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Anxieties Regarding Family Return to Latvia: Does the Imagined Turn Out to Be Reality?

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For a migrant, returning to his or her homeland after living abroad can be much anticipated, yet also daunting, especially if return includes other family members who may have little insight into the cultural traditions and life approaches of the homeland. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative evidence from interviews and a survey of both Latvian nationals living abroad and returnees to Latvia, the anxieties concerning first-generation family return with (mostly) second-generation children are unravelled – particularly the challenges faced by the children. The paper explores the difference between an imagined family return to the homeland and the lived experience. Anxieties especially concern children's readiness for school – lack of home-country language skills, curriculum disparities and the often unsympathetic attitude of teaching staff towards returnee pupils. Preparation in advance, a resilient mindset and an avoidance of comparisons with the host country are found to reduce return anxiety for both parents and children and to ease (re)integration into the homeland setting. Home-country government initiatives offering support measures to returnees also help to mitigate the challenges of return.

Keywords: family return migration, return culture shock, returnee children, education, imagination, Latvia

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Introduction

If intra-European migration in a unified labour market often happens in response to major geopolitical events such as the expansion of the European Union, combined with individuals' quest for higher incomes and better career prospects (King 2018), it is often the case that return migration results from more subjective and personal motivations based more on strong familial ties (Gmelch 1980). Return migraton might be driven by the desire to re-unify the family; yet when host-country-born children are brought back to the homeland country, their integration may be problematic. Their 'return' experiences are the main focus of this article.

On a broader front, research has found that, alongside the general acceleration of migration in Europe, with new types of temporary and circular migration, the trajectories of migration are diversifying (King 2018) – a result of the variety of life circumstances that led to the initial migration as well as personal reasons for migrants remaining in or moving on from the host country. There is a trend to move from less fixed, one-directional migration trajectories to more complex migration patterns and regimes, fuelled by globalisation and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). There is evidence of a large number of 'footloose' highly skilled migrants who have more loosely structured personal and family networks and who enjoy an 'easy' transnationalism (Ryan, Klekowski von Kloppenfels and Mulholland 2015).

While transnational work may be a boon for highly skilled migrants, it can still prove to be a difficult juggling act when young migrants start a family. For most young, single migrants, the myth that 'the world is your oyster' is true until the reality of adult life hits and decisions need to be made about more permanent lifestyle options. For transnational families, return moves are also considered as an option, as other priorities start to surface when children come into the picture – if transnational lifestyles are still possible with young children in tow, they can prove more challenging when children reach school age and need more stability in their lives.

Previous return-migration research has focused on the economics of a return move, for example, cost–benefit evaluations of the return made by potential returnees (Arango 2000; Wahba 2022) or on the strategies of young adults contemplating life-course transitions that should improve their employment prospects and status (Corijn and Klijzing 2001). The motivation for return migration is, however, an interplay between economic and non-economic factors. Subjective decision-making may only appear as such on the surface and often needs to be contextualised in each particular migration scenario. Just as with migration where 'there is a history and context to that which is imaginable [which] includes such imperatives as the ability to pay for passage and meet all its attendant expenses' (Smith 2006: 58), in a return situation this can also be the case. Return can only be imagined and seriously considered when the context is conducive to return – namely, that returnees will have the means to support themselves (and their families) on return, have sufficient social capital for a return to succeed (contacts for job-seeking, family, friends) and be able-bodied and energetic enough to deal with challenges that may arise. For labour migrants a return would be irrational if none of these criteria were met. Yet, as this study shows, returnees are making decisions outside these economic and social-class parameters – they are also emotionally based and cannot fully be accounted for from a labour-market perspective.

Migration research often leaves out social and psychological factors that are important in return decision-making (Bolognani 2007), including within the migrant family. The purpose of this article is to explore these lesser-researched aspects of migration: the experiences of families – both parents and children – when planning a return to a parent's country of origin, particularly the inner dialogue that plays out in the minds of potential returnees regarding the ease of return and the potential challenges that may be faced.

Anxiety about how a return migration could unfold for a family with school-age children is a challenge to contend with. Questions typically raised by parents before the return move takes place concern job opportunities, options for renting or buying a property, negotiating bureaucratic labyrinths in the country of origin regarding

the tax system, potential visa and residency requirements for non-ethnic spouses and many other hurdles. These foreseeable obstacles also concern parents' perceptions of the ease of integration of their children into the new environment – for instance, the challenge of fitting into a new school setting, a different curriculum, insufficient language skills, being accepted by class teachers and other children. Worries about return prospects and challenges may determine whether a return move actually occurs.

This article puts the spotlight on families returning to the Baltic state of Latvia, which has, for the past few decades (since 2004, when Latvia joined the EU), been an emigrant sending country (Apsīte-Beriņa, Manea and Bērziņš 2020). The UK (the most popular destination country, with approximately 120,000 Latvian nationals), Germany, Ireland, Norway and Sweden were the main destinations for Latvian emigrants, particularly following the Global Economic Crisis which hit Latvia hard (McCollum, Apsīte-Beriņa, Bērziņš and Krišjāne 2017). Latvia witnessed a total net migration loss of 405,000 between 1991 and 2013 (Krišjāne, Apsīte-Beriņa and Bērziņš 2016), resulting in 15 per cent of Latvian nationals currently living abroad (Mieriņa, Ose, Kaprāns and Lāce 2017).

