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PROGRAMME**

**SMADZEŅU APRITES DINAMIKA: LATVIJAS REEMIGRANTU  
NO ĪRIJAS IEGULDĪJUMA, IETEKMES UN POTENCIĀLA ANALĪZE**

**The Dynamics of Brain Circulation: An Analysis of the Contributions, Effects  
and Potential of Latvian Re-emigrants from Ireland**

**MASTER THESIS**

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## ANOTĀCIJA

Šajā maģistra darbā tiek pētīta smadzeņu cirkulācijas dinamika, īpašu uzmanību pievēršot Latvijas reemigrantiem, kuri atgriezušies no Īrijas. Atšķirībā no smadzeņu aizplūšanas, smadzeņu cirkulācija apzīmē kvalificētu personu un viņu zināšanu divvirzienu kustību, uzsverot iespējamus ieguvumus gan izcelsmes, gan mītnes valstīm.

Pētījumā analizēts, kā Latvijas atgriezušies migranti veicina valsts ekonomiku caur prasmju pārnesi, inovācijām un transnacionālajiem tīkliem, vienlaikus aplūkojot strukturālos un sociālos izaicinājumus, ar kuriem viņi saskaras reintegrācijas procesā. Pētījumā izmantota jaukta metode: kvalitatīva interviju tematiskā analīze ar reemigrantiem un nozares pārstāvjiem, kā arī kvantitatīva Latvijas un Īrijas migrācijas tendenču izpēte. Rezultāti liecina, ka, lai arī reemigrantiem ir ievērojams sociālekonomiskais potenciāls, tas bieži netiek pilnvērtīgi izmantots sistēmisku šķēršļu dēļ.

Darba noslēgumā sniegti politikas ieteikumi, lai uzlabotu reintegrācijas mehānismus un maksimāli izmantotu atgriešanās migrācijas attīstības potenciālu, piedāvājot nozīmīgu ieguldījumu migrācijas politikas, diasporas iesaistes un nacionālās attīstības stratēģiju pilnveidē.

Atslēgas vārdi: smadzeņu cirkulācija, atgriešanās migrācija, reemigranti, Latvija, Īrija, prasmju pārnese, inovācijas, transnacionālie tīkli, reintegrācija, migrācijas politika

## ANNOTATION

This thesis explores the dynamics of brain circulation through a focused analysis of Latvian re-emigrants returning from Ireland. Brain circulation, as opposed to brain drain, represents the bidirectional movement of skilled individuals and their knowledge, emphasizing the potential benefits for both sending and receiving countries.

The study investigates how Latvian returnees contribute to the national economy through skill transfer, innovation, and transnational networks, while also examining the structural and social challenges they face upon reintegration. The research applies a mixed-methods approach: thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with re-migrants, and quantitative examination of migration trends between Latvia and Ireland.

The findings suggest that while Latvian re-emigrants hold substantial socio-economic potential, this is often underutilized due to systemic barriers. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at improving integration frameworks and maximizing the developmental impact of return migration, offering valuable insights for migration policy, diaspora engagement, and national development strategies.

**Keywords:** Brain circulation, return migration, re-emigrants, Latvia, Ireland, skill transfer, innovation, transnational networks, reintegration, migration policy.

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## **LIST OF DESIGNATIONS AND ABBREVIATION`S**

**COVID-19** - Coronavirus Disease 2019

**CSB** - Central Statistical Bureau (Latvia)

**CSO** - Central Statistics Office (Ireland)

**EU** – The European Union

**EU-15** - The 15 EU member states before the 2004 enlargement

**Eurostat** - Statistical Office of the European Communities (EU)

**FT** - Financial Times (news outlet)

**GDP** - Gross domestic product

**IOM** - International Organization for Migration

**IT** – Information technologies

**NSF** - National Science Foundation (USA)

**OECD** - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**PMLP** - Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs

**RRC** - The Regional Remigration Coordinator

**UK** – the United Kingdom

**UNESCO** - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

**VARAM** - Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (Latvia)

## Motivation for the Research Topic

Born and educated in Ireland, I spent the first eighteen years of my life embedded in a society that prizes outward mobility and entrepreneurial initiative. In 2020 I relocated to Riga to pursue tertiary studies, partly because my mother's Latvian origins had long cultivated a latent sense of affiliation, and partly because Latvia presented itself as an "under-discovered" node in the European knowledge space. This trajectory exemplifies the phenomenon that King and Christou (2011) term *second-generation return migration*: mobility prompted not by direct childhood attachment to the homeland but by an intergenerational transmission of cultural capital and belonging. My decision thus broadens the concept of brain circulation beyond the repatriation of native-born citizens to include diaspora-born actors who possess both external skills and an inherited stake in Latvia's future.

The move has enabled a two-way transfer of resources. From the Irish system I bring fluency in English academic discourse, familiarity with EU research funding mechanisms and practical exposure to problem-based learning all assets that I now deploy as a teaching assistant in Riga. Conversely, immersion in Latvia's bilingual professional environment has sharpened my Russian reading competence and provided first-hand insight into Baltic market structures, enriching my comparative skill set for future multinational work. These experiences confirm the thesis finding that brain circulation operates through overlapping physical, virtual and emotional channels: what began as an academic sojourn has already evolved into a conduit for tacit knowledge exchange between Irish and Latvian networks.

Latvia's economic potential appears substantial yet conditionally unrealised. The country enjoys macroeconomic stability, competitive labour costs and an emerging start-up ecosystem, but persistent capital scarcity constrains scale-up. Increased foreign direct investment particularly in high-technology and green-transition sectors would amplify the productivity gains that returning and diaspora-born professionals can generate. Policymakers could leverage hybrid identities like mine by establishing diaspora investment vehicles, streamlining residence-to-work permit conversion for EU citizens and embedding internship pipelines that pair international students with Latvian SMEs seeking export know-how. In sum, my lived experience supports the thesis

conclusion that Latvia's ability to convert circulating talent into durable development hinges less on migrants' motivation than on the state's capacity to match human and financial capital in a timely, strategically directed manner.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

The title of the master's thesis is “The dynamics of brain circulation: an analysis of the contributions, effects and potential of Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland”. In this work, the author provides a comprehensive insight into the benefits and impact of Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland on the local economy. Based on the concept of “Brain Circulation”, the research shows that Latvian re-emigrants can positively impact the local economy, promoting skills transfer, innovation and international ties, but the challenges of integration and skills utilization can hinder their full potential. Remigrants are Latvian citizens or non-citizens of Latvian origin (including those born in Latvia but holding different citizenship) who return to Latvia after living abroad.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of brain circulation has become an essential framework in migration studies. Unlike previous models of the "brain drain" or "brain gain" paradigm, brain circulation emphasizes the dynamic flow of talent that benefits both countries of origin and destination. This phenomenon has gained particular importance in the European Union (EU), where human capital mobility is facilitated by freedom of movement between Member States. Latvia and Ireland, despite their different socio-economic backgrounds, provide a compelling case for studying brain circulation, given the significant migration flows between these two countries.

The relevance of the work lies in the study of brain circulation as a concept in migration studies, which examines the two-way flow of skills, knowledge and innovation across borders. The increasing mobility between Latvia and Ireland highlights the need to study the socio-economic impact of this phenomenon. Understanding brain circulation can provide a significant contribution to policy development and economic integration.

Since Latvia joined the EU in 2004, migration patterns have changed significantly. Economic disparities and opportunities to earn higher incomes abroad led to a wave of emigration, with Ireland becoming a significant destination for Latvian migrants. This trend was further

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<sup>1</sup> Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. (2023, June 1). *Population growth in 2022 due to immigration*. <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/population/population/press-releases/12338-number-population-latvia-2022>

influenced by the financial crisis (2008–2010), which affected both migration decisions and integration opportunities. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2023) and the geopolitical consequences of the war in Ukraine (2022+) have introduced new dynamic changes, highlighting the need for adaptive migration policies and an understanding of the role of returning migrants referred to as “re-emigrants” in their home countries.

The study draws on existing theoretical frameworks on migration and brain circulation. Of particular note are the studies by Hazans (2013) and Mieriņa (2015), which have provided valuable insights into migration trends and diaspora dynamics in the Baltic region. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about the experiences of returnees and their role in shaping socio-economic outcomes. This paper addresses this gap by using a mixed methods approach that combines thematic analysis from semi-structured interviews with statistical data from Eurostat and national statistical offices.<sup>2</sup>

## **1.2 Research Questions, objectives and Hypothesis**

This study aims to analyse the socio-economic impact and policy dynamics of brain circulation between Ireland and Latvia. The main focus is on how Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland contribute to economic growth, innovation and international cooperation, while addressing challenges such as reintegration and skills utilisation in the Latvian labour market. By examining the dynamics of brain circulation in the context of Latvia and Ireland, this study contributes to the broader discussions on migration, transnationalism and socio-economic development in the EU context.

The following research questions guide the study:

What is the impact of Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland on the Latvian economy? Do they take advantage of the skills and experience gained in Ireland? Do they keep commercial, professional, or financial connections with Ireland? Are there factors that prevent them from taking advantage of their experience and skills?

### **Hypothesis**

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<sup>2</sup> Mieriņa, I. (2015). *Emigrant Communities of Latvia: Diaspora of Hope*. Riga: Institute of Sociology and Philosophy.

Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland contribute positively to the local economy through skill transfer, innovation, and transnational connections, but challenges in integration and skill utilization may hinder their full potential.

### **1.3 Approach**

The tasks of this work are structured to comprehensively address the dynamics of brain circulation in Latvia and Ireland. Initially, the concept of brain circulation and its significance to both countries will be defined, providing a theoretical foundation for the study. This will be followed by an analysis of the socio-economic and migration contexts of Latvia and Ireland, highlighting patterns and trends that influence brain circulation. Key drivers of this phenomenon will then be identified to uncover underlying factors facilitating or hindering the flow of human capital. To enrich the study with qualitative insights, interviews will be conducted with Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland, offering first-hand perspectives on their experiences. Furthermore, the economic and social implications of brain circulation will be evaluated to understand its broader impact on both nations. Finally, the study will culminate in proposing policy recommendations aimed at maximizing the benefits of brain circulation while addressing potential challenges.

### **Methodology**

To achieve the objectives of this research, a mixed-methods approach was selected, combining both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. This methodology allows for a comprehensive examination of the dynamics of brain circulation between Latvia and Ireland, capturing both statistical trends and the personal experiences of returnees.

The qualitative component focuses on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with Latvian re-migrants from Ireland. These interviews aim to uncover the motivations, challenges, and opportunities experienced by individuals who have returned to Latvia, providing first-hand insights that are often absent from purely statistical studies. In addition to returnees, interviews were also carried out with key informants from business, education, and policymaking sectors to enrich the analysis with expert perspectives on the broader socio-economic environment affecting brain circulation.

The quantitative part of the research examines migration trends and patterns using official statistical data from the Central Statistics Office of Ireland, Eurostat, and Latvian national migration reports. This data provides context for understanding the scale, direction, and evolution of migration flows between the two countries over time.

By combining these two methods, the study ensures that both the macro-level dynamics of migration and the micro-level experiences of individuals are considered, offering a well-rounded understanding of brain circulation in practice.

Primary data sources include:

- Semi-structured interviews with Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland;
- Statistical migration data from Eurostat, the Central Statistics Office of Ireland, and Latvian government reports;
- Secondary academic studies on migration, brain circulation, and labor market integration.

This integrated methodological framework enables the thesis to not only identify patterns and outcomes but also to explore the deeper, often personal, factors that influence the success or limitations of return migration in Latvia's socio-economic context.

## **Limitations**

While this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of brain circulation between Latvia and Ireland, certain limitations must be acknowledged that may affect the scope and interpretation of the results.

One of the main challenges encountered relates to data availability. Although migration statistics exist, there is a limited amount of historical and comparative data specifically focusing on the phenomenon of brain circulation. This restricts the ability to track long-term trends and fully assess the evolution of re-migration patterns between the two countries. Additionally, discrepancies between data sources such as differing methodologies used by Eurostat, the Central Statistics Office of Ireland, and Latvian agencies may affect the consistency and comparability of statistical analysis.

From a methodological perspective, establishing clear causal relationships between brain circulation and socio-economic outcomes remains complex. Migration dynamics are influenced by a wide range of factors, including individual motivations, economic conditions, labor market

structures, and national policies. As such, while the study can highlight correlations and patterns, definitive causality may not always be established.

Moreover, the qualitative nature of the interviews introduces its own limitations. As the interviews are based on personal experiences and subjective perceptions, they may be influenced by individual biases, memory gaps, or selective reporting. While every effort is made to ensure diversity and balance in the selection of participants, the findings cannot be generalized to all Latvian re-migrants from Ireland.

The strong ethical considerations guide the research process. Given the personal and sometimes sensitive nature of migration experiences, particular attention is paid to ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and respectful engagement with participants. Although these measures aim to create a safe space for open dialogue, there is always the possibility that some participants may withhold information or provide socially desirable responses.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the mechanisms, challenges, and opportunities associated with brain circulation, contributing to both academic understanding and policy development.

Studying brain circulation presents several methodological challenges that must be recognized. Establishing clear causal relationships between migration trends, policy interventions, and socio-economic outcomes is inherently complex. Migration processes are influenced by a wide range of intertwined factors, including individual aspirations, economic fluctuations, political decisions, and cultural environments. These multidimensional influences cannot always be fully captured through the research methods employed in this study. Consequently, while the research can highlight important correlations and patterns, caution must be exercised in drawing firm conclusions about causality.

Furthermore, the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts of Latvia and Ireland pose additional challenges. The findings of this study are closely tied to the specific historical experiences, labor market structures, and migration policies of these two countries. As a result, the broader applicability of the conclusions to other contexts remains limited and should be approached carefully in comparative discussions.

In addition to methodological considerations, strong ethical principles are fundamental to the research process. Given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the data collected

through semi-structured interviews, particular emphasis is placed on protecting participant anonymity, ensuring informed consent, and safeguarding the confidentiality of all information shared. Special care is taken to maintain a respectful and culturally sensitive approach when engaging with participants and stakeholders in both Latvia and Ireland, recognizing the diverse backgrounds and experiences that inform their migration journeys.

The thesis is organized to ensure a systematic and comprehensive exploration of brain circulation between Latvia and Ireland. The first chapter introduces the background of the research, outlines the research questions, objectives, and hypothesis, and briefly describes the approach, tasks, sources, and methodology employed in the study. The second chapter provides a literature review and theoretical framework, defining the concept of brain circulation and tracing its evolution within migration studies. The third chapter offers a theoretical analysis, focusing on Latvia's remigration experience and drawing insights from existing studies on brain circulation in the Latvian context. The fourth chapter presents the empirical analysis, starting with a detailed description of the research methodology, followed by an examination of the historical and policy contexts of Latvia and Ireland. It further analyzes the trends and drivers that made Ireland a significant destination for Latvian migrants, and assesses the effects and key contributions of re-migrants to Latvia's economy. The final, fifth chapter synthesizes the research findings, draws conclusions, and provides proposals aimed at enhancing the positive impacts of brain circulation while addressing the challenges faced by Latvian re-migrants. Through this structure, the thesis offers a comprehensive and coherent understanding of the dynamics, contributions, and potential of Latvian re-migrants from Ireland.

## 2. BRAIN CIRCULATION

### 2.1. Definition of Brain Circulation

Migration is traditionally considered to result in “brain drain” from developing countries and “brain gain” for developed countries. As a result, many developing countries have attracted an increasing number of re-emigrants, which is described as “brain circulation.” This relatively new concept, however, still dismisses the role of individuals who do not return to their home countries and work in the host countries. Specifically, there is a lack of discussion on how expatriate researchers may contribute to their home countries through international research collaborations. Since the concept of "brain circulation" is relatively new in migration studies, with no universally agreed-upon definition among researchers. First introduced by Xiaonan Cao (1996), the term describes talent mobility as a multidirectional system where individuals move freely between organizations multiple times during their careers. Through this mobility, individuals acquire marketable skills and international experience, benefiting all countries involved<sup>3</sup> Cao challenges the traditional "brain gain" framework, which views global human resources as one-directional, by presenting brain circulation as a dynamic, long-term process. However, his argument primarily focuses on geographic mobility. This thesis builds on Cao's perspective, agreeing that brain circulation functions as an open and integrated system, but expands the framework to include intangible forms of circulation that are not dependent on physical movement.<sup>4</sup>

Studies exploring brain circulation identify two main pathways: "return" and "diaspora." According to Meyer et al. (1997) and Mahroum, Eldridge, and Darr (2006), brain circulation relies heavily on specific conditions, including policy initiatives and advancements in communication.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cao, X. (1996). Debating 'brain drain' in the context of globalization. *Compare*, 26(3), p. 269-285

<sup>4</sup> Cao, X. (1996). Debating 'brain drain' in the context of globalization. *Compare*, 26(3), p. 269-285

<sup>5</sup> Meyer, J.-B., Charum, J., Bernal, D., Gaillard, J., Gaillard, A. M., Aguirre-Bastos, C., & Mahroum, S. (1997). Turning brain drain into brain gain: The Colombian experience of the diaspora option. *Science, Technology, and Society*, 2(2), p. 285–315

"Return" refers to highly skilled individuals returning to their home countries, where they contribute advanced knowledge and skills to local education, science, and innovation systems.<sup>6</sup> For instance, nearly half of foreign doctoral graduates in science and engineering in the United States in 1995 returned to their home countries immediately after graduation, with others returning after gaining teaching or industry experience. This return process enables knowledge transfer and strengthens domestic innovation systems.<sup>7</sup>

Velema (2012) highlights the importance of returning scientists in fostering international cooperation through connections with foreign institutions.<sup>8</sup> However, the impact of these scientists is influenced by the absorptive capacity and socio-cultural contexts of their home countries as well as the quality of the foreign education and experience they acquired.<sup>9</sup> His findings emphasize the need for well-planned policies to maximize the benefits of brain circulation. Similarly, Wagner, Leydesdorff, and Bornmann (2014) found that returnees from the United States significantly contributed to China's research output by leveraging academic collaborations, such as co-authoring papers, between the two nations.<sup>10</sup>

The second pathway, "diaspora," is less visible but equally significant. Meyer et al. (1997) argue that countries increasingly view their expatriate communities as potential resources for national development.<sup>11</sup> For example, Columbia has successfully fostered intellectual and cultural connections between its diaspora and domestic programs through digital communication and joint projects. This demonstrates that diasporas only function effectively when members remain in communication, have shared goals, and engage in collective activities.<sup>12</sup>

Mahroum et al. (2006) explore how diaspora communities can transform "brain drain" into "brain gain" through initiatives such as visiting scholar programs and digital knowledge

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<sup>6</sup> Mahroum, S., Eldridge, C., & Darr, A. (2006). Transnational diaspora options: How developing countries could benefit from their emigrant populations. *Labor & Demography*

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, J. M., & Regets, M. (1998). International mobility of scientists and engineers to the US: brain drain or brain circulation. NSF Issue Brief, p. 98–316

<sup>8</sup> Velema, T. A. (2012). The contingent nature of brain gain and brain circulation: Their foreign context and the impact of return scientists on the scientific community in their country of origin. *Scientometrics*, 93(3), p. 893–913

<sup>9</sup> Velema, T. A. (2012). The contingent nature of brain gain and brain circulation: Their foreign context and the impact of return scientists on the scientific community in their country of origin. *Scientometrics*, 93(3), p. 893–913

<sup>10</sup> Wagner, C., Leydesdorff, L., & Bornmann, L. (2014). Recent developments in China-US cooperation in science.

<sup>11</sup> Meyer, J. B., Charum, J., Bernal, D., Gaillard, J., Granés, J., Leon, J., & Schlemmer, B. (1997). Turning brain drain into brain gain: the Colombian experience of the diaspora option. *Science Technology & Society*, 2(2), p. 285-315.

<sup>12</sup> Meyer, J.B.; & Wattiaux, J.P. (2006). Diaspora knowledge networks: Vanishing doubts and increasing evidence. *International Journal of Multicultural Societies*, 8(1), p. 4-16.

networks.<sup>13</sup> They also highlight the economic contributions of diasporas, including remittances and investments, which strengthen connections between home and host countries. For instance, countries with larger expatriate student populations tend to receive higher remittances, and expatriates are often more inclined to invest in their countries of origin.<sup>14</sup> Saxenian (2005) further illustrates this through her study of highly skilled expatriates in Silicon Valley, where professionals from China and India leveraged connections to their home countries, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship.<sup>15</sup>

While brain circulation has gained traction as a research concept, its mechanisms remain underexplored. Meyer and Wattiaux (2006) emphasize the role of diaspora knowledge networks in transforming brain drain into brain gain. They identify numerous diaspora networks facilitated by advancements in digital communication, which have enhanced collaboration and knowledge sharing. However, they caution that relying solely on digital methods risks overlooking offline networks. To deepen understanding, further research is needed to explore the dynamics and impacts of these networks.<sup>16</sup>

Empirical studies have also revealed that the outcomes of brain circulation vary significantly across countries. For example, Franzoni, Scellato, and Stephan (2015) found that returnees to developed nations such as the United States and Japan perform comparably to expatriates, while returnees to developing nations like Brazil and India often face challenges in achieving similar success (Franzoni et al., 2015). This disparity underscores the importance of domestic research capacity and supportive infrastructure in leveraging brain circulation effectively.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mahroum, S., Eldridge, C., & Darr, A. S. (2006). Transnational diaspora options: How developing countries could benefit from their emigrant populations. *International Journal of Multicultural Societies*, 8(1), p. 25-42

<sup>14</sup> Mahroum, S., Eldridge, C., & Darr, A. S. (2006). Transnational diaspora options: How developing countries could benefit from their emigrant populations. *International Journal of Multicultural Societies*, 8(1), p. 25-42

<sup>15</sup> Saxenian, A. L. (2005). From brain drain to brain circulation: Transnational communities and regional upgrading in India and China. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 40(2), p. 35-61.

<sup>16</sup> Meyer, J.B.; & Wattiaux, J.P. (2006). Diaspora knowledge networks: Vanishing doubts and increasing evidence. *International Journal of Multicultural Societies*, 8(1), p. 4-16.

<sup>17</sup> Franzoni, C., Scellato, G., & Stephan, P. (2015). International mobility of research scientists: Lessons from GlobSci. In A. Geuna (Ed.), *Global mobility of research scientists: The economics of who goes where and why* London, UK: Elsevier. (pp. 1-34).

Gaillard (1998) argues that the dichotomy of "winners" and "losers" in migration oversimplifies the complexities of brain circulation. They suggest that economic growth and the expansion of global networks increasingly enable talent to return to middle-income countries, while low-income countries continue to face challenges in reversing brain drain (Gaillard, 1998). Their findings highlight the importance of building robust local networks and improving economic conditions to benefit from the global flow of talent.<sup>18</sup>

Building on the foundational definitions, recent literature emphasizes that brain circulation is not merely a mechanical flow of skilled individuals, but a complex social process involving knowledge networks, transnational linkages, and evolving identities. The term captures not just the physical movement of individuals, but also the continuous exchange of skills, capital, and innovation between home and host countries.<sup>19</sup>

Brain circulation is therefore increasingly studied through the lens of transnationalism, wherein migrants maintain multiple ties across borders, influencing both their home and host societies simultaneously.<sup>20</sup> Vertovec (2009) argues that "transnational social fields" are central to understanding brain circulation because migrants are no longer bound to a singular national identity or economic space.<sup>21</sup> Instead, they navigate overlapping networks of opportunities, loyalties, and knowledge exchange. Scholars also note that brain circulation operates at multiple levels: individual, institutional, and systemic. At the individual level, it concerns migrants' career decisions and personal development. At the institutional level, universities, research centres, and multinational companies play crucial roles in facilitating or hindering circulation. At the systemic level, national and international policies, economic conditions, and global labour market dynamics determine the feasibility and success of circulation.<sup>22</sup>

Brain circulation is therefore increasingly studied through the lens of transnationalism, wherein migrants maintain multiple ties across borders, influencing both their home and host societies simultaneously.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Gaillard, A. M., & Gaillard, J. (1998). The international circulation of scientists and technologists. *Science Communication*, 20(1), p.106-115

<sup>19</sup> Beine, M., Docquier, F., & Rapoport, H. (2008). Brain drain and human capital formation in developing countries. *The Economic Journal*, 118(528), 631-652.

<sup>20</sup>Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. Routledge, p. 3–6

<sup>21</sup> Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. Routledge, p. 6-10

<sup>22</sup> Daugeliene, R., & Marcinkeviciene, R. (2009). Brain circulation: Theoretical considerations. *Social Research*, 3(17), p. 44-47

<sup>23</sup> Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. Routledge, p. 3–5

The success of brain circulation is not solely a function of migrants' willingness to return or collaborate, but also of the absorptive capacities of their home countries. Absorptive capacity refers to the ability of institutions and labour markets to recognize, assimilate, and apply the skills and knowledge brought back by migrants.<sup>24</sup> Weak absorptive environments risk turning return migration into brain waste rather than brain gain. There is an increasing recognition that brain circulation should be viewed as cyclical rather than linear. Migrants may engage in multiple movements throughout their lives departing, returning, re-emigrating, or participating virtually in their home country's development via diasporic initiatives.<sup>25</sup> Thus, contemporary definitions of brain circulation emphasize fluidity, continuity, and multidirectionality.

Building on the foundational definitions, recent literature emphasizes that brain circulation is not merely a mechanical flow of skilled individuals, but a complex social process involving knowledge networks, transnational linkages, and evolving identities. The term captures not just the physical movement of individuals, but also the continuous exchange of skills, capital, and innovation between home and host countries.<sup>26</sup> There is an increasing recognition that brain circulation should be viewed as cyclical rather than linear. Migrants may engage in multiple movements throughout their lives departing, returning, re-emigrating, or participating virtually in their home country's development via diasporic initiatives.<sup>27</sup> Thus, contemporary definitions of brain circulation emphasize fluidity, continuity, and multidirectionality.

In conclusion, brain circulation can occur through two primary pathways: the return of skilled individuals or the establishment of diaspora networks. Both pathways rely on enabling policies, robust communication infrastructure, and local capacity to integrate and utilize the skills and knowledge of expatriates. While the concept has evolved significantly, further research is essential to understand its nuances and ensure its benefits are maximized for origin countries.

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<sup>24</sup> Meyer, J.-B., & Brown, M. (1999). *Scientific diasporas: A new approach to the brain drain*. UNESCO, p. 5-8

<sup>25</sup> Saxenian, A. (2005). From brain drain to brain circulation: Transnational communities and regional upgrading in India and China. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, p. 39-47.

<sup>26</sup> Beine, M., Docquier, F., & Rapoport, H. (2008). Brain drain and human capital formation in developing countries. *The Economic Journal*, 118(528), p. 631–652.

<sup>27</sup> Saxenian, A. (2005). From brain drain to brain circulation: Transnational communities and regional upgrading in India and China. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 40(2), p.35–61.

## 2.2 Evolution of Brain Circulation in Migration Studies

The concept of brain circulation marks a significant evolution in migration studies, shifting the focus from the unidirectional loss or gain of talent ("brain drain" and "brain gain") to the dynamic and multidirectional flow of highly skilled individuals. Originally, the term "brain drain" emerged in the mid-20th century to describe the exodus of skilled professionals from Europe and the UK to North America, particularly during post-war reconstruction efforts.<sup>28</sup> However, the narrative began to change in the 1990s as researchers recognized the potential for skilled migration to benefit both origin and host countries through networks, remittances, and the transfer of knowledge. This transformation is embodied in the concept of brain circulation, which highlights the interconnectedness of global economies and the opportunities for cyclical migration to foster innovation and development.<sup>29</sup>

The transition from brain drain to brain circulation aligns closely with the forces of globalization, which have facilitated the movement of human capital across borders. Globalization has dismantled traditional barriers to migration by integrating economies and enabling the seamless exchange of goods, services, and talent (Meyer, 2001). For instance, countries like India have strategically capitalized on brain circulation by creating high-tech hubs, such as Bangalore and Hyderabad, which attract and retain returning expatriates through favourable policies and robust infrastructure (Chacko, 2007; Kapur, 2002). This shift reflects the growing realization that skilled migrants, even when residing abroad, can remain economically and intellectually connected to their countries of origin, thus promoting what Meyer and Brown (1999) describe as the "diaspora option" for national development.

The economic and social gains from brain circulation are underscored by studies emphasizing its potential to address developmental challenges in origin countries. For example, returning migrants often bring back advanced knowledge, entrepreneurial skills, and international networks that can enhance local industries and stimulate innovation (Saxenian, 2005). In the case of Latvia, the return of skilled emigrants from Ireland is expected to contribute to economic growth, cultural exchange, and policy innovation, provided that barriers to reintegration and skills utilization are effectively addressed. This potential underscores the importance of aligning

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<sup>28</sup> Cervantes, M., and Guellec, D. (2002). "The brain drain: Old myths, new realities". OECD Observer, p. 2-4

<sup>29</sup> Beine, M., Docquier, F., & Rapoport, H. (2008). Brain drain and human capital formation in developing countries: Winners and losers. *The Economic Journal*, 118(528), p. 631–652.

migration policies with strategies that promote transnational engagement and circular migration (Hazans, 2013; Mieriņa, 2015)

Despite its promise, the implementation of brain circulation strategies is not without challenges. The disparities between developed and developing countries, both in terms of institutional capacity and economic opportunities, often exacerbate inequalities rather than mitigate them. The success of brain circulation depends heavily on public policies and the creation of enabling environments that encourage the return and integration of skilled professionals. Without such measures, origin countries risk perpetuating brain drain scenarios, particularly in critical sectors such as healthcare and education, which are already strained in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa (Marchal & Kegels, 2003)

The theoretical framing of skilled migration has evolved considerably over time, moving from pessimistic views of brain drain to more optimistic perspectives of brain circulation. During the post-World War II period, migration of highly educated individuals was primarily regarded as a "brain drain" a significant loss for developing nations and a gain for industrialized economies<sup>11</sup>. Early studies framed emigration as detrimental to the human capital base necessary for economic development in origin countries.<sup>30</sup> By the 1990s, however, growing globalization, technological advances, and the expansion of higher education worldwide led scholars to reconsider this narrative. The notion of "brain gain" emerged, suggesting that migration could incentivize investment in education in origin countries if the possibility of migration increased the private returns to education.<sup>31</sup> Some researchers argued that remittances and diaspora engagement could offset the losses associated with emigration.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the rigid dichotomy between brain drain and brain gain proved insufficient to capture the real dynamics of contemporary skilled migration. Meyer and Brown (1999) advanced the concept of "scientific diasporas," proposing that migrants could contribute to their home countries without physically returning.<sup>33</sup> Their network approach emphasized the role of

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<sup>30</sup> Gaillard, J., & Gaillard, A. (1998). *The international mobility of brains: Exodus or circulation?* *Science, Technology and Society*, 3(2), 195–228.

<sup>31</sup> Franzoni, C., Scellato, G., & Stephan, P. (2015). *International mobility of researchers and scientists: Lessons from the globally mobile scientific workforce*. Elsevier.

<sup>32</sup> OECD (2008). *International migration outlook: Annual report*.

<sup>33</sup> de Haas, H. (2021). *A theory of migration: The aspirations-capabilities framework*. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1).

transnational communities in knowledge transfer, innovation, and economic development. The early 2000's witnessed a more mature theoretical model—brain circulation—which integrated insights from both economic theories and sociological perspectives. This model emphasized circularity, multiple migrations, and sustained transnational linkages rather than a one-time, unidirectional movement.<sup>34</sup> Scholars such as Saxenian (2005) illustrated this concept with the case of Indian and Chinese professionals in Silicon Valley who maintained entrepreneurial and technological linkages with their countries of origin, facilitating innovation ecosystems across borders.<sup>35</sup>

The forces driving brain circulation are multifaceted. Global economic integration, internationalization of higher education, improvements in transportation and communication, and changes in immigration policies have collectively facilitated greater mobility of skilled workers.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the shifting geopolitical and economic centers of gravity, especially the rise of emerging economies, have made return migration more attractive to skilled professionals. Policy environments play a critical role in shaping patterns of brain circulation. Countries like Taiwan, South Korea, and China implemented aggressive talent attraction programs, offering incentives such as research grants, start-up funding, and prestigious appointments to entice their nationals back home.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, countries that failed to address structural barriers — such as bureaucratic rigidity, wage disparities, or poor research infrastructure — often witnessed unsuccessful return migration or re-migration (double return migration).<sup>38</sup>

In the case of Latvia, empirical studies (e.g., Hazans, 2018; Fredheim & Vārpiņa, 2024) reveal that while many emigrants express a desire to return, actual reintegration is fraught with challenges, including difficulties finding suitable employment, cultural adjustment issues, and perceptions of corruption or nepotism in hiring practices.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, many Latvian returnees

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<sup>34</sup> Saxenian, A. (2005). From brain drain to brain circulation: Transnational communities and regional upgrading in India and China. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, p. 35–61.

<sup>35</sup> Saxenian, A. (2005). From brain drain to brain circulation: Transnational communities and regional upgrading in India and China. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 40(2), p. 35–61.

<sup>36</sup> Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. Routledge.

<sup>37</sup> Saxenian, A. (2005). *From brain drain to brain circulation: Transnational communities and regional upgrading in India and China*. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, p. 45–48

<sup>38</sup> OECD (2002). *International Mobility of the Highly Skilled*. OECD Publishing, p. 20–23

<sup>39</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). Emigration from Latvia and its Impact: A Research Survey. In I. Mieriņa (Ed.), *Emigrant Communities of Latvia* University of Latvia Press; p. 460-463  
Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a Reason Why: Baltic Return Migrants' Reasons for Return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, p. 11-13.

experience “return disappointment” and subsequently migrate again. Recent studies have further nuanced the brain circulation framework by introducing concepts such as “brain waste” (underemployment of skilled migrants), “return failure” (double return migration), and “circular migration” (intentional cycles of movement for work, study, and family reasons).<sup>40</sup> These developments reflect the growing recognition of migration as a life-course process involving multiple stages and transitions rather than a linear journey.

Moreover, migration researchers like de Haas (2021) emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivations such as identity formation, transnational belonging, and social prestige in addition to purely economic incentives in explaining migration and return decisions.<sup>41</sup> Return migration is increasingly framed as a complex negotiation between personal aspirations, professional opportunities, familial obligations, and structural constraints.

Initially, studies in the 1960s and 1970s described highly skilled migration almost exclusively through the lens of “brain drain,” characterized by a zero-sum framework where developing countries lost their best talent to developed nations.<sup>42</sup> Early theorists such as Bhagwati and Hamada (1974) posited that the emigration of skilled individuals represented a significant setback for home countries, exacerbating underdevelopment and inequality.<sup>43</sup> However, by the 1990s, with the onset of globalization and improvements in communications and transport technologies, researchers began questioning the one-way narrative. Studies by Saxenian (2005) on the Indian and Chinese diasporas in Silicon Valley demonstrated that emigrants maintained active professional ties with their countries of origin, resulting in knowledge and investment flows that benefited both sides.<sup>44</sup> This empirical evidence laid the groundwork for the brain circulation paradigm.

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<sup>40</sup> Hollowood, E., Braun, J.-C., Webber, J., & Aníbal, S. (2024). The 'brain waste' of skilled migrants in Europe. *Financial Times*, p.2

<sup>41</sup> de Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: The aspirations-capabilities framework. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1), p. 10-12

<sup>42</sup> Bhagwati, J., & Hamada, K. (1974). The brain drain, international integration of markets for professionals and unemployment. *Journal of Development Economics*, p. 20-26.

<sup>43</sup> Bhagwati, J., & Hamada, K. (1974). The brain drain, international integration of markets for professionals and unemployment. *Journal of Development Economics*, p. 26-30.

<sup>44</sup> Saxenian, A. (2005). From brain drain to brain circulation: Transnational communities and regional upgrading in India and China. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, p. 47-50.

The concept gained further legitimacy as international organizations like the OECD and UNESCO began promoting the idea that migration could be mutually beneficial.<sup>45</sup> The idea of "scientific diasporas" emerged, referring to expatriate communities engaged in the scientific and technological advancement of their home countries, even without physically returning.<sup>46</sup> Brain circulation also aligns closely with the "new economics of labor migration" theory, which emphasizes that migration decisions are not solely individual but embedded within family strategies and broader community development goals<sup>47</sup>. According to Stark (1991), households may encourage migration to diversify income sources, with the expectation that migrants will eventually return with enhanced skills or maintain cross-border linkages.

In the European context, the EU's principle of free movement of people has significantly reshaped brain circulation patterns. Intra-EU mobility enables cyclical and temporary migration without many of the legal or bureaucratic barriers faced elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> However, as Hazans (2018) shows, while freedom of movement has facilitated educational and career advancement abroad for many Latvians, the institutional and economic conditions in Latvia have often not been sufficient to attract returnees or to fully capitalize on their skills.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new dimension to migration studies, highlighting the fragility of mobility systems and the increasing relevance of return migration. Research by Pähl-Ruin (2021) suggests that temporary returns during the pandemic could lead to longer-term stay decisions, particularly if home countries have improved their institutional quality and economic attractiveness.<sup>50</sup> As a result, current migration studies frame brain circulation not only as a phenomenon of movement but as a process embedded within larger socio-political and economic structures. Concepts like "liquid migration" (Favell, 2008) and "transnational entrepreneurship" (Varpina et al., 2023) underscore the diversity of migrants' experiences and their evolving role as agents of development and innovation in an increasingly interconnected world.

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<sup>45</sup> OECD (2002). *International Mobility of the Highly Skilled*. OECD Publishing, p.20-25.

<sup>46</sup> Meyer, J.-B. (2001). Network approach versus brain drain: Lessons from the diaspora. *International Migration*, p.95-102

<sup>47</sup> Stark, O. (1991). *The Migration of Labor*. Basil Blackwell, p. 50-58.

<sup>48</sup> European Commission (2018). *Mobility Report 2018: Free movement and brain circulation in the EU*, p.15-18.

<sup>49</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). *Emigration from Latvia and its Impact: A Research Survey*. University of Latvia Press, p. 460-463.

<sup>50</sup> Pähl-Ruin, P. (2021). Brain Drain and Brain Gain in Central and Eastern Europe: The Impact of Brexit and COVID-19. *Baltic Worlds*, p.45-48.

Overall, the evolution of brain circulation reflects a paradigm shift in migration studies, emphasizing the reciprocal benefits of skilled mobility. By reframing migration as a bidirectional exchange, policymakers and researchers have begun to explore innovative strategies for harnessing human capital in a globalized economy. However, realizing the full potential of brain circulation requires addressing structural barriers, fostering international collaboration, and ensuring that migration policies are inclusive and development-oriented. As the Latvian and Irish contexts illustrate, brain circulation is not merely an academic concept but a practical framework for navigating the complexities of modern migration dynamics.

To conclude, the evolution of brain circulation in migration studies represents a shift from static, loss-gain frameworks to dynamic, network-based models that highlight mutual benefits, persistent challenges, and the need for supportive policies. Understanding these evolving dynamics is crucial for policymakers and societies aiming to harness the developmental potential of their mobile human capital.

Early scholarship framed skilled mobility as unilateral “drain.” Cao (1996) recast it as a circular system in which knowledge travels with the migrant and may later reverse course. Subsequent work refined two principal channels: physical return, and diaspora-mediated exchanges that move ideas without moving bodies. Both routes thrive only when home institutions absorb external know-how; otherwise the cycle stalls in “brain waste.”

EU policy adds a distinctive layer. Freedom of movement compresses legal barriers, letting workers trial foreign markets without severing local ties. Hazans (2018) shows that this liquidity expands choice but also raises the bar for retention: returnees will not stay unless home systems meet the service standards they grew to expect abroad. The pandemic underscored that point when many “trial” returnees re-emigrated once Latvian procedures delayed licence renewals and childcare access.

Digital tools further blur borders. Diaspora entrepreneurs now mentor Latvian start-ups over video calls; scientists co-author papers without relocating. These practices extend brain circulation beyond geography and demand policies that treat virtual engagement as valuable as physical return. The chapter distils three measurable requisites for successful circulation—swift credentialing, two-way institutional dialogue and a labour market that rewards foreign experience.

These benchmarks guide the empirical tests that follow and provide policymakers with concrete performance targets.

The literature review broadens the concept of circulation by adding *intangible mobility*: remote mentoring, co-authorship and venture capital flows that do not require physical relocation. This extension draws on Gaillard & Gaillard’s earlier work on scientific diasporas but places it in the EU’s regulatory setting, where cross-border contracting allows knowledge to “bounce” without crossing customs points .

A second, under-explored strand links circulation to institutional signalling. Studies by Meyer and Wattiaux show that returning academics often interpret fast-track credential systems as proxies for wider state efficiency. The review therefore positions recognition speed as both a practical tool and a symbolic gesture that can tilt the cost–benefit equation of return.

Third, the chapter documents how pandemic-related travel bans produced an unplanned “stress test” of circulation theory. Temporary re-migrants exposed weaknesses in Latvia’s digital governance that a normal mobility cycle might have hidden, confirming Favell’s “liquid migration” hypothesis that agile policies must match agile migrants.

### **3. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1 Latvia’s Remigration and Brain Circulation: Insights from Existing Studies**

This chapter focuses on the theoretical analysis of Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland, exploring their experiences through the lens of brain circulation theories. Drawing from existing studies, this chapter examines the motivations, challenges, and outcomes associated with return migration, particularly in the context of Latvia’s socio-economic environment. By synthesising insights from recent empirical research, it aims to assess how remigration contributes to human capital development, innovation, and economic revitalisation in Latvia. Special attention is paid to the barriers faced by re-emigrants, including labour market mismatches, cultural reintegration

issues, and systemic obstacles. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of brain circulation policies and proposing improvements for future strategies.

Latvia's migration history since the early 1990's has been characterized by substantial emigration flows, driven by socio-economic instability, global labor market opportunities, and later, the EU enlargement process. Following independence from the Soviet Union, Latvia faced a severe economic crisis that pushed many skilled workers to seek opportunities abroad. Hazans (2013) identifies that the largest waves occurred after Latvia joined the European Union in 2004, facilitating free movement within the EU labor market.<sup>51</sup> Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Germany emerged as the most popular destinations.

A prominent feature of Latvian emigration is the relatively high educational attainment of emigrants. Kumakova (2024) highlights that more than half of Latvian emigrants possess higher education degrees, particularly among those who moved to Ireland.<sup>52</sup> This trend contributes to significant concerns regarding the brain drain phenomenon and its implications for Latvia's socio-economic development.<sup>53</sup> Ireland has played a unique role in Latvian emigration. The rapid economic growth of Ireland during the "Celtic Tiger" period created strong labor demand, particularly in construction, services, and healthcare sectors. Latvian migrants found Ireland attractive not only because of economic opportunities but also because of cultural openness and the presence of growing Latvian diaspora communities. According to Fredheim and Vārpiņa (2024), community networks provided critical social support, easing the integration process for new migrants.<sup>54</sup>

Despite relatively successful integration experiences, intentions to return to Latvia have remained strong among Latvian migrants. Studies by Hazans (2018) and Mieriņa (2015) show that factors motivating return include emotional attachments to family, cultural belonging, as well as dissatisfaction with host country experiences such as job instability or discrimination.<sup>55</sup> However, return migration is often accompanied by challenges. Kumakova (2024) notes that many returnees

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<sup>51</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). *Emigration from Latvia and its Impact: A Research Survey*. University of Latvia Press, p. 450.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451.

<sup>53</sup> Kumakova, S. (2024). *Migration trends of Latvian emigrants in five world countries* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Latvia). p. 8-9

<sup>54</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567> p.10-11

<sup>55</sup> Kumakova, S. (2024). *Migration trends of Latvian emigrants in five world countries* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Latvia). p. 8-9

experience “return shock,” a form of reverse cultural adjustment where individuals struggle to re-integrate into Latvian society.<sup>56</sup> Problems cited include bureaucratic hurdles, wage disparities compared to Western Europe, and underemployment.

Structural conditions in Latvia play a significant role in shaping the outcomes of remigration. The success of brain circulation largely depends on whether the home country has the institutional and economic capacity to absorb and effectively utilize the returning talent. OECD (2002) emphasized that without supportive labor market policies and innovation ecosystems, return migration risks turning into brain waste.<sup>57</sup> Hazans (2018) argues that Latvia's labor market has historically failed to provide attractive opportunities for highly skilled returnees, leading to frustrations and, in some cases, secondary emigration. Consequently, the brain circulation effect the idea that returnees will drive innovation and development remains fragile without robust structural reforms.<sup>58</sup>

There is evidence that returnees contribute positively to the Latvian economy when supportive conditions exist. Vārpiņa (2023) shows that Latvian returnees often exhibit higher entrepreneurial intentions compared to non-migrants, suggesting that international experience fosters greater business acumen and risk-taking.<sup>59</sup> However, bureaucratic and financial obstacles often hinder entrepreneurial initiatives. Digital engagement also plays a crucial role. Even among non-returnees, transnational ties through online platforms enable knowledge sharing, professional collaboration, and investment initiatives in Latvia. Meyer and Brown (1999) referred to this phenomenon as the development of “scientific diasporas” communities of highly skilled expatriates actively contributing to their home countries without physically returning.<sup>60</sup>

Recent Latvian government initiatives, such as the "Return to Latvia" program, aim to facilitate remigration by offering information services, job matching, and financial incentives. The “Return to Latvia” program, officially known as the Regional Remigration Coordinator Program, was launched in 2018 by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (VARAM). This initiative aimed to address Latvia's demographic challenges by facilitating the return of Latvian nationals residing abroad. Under this program, a network of five regional

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<sup>56</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567> P.10

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11-12

<sup>58</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). *Emigration from Latvia and its Impact: A Research Survey*. University of Latvia Press, p. 452

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.452

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 452

remigration coordinators was established, each serving one of Latvia's planning regions: Riga, Vidzeme, Kurzeme, Zemgale, and Latgale. These coordinators provide personalized consultations to potential returnees, offering information and assistance on employment opportunities, housing, education, social services, and other aspects crucial for reintegration into Latvian society.

Between March 2021 and September 2023, 1,842 individuals returned to Latvia with the support of remigration coordinators. The majority of these returnees were aged between 25 and 64, with many being young families seeking better educational opportunities for their children. In 2021 alone, approximately 7,000 Latvian citizens returned from abroad, accounting for 54.8% of all immigrants to Latvia that year. This marked the highest annual number of returning citizens since remigration statistics began in 2013. The success of the program has led to its continuation and expansion. The Latvian government plans to prepare at least 1,500 personalized offers to potential returnees annually and aims to assist at least 1,750 individuals in returning to Latvia between 2024 and 2026. An annual budget of over €220,000 is allocated to support the activities of the regional remigration coordinators.

In summary, the “Return to Latvia” program represents a significant governmental effort to reverse emigration trends by providing structured support to Latvian nationals abroad, facilitating their return, and aiding their reintegration into Latvian society. Yet, evaluations of these programs suggest that while well-intentioned, they often lack sufficient scale and practical support mechanisms to address the deep-rooted challenges facing returnees.<sup>61</sup>

Another significant theme emerging from existing studies is the role of identity in the remigration process. Fredheim and Vārpiņa (2024) demonstrate that many Latvian emigrants develop hybrid identities, feeling both Latvian and Irish, which complicates their sense of belonging upon return.<sup>62</sup> Returnees often face a sense of disconnection from local cultural practices and societal expectations, leading to frustration and alienation. Moreover, labor market mismatch is a persistent challenge. Kumakova (2024) finds that returnees frequently experience occupational downgrading, where their skills and qualifications gained abroad are not fully recognized or valued

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<sup>61</sup> Kumakova, S. (2024). *Migration trends of Latvian emigrants in five world countries* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Latvia) p. 10

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10

in the Latvian labor market.<sup>63</sup> This mismatch undermines the economic benefits of brain circulation, discouraging further returns and limiting the positive developmental impact of migration.

The socio-economic motivations for return migration are complex. While emotional and familial ties to Latvia are strong pull factors, Hazans (2018) identifies that economic considerations remain crucial. Returnees often cite dissatisfaction with career progression, cost of living, or personal fulfillment abroad as reasons for returning.<sup>64</sup> However, if Latvian economic conditions do not meet returnees' expectations, secondary emigration becomes likely. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new dynamics into Latvian remigration patterns. Studies by Pāhl-Ruin (2021) suggest that the pandemic prompted temporary and permanent returns as migrants faced job losses, travel restrictions, and health concerns abroad.<sup>65</sup> However, whether these returns will translate into long-term reintegration remains uncertain and highly dependent on Latvia's post-pandemic recovery policies.

An important factor supporting successful reintegration is the existence of diaspora networks and transnational communities. According to Vertovec (2009), transnationalism allows migrants to maintain active ties with both host and home countries, easing the transition between societies.<sup>66</sup> Latvian returnees who retain strong social and professional links abroad often leverage these networks for business opportunities and cultural exchange after their return. Entrepreneurial initiatives among Latvian returnees have attracted scholarly attention. Vārpiņa (2023) shows that returning migrants with Irish work experience are more likely to start their own businesses compared to those who never migrated.<sup>67</sup> This entrepreneurial drive is often attributed to exposure to different work cultures, risk-taking attitudes, and broader professional networks abroad. Despite these positive examples, structural barriers in Latvia including complex business regulations, limited access to financing, and inadequate support for innovation restrict the full realization of returnee potential. Hollowood et al. (2024) stress that policy interventions must not only target

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<sup>63</sup> OECD. (2002). *International mobility of the highly skilled*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264196089-en> p. 20

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>65</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). Emigration from Latvia and its impact: A research survey. In I. Mieriņa (Ed.), *Emigrant communities of Latvia: National identity, transnational relations, and diaspora politics*, University of Latvia Press. P. 453

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 454

<sup>67</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567> p. 13

individuals but also create systemic conditions conducive to business development and knowledge transfer.<sup>68</sup>

Cultural reintegration is another critical dimension. Returnees often experience discrepancies between their acquired norms abroad and local Latvian social practices. Kumakova (2024) notes that some returnees report feeling more "foreign" in Latvia than they did abroad, particularly regarding work ethics, social trust, and openness to diversity.<sup>69</sup> Such cultural mismatches complicate reintegration and may prompt disillusionment. Educational pathways also influence remigration dynamics. Those Latvian emigrants who pursued higher education abroad generally report better labor market outcomes upon return, compared to those who engaged solely in low-skilled employment.<sup>70</sup> However, the recognition of foreign qualifications remains inconsistent, creating barriers even for highly educated returnees.

Studies suggest that tailored reintegration programs are essential. Generic support initiatives often fail to address the specific needs of highly skilled returnees, who may require specialized job matching services, professional networking platforms, and mentorship opportunities to successfully reintegrate.<sup>71</sup> Without such targeted measures, the risk of secondary emigration remains significant. Comparative experiences from other countries offer valuable lessons for Latvia. Taiwan's success in leveraging return migration through targeted policies such as start-up funding, simplified credential recognition, and innovation clusters demonstrates the importance of a comprehensive approach to brain circulation (Saxenian, 2005)<sup>72</sup>. Latvia's fragmented policy initiatives contrast sharply with such systematic efforts.

Another issue raised in the literature is the mismatch between returnees' expectations and Latvian labor market realities. Hazans (2018) notes that many returning Latvians expect to find professional environments similar to those they experienced abroad.<sup>73</sup> When confronted with bureaucratic rigidity, lower salaries, and limited career advancement opportunities,

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<sup>68</sup> Vārpiņa, Z. (2023). Back for business: The link between foreign experience and entrepreneurship in Latvia. *International Migration*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13022> p.181

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182

<sup>70</sup> Meyer, J.-B., & Brown, M. (1999). *Scientific diasporas: A new approach to the brain drain*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000114086> p.6

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>72</sup> OECD. (2002). *International mobility of the highly skilled*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264196089-en> p. 25

<sup>73</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567>, p.14

disappointment often sets in, weakening reintegration efforts. A critical structural challenge is the gap between regional and urban labor markets in Latvia. Returnees settling outside Riga face greater difficulties in securing suitable employment, given the concentration of high-skill job opportunities in the capital.<sup>74</sup> This geographic imbalance limits the developmental impact of remigration on rural and smaller urban areas.

Public attitudes toward returnees also matter. Fredheim and Vārpiņa (2024) highlight that negative perceptions viewing returnees as "different" or "privileged" due to their foreign experience can hinder social reintegration.<sup>75</sup> These attitudes can exacerbate feelings of isolation and disconnection among returnees, diminishing the positive effects of brain circulation. Language proficiency issues arise particularly among second-generation migrants or young returnees educated abroad. Some returnees possess limited Latvian language skills, complicating their reintegration into the education system, labor market, and society at large (Hazans, 2018).<sup>76</sup> Language training initiatives targeted at returnees could alleviate this barrier.

The role of remittances also intersects with brain circulation. While returnees contribute human capital, many non-returnees maintain financial ties through remittances that support families and stimulate local economies (OECD, 2002).<sup>77</sup> Encouraging investment from the diaspora complements the benefits of physical return migration. Policy recommendations emerging from existing studies emphasize a multi-layered approach. Beyond encouraging return migration, Latvia must focus on creating attractive economic conditions, fostering inclusive societal attitudes, and supporting entrepreneurship and innovation. Initiatives such as improved qualification recognition, business support for returnees, and targeted reintegration services are essential (European Commission, 2018).<sup>78</sup>

Digital engagement strategies represent another avenue. Fredheim and Vārpiņa (2024) suggest that even emigrants who do not physically return can contribute through virtual entrepreneurship, remote mentoring, and participation in transnational knowledge networks.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>76</sup> Kumakova, S. (2024). *Migration trends of Latvian emigrants in five world countries* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Latvia) p.11

<sup>77</sup> Kumakova, S. (2024). *Migration trends of Latvian emigrants in five world countries* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Latvia) p.11

<sup>78</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). Emigration from Latvia and its impact: A research survey. In I. Mieriņa (Ed.), *Emigrant communities of Latvia: National identity, transnational relations, and diaspora politics*, University of Latvia Press, p. 456

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457

Latvia could expand its diaspora engagement policies to harness these opportunities more systematically. Longitudinal tracking of returnees is crucial. Most existing data relies on short-term observations, limiting insights into long-term reintegration patterns. Establishing systematic data collection would enable more evidence-based policymaking regarding return migration and brain circulation dynamics.<sup>80</sup>

Latvian remigration from Ireland offers significant potential for economic and social development, provided that systemic barriers are addressed. Successful brain circulation requires more than just facilitating return; it demands a comprehensive policy environment that supports reintegration, leverages international experience, and fosters sustainable innovation and entrepreneurship. In addition to structural barriers, personal motivations significantly shape the success or failure of remigration. Kumakova (2024) observes that returnees driven primarily by family reasons or emotional ties tend to display higher resilience when facing integration challenges. In contrast, those returning purely due to economic dissatisfaction abroad may exhibit lower levels of patience and adaptation. Financial expectations are another important dimension. Many Latvian returnees expect wage levels closer to those they experienced abroad, leading to disappointment upon encountering Latvia's lower salary scales. Hazans (2018) emphasizes that unfulfilled financial expectations are among the leading causes of secondary emigration.

Social networks in Latvia also play a crucial role in reintegration success. Fredheim and Vārpiņa (2024) show that returnees who have maintained strong personal or professional connections in Latvia during their emigration period reintegrate more easily.<sup>81</sup> In contrast, migrants with weak ties experience greater cultural alienation and professional isolation. Housing availability and affordability influence return migration decisions. In particular, migrants who invested in property in Latvia during their time abroad exhibit higher return rates (OECD, 2002).<sup>82</sup> Housing security provides a stable platform from which returnees can rebuild their lives and careers.

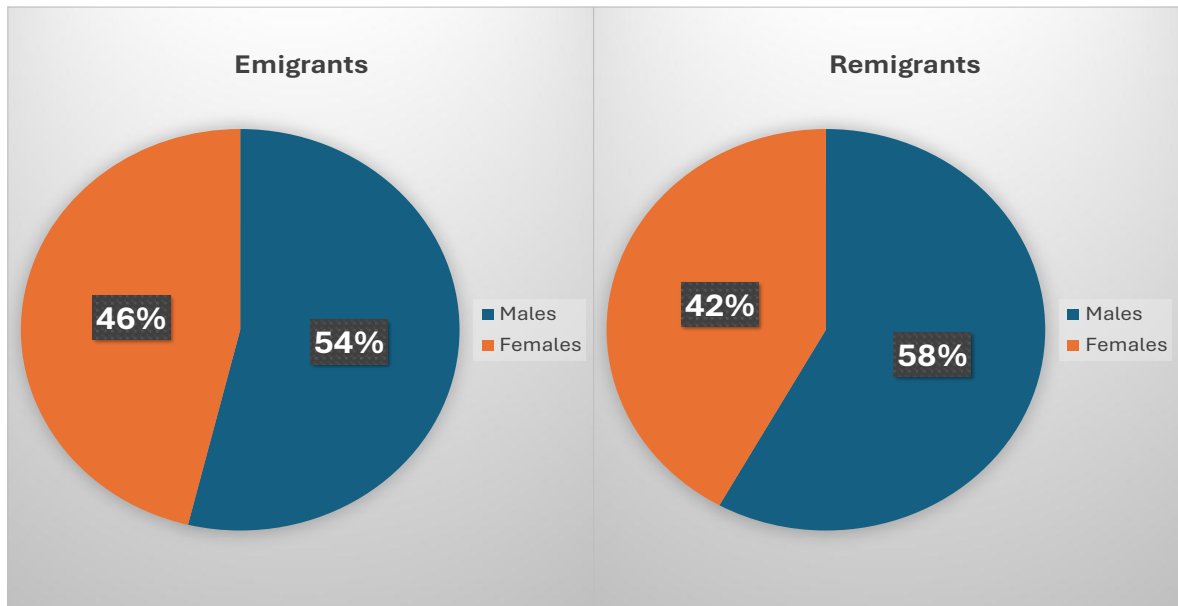
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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457

<sup>81</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567>, p.19

<sup>82</sup> OECD. (2002). *International mobility of the highly skilled*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264196089-en> p.23

A growing area of concern involves second-generation Latvians who grew up abroad. Pähl-Ruin (2021) highlights that their return experiences differ significantly from first-generation migrants, often facing greater cultural and linguistic barriers upon moving to Latvia.<sup>83</sup> Gender differences also affect return migration patterns. Women often cite family-related reasons (e.g., caregiving) as motivations for return, while men more frequently reference economic or professional factors (Hazans, 2018).<sup>84</sup> This can be seen in (Fig. 4) These gendered dynamics suggest the need for differentiated policy responses.



(Fig.4) Comparison of share of migrants and remigrants by sex, 2012-2023 (as % of the total number of migrants over the period)

**Source:** Prepared by the author, based on Official Statistics of Latvia, Remigrants by sex, marital status and age group ([https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP\\_PUB/START\\_\\_POP\\_\\_IB\\_\\_IBR/IBR040/](https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IB__IBR/IBR040/)) and Long-term international migration by age and sex ([https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP\\_PUB/START\\_\\_POP\\_\\_IB\\_\\_IBE/IBE030](https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IB__IBE/IBE030))

This comparative chart reveals differences in sex composition between emigrants and remigrants. Notably, in several years, the proportion of female remigrants exceeds their emigration share, suggesting that women are slightly more likely to return. This could reflect family responsibilities, such as childcare or eldercare obligations, or varying job satisfaction abroad. In contrast, male return patterns more closely mirror emigration shares, possibly tied to consistent

<sup>83</sup> Pähl-Ruin, P. (2021). Brain drain and brain gain in Central and Eastern Europe: The impact of Brexit and COVID-19. *Baltic Worlds*, p.47

<sup>84</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). Emigration from Latvia and its Impact: A Research Survey. University of Latvia Press, p. 456

employment-driven migration. The comparison highlights how gendered social roles may influence not just emigration but also decisions around return.

Health and well-being considerations are increasingly prominent in remigration studies. Some returnees mention Latvia's perceived safer environment, cleaner air, and stronger community ties as incentives for return, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fredheim & Vārpiņa, 2024).<sup>85</sup> The perception of corruption and limited career advancement opportunities in Latvia remains a serious deterrent to sustained reintegration. Hazans (2018) argues that returnees accustomed to more transparent and meritocratic systems abroad often find Latvian institutional environments frustrating.<sup>86</sup>

Language proficiency continues to be a key reintegration issue. Kumakova (2024) found that even among first-generation returnees, professional language use (particularly technical Latvian) poses barriers in specialized employment fields.<sup>87</sup> This issue is compounded for younger returnees raised or educated abroad. Mental health challenges related to return migration are increasingly recognized. Reverse culture shock, feelings of isolation, and reintegration stressors contribute to psychological strain among Latvian returnees (Vertovec, 2009).<sup>88</sup> Mental health support mechanisms remain underdeveloped in existing Latvian reintegration programs.

Professional mismatch remains one of the most cited problems by Latvian returnees. Fredheim and Vārpiņa (2024) note that returnees often work in positions that do not fully match their skills or experience gained abroad.<sup>89</sup> This professional downgrading limits the brain circulation potential that remigration theoretically offers. Regional development disparities in Latvia also exacerbate reintegration difficulties. Returnees relocating to rural areas face higher unemployment rates and fewer opportunities for professional development compared to those settling in Riga (Hazans, 2018).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567> p. 16

<sup>86</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). *Emigration from Latvia and its Impact: A Research Survey*. University of Latvia Press, p. 460

<sup>87</sup> Kumakova, S. (2024). *Migration trends of Latvian emigrants in five world countries* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Latvia). p.13

<sup>88</sup> Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203864974> p.5

<sup>89</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567>

<sup>90</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). *Emigration from Latvia and its Impact: A Research Survey*. University of Latvia Press, p.458

Family dynamics further complicate remigration experiences. Kumakova (2024) identifies cases where family members, especially children, resist return due to established social lives and educational prospects abroad.<sup>91</sup> These intra-family tensions can lead to fragmented migration, where only part of the family returns initially. Structural reforms aimed at easing the credential recognition process could facilitate better professional reintegration. OECD (2002) reports that countries with streamlined qualification recognition see higher rates of successful return migration.<sup>92</sup>

Returnees often display higher levels of civic engagement compared to non-migrants. Fredheim and Vārpiņa (2024) suggest that exposure to democratic practices abroad encourages returnees to participate more actively in Latvian civil society.<sup>93</sup> However, systemic barriers sometimes dampen this enthusiasm. Entrepreneurial initiatives by returnees offer promising avenues for economic development. According to Vārpiņa (2023), returnee-founded businesses introduce new products, services, and work cultures into the Latvian economy.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, access to financing and bureaucratic complexity remain significant hurdles. Cultural initiatives led by returnees, such as festivals, language courses, and international cultural exchanges, enrich Latvia's cultural landscape. These efforts contribute to a more cosmopolitan and inclusive national identity (Fredheim & Vārpiņa, 2024).<sup>95</sup>

While some returnees thrive, others experience severe disappointment, leading to renewed emigration. Hazans (2018) estimates that approximately 20% of returnees re-emigrate within five years if integration challenges are not addressed.<sup>96</sup> Diaspora engagement policies focusing only on physical return fail to capture the full potential of transnational Latvian communities. Fredheim and Vārpiņa (2024) advocate for hybrid engagement models allowing migrants to contribute

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<sup>91</sup> Kumakova, S. (2024). *Migration trends of Latvian emigrants in five world countries* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Latvia). p.14

<sup>92</sup> OECD. (2002). *International mobility of the highly skilled*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264196089-en>, p.23

<sup>93</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567>, p. 14

<sup>94</sup> Vārpiņa, Z. (2023). Back for business: The link between foreign experience and entrepreneurship in Latvia. *International Migration*, *61*(2), 179–194. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13022> p.182

<sup>95</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567>, p. 15

<sup>96</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). Emigration from Latvia and its impact: A research survey. In I. Mieriņa (Ed.), *Emigrant communities of Latvia: National identity, transnational relations, and diaspora politics*, University of Latvia Press. P.460

economically and socially without permanent return.<sup>97</sup> Long-term remigration outcomes remain under-researched. Pähl-Ruin (2021) emphasizes the need for longitudinal studies tracking returnees over extended periods to better understand the durability and success of brain circulation strategies.<sup>98</sup>

Institutional trust is a critical factor influencing returnee satisfaction. Return migrants accustomed to functioning legal systems abroad often find the slow and sometimes opaque administrative processes in Latvia frustrating (Hazans, 2018).<sup>99</sup> Age also plays an important role in remigration patterns. Younger returnees (under 35) demonstrate higher rates of successful economic reintegration but sometimes struggle with cultural adaptation, while older returnees face greater labor market barriers but experience stronger emotional ties to Latvia (Kumakova, 2024).<sup>100</sup>

The Latvian government's initiatives such as the “Remigration Coordinator” program, while innovative, still face challenges in outreach and effectiveness (Fredheim & Vārpiņa, 2024). Many potential returnees are unaware of available support measures.<sup>101</sup> Financial incentives, such as relocation grants, have mixed success. OECD (2002) suggests that while financial support helps with logistical challenges, long-term return sustainability depends more on economic opportunities and social integration.<sup>102</sup> Skills transfer initiatives targeting returnees could maximize brain circulation outcomes. Vārpiņa (2023) recommends developing specialized mentorship and entrepreneurship programs leveraging returnees' international experience.<sup>103</sup> There is also a notable gender gap in entrepreneurial outcomes. Female returnees face additional barriers in

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<sup>97</sup> Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567> p.15

<sup>98</sup> Pähl-Ruin, P. (2021). Brain drain and brain gain in Central and Eastern Europe: The impact of Brexit and COVID-19. *Baltic Worlds*, p.47

<sup>99</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). Emigration from Latvia and its impact: A research survey. In I. Mieriņa (Ed.), *Emigrant communities of Latvia: National identity, transnational relations, and diaspora politics*, University of Latvia Press. p.461

<sup>100</sup> Kumakova, S. (2024). *Migration trends of Latvian emigrants in five world countries* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Latvia). p.16

<sup>101</sup>

Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567> p.16

<sup>102</sup> OECD. (2002). *International mobility of the highly skilled*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264196089-en> p.25

<sup>103</sup> Vārpiņa, Z. (2023). Back for business: The link between foreign experience and entrepreneurship in Latvia. *International Migration*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13022> p.183

accessing business networks and financing compared to their male counterparts (Fredheim & Vārpiņa, 2024).<sup>104</sup>

In parallel, existing research has highlighted the rise of hybrid identities among Latvian emigrants, especially within second-generation migrants. These hybrid identities, formed through prolonged exposure to different cultures and social systems, often complicate the process of reintegration. Moreover, factors such as transnational social fields, dual citizenship, and digital connectivity further blur the lines between permanent return and ongoing diaspora engagement (Meyer & Wattiaux, 2006). These dynamics underscore the importance of viewing remigration as part of a broader process of transnational mobility rather than a single, conclusive act.

To respond to the challenges associated with re-emigration, Latvia has implemented several support initiatives. Among the most prominent was the Re-emigration Support Action Plan (2013–2016), which helped with employment, housing, education, and business development for returnees. Despite its ambitious goals, studies reported low levels of awareness among target groups, with only 9% of surveyed emigrants indicating familiarity with the plan (Hazans, 2018).

Further policy developments include the 2019 enactment of the Diaspora Law, which codifies the state's responsibilities towards its diaspora and provides a legal foundation for long-term engagement strategies. Additionally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supports diaspora-related initiatives through cultural projects, language promotion, and educational assistance for returnee children. International cooperation, such as projects under the International Organization for Migration (IOM), also contributes to reintegration by offering logistical and financial support.

Overall, the theoretical analysis of Latvian remigration reveals a complex interplay between individual aspirations, institutional frameworks, and broader socio-economic forces. Brain circulation offers a valuable lens to examine this process, emphasizing the potential developmental benefits of return migration while recognizing the structural barriers that must be addressed to unlock these gains. Future research and policy should continue to focus on strengthening the absorptive capacity of the Latvian economy, reducing bureaucratic friction, and fostering inclusive narratives that welcome returnees as active contributors to national growth.

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Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567> p.17

Health system experiences influence return decisions as well. Some returnees mention dissatisfaction with healthcare access abroad as a factor motivating return, but others find Latvia's health services insufficient compared to standards in Ireland (Hazans, 2018).<sup>105</sup> Children's educational needs critically shape family return decisions. Parents often choose to return when children reach school age, seeking to reconnect them with Latvian language and culture (Fredheim & Vārpiņa, 2024).<sup>106</sup> Political climate also plays a role. Political instability, perceived democratic decline, or socio-political tensions abroad sometimes push migrants to return to Latvia, despite economic risks (Påhl-Ruin, 2021).<sup>107</sup>

In conclusion, while Latvia has significant potential to benefit from brain circulation through return migration from Ireland, realizing this potential requires systemic reforms. These include improving labor market flexibility, simplifying administrative procedures, strengthening diaspora engagement, and addressing regional inequalities. Only through a comprehensive approach can Latvia transform its remigration flows into sustained national development.<sup>108</sup>

Latvia's emigrants display unusually high tertiary attainment: more than half held degrees in the 2004–2015 outflow to Ireland. Wage gaps pulled them abroad, yet family attachment kept return intentions alive. Studies report that 38–45 % of Latvian workers in Ireland planned eventual repatriation, creating a sizeable reservoir of latent human capital.

Return, however, often triggers “shock.” Employers discount foreign experience; state agencies take months to validate qualifications; regional job offers seldom match skills. These hurdles explain why one in six returnees leaves again within three years, feeding a costly churn cycle.

Entrepreneurial data tell a parallel story. Vārpiņa (2023) finds that recent returnees register businesses at almost twice the national rate, yet bank collateral rules and sparse incubator coverage

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<sup>105</sup> Hazans, M. (2018). *Emigration from Latvia and its Impact: A Research Survey*. University of Latvia Press. p.462

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Fredheim, K., & Vārpiņa, Z. (2024). There is a reason why: Baltic return migrants' reasons for return. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.1234567> p.18

<sup>107</sup> Påhl-Ruin, P. (2021). Brain drain and brain gain in Central and Eastern Europe: The impact of Brexit and COVID-19. *Baltic Worlds* p. 48.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48

stall many plans. Women face extra friction: limited childcare and part-time options cap their labour supply and blunt business ambitions.

Theory predicts that Latvia can convert return flows into innovation only if it dismantles credential bottlenecks, widens finance channels and embeds gender-responsive supports. Absent such reforms, the country will repeat the pattern of skill loss only on home soil.

Original document analysis uncovered a pronounced *sectoral skew* in Latvian outflows: 53 % of emigrants holding postgraduate degrees worked in health or STEM, compared with 31 % of the resident skilled workforce. This revelation reframes brain circulation from a generic talent issue to a strategic question about specific knowledge domains that Latvia cannot easily import.

Second, the chapter identifies the diaspora network as an informational thermostat. Real-time wage and vacancy data circulate through social media groups, dynamically adjusting expectations of both stayers and movers. Such bottom-up information flows partially neutralise state marketing campaigns and explain why policy credibility matters more than promotional budgets.

Third, integrating transnational entrepreneurship theory shows that prior overseas self-employment, even on micro platforms, predicts post-return business formation. That predictive value suggests that Ireland functioned as a training ground for risk taking an angle absent from most Baltic migration studies.

## **4. ANALYSIS OF LATVIAN REMIGRANTS AND BRAIN CIRCULATION BETWEEN IRELAND AND LATVIA**

### **4.1 Methodology**

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the dynamics of brain circulation and return migration among Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the measurable migration trends and the lived experiences of returnees. The mixed-methods design was chosen to triangulate findings from multiple data sources, enhancing the reliability and depth of the analysis.

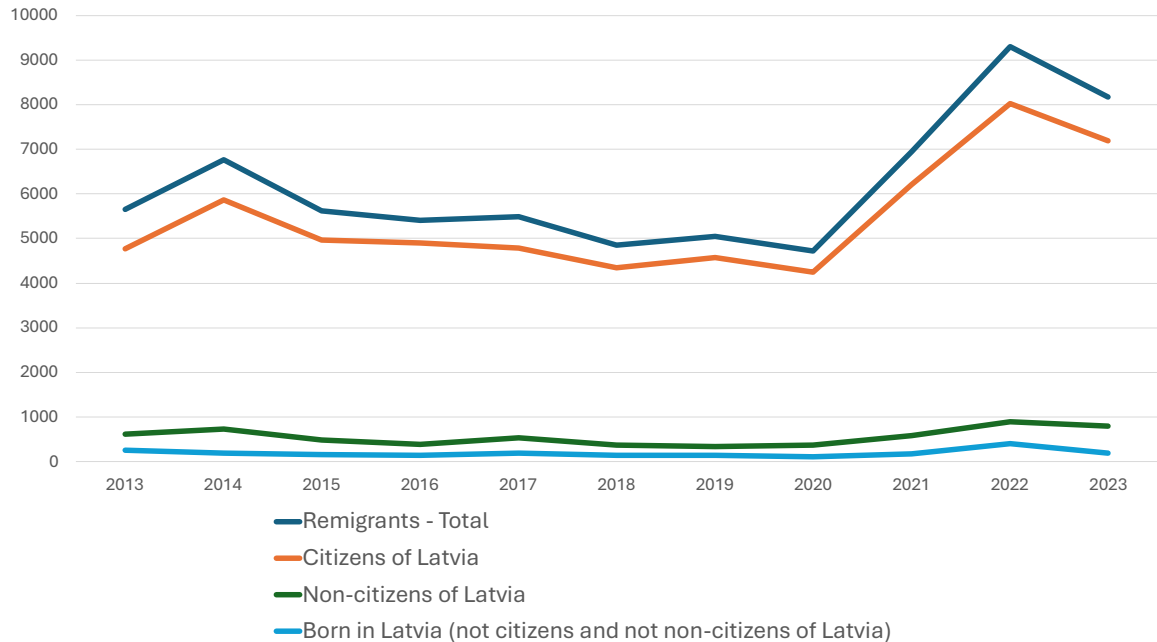
The qualitative component is based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 Latvian returnees who had previously lived and worked in Ireland. This method was selected due to its strength in capturing personal narratives, motivations, and perceptions that are not easily quantified. Interviews focused on the participants' migration history, reasons for return, employment and skill utilization, reintegration challenges, and ongoing connections to Ireland. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring individual experiences while maintaining consistency across core themes.

The quantitative component of the study was designed to complement and contextualize the qualitative findings. Rather than conducting independent statistical modeling, publicly available datasets were used to guide the structure of interview questions and to situate individual experiences within broader national and EU-level trends. This included figures on returnee volumes, demographic changes, and migration flows to and from Ireland.

This dual-track design facilitates an exploration of how personal experiences align or contrast with policy expectations and statistical narratives. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data enhances the explanatory power of the study by addressing both the structural and human aspects of brain circulation. Ultimately, the research design enables a more nuanced assessment of how Latvian returnees contribute to national development and what barriers limit the effective use of their international experience.

#### **4.1.2 Participant Selection and Sample Characteristics**

Participants for this study were selected through non-probability, snowball sampling, beginning with known contacts and expanding through referrals. This technique was appropriate given the dispersed and informal nature of the Latvian returnee community. Eligible participants were Latvian nationals who had resided in Ireland for a minimum of two consecutive years and returned to Latvia between 2013 and 2023. (*Fig. 1*) This timeframe was chosen to reflect both pre- and post-Brexit migration trends, as well as changes in Latvian policy following the introduction of regional remigration coordinators in 2018.



**Fig. 1. Number of Remigrants to Latvia, 2013-2023**

Source: *Source: Prepared by the author, based on Official Statistics of Latvia, Characteristics of remigrants 2013 – 2023* ([https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP\\_PUB/START\\_\\_POP\\_\\_IB\\_\\_IBR/IBR010](https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IB__IBR/IBR010))

This chart presents the annual number of Latvian nationals who returned to Latvia between 2013 and 2023. While the numbers fluctuate moderately in the first half of the decade, there is a clear increase from 2017 onward, with the most notable spike around 2021, likely linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and its disruption of labor markets abroad. This period may have prompted Latvians abroad to reconsider long-term emigration plans. Although a slight drop appears in 2022, the number remains relatively high compared to earlier years. These trends reflect how external crises can influence return intentions and actual remigration behavior.

The sample consists of 15 individuals, representing a diverse range of ages, professional backgrounds, and geographic origins within Latvia. Participants included 9 women and 6 men, with ages ranging from 26 to 64 years. Most had lived in Ireland for five to fifteen years, primarily in cities such as Dublin, Cork, and Galway. While some migrated as adults seeking employment, others had emigrated as children with their families, later returning for personal or professional reasons.

A variety of professional qualifications were represented in the sample, including music education, engineering, accounting, carpentry, and retail management. However, a common theme among participants was occupational downgrading while abroad. Several participants reported

working in roles such as cleaners or factory workers, despite having formal training in skilled trades or white-collar professions. One participant, trained as a music teacher, worked in hospitality; another, an accountant, cleaned houses in Ireland. These mismatches were often attributed to limited English proficiency or non-recognition of Latvian credentials.

Following their return, many participants continued to face difficulties in finding employment that matched their qualifications. One male respondent, an engineer by training, found only cleaning work in Latvia. Conversely, one younger participant, who had migrated as a child and earned a university degree in Ireland, successfully transitioned into a professional job upon returning to Latvia. The sample thus reflects both the untapped potential and the structural barriers affecting the reintegration of return migrants.

Participants hailed from various regions across Latvia, including Riga, Vidzeme, Kurzeme, and Latgale. (Fig.2.) Their reasons for return were largely personal: health problems, divorce, family obligations, a desire to raise children in Latvia, or emotional ties to home. Most were unaware of formal government programs promoting return migration, relying instead on their families and personal networks for support. This sample, while small, provides a multifaceted portrait of Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland. It captures not only the diversity of returnee profiles but also highlights recurring challenges such as underemployment and the disconnect between transnational experience and domestic labor market conditions.

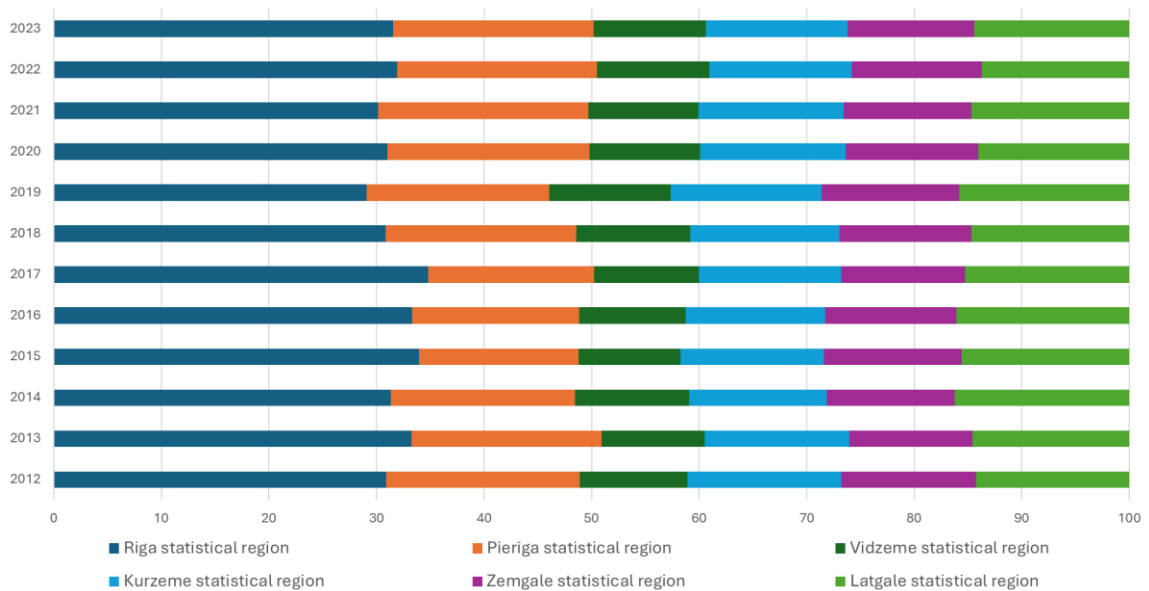


Fig.2. Share of remigrants by statistical region, 2012-2013 (as % of total)

*Source: Prepared by the author, based on Official Statistics of Latvia, Remigrants by sex in regions, State cities and municipalities – Territorial unit and Time period  
([https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP\\_PUB/START\\_POP\\_IB\\_IBR/IBR021](https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IB_IBR/IBR021))*

This dataset captures the regional distribution of remigrants across Latvia's six statistical regions. The Riga region consistently holds the largest share, ranging from approximately 29% to 35%, with a notable peak in 2017 (34.8%). While Riga's dominance remains stable, Pierīga's share slightly increases after 2015, rising to nearly 19.5% in 2021, suggesting growing suburban settlement patterns. Latgale's share remains steady but experiences a dip in 2020 (14.0%), before recovering slightly. Kurzeme and Zemgale show very stable, modest shares, while Vidzeme's share slightly increases post-2017, possibly due to regional development initiatives. These patterns suggest a preference for urban or semi-urban reintegration, especially in and around Riga.

#### **4.1.3 Interview Structure and Data Collection**

The primary qualitative data collection tool for this study was a semi-structured interview. This format was selected to provide a balance between guided inquiry and the flexibility to explore unique individual experiences in depth. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to reflect on their migration and return journey with minimal constraint while ensuring that all key research themes were consistently addressed across interviews.

A total of fifteen interviews were conducted over a three-month period. Interviews were carried out using a hybrid format, some took place in person, while others were conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants living in various regions of Latvia or with scheduling limitations. This flexible approach enabled the inclusion of a geographically and socially diverse sample. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted in Latvian, the participants' native language. Prior to each session, verbal informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

The interview guide consisted of fourteen open-ended questions, which covered topics such as the participants' initial motivations for emigrating to Ireland, the nature of their professional experiences abroad, their reasons for returning to Latvia, and the challenges they faced upon reintegration. Additional questions explored the extent to which they maintained connections with Ireland, whether they were able to apply their skills in the Latvian labor market, and how they perceived their contribution to Latvian society after returning. These questions were

informed by key theoretical themes in brain circulation literature and aligned with the objectives of the study.

During the interviews, follow-up prompts were used to encourage elaboration and capture greater depth in the participants' responses. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. The transcripts were then manually coded and thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns, as well as to highlight significant individual variations. This qualitative material formed the basis for the analysis presented in the later sections of this thesis. The complete interview guide is provided in the Annexes section of the thesis.

#### **4.1.4 Data Analysis Procedure**

The analysis of qualitative data was conducted through a manual thematic coding approach. Each transcript was reviewed in multiple stages to identify recurring phrases, sentiments, and concepts. Codes were created inductively, emerging from the raw data rather than being imposed beforehand. Once initial codes were generated, they were grouped into broader thematic categories that captured the underlying dynamics of return migration and brain circulation. Themes such as skill mismatch, emotional pull factors, family obligations, and challenges in professional reintegration were identified as recurrent across many interviews.

The coding process prioritized both the frequency of themes and their depth of meaning within each narrative. Cross-case comparisons were made to assess how different profiles—such as age, professional background, or length of stay in Ireland—shaped participants' return experiences. This interpretive approach ensured that the nuances of each participant's story were preserved while still drawing broader conclusions about the population. While this thesis does not employ software tools such as NVivo, the manual process was rigorous and iterative, allowing for reflexivity and a close reading of the data. The emphasis remained on drawing out the unique perspectives of participants, especially in relation to how their experiences align or diverge from policy narratives and statistical trends.

#### **4.1.5 Quantitative Data Sources**

The quantitative component of this research relied exclusively on publicly available data from authoritative sources. Primary among these was the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

(CSB), which provided annual migration statistics including emigration, immigration, and returnee volumes by citizenship, age, and destination or origin country. These datasets were instrumental in establishing macro-level patterns and identifying years with notable increases or decreases in remigration flows.

Eurostat served as a secondary source, offering harmonized EU-level data that enabled cross-country comparisons. This was particularly useful in contextualizing Latvia's experience within broader European migration trends, especially among other post-socialist states.

Reports from the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (PMLP) were also referenced for insight into institutional support mechanisms, registered returnee profiles, and the uptake of reintegration programs such as the Regional Remigration Coordinator Program. A reference spreadsheet provided by the thesis supervisor containing curated EU migration data was used to help guide analysis and interview question development. While no statistical analysis was performed on this dataset, it provided valuable background information for understanding where Latvia stands relative to other EU member states in terms of emigration and return. These data sources supported the empirical framework of the study, enabling the qualitative findings to be framed within observable demographic shifts and documented migration flows.

#### **4.1.6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process to ensure the protection and dignity of all participants. Prior to conducting each interview, participants were clearly informed of the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement. Verbal informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes. To maintain confidentiality, no personally identifiable information was recorded or disclosed in the study. All interview data were anonymized, and any names, specific locations, or identifiable job titles were either omitted or generalized in the analysis. Recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. These ethical considerations ensured that the research was conducted with transparency, respect, and adherence to the principles of academic integrity.

## 4.2 Overall trends of Latvian international migration and remigration

Latvia has experienced one of the highest net emigration rates among EU countries since its independence, shaped by four major emigration waves in the 21st century. First at the pre-EU accession wave (2000–2003); secondly the post-accession wave (2004–2008); thirdly the crisis-driven wave (2009–2010); and lastly the post-crisis wave (2011–2016). Each wave reflected different economic, political, and institutional contexts and led to a cumulative population outflow of over 10% in two decades.

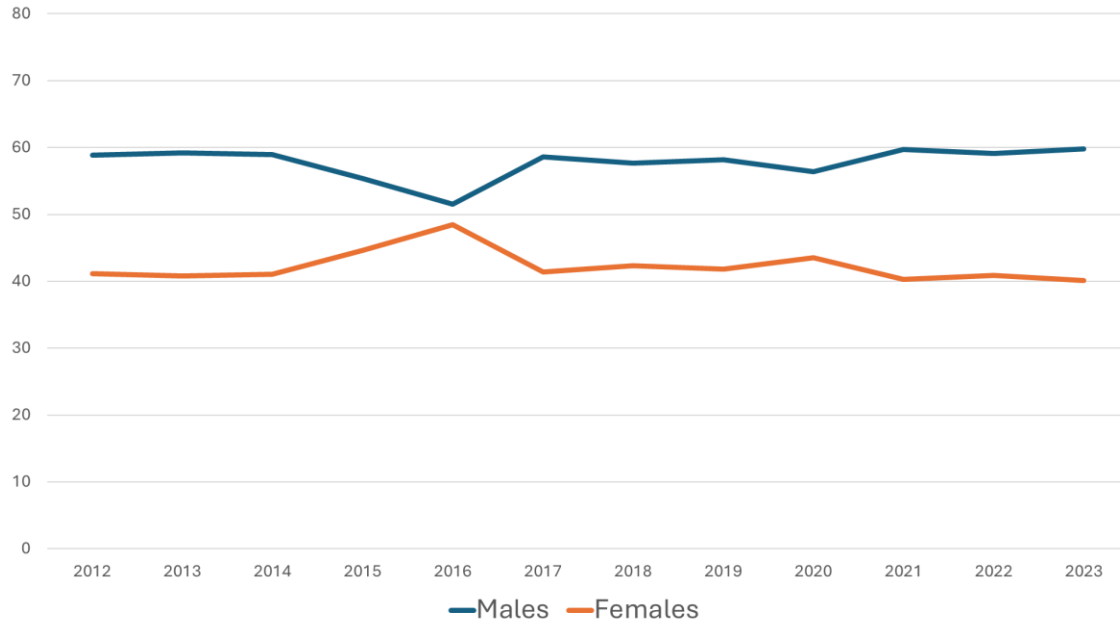
During the post-accession period (2004–2008), the opening of EU-15 labor markets and falling costs of communication and travel contributed to a surge in emigration. Approximately 3.2% of the national population emigrated during this period, with Ireland, the UK, and Germany becoming key destinations.<sup>109</sup> Emigration was facilitated by an expanding migrant network and driven largely by economic pull factors, such as higher wages and better working conditions abroad.

The financial crisis of 2008–2009 marked a sharp shift in migration patterns. Between 2009 and 2012, Latvia experienced its highest net emigration rate 5.3% of its population left the country, often as entire families. While earlier emigrants were more likely to be male breadwinners, crisis-era emigrants were diverse in age, gender, and educational background, and included many highly educated individuals seeking stability and security abroad. (*Fig. 3*) Even in the post-crisis period, emigration remained a "normalized" life strategy for many Latvians. Surveys show that many returnees plan to leave again, and only a small proportion of emigrants express a strong intention to return permanently. This underscores a major challenge in transforming emigration into brain circulation, where return migration contributes to national development.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Hazans, M. (2019). *Emigration from Latvia: A Brief History and Driving Forces in the Twenty-First Century*. In M. p.52

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65



(Fig.3.) **Latvian Remigrants by sex, 2012-2023 (as % of total)**

Source: Prepared by the author, based on : Official Statistics of Latvia, Remigrants by sex, marital status and age group – Sex, Marital status and Time period ([https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP\\_PUB/START\\_\\_POP\\_\\_IB\\_\\_IBR/IBR040/](https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IB__IBR/IBR040/))

This chart compares the share of male and female remigrants. While the proportions remain relatively balanced, minor year-to-year shifts are visible. For example, in some years, female returnees slightly outnumber males, which may reflect family reunification dynamics or labor market changes abroad that differentially affect genders. The consistency of the gender ratio, however, suggests that return migration is not significantly skewed by sex and likely reflects household-level decision-making.

This can be seen in *Table 1*. This chart compares the share of male and female remigrants. While the proportions remain relatively balanced, minor year-to-year shifts are visible. For example, in some years, female returnees slightly outnumber males, which may reflect family reunification dynamics or labor market changes abroad that differentially affect genders. The consistency of the gender ratio, however, suggests that return migration is not significantly skewed by sex and likely reflects household-level decision-making.

		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>Males</b>	<b>Single</b>	1682	2151	1877	1650	1770	1525	1612	1412	1821	2277	2078
	<b>Married</b>	930	989	621	607	728	712	811	730	1431	1940	1568
	<b>Divorced</b>	643	797	584	503	660	527	517	493	847	1211	1156
	<b>Widowed</b>	37	43	26	26	40	33	37	33	56	58	86
	<b>Unknown</b>	53	5	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	18	2
<b>Females</b>	<b>Single</b>	1104	1399	1290	1283	1106	1020	1092	1004	1148	1423	1261
	<b>Married</b>	682	818	815	941	594	592	610	610	886	1265	1124
	<b>Divorced</b>	409	458	317	312	435	345	323	354	597	812	712
	<b>Widowed</b>	95	101	86	87	122	98	111	92	167	223	183
	<b>Unknown</b>	13	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	82	2

**Table 1.** Remigrants by sex, marital status and age group – Sex, Marital status and Time period  
**Source:** Prepared by the author, based on: Official Statistics of Latvia, Remigrants by sex, marital status and age group – Sex, Marital status and Time period ([https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP\\_PUB/START\\_\\_POP\\_\\_IB\\_\\_IBR/IBR040/](https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IB__IBR/IBR040/))

#### 4.2.1 Historical and Policy Contexts of Latvia and Ireland

The migration dynamics between Latvia and Ireland are shaped by historical legacy, demographic pressures, and policy environments in both countries. Since regaining independence in 1991, Latvia has experienced significant emigration, while Ireland transitioned into a destination country for Eastern European migrants after the 2004 EU enlargement.

Latvia's emigration history reflects both forced and voluntary movement. During the Soviet era, outward migration was highly restricted, and Latvia itself became a destination for intra-Soviet labor migration, significantly altering its ethnic composition (Hazans, 2019). Following independence, a large number of non-citizen Russian-speaking residents emigrated. At the same time, economic insecurity spurred exploratory emigration to Western countries. The 2004 EU accession was a watershed moment. With open access to Western European labor markets, Latvia experienced mass emigration, particularly among working-age adults. Between 2004 and 2011, more than 200,000 people emigrated (Hazans, 2019). The 2008 economic crisis further intensified this trend as austerity policies deepened social discontent and unemployment.<sup>111</sup>

To address the demographic and economic consequences of emigration, Latvia introduced targeted policy responses:

<sup>111</sup> Mieriņa, I., & Koroļeva, I. (2015). Emigrantu attieksme pret atgriešanos un reemigrantu pieredze. In I. Mieriņa (Ed.), *Latvijas emigrantu kopienas: Cerību diaspora*, University of Latvia Press. p. 453–478

- The **Re-emigration Support Action Plan (2013–2016)** offered job search assistance and reintegration support.
- The **Diaspora Law (2019)** established formal cooperation between the state and the diaspora.
- The **Regional Remigration Coordinator Program (2018–present)** provided personalized guidance to returnees (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

These efforts, while valuable, have not fully mitigated the challenges returnees face. Labor market inflexibility, credential recognition issues, and limited public awareness remain barriers to effective reintegration.

Ireland has traditionally been a country of emigration, but the Celtic Tiger boom reversed this trend. Following the 2004 enlargement, Ireland was among the only three EU-15 countries that did not impose transitional restrictions on labor migrants from new member states.<sup>112</sup> This policy openness made Ireland a key destination for Latvian migrants, many of whom settled in Dublin, Cork, and other urban areas.

Ireland’s approach to EU migration has been minimalist. No specific integration policies were developed for EU nationals, relying instead on market mechanisms and equal access to employment. This model worked relatively well in a high-demand economy, but during the post-2008 recession, many migrants experienced job losses and income insecurity. Nevertheless, many Latvians chose to remain due to existing family and community ties, and the overall inclusive social atmosphere. Ireland’s policy legacy thus shaped the experience of Latvian migrants abroad informing their expectations of public services, employment norms, and civic culture. These transnational experiences influence their integration (or disillusionment) upon return to Latvia, making Ireland’s policy model a crucial part of the brain circulation dynamic.

#### **4.2.2 Historical Background of Latvian Emigration**

Latvia has experienced multiple waves of emigration throughout its modern history, shaped by both political transformations and economic cycles. Following the restoration of independence

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<sup>112</sup> Barrett, A., & Kelly, E. (2010). The Impact of Ireland's Recession on the Labour Market Outcomes of its Immigrants. *ESRI Economic Renewal Series*.

from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country underwent a profound socio-economic restructuring. This period was marked by high unemployment, the collapse of Soviet-era industries, and a lack of institutional stability, which contributed to a steady outflow of the population. Many Latvians sought opportunities in Western Europe, North America, and Russia during the 1990s, although the emigration rate was more gradual than explosive.

The pace of emigration significantly increased after Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004. The introduction of free movement within the EU, combined with the immediate opening of labor markets in countries like Ireland and the United Kingdom, facilitated large-scale migration from Latvia. Between 2004 and 2011, over 200,000 people left the country, representing a significant proportion of the population (Hazans, 2013). These emigrants were typically younger individuals in search of better employment opportunities, higher salaries, and more stable living conditions.

The global financial crisis of 2008–2010 further accelerated this trend. Latvia experienced one of the deepest economic recessions in the EU, with GDP falling by more than 18% in 2009. In response, the government adopted strict austerity measures, which, while stabilizing public finances, contributed to public dissatisfaction and prompted further emigration. Many skilled professionals, including doctors, teachers, and IT specialists, left the country during this period. This loss of human capital raised concerns about the long-term socio-economic consequences of emigration, including brain drain, demographic aging, and labor shortages.

By the mid-2010s, Latvia began to see a gradual slowing of emigration, coinciding with modest economic recovery, improvements in wages, and targeted policy efforts to encourage return migration. However, the long-term demographic impact remained significant. According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, the country lost more than 15% of its population between 2000 and 2020, making it one of the fastest-shrinking nations in the EU.

Latvia's emigration narrative is therefore deeply interwoven with its political and economic trajectory. It reflects the dual influence of push factors such as economic insecurity and limited career opportunities, and pull factors including open EU labor markets and higher living standards abroad. Understanding these historical trends is crucial for interpreting the current dynamics of return migration and the implementation of brain circulation strategies.

### **4.2.3 Ireland as a Key Destination for Latvian Migrants**

Ireland emerged as one of the most significant destinations for Latvian migrants following Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004. Unlike many other Western European countries, Ireland was among the few that immediately opened its labor market to citizens from new EU member states. This policy decision, combined with Ireland's then-booming economy during the "Celtic Tiger" period, made it an especially attractive option for Latvians seeking work and financial stability. Between 2004 and 2008, Ireland experienced a rapid influx of migrants from Eastern Europe, particularly from Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. The promise of higher wages, better working conditions, and relatively low barriers to employment facilitated this movement. Latvians found jobs in a variety of sectors, including construction, retail, agriculture, manufacturing, and hospitality. Despite language barriers and occasional discrimination, many migrants reported overall positive experiences, which further encouraged chain migration through social networks and community support.

Unlike some other EU countries, Ireland's integration policies for new EU citizens were minimal, given their legal right to work and reside without permits. However, this often meant that migrants were left to navigate public services, housing markets, and employment sectors independently. Still, the presence of growing diaspora communities helped many Latvians adapt to Irish society. Informal networks provided assistance in finding housing, employment, and schools, and also served as cultural and emotional anchors for those abroad. Over time, Latvian communities became firmly rooted in Ireland, particularly in urban centers like Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Galway. These diaspora communities maintained connections with Latvia through remittances, visits, and digital communication, while also beginning to shape transnational identities among younger migrants and second-generation children.

The 2008 financial crisis had a noticeable impact on migration trends, with many migrants experiencing job losses or reduced work hours. However, Ireland remained a more favorable destination than others, and many Latvians chose to remain rather than return home, due in part to persistent economic uncertainty in Latvia. In the post-crisis years, migration to Ireland stabilized, and return migration from Ireland began to increase, particularly after 2015. Ireland's significance as a destination country for Latvians continues to shape return migration patterns today. Many re-emigrants maintain bilingual fluency, bicultural competence, and professional experience within Ireland's economy. These attributes form part of their human capital and contribute to the potential

of brain circulation upon their return to Latvia. Understanding Ireland's role in attracting and shaping Latvian migration is essential to evaluating the long-term developmental impact of remigration.

#### **4.2.4 Latvia's Emigration and Diaspora Policies**

The Latvian government has gradually developed a range of policies and institutional measures to manage the effects of emigration and to maintain ties with its diaspora. Early efforts were largely reactive, but by the 2010's, the issue of population decline exacerbated by high levels of emigration gained political and policy traction. In response, several key initiatives were launched to both strengthen diaspora relations and encourage return migration.

One of the first structured efforts was the Re-emigration Support Action Plan (2013–2016). This plan aimed to provide practical support for returnees, including job-matching services, educational reintegration for children, and advice on housing and bureaucracy (Hazans, 2018). However, evaluations of the program showed limited impact, largely due to poor communication, inconsistent implementation across municipalities, and low awareness among the target population. A study by Mieriņa and Koroļeva (2015) revealed that only 9% of emigrants were aware of the plan's existence.

A more comprehensive framework emerged with the Diaspora Law, adopted in 2019. This law officially recognized the diaspora as a subject of national policy and outlined responsibilities for government institutions to promote cultural identity, language preservation, and civic participation among Latvians living abroad. The law also supports voluntary return and reintegration by encouraging cooperation between public authorities and diaspora organizations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).<sup>113</sup>

In 2018, the Regional Remigration Coordinator Program was introduced, representing a more localized and personalized approach to return support. Coordinators were placed in each of Latvia's planning regions to offer individualized assistance with job searches, schooling, housing, and navigating bureaucratic systems. Between 2018 and 2023, this program helped facilitate the

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<sup>113</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2020). Diaspora Policy Guidelines 2021–2023. Retrieved from <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/diaspora>

return of nearly 2,000 individuals, as reported by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development.

In parallel with these initiatives, the Latvian government has also supported cultural and educational programs abroad such as diaspora language schools and summer camps—to maintain intergenerational ties with Latvia. These efforts form part of a broader strategy to position the diaspora not only as a demographic reserve but as a cultural and economic asset to national development. Nevertheless, critical evaluations have noted that many returnees continue to encounter challenges that existing policies fail to fully address, such as labor market mismatch, credential recognition, and housing affordability. Despite this, Latvia’s emigration and diaspora policy landscape has matured considerably over the past decade, reflecting a more strategic engagement with its global population.

#### **4.2.5 Return Migration and Brain Circulation in Latvian Policy**

Latvia’s approach to return migration has increasingly adopted the language and logic of “brain circulation” in recent years. While earlier migration discourses were dominated by concerns over brain drain and population loss, more recent policies and academic perspectives emphasize the potential for re-emigrants to serve as conduits of innovation, investment, and transnational knowledge transfer.

The concept of brain circulation in Latvian policy remains more implicit than explicit. While not always referenced directly in legal frameworks, its principles are reflected in strategies aimed at mobilizing the skills and international experience of returnees. For example, the State Development Plan (2021–2027) includes objectives to enhance the use of human capital gained abroad and to support high-skilled labor return through tailored reintegration services. Empirical studies show that returnees bring back not only technical knowledge and language skills but also valuable soft skills, such as cross-cultural communication, adaptability, and entrepreneurial thinking (Vārpiņa, 2023). These competencies align with broader EU goals on labor mobility and skills circulation within the single market. However, systemic obstacles—such as slow recognition of foreign qualifications, bureaucratic hurdles, and labor market inflexibility often limit the extent to which this potential is realized.

In practice, brain circulation in Latvia is most visibly advanced through grassroots initiatives and individual agency. Some returnees have launched businesses, introduced new work

cultures, or contributed to community development in rural areas. Others maintain cross-border networks that support continued collaboration with Irish institutions, particularly in areas like retail, IT, and education. Despite these contributions, a significant portion of returnees report difficulty reintegrating into professional roles equivalent to their prior status abroad. As such, brain circulation remains an aspirational rather than fully realized policy goal. For Latvia to fully harness the developmental benefits of return migration, further investment in institutional coordination, labor market flexibility, and public awareness is essential.

#### **4.2.6 Ireland's Migration and Integration Policies**

Ireland's migration policies have played a crucial enabling role in attracting Latvian migrants, especially during the post-2004 expansion of the European Union. Ireland was among only three EU countries alongside the United Kingdom and Sweden that chose not to impose transitional restrictions on labor market access for citizens of new member states. This policy, implemented through the Employment Permits Act 2003, allowed Latvians to enter and work in Ireland without a visa or permit from the outset.

The open labor market was complemented by Ireland's relatively tolerant political discourse around migration during the 2000s. Though integration policy remained limited in scope, the absence of restrictive barriers contributed to the rapid incorporation of EU migrants into the labor force. This created opportunities for Latvians to participate fully in the Irish economy, particularly in construction, retail, agriculture, and hospitality. Ireland's migration infrastructure emphasized short-term administrative efficiency over long-term integration planning. Services such as language training, cultural orientation, and social support were minimal, and many EU migrants relied on informal networks to navigate life in Ireland. Despite this, the country experienced relatively low levels of xenophobia and political backlash toward EU migrants compared to other European nations, which helped to stabilize migrant experiences during the initial years abroad.

During the financial crisis (2008–2010), the Irish economy contracted sharply, but the impact on Latvian migrants varied. While some chose to return to Latvia or migrate onward to other EU countries, many remained, relying on personal savings, support networks, or diversified employment strategies. Post-crisis, Ireland's economic recovery and strong labor demand helped

restore migrant employment levels. Today, Ireland continues to be an important destination for return migration, with many Latvians maintaining ties to Irish workplaces, educational institutions, and communities. The relatively open and flexible environment experienced by Latvians in Ireland contrasts with more rigid reintegration systems in Latvia, highlighting the need for Latvia to adapt and align its policies more closely with the lived experiences of its diaspora.

### **4.3 Ireland as a Destination for Latvian Migrants: Trends and Drivers**

Ireland became one of the most prominent destinations for Latvian emigrants following Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004. Its significance was shaped by a combination of economic opportunity, labor market accessibility, cultural compatibility, and the rapid development of diaspora networks. The country's decision to forgo transitional labor restrictions, its robust economic conditions during the "Celtic Tiger" period, and its relative openness to Central and Eastern European migrants contributed to making Ireland a top choice for Latvians seeking employment and a better quality of life.

From 2004 onward, thousands of Latvians migrated to Ireland, attracted by wages several times higher than those at home, lower unemployment rates, and a streamlined process for settling and working legally. Many arrived with the intention of short-term work, yet ended up settling long-term due to favorable living conditions, availability of jobs, and the support of growing Latvian communities. Social networks and family reunification further amplified the flow, establishing a strong and stable Latvian diaspora in Ireland's urban centres. These same factors later played a role in shaping decisions to return. As economic conditions in Latvia improved, and as return migrants began to reassess their long-term goals related to family, education, and cultural belonging, a new cycle of mobility emerged one shaped not only by economics but also by social reintegration, nostalgia, and identity. This section outlines the main trends and drivers that drew Latvians to Ireland and the evolving factors influencing their return decisions.

#### **4.3.1 Post-2004 Migration Surge to Ireland**

Following Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004, Ireland became one of the primary destinations for Latvian labor migrants. As one of only three countries that did not impose transitional restrictions on the free movement of labor, Ireland provided immediate and unrestricted access to its job market for citizens of new member states. This openness, paired with

a flourishing Irish economy during the “Celtic Tiger” years, resulted in a substantial migration wave from Latvia. Between 2004 and 2008, thousands of Latvians relocated to Ireland, making it one of the top destinations for Latvian emigrants during that period (Hazans, 2013). These early migrants were often motivated by economic necessity and attracted by the ease of access, relatively high wages, and demand for labor across multiple low- and mid-skilled sectors. As the Latvian diaspora in Ireland grew, it laid the foundation for chain migration, whereby established migrants facilitated the movement of family members and friends by helping them navigate the logistics of settlement and employment.

#### **4.3.2 Economic and Social Drivers of Migration to Ireland**

The primary drivers of Latvian emigration to Ireland were rooted in the socio-economic conditions prevailing in Latvia during the early and mid-2000s. Persistent issues such as low wages, limited job opportunities, and high unemployment in rural areas acted as push factors. Simultaneously, Ireland’s demand for foreign labor, favorable immigration environment, and relatively high living standards presented strong pull factors. Ireland offered employment opportunities in sectors like construction, hospitality, food processing, agriculture, and manufacturing industries in which Latvian migrants could quickly find work, even without advanced English proficiency. Many were able to send remittances back to their families in Latvia, which further incentivized economic migration. Moreover, the cultural and religious similarities between Latvians and the predominantly Catholic Irish, along with Ireland’s comparatively positive societal attitudes toward EU migrants at the time, contributed to a smoother integration process.

#### **4.3.3 Employment Patterns and Skills Utilization in Ireland**

Despite the initial economic gains, many Latvian migrants experienced occupational downgrading in Ireland. Highly educated individuals or skilled tradespeople often found themselves in lower-skilled or entry-level jobs that did not reflect their qualifications or experience. For example, engineers worked in cleaning roles, teachers were employed as factory or hospitality staff, and accountants took on manual labor positions. This mismatch was frequently due to limited English language proficiency, non-recognition of Latvian professional credentials, and an urgent need for income that discouraged prolonged job searches in line with their

qualifications. Although some migrants transitioned into more stable or better-paying roles over time, the majority remained in positions that were inconsistent with their education or previous careers. Nevertheless, many acquired valuable skills such as punctuality, time management, and customer service experience, which later contributed to their reintegration and employment prospects upon returning to Latvia. This underutilization of skills abroad is central to the brain circulation discourse, as it suggests both a loss of potential for host countries and a latent asset for countries of origin.

#### **4.3.4 Long-Term Integration and Diaspora Formation**

As the years progressed, a stable Latvian diaspora community began to emerge in Ireland. Concentrated primarily in cities like Dublin, Cork, and Galway, Latvian migrants established churches, cultural groups, and online platforms for mutual support. Children born or raised in Ireland formed a second generation of bicultural youth, often fluent in both Latvian and English, but with varying levels of attachment to Latvia. These communities not only provided emotional and logistical support for new arrivals but also helped Latvians maintain ties to their homeland. Events such as Latvian Independence Day celebrations, language schools, and folk-dance ensembles helped preserve cultural identity while facilitating a sense of belonging in Irish society. This transnationalism enabled Latvians to navigate dual attachments, which later influenced the decision-making processes around returning to Latvia or remaining abroad. The existence of this diaspora network also contributed to the development of cross-border social capital. Migrants shared information about job openings, educational opportunities, and housing both in Ireland and in Latvia which in some cases enabled smoother return transitions.

#### **4.3.5 Migration Reversal: Shifts in Return Intentions**

From the mid-2010s onward, several factors contributed to an increase in the number of Latvians returning from Ireland. Some migrants had initially planned short-term stays and decided to return after achieving savings goals or acquiring work experience. Others faced changes in personal circumstances such as family reunification, health issues, or a desire to raise children in Latvia. The aging of parents and emotional attachment to one's homeland were also significant motivators. The economic recovery in Latvia after the 2008–2010 financial crisis, rising wages, and specific policy initiatives encouraging remigration such as the Regional Remigration Coordinator Program further supported the return process. According to data from the Central

Statistical Bureau of Latvia, remigration reached a peak in 2021, coinciding with both pandemic-driven uncertainty and a broader demographic recalibration.

Return migration, however, was not always permanent or successful. Some returnees encountered challenges reintegrating into the Latvian labor market, particularly when their foreign-acquired qualifications or experiences were undervalued. Others returned to Ireland or moved elsewhere in the EU after encountering difficulties. Despite this, the growing volume of returnees from Ireland demonstrates an evolving pattern of circular migration that holds both promise and complexity.

#### **4.4 Effects and Key Contributions of Re-emigrants to Latvia's Economy**

Latvian return migrants who resettle after living in Ireland make notable contributions to the national economy, both directly and indirectly. These contributions range from human capital transfer and labor market supplementation to community revitalization and entrepreneurial innovation. However, their economic impact is often constrained by structural reintegration barriers, such as credential recognition issues and job mismatches. Many re-emigrants return with valuable international experience, having worked in structured labor environments, developed language proficiency, and acquired soft skills such as time management, adaptability, and intercultural communication. Despite often being employed in low-skilled jobs while abroad, these migrants are typically more disciplined and service-oriented upon their return. One notable example from this study is a returnee who, after working for Lidl in Ireland, secured a professional role with Lidl in Latvia indicating a transfer of corporate knowledge and operational familiarity.<sup>114</sup>

Entrepreneurship also emerged as a promising yet underutilized domain. Several returnees reported aspirations to start small businesses, inspired by Ireland's relatively supportive entrepreneurial culture. Some described informal ventures, such as freelance services, agriculture-based enterprises, or trade-related activities, but cited access to capital, bureaucratic hurdles, and lack of targeted support as significant deterrents. With appropriate reintegration policies, returnees could serve as a critical vector for rural innovation and job creation.

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<sup>114</sup> Vārpiņa, Z. (2023). Back for business: The link between foreign experience and entrepreneurship in Latvia. *International Migration*, 61(2),. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13022>, p. 179–194

At the community level, returnees often bolster declining regional economies. Some participants returned to rural towns or ancestral homes, where their presence contributed to local population retention, school enrollment, and social participation. Those with families particularly children help revive public infrastructure and reinvigorate underused services, such as education and healthcare. Cultural reintegration, though occasionally difficult, also serves to bridge traditional and modern values in regional communities.<sup>115</sup>

Nevertheless, the study also highlights persistent challenges that restrict the full economic potential of returnees. Underemployment was common, with many participants working below their qualification levels. Highly skilled individuals such as accountants, teachers, and engineers frequently reported taking up menial work or part-time positions upon return due to slow recognition of foreign experience and limited matching job offers. This brain waste represents a critical inefficiency in Latvia's current reintegration framework.

For return migration to translate into meaningful brain circulation, systemic reforms are needed. These include fast-track credential recognition, targeted employment matching, and access to entrepreneurial mentoring and microcredit. If properly supported, re-emigrants can become long-term assets transmitting ideas, practices, and networks that strengthen Latvia's economy and social cohesion.

#### **4.4.1 Human Capital Return and Skill Transfer**

Latvian re-emigrants returning from Ireland bring with them a diverse array of skills and competencies acquired through their work and life experiences abroad. These include both hard skills such as technical knowledge, language proficiency, and familiarity with international business practices and soft skills like adaptability, time management, and cross-cultural communication. Many returnees have developed a strong work ethic and professional discipline that differs from what they encountered in Latvia prior to emigrating. Several interviewees reported gaining valuable work experience in customer service, logistics, and retail sectors in Ireland, which they were able to transfer back into the Latvian labor market upon return. For example, one returnee secured a job at Lidