accession to the EU then migrants seeking new opportunities abroad [6].

Since the recession, unemployment fell and wages grew higher than labour productivity [12]. The supply of labour became more uneven: in some sectors and locations, there is a shortage of labour, while elsewhere there is underemployment. With changes in labour market, societies, and economies (host and home), the number of returnees changed too: in Estonia, returnees outnumbered emigrants two years in a row (2018-19), while Latvia and Lithuania return migration has gradually increased [13, 14, 15].

2.3 Return migrants bring back skills and experience

Brain gain has been extensively researched in the context of return migration as return migration can result in brain gain, bringing human net capital gain to a country [16, 17, 18]. Some positive effects of brain drain are backed by models [1, 2, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22]. Research shows that returnees benefit their home country through experiences they bring back [2, 23, 24].

While the skills and experience of returnees are valuable, a fundamental question is if there is a difference between the experiences of returnees and non-returnees. Some skills acquired abroad could have been acquired at home, as Hagan points out in his review of return migration providing examples from India and Poland [25]: 2003 study found that IT professionals in India and returnees acquired similar knowledge. Thus, returnees received no promotion or wage premium upon return. Similarly, mobility and the associated learning may be acquired without migration through relocation or changing jobs, highlights the Polish experience.

2.4 Foreign experience is appreciated by employers

Returnees' experiences are valued. Two well-researched indicators are opportunities and salaries. Returnees receive better opportunities and salaries than those without foreign experience in Central and Eastern Europe [26, 27] the income premium for work abroad in the region is between 10-45% [28]. In Estonia and Latvia returnees are less likely to occupy medium and high-level positions, but receive a wage premium [29, 30]. Much of research on the impact of foreign experience focused on

graduates; there is variation between countries on whether studying abroad increases employability [31, 32]. In general, studying abroad does increase employability [33, 34], but not in the Nordic context for instance [35]. In Latvia, almost 50% of employers valued an internship abroad, in Lithuania and Estonia less than 20% of employers valued similar experience [36].

Variation in how foreign experience is valued does not only hold for graduates, suggests a growing body of literature. In Lithuania Žvalionytė's research showed that the labour market is less welcoming for returnees: employers rarely consider a wage premium and 8 out of 10 employees preferred to employ people with Lithuanian experience and education [4]. Surveys conducted in Argentina, Romania, Senegal, and Ukraine show variation in respondents' views on return migrants' skills [37], while in the Philippines returnees' experiences are not valued upon hiring [38]. In this paper, we will briefly explore how managers and entrepreneurs report if returnees' experiences are an advantage. Once we look into which experiences of returnees are valued by managers, the literature becomes more scarce [26] with a focus on graduates. A recent study shows that decision-making and language are skills employers value in graduates who completed their internship abroad [36]. In general terms, problem-solving, language skills, communication skills, personal values are some of the main experiences employers appreciate [38, 39, 40]. Thus, how returnees' experiences are valued by managers remains an understudied topic, and this is what this article was set out to explore in the Baltic context.

3 Methods

We conducted 67 in-depth interviews with managers and entrepreneurs in the three Baltic countries between 2018-2020 to find out more about their thoughts and experiences on returnees.

The interviews were face-to-face until 2020. In 2020, due to the pandemic, interviews were a mix of face-to-face, phone, or video-conference. Most interviews were conducted in the national languages, some in English and Russian at the request of the interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured. In interviews, all 67 entrepreneurs/ managers were asked about their own migration background, employment, thoughts, and experiences on migration and returnees as well as their experience. All

interviewees spoke about return migrants as well as their own migration episodes. Most managers/ entrepreneurs had hiring responsibility, thus could talk not only about valuing but also hiring new employees.

Interviewees come from different industries, regions, age groups, ethnicity, and gender. Since the population and most companies in the Baltic countries are centred on the capital cities and major regional centres, these make up the majority of locations.

Potential interviewees were contacted after searching on registers and social networks (LinkedIn), personal networks of the research team, and employment networks. There was also an opportunity to register on the research projects' website if someone was interested in being interviewed.

All potential interviewees received information on the research and consented to the interviews. Interviews were recorded, anonymous and all interviewees received pseudonyms.

The analytical approach was thematic, looking for patterns and relationships between them. At the same time, interviewees' biographies provided a backdrop on which patterns across interviews emerged. The sample is not representative, but given its diversity, it captures perceptions of managers in these three years.

4 Results

We discuss how managers/ entrepreneurs in the Baltics perceive returnees' experience abroad. Specifically, we explore how managers report on valuing returnees' experience, and which experiences they highlight as valued.

4.1 Returnees experience is mostly valued

Most managers and entrepreneurs interviewed do in principle value experience by returnees. Ritvars from Latvia manages an online platform, he hired returnees: *“One of them has obtained education abroad, another has worked in Denmark and Sweden, and now...we would like to see someone with a wide world view”*. Ritvars' views were echoed in other interviews with managers, who recruited high-skilled workers.

Positive valuation was not limited to high-skilled workers. Zane, who runs a metalworking factory too recruited return migrants: *“I could say that approximately ten (out of 80) have been abroad... Those who have returned, it is ...positive, because they bring new knowledge and different experience”*. Without mentioning specific experiences or knowledge ‘new’ and ‘different’ experiences were key to the reasons why returnees were appreciated by managers in the interviews. In contrast, interviewees who recruit low-skilled workers mentioned foreign experience, according to some managers, is not always considered positively. Kazimieras, from Lithuania who manages a transportation company, did not hire returnees due to prior bad experience: *“I am avoiding people who worked abroad because they have a bad experience and a bad attitude”*. This was not necessarily a reflection of experience but of attitude and prejudices around those with return experiences. Such refusal of hiring returnees, however, was rare in the interviews.

Instead, managers highlighted specific reasons experience acquired abroad was not valued. *“It depends on the role”* was a frequent line during interviews. Marta, from Latvia, said that for many specialist positions knowledge of local laws and regulations was important: *“It is very nice when people have different experiences... But not in all job positions. There are some very specific, where you have to know for example the local law.”*

This was pronounced in the medical field, where *“experience abroad doesn’t play a big role”* and in fact, it is *“a disadvantage, because they don’t know the local laws, rules and regulations”* (Grete). Knowledge of the local ecosystem remains an important part of hiring, and those without such knowledge may struggle to integrate into the labour market. Thus, returnees in certain fields and roles were perceived as lacking the local knowledge and were in a less advantageous position to ‘locals’.

Therefore, while the experience was generally valued, managers negative experiences and the need for experience with the local environment negatively influenced managers’ perceptions of returnees’ experience. The latter highlights that returnees are by some seen to occupy an in-between space. They were seen as insiders as nationals of the country but also as outsiders who may not know what it was like in the home country.

4.2 Which experiences are valued

Looking beyond the statement experiences of returnees are valued, we searched for insight in the interviews about which experiences managers reported to value.

Language skills

Language skills were appreciated by interviewees. Ieva, who manages a Latvian company offering online courses, considered language skills an asset: *“language is a very important aspect, so, regardless the position, we look for people with good English knowledge”*. This view was echoed by managers in all three countries and was the most frequently highlighted skill. Janis (Latvia), emphasized that *“the main thing about someone who has been abroad, it is the language, English”*, Kadri- Liis (Estonia) too noted that *“language skills play a role”*.

Even though the Baltic countries rank high in English skills, managers commented that English skills vary. Signe remembered: *“the English skills of young people in Estonia are ... not that great... their English is the English of TV shows. If you are looking for someone who can speak and write grammatically correct English and who has a broad vocabulary, then it might get tricky sometimes”*.

Language skills, in particular English language skills, were the most frequently mentioned skills during the interviews. Returnees’ advantage of having good language skills was emphasized by those employing high-skilled workers, but not exclusively. This aligns with Eurobarometer findings that show – 40% of recruiters emphasized the importance of foreign language skills [40].

Openness and adaptability: travel, tanks, and survivors

Return migrants bring openness and adaptability to the workplace, argued interviewees. While neither openness nor adaptability was defined by managers, they were linked to problem-solving and resilience.

Both openness and adaptability were linked to problem-solving. Ieva, from Latvia, appreciated that returnees can think outside of the box: *“Then, it is important that those who have been abroad, they*

are more open-minded and sometimes less stereotyped about some issues. [...] People are really open to new solutions". Andis, also from Latvia, added that openness and problem-solving relates to experience in a different environment, which returnees experiences: *"It is the readiness to accept that in different places people treat different problems in different ways. The idea that nothing is given as natural... To accept the variety"*. These traits were regarded highly when describing returnees who already work for the interviewees but were not described in the context of hiring. This not surprising, as problem-solving is consistently mentioned as one of the most important skills employers look for. Returnees stood out as problem solvers and managers attributed this to their experience abroad, including travel. Katariina, from Estonia, emphasized that especially during these times of change she saw the difference between her employees who were returnees and who were not: *"If they have travelled somewhere or have had to adapt to different environments, then, like with the corona crisis they don't just stop....they will think how to pursue the goals.... So they are like a tank, they will go through everything."*

This adaptability was frequently linked to resilience, Signe from Estonia used similar language: *"I know that I'm generalizing now, but all three that I knew were active, positive, survivor-type of people"*. The language of the battlefields and survival reoccurred when talking about the adaptability of returnees. Like in Katariina's interview, this was seen as a definite advantage during the pandemic. Most managers reflected that this was a challenging business environment, and the value returnees bring to the organization was highlighted.

Broader experience, global outlook

Another set of highly appreciated but not concisely defined characteristics that made returnees stand out was that they had a broader experience and a global outlook. Lisette, from Estonia, emphasized that returnees are attractive as employees because *"people who have lived abroad, they have a broader perspective on life, they know how to compare things, they have this experience"*, while Heli (Estonia) explained that *"the broader worldview... play a significant role"*. References to the broad world view occurred in all three Baltic states, though managers did not elaborate further on what this entails.

Efficiency

One skill that was extensively discussed by managers in Lithuania and Latvia was efficiency and productivity. This was the most distinct skill managers mentioned when discussing low-skilled hires. Andrius explained that “*the labor productivity is different from ours, they <returnees> work in other places. I mean, they work more productively*”, while Dovydas described it as an “*other level of efficiency*”. Labour productivity and efficiency are frequent topics in popular discourse. Latvia and Lithuania lag behind the EU average on labour productivity [41], Estonia is only doing somewhat better. This may be why efficiency was frequently noted in the Lithuanian and somewhat mentioned in the Latvian context but missing in the Estonian context.

Character

Managers in all countries, locations, and sectors talked of character as a major factor when hiring and succeeding in the workplace. Thus, suggested that migration was an experience that developed a person as a whole. As a migrant you “*need to have character*” (explains Domas, a manager from Lithuania). While character development during migration was emphasized, hiring based on the character was seen as general and not restricted to return migrants. Egidijus pointed out that “*most important was a character of the person – leader features, courage*”, which she did not associate with being a return migrant only. Character, though not defined, is a term used for personality and leadership skills in interviews, which maps on to assessing fit to an organization and leadership capacity. According to existing general research, these are some of the most sought-after experiences by employers. Migrants have also been profiled as different from those who have no plans to emigrate in research in being more work-oriented [42] as well as being more open and extraverted [43]. These character traits have been linked to authentic leadership style also [44].

There was only one group of interviewees that thought returnees consistently are a better match and have better leadership skills. Managers, who themselves were returnees, emphasized that migration shapes one’s character. They also valued adaptability and global outlook more in future employees. One manager, Domas, explained this as “*If a person would be from abroad I would take him*

immediately. Because he was more similar". Migration and return migration were thus seen as a shared experience, and likeness based on experience and character was assumed.

5 Conclusions

This paper set out to answer two questions: if managers and entrepreneurs value return migrants' experiences acquired abroad and which experiences they value.

The interviewees' views on whether returnees' experiences varied; while experiences were appreciated, there were also those who point-blank refused to hire returnees or found that returnees are in a disadvantageous position since they lack local knowledge.

Which experiences managers valued were consistent, they most frequently mentioned general rather than role-specific experiences that made returnees stand out. These included language skills, openness and adaptability, global outlook, efficiency and problem-solving. In these skills there were no differences between countries, except for efficiency. While efficiency was one of the most frequently mentioned attributes in interviews in Lithuania and Latvia, it was not at all mentioned in interviews with Estonian managers. These experiences were described in broad strokes only, yet the list of experiences aligned to skills employers look for according to existing research, especially problem solving, language skills and adaptability. Interviews conducted after the first restrictions were imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic stressed that in the context of change, these experiences made returnees stand out more. Return migrants stand out in these areas may highlight what migrants learn abroad and contribute. It may also be a reflection on the local labour market, where these skills are sought yet less present. On a very practical level, these skills could highlight gaps for those in education and skill development, businesses evaluating their hiring and return migrants seeking opportunities. These findings therefore fill a gap not only in academic literature but also in the knowledge of policy makers, businesses and return migrants. On a practical level these findings can facilitate matching skills, expectations and policy decisions to create sustainable channels for return migration in the future, ultimately turning brain drain to brain gain in the Baltics. To understand if

these experiences are valued more in the Baltic region compared to other countries, further international analysis would be necessary.

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