Despite the exodus of Latvians to other countries in Europe, there has been a recent trend for Latvian nationals to return to their homeland (Hazans 2020), especially for Latvians living in the UK. This return push started from the Brexit announcement, continued post-Brexit and has also been fuelled by job losses during the Covid-19 pandemic. News reports in the Latvian press (eng.lsm.lv 2020, 2021a, 2021b) and tracking by government-appointed return-migration coordinators on the return of nationals indicate that many migrants are returning with their families, some motivated by nostalgia and homesickness for family and friends and others attracted by decreasing wage differences and improved job opportunities in Latvia (Apsīte-Beriņa *et al*. 2020). For some migrants and their families, the return had been contemplated for a while and Brexit, coupled with the pandemic, served as the 'final straw'. For those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic, return has been more of a spontaneous decision. According to *The Economist*, in 2021 there was a pan-European trend, post-Brexit and pandemic-driven, for EU27 migrants to return back to their countries of origin (Charlemagne 2021).

This article looks at the variegated return experiences of Latvian families, combining the insights of both parents and children but with a stronger focus on the latter. It also outlines the support measures provided by national policies and home-country institutions which contribute to easing return and reveals the wider national context within which the return of migrants is set. A strength of this mixed-method study is the capability to not only draw on a large quantitative dataset and on qualitative interviews – where both emigrants and return migrants are addressed simultaneously – but also to look at return both prospectively and retrospectively. The voices of children have been largely overlooked in return-migration narratives. While some studies have looked at children's involvement in migration decision-making (Ackers 2000; Bushin 2008; Mason 2000), there has been a gap in research regarding children's moves to a notional country of origin. My contribution in this article is to combine the multiple perspectives of both parents and their children and to probe the thought processes and imaginaries of actual and potential returning migrants about a possible new chapter in their lives.

Migration and imagination

The nexus between imagination and migration has been looked at by scholars from a variety of perspectives. In considering the delicate dance between migrants' dreams and the actual, real-life options that are available to them and how they manifest themselves in migrants' lives, Chambers (2018: 1424) has reflected:

> *Imagining is not an act of absent-minded pondering but, instead, directs engagements with the material and is itself shaped through such engagements. (…) However, migration, its effects and connections are also shaped by the imagination and simultaneously active in shaping the imagination – a process that is*

self-perpetuating. (…) There are also various ways in which the imaginations of migrants can be subverted, co-opted, influenced and structured to meet the demands of labour markets both domestically and abroad.

The shaping of the limits of what one may 'dare to dream' opens up the concept of determinism and the option of choices truly available. Smith (2006) has argued that an often ignored facilitator of successful migration is class position. Middle-class migrants ascribe the success of their migration to their own efforts yet, for lower-class migrants, often 'the reality does not live up to aspirations or dreams conjured up in the imagination' (Smith 2006: 54). Smith's position that 'even the most utopian dream is dreamed contextually' (2006: 54) strongly implies that there is a social and historical determinism to what a potential migrant dreams and that this is dependent on class.

Schielke (2020) states that humans are probably never autonomous and self-determined with regard to migration – they only appear to be. What seems to be an autonomous choice is often due to 'invisible forms of support, infrastructure, privilege and resource exploitation' (2020: 110). He posits that the trajectories taken show that the knowledge, skills and techniques of a migrant (human and resource capital) can be assembled and combined in a variety of ways in order for them to be useful for migrants' (and their families') future survival.

In other studies on the migration–imagination nexus, Salazar (2011) has tackled imagined economic opportunities, whilst lifestyle migration has also been viewed through an imagination-driven lens (Benson 2012; Bolognani 2014). Meanwhile, Koikkalainen, Kyle and Nykänen (2020) and Manolova (2019) have studied migrants who idealise their potential lives in a different place – Finland seen through the eyes of Iraqi asylum-seekers and potential Bulgarian migrants' imaginings of life in the UK. Each of these studies demonstrates that an envisaged future in a person's mind can be the wellspring for action in the real world.

Krivonos and Näre (2019), looking at the initial stages of a planned move abroad, stress the role of imagination in the decision to migrate, creating the desire to be in a particular place. This impetus can be experienced at the level of an individual or family unit or as a part of 'collective imaginings' (Adams 2004; Vigh 2009) where a better way of life in one specific destination is envisaged by multiple people from one region. Closer to the setting for my research, the Brexit phenomenon and how it relates to freedom of movement has been looked at from an imagination perspective by Sredanovic (2020): EU27 citizens living in the UK imagine their future post-Brexit and consider potential future mobilities as a result of it; this also applies to the flipside – British citizens living in Belgium fear what a post-Brexit future holds for them if they wish to continue residing in the EU.

The UK scenario was indeed bewildering and upsetting for those EU citizens who, for many years, had felt a strong and developing identification with and belonging to the UK – a sense of 'differentiated embeddedness' (Ryan 2017). Zontini and Però (2020) have documented the emotional stress and anxiety that families experienced during this period and which made EU citizens question and change their emplacement practices. This rude awakening in the minds of EU citizens in the UK was especially concerning for the sake of their children, particularly the impact that their children's 'foreign' status could have. EU citizens had to decide whether settled status and permanent life in the UK are what the families ultimately desire. Families with EU citizenship were thus spurred to re-imagine their future.

Among these are families from Latvia who were forced to weigh up their post-Brexit life in the UK, deciding whether it is a long-term or a temporary project. Another, more recent, source of anxiety for migrants globally, including those from Latvia, which led to imagined scenarios of return, is Covid-19 and the unpredictability caused by restrictions to travel, job losses and financial instability. One survey of Latvian nationals living in the UK revealed that the uncertainty caused by Brexit is more worrying to them than the consequences caused by Covid-19 (Kaprans 2020). However, such surveys are very dependent on the moment

at which they were taken and, as the pandemic progressed through 2021, as well as the unfolding impact of Brexit, results of a similar survey taken one year later could be quite different.

Tying this in with the topic of this article, scholars are now looking not only at purely economic (for example, caused by the financial crisis or Covid-19) or geopolitical (as in the case of Brexit) explanations for the motivation for people to uproot their lives. A significant role in the process can be attributed to the perception of a collectively seen better future elsewhere. This can also include the idea that the country of origin may be considered a viable alternative. Imagined alternative realities can relieve the angst of living in a certain place or, alternatively, returning to a prior place. Bolognani (2007: 65), referring to returning British Pakistanis in the UK who see Pakistan as a desirable future place of residence, reasons that:

> …[the] *imaginary homeland is the antidote to frustration: if things are not good here* [in Britain] *for younger transnationals, they need to believe that elsewhere there is a place where working towards personal well-being is possible.*

Yet there can also be either perceived or actual angst on arrival, whether it be because it is an unfamiliar place or even a previously known territory where the person once lived.

The perceptual aspect of return – which is subjective and dependent on an individual's imagined idea of what awaits them at the other end – is often founded on a gut feeling, the return stories of acquaintances, media reports and even heresay. These opinions are influential and can have a profound impact on potential movers – for instance, advice from a close friend to remain in the host country (or, alternatively, to move immediately) or sensationalised news reports on a website or in the social media in the home country can conjure up all types of scenarios in a person's mind.

However, the image of the homeland that emerges over time, even filtering into the consciousness of the migrant second generation, can lead to unrealistic perceptions. Harper (2005: 3) suggests that '[e]migrants in all generations tended to construct and freeze their own chosen image of the homeland as they left, an image which becomes more indelible and unalterable as time went on'. Yet an image of the homeland based on memories of a previous generation can be misleading and lead to disappointment and culture shock if life in the homeland has changed considerably in the meantime.

Taking a more pragmatic look at return, Cassarino (2008) outlines factors that shape the reintegration of migrants in the home country – the context of reintegration, optimal duration and type of migration experience and motivating factors for return. Cassarino (2004: 271) argues that there are certain conditions for a return to be a success. Resource mobilisation and preparedness are two aspects that can ensure that returnees experience reduced culture shock. The tangible and intangible resources associated with resource mobilisation (financial capital, skills, connections and social capital) could be in the form of savings accumulated whilst abroad, acquaintances and contacts (in both the host and the home country) who can be drawn on for assistance as well as the knowledge and skills that have been acquired while living abroad.

Preparedness comprises both a willingness and a readiness to return, forming a frame for the real and practical side of return (Cassarino 2008: 101). A returnee's preparedness is also dependent on his or her perception that significant changes have occurred back home – these could be institutional, economic or political changes that have made the country of origin appealing once again. The reintegration process on return, however, leads to a 'rediscovery of [the] real characteristics of the origin country' (Cassarino 2004: 273) which require adaptation and a renegotiation of the terms of living there. Cassarino goes on to argue that 'the higher the level of preparedness, the greater the ability of returnees to mobilise resources autonomously and the stronger their contribution to development' (2004: 275).

In the case of children and their adaptation to life in the homeland of their parent(s), this is dependent on the preparedness and resource mobilisation of adults on their behalf. In other words, the level of preparedness of the child is dependent on the efforts made by adults – for instance, to maintain their child's native-language skills, acquaint the child with the future environment via return visits and create a feeling in the child that s/he will be heard and supported by the parents as they negotiate their new surroundings.

This study fills a knowledge gap with its focus specifically on the *perception* of return, looking at empirical evidence of self-reports of how a return to the homeland is envisaged by Latvian nationals living abroad, compared with the *reality* of return – given by the views of compatriots who have already moved and experienced the practicalities and emotions associated with a return. The study specifically concerns family return and, in particular, the effect that return has on children. By also drawing on interviews with the children themselves, adding to parent-proxy reports, in-depth insights are gained into the return-migration situation.

Methodology and fieldwork

This research was conducted under the auspices of a state-commissioned large-scale study carried out by the University of Latvia which assesses the lives and wellbeing of Latvian nationals who have emigrated abroad as well as returning nationals. A quantitative online survey conducted in 2019 and disseminated in the diaspora and within Latvia via various online channels, received responses from 7,700 *émigrés*, including 2,477 returnees (Mieriņa, Hazans, Goldmanis, Koroļeva, Reine, Aleksandrovs and Grosa 2020a). Questions in the survey included those specific to migrants with families regarding the perceived problems of return (for emigrants) and actual problems on return (for returnees). The research also had a qualitative component**.**

Independently I conducted a total of 67 semi-structured interviews with Latvian *émigrés*, as well as returnees – either individually or in small family-based focus groups. Both parents and children from 39 families – 22 emigrants and 17 return-migrant families – were interviewed. Most often the family member interviewed was the mother (although there were some fathers interviewed), as mothers were more responsive to the invitation to take part in the study and open to discussing their family's experiences. When interviewing children, ethical safeguards were strictly adhered to, with care and discretion exercised during interviewing, veering away from topics that might cause distress. All participants were given pseudonyms. Most of the research evidence presented here comes from these interviews, supplemented by selected data from the questionnaire survey.

Interviewees were living in or had returned from various host countries in the European Union (primarily the UK – still part of the EU at that time – Ireland and Germany) and Norway (an EEA country, where EU nationals may work on the same footing as in other EU member states) as well as from countries further afield – the USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere. Participants were recruited via various methods – answering an invitation to take part in the study in co-ethnic Facebook groups in Germany and the UK, responding to an invitation in Latvian ethnic-language schools in Germany and the UK, personal invitations to participants known to the author, as well as recruitment via the snowball technique (whereby one interviewee recommends another for interviewing). The interviewees came from different socio-economic groups, with a range of educational backgrounds. The children were aged between 8 and 18 and both sexes were interviewed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and also via Skype or Zoom. They were recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo thematic coding.

Among the questions put to interviewees living abroad were topics concerning the Latvian language proficiency of the children, the possibility of return and the foreseeable challenges which their children may face, while returnees were questioned about the ease of adaptation which the families experienced on return. The two main research questions for the study were:

- How does an imagined family return to the homeland differ from the lived experience?
- What factors lessen the impact of return?

This is not a longitudinal study and the experiences of specific families are not compared pre- and post-return. Instead, the perceived difficulties that would accompany a return outlined by families who are currently living abroad were compared to the current experiences of recent returnees.

The next section concerns Latvian nationals currently living abroad and their imaginaries and perceptions of return – from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. This is followed by the narratives of returnees, sharing the return stories of their families, including the views and experiences of some returnee children. The last part outlines the factors, when preparing for return, that can mitigate anxiety.

Migrants living in the host country

For migrants who have made a decision to move, with young children, to a new country, one of the reasons for such a move is based on the perception that the children's future prospects will be much improved. So, for Ritma the mother of twin primary-school-age boys who moved to the UK in 2018, justification for the decision was articulated in one simple sentence: 'If they [the boys] completed their schooling in Latvia, then their career prospects would be – as manager at *Rimi* [a supermarket chain in Latvia]'. In Ritma's view, a supermarket manager does not amount to much in career terms and education in the UK school system offers more opportunities for her sons. This echoes research on the educational aspirations of immigrants, which is dependent on social background and influences educational careers with educational choices linked to the high level of optimism and motivation for upward mobility by immigrants (Astleithner, Vogl and Parzer 2021; Tjaden and Hunkler 2017). Basit (2012) labels this 'aspirational capital' and notes that high levels of this form of capital can compensate for low parental socio-economic status – a finding confirmed by a recent study of the experiences of the children of Latin American parents in Britain conducted during the Covid period (Klitzsch 2021).

Some participants had taken their imagination back to their childhood. They had the view that, as the education system in Latvia had not changed significantly since their early years, they did not want their children subject to it. The post-Soviet education system still entails many elements of the conservative approach that existed 30+ years ago – in terms of discipline, teacher–student relationships, curricula, assessment and attitudes towards diversity. Whether this is the case in every school in Latvia is debatable (private schools most certainly have a different approach) but the perception of migrants is that there has been little change. The parents of Polish returnees studied by Szydlowska, Durlik and Grzymala-Moszczynska (2019) were similarly critical of methods used by teachers in Polish schools (also previously under the Soviet sphere of influence), highlighting instruction methods described as 'archaic, schematic and destroying the natural curiosity and creativity of children' (2019: 184).

This view is also illustrated by Lidija, who lives in Germany. She admits that she would not consider returning to Latvia for her two young children as she does not want them to be in the system in which she was raised. Her opinion was even stronger than that of Ritma – Lidija said that she wants her children to open their eyes to the world and not squander their lives or waste time unnecessarily, which would happen if they returned to Latvia. Such a perception is based on her own rather negative experience of a brief return (prior to having children) where she felt that the higher education which she had obtained abroad was being wasted in a job in her profession in Latvia.

Oskars, who lives in the UK, also made an attempt to test out return by enrolling his son in a prestigious school in Riga in Grade 1 for one school year. The experiment – as he calls it – was not successful and the boy came back to the UK after one semester: 'There were problems. The problem was that (...) teachers couldn't cope with the class, there was bullying (…) and the school didn't really get involved in solving it…'. This lack of interest by teachers in resolving the bullying directed towards his son was an eye-opener that gave his

imagined return a bitter taste. A negative experience in one school in the country of origin can mar the dream of return for good. Oskars has not been considering return since that incident, citing stability for his family as paramount as his three sons get older and enter secondary school. The bullying of school-age returnees has also been spotlighted in the return-migrant literature, where teasing and pranks directed at children in schools have been found to be rife (Vathi and Duci 2016; Vathi and King 2021).

Other perceived challenges were outlined by participants in the questionnaire-survey responses. Although the most frequent answers for them not returning to Latvia were 'I have settled here (in the host country) for life' and 'I am disappointed in Latvia', other frequently mentioned answers included 'I am not sure if my child will receive the required support to integrate into the Latvian education system' and 'I don't see opportunities for growth for my children in Latvia', as well as 'a lack of Latvian language proficiency' (their own or that of their spouse or children). Based on these perceived outcomes (and other reasons), a move back is not considered by many to be an option. Digging a bit deeper, 30 per cent of all survey participants living abroad felt that their children would find it difficult or very difficult to adapt to school or pre-school in Latvia and the reasons given for this were varied (see Table 1).

Table 1. Challenges which emigrant children would face in the pre-school/school system in Latvia, according to parents (data in %, n = 2477)

Challenges perceived by parents	%
Children's proficiency in the Latvian language	73
Different approach to teaching in schools	59
Attitude of teachers	46
Attitude of classmates to newcomers	41
Curriculum differences (not harmonised)	35
A lack of support for psychological preparedness and resilience	21
Nothing would hinder the children's adaptation	6

Yet there are migrants – and their children – who see themselves returning to Latvia once they have completed their education. Fifteen-year-old Sofija, who has been living in Germany for 10 years, wants to live in Latvia after she has finished school. Her reasoning: she gets fed up with Germany, with so many people around. Renāte, a Latvian teenager living in Switzerland with her family, wants to complete university studies in Europe and, after that, once she has a good grasp of her profession, would like to move to Latvia and start up a business there. Gaining a good education abroad and learning foreign languages are of high priority for many migrants. This falls in line with Wessendorf's (2007) findings on 'roots migration' where second-generation 'returnees' completed their schooling and studies in Switzerland, yet chose to return to Italy in their 30s because of their strong sense of belonging to their ethnic homeland as a place that is both real and imagined.

Returnee family experiences

Survey responses from returnee families indicate a rosier view of return than that articulated by most of the emigrants. Table 2 shows the responses of returned parents regarding their children's experiences on return. This substantially correlates with previous research that has shown that a lack of Latvian language skills will more likely cause difficulties in adapting to life in Latvia for adults and especially for children (Hazans 2016; Mieriņa, Koroļeva, Jansone and Grosa 2020b). An overall 53 per cent of participants in the survey study replied that integration into the school pre-school system was either very easy or easy and only 8 per cent indicated

that it was difficult or very difficult. Such a contrast between the views of migrants and returnees (compare the survey results in Tables 1 and 2) regarding the perceived and actual challenges experienced shows that the perception of future events seems to be bleaker than they actually turn out to be.

Table 2. Challenges which returnee children faced in the pre-school/school system in Latvia, as perceived by their parents (% data, n = 351)

Challenges perceived by parents	%
Nothing hindered the children's adaptation	41
Children's proficiency in the Latvian language	26
Attitude of Latvian teachers to newcomers	26
Curriculum differences	16
Attitude of classmates to newcomers	13
A lack of support for psychological preparedness and resilience	11

There could also be an element of self-justification in these responses. If a person does not wish to return, then the reasons for staying put in the host country will be more enhanced and the perception of the children's integration challenges can be one of the many justifying factors. For those who have returned and experienced the situation first-hand, the feeling is more positive, arguably because returnees may have a different mindset – full of hope and trust that return will be successful. However, the fact that returnees have committed themselves to the return might also make them want to justify that decision and to play down problems experienced by themselves and their children. For this reason, returnees do not generally express many regrets about their return – at least not initially. The decision-making and return process, possibly long and cumbersome, with a long period of preparation for some, is often taken with eyes wide open. For others, however, decisions are made spontaneously and based on a gut feeling. Regardless of how long the preparation took or whether resource mobilisation (as outlined by Cassarino 2004) was made use of, the imagined return can be successful for a variety of reasons. For parents, making a joint decision and relocating the whole family is no small task, yet a single-minded, unwavering and positive attitude on the part of the parents can also influence the children and make the move more eagerly anticipated.

Vanda, who had been living in France for 18 years, had always dreamed of returning to Latvia. Her French husband and two teenage children, both born in France, shared her dream of moving to Vanda's homeland. They fulfilled this dream and made the move to provincial Latvia, having found and purchased their 'dream home' in the woods. Everyone seemed to initially enjoy life in their new environment, yet Vanda tells us:

> *Each of us had created our dream world that we wanted to live in. My husband wanted me to be happy and he knew I wanted to return to Latvia… From the outset we held the thought that nothing is set in stone and if it doesn't work out we can always return* [i.e. go back to France]. *But at the same time, we did everything with the mindset that* [the move] *is forever… In our case it was more about where our roots are… One person will adapt and the other person will say 'No I can't adapt'.*

There is an interesting dichotomy here in Vanda's mindset – the move was meant to be forever yet, according to her, was 'not set in stone'. The reasoning behind such contrasting statements would need deeper probing as it appears that there was some confusion about the permanence of this move. Each family and each family member processes mobility differently and makes decisions and expresses opinions based on different criteria. Ease of mobility is one factor (if the family can uproot themselves quickly because of a transnational lifestyle),

as is the way in which each family member adapts to the new environment and the empathy within the family towards each individual family member's success at integration.

In Vanda's case, the family ended up returning to France. Vanda agonised over the 'double return' migration (White 2014) as she saw that only some members of her family were happy. She initiated a family meeting and the new joint family decision was to 're-return'. However, Vanda admitted that she would advise anyone considering return to the homeland to do so and not to hesitate:

> *If you want to return to Latvia, then return. The worst that can happen would be that you return to where you came from* [the host country] *(…) the only thing you can lose is money. The rest is an experience that you will only gain from.*

By rationalising a return or a re-migration following return in this way, Vanda takes away the disappointment of an unsuccessful return by putting it down to 'experience', which could be seen to be a rather nonchalant way of downplaying any anxiety caused by uprooting those family members involved in the process. Similar back-and-forth situations have been documented by Bermudez and Paraschivescu (2021) when researching the return of Romanian families to Romania who then subsequently re-migrated to France for emotional and financial reasons. White (2014) also wrote on Polish migrants in Britain returning to Poland, finding that they could not settle there and then moving back to Britain to pick up their lives.

Sarma, who lived in the UK for seven years with her partner and two primary-school-aged children and worked in hospitality, aimed to save money for their own home back in Latvia. She presented the idea of return to her children by putting a positive spin on it:

> *…we gave them the positives – that, in time, we would get a bigger house (…) as over there* [in England] *(…) they were in one bedroom (…) that we could get a cat and a dog. That's how we motivated them (…) that their cousin would be nearby. We told them a while back that we were planning this.*

Parents who point out the positives of a move can make the imagined return more palatable to their children. Without this, it is difficult to convince them of the benefits of moving away from friends and a life that is familiar and dear to them. Sarma's children adapted quite well to their new environment in Latvia, despite a realisation that they would no longer see their friends in England and the initial handicap of a lack of Latvian language proficiency. Puplauskaite (2021), researching Lithuanian returnees from Norway (the Lithuanian situation with regard to migration being very much like that of Latvia), evidenced a similar situation: despite Lithuanian children in Norway maintaining their native language, they faced difficulties with the language on entering school in Lithuania and were required to work additionally on their language skills as well as having to adapt to the new education system.

Even if there is an element of seeing the parental homeland through 'rose-coloured spectacles' before moving, these can come off fairly soon after arrival. This was put very emotionally by Vilis, who remembers his move to Latvia from Australia 12 years ago, aged six:

> *Maybe I don't have memories of that time but, in actual fact, I think I didn't even know what that meant – to move… I didn't know that my friendships with classmates would come to an end, that my life would change its course by 180 degrees (...) to me it seemed like one big adventure... I had this fantasy Latvia in my mind. I'm heading there but there is a difference between what is in your mind and what the reality is.*

This poignant illustration of how a child feels on 'return' (in Vilis' case, it was a new move, as he was born in Australia) highlights the dissonance between the imagined and the real. Vilis' admission that the veil of fantasy lifted clearly states that even a young child can feel the impact of a physical relocation, challenging the notion that young age can be a protective factor for migrant children (Gervais, Côté, Pomerleau, Tardif-Grenier, de Montigny and Trottier-Cyr 2021) and identifying it as a risk factor (Patterson 2012). So what factors can mitigate the anxiety of changed circumstances for an immigrant family, even if they cannot eliminate the stress completely?

Mitigating factors to reduce the angst of return

Cassarino (2004, 2008), outlining the conditions and timing for a successful return, stresses the importance of return readiness and preparedness. One of the ways in which the fantasy element of a return can be mitigated is with frequent trips to the homeland. Many Latvian nationals living abroad (most commonly in countries in Europe) travel to visit family and friends during their summer holidays. This provides regular physical contact (still a more preferred option to Skype and Zoom calls) with relatives and helps children to familiarise themselves with their parents' homeland, so it is not a mythical, unknown place and the children gain specific points of reference.

Another mitigating factor is learning and maintaining the language of the country of origin – in this case, Latvian (or, for some returning nationals, Russian, if the family is of Russian origin). If the language is spoken at home or enhanced either at a weekend language school or via distance education, then the childr en's integration can be smoother (Grosa 2020; Mieriņa *et al*. 2020b; Puplauskaite 2021). It does not remove all obstacles, as the home language spoken while living abroad is often less rich and lacking in vocabulary and is most likely not of the standard expected at school in Latvia. Likewise, attending cultural performances and traditional Latvian customary events put on by diaspora organisations while living abroad also familiarises children with the culture of the home country and can ease integration, albeit these events are not sufficient on their own to prepare children for the move to Latvia. Diaspora summer camps are another way in which children living in the diaspora can maintain their language and culture.

Preparation can take other forms. It can involve giving children a chance to say a proper goodbye to their classmates and friends in the host country and encouraging contact with them via social networks – which will probably lessen as time goes by. Pollock and van Reken (2009) discuss the grief cycle with regard to 'third-culture kids' (children living in a country the culture of which is not their ethnic or customary culture) and relocation, a stage that may be applicable to any child who moves from one country to another. Continued contact with the previous life is seen to be important for primary and high-school children who, after moving, will naturally still want to cling to the diminishing fantasy of the life that still continues in the previous country of residence.

Seventeen-year-old Pauls returned to Latvia after living in the USA for five years. This last return to Latvia was more uprooting than previous ones, although he is not a novice at moving as his family relocated a number of times in his childhoood. Pauls shares:

> *This time it was a bit different as (…) well, I do write to my friends but I haven't met any of them since I left and most likely over the next few years I won't meet them, only if they come to Europe (...) so this time for me, purely from a psychological point of view, this was the most complicated time, because I was there for five years (…) and they were also the years where I matured the most, which means I established ties with people which I had never done previously and that's why I think the last time was the hardest…*

No amount of readiness and preparation for the imagined new life back in Latvia can mitigate the grief associated with disrupted friendships. Staying in contact was possible for Pauls via social media and other platforms but the face-to-face friendships being cut short was a fact of life he faced because of the move. A mitigating factor in Pauls' case was keeping himself busy and throwing himself into the array of after-school activities which were available to him in Latvia, almost all free of charge.

A positive attitude towards the move by the parents themselves can also be a contributing factor in the success or disappointment of a return, especially for the children. Frequent comparison with the host country and denigration of the country of origin can psychologically influence both parent and child. This is how Kristīne, a recent returnee from a large city in Norway, relays the positives of a new life in Latvia to her primary-school-aged son, who is currently adapting to life in a large town in northern Latvia. Like Pauls, he is also being kept busy with many after-school activities:

> *In M.* [a regional town] *there is a very wide variety of after-school activities and they cost nothing. He* [Kristīne's son] *will attend the digital centre, three different activities and they cost nothing. He has also started rowing training (…) we have a river near M., we have the sea, we have a lake, the forest. Everything is 10 minutes away. And that is what my son really, really likes. He has expressed his feelings: 'And now I have a home'. And maybe for him, too, a home is a house not an apartment.*

Kristīne and her son did experience challenges negotiating the Latvian school system and the return was fraught with dramatic twists and turns yet, in Kristīne's mind, the positives of the return – outside the school environment – outweigh the negatives. Her son is also more settled with extended family around him and the dream of a less-complicated life back in the homeland can be lived if a person sees the benefits of the 'bigger picture'.

Seeing the positives was also evident in Samanta's account of her family's recent return after living in a country in sub-Saharan Africa. Samanta, her African husband and their children spent part of the year of the Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia and the return was for family reasons. This move was considered to be a temporary one, as Samanta admits she is just as happy in her home in Africa as an 'expat' as she is in the small country town in Latvia in which they currently reside. She must now decide what to do in the long term – whether the family will remain in Latvia is still uncertain. The positives, despite living amidst restrictions imposed by the pandemic, are that her 10-year-old daughter can move about freely in Latvia – go to the shops by herself and meet up with her friends, something that was not so simple back in Africa. Samanta, however, admits that she finds it difficult to adapt, having spent almost half of her life abroad. She shares that:

> *Latvia to me, having spent 21 years abroad, had become an idealised Latvia. All the bad things are forgotten and only the good is remembered and I lived in this bubble, despite the fact that every year I visited Latvia and met my girlfriends… Now that I have returned (...) it's not the same (...) you can't just go back into the previous life. I have the feeling that I have to start afresh.*

This illustrates the uncertainty and frustration of the returning parents themselves, not just the children. Yet Samanta remains hopeful and is positive about the assistance her daughter received when settling into school. The return was planned a few months beforehand, the school was already lined up and their daughter speaks Latvian, making return easier – so preparation (as outlined by Cassarino 2004) was certainly evident in this situation.

Support measures by home-country institutions

Preparation and resource mobilisation on the part of migrants are helpful; also crucial are support measures in the education system of the country of origin. Latvia has put in place support measures such as additional individual language and subject lessons for 1–2 years if required, teaching assistants in the classroom – available with additional funding from municipal council funds – and individual lesson plans. The findings of the 2019 survey show that the capacity-building of teachers is one important aspect – being able to empathise with newcomers, welcome them and include them in the class cohort. Around 30 per cent of survey participants who were returnees reported that teachers/educators in Latvia are very empathetic to the needs of returnee children (compared with 60 per cent among those living abroad, replying about teachers in the host country). Adapting the curriculum to cater for different levels of language proficiency and knowledge in various subjects, making allowances for students in their first few months and not grading them initially according to the assessment criteria used for other students are all suggestions made by parents in open-ended answers in the survey.

Other support measures that the Latvian government has implemented are an online handbook issued by the Latvian Language Agency which provides advice to returning parents and to those who teach returnee children (LVA 2021a, b). Ongoing professional development classes for teachers of return-migrant pupils in government schools, as well as online language classes that maintain children's Latvian language skills in the diaspora, are run by the same agency (Krastiņa and Zariņa 2021). Another recent Latvian government initiative – the employment of return-migration coordinators – has been a great support to returnees and to families in particular. These civil servants – one in each of five regions in Latvia – help returnees to find a job or start up a business, source pre-schools and schools for the children and organise social-security benefits. Their assistance has been much appreciated by returnees (Prusakova, Bērziņš and Apsīte-Beriņa 2021). Information/socialisation camps for returnees are also run by the Latvian Language Agency and these have been rated positively by families who have taken part. The Latvian language can also be maintained in over 100 Latvian diaspora schools worldwide as well as in summer camps organised for Latvian children living abroad with Latvian government and diaspora community funding.

All these support measures can be seen as a form of preparation for return, both on the part of the returning families themselves and as assistance from the Latvian government. Resource mobilisation in the form of advice and assistance from transnational friendships – advice from friends who are recent returnees and from relatives living back home – can also help. Yet no amount of preparation can make a person fully ready – imagination can be the catalyst and provide a mental image of what could take place, holiday visits can familiarise the person with the country and native-language skills can be seen as capital; however, the reality of moving will always be an individual experience for each family and for its constituent members.

Conclusion

Return to the homeland with second-generation children can be daunting and the cause of worry and anxiety. The imagining of a much-improved life back home can be a catalyst for mobility but a smooth integration is not guaranteed. Yet there can be mitigating factors to lessen the angst associated with return. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data have shown that the perceived challenges may appear greater in the imagination than they turn out to be in reality. The imagined challenges of a return to the homeland for their children voiced by parents in the diaspora, when compared with the opinion of actual returnees, show that the primary anxiety – that a lack of native-language proficiency would hinder children's adaptation into school life – is largely unfounded. Nevertheless, my study does show that some areas of school life for returnees are

problematic – a curriculum unharmonised with those of other countries, a lack of empathy on the part of teachers and a sometimes hostile attitude on the part of classmates are all still challenging. Yet the survey findings of returnees have shown an overall positive opinion of return regarding the integration of their children.

Cassarino's (2004, 2008) framework of return preparedness, willingness and readiness, coupled with resource mobilisation, seems to ring true for many of the interviewees in the qualitative part of this study. Those families where children had maintained their native language skills, had frequently visited Latvia, had been informed about the move in a timely manner and were prepared for the move by their parents with a positive mindset, found it easier to acclimatise to their new surroundings.

Return anxieties can be further mitigated by a welcoming attitude in the home country – not only by the relatives (grandparents, cousins, uncles, aunts) but also by the state and its institutions (schools, after-school activities, return-migration coordinators). School support measures, including teachers who show empathy for children who are entering a system that is unfamiliar to them and classmates who welcome rather than bully newcomers, are all ideals to strive for. Progress has been made with some support measures in welcoming new families back (e.g. return-migrant camps, a handbook for returnee parents and those who teach returnee children) yet there is still more to be done to make returnee children feel completely welcome and fully understood – from both an academic and a social perspective.

Some additional recommendations for support measures are greater opportunities for potential returnees to find out about the school system from school representatives in Latvia (either teaching staff, returnee parents or even returnee school-aged children). Summer camps for potential returnee families to meet recent returnees and schoolteachers can be another helpful activity to ease anxiety. Websites for returnees, answering frequently asked questions, as well as more online forum platforms for potential returnees could help to put people's minds at rest, particularly concerning school entry in Latvia. Currently there is one Facebook forum for returnee families which has helped people to resolve some issues but these websites and social-media platforms are also needed at the school and municipal government levels, offering advice to people seeking information regarding return.

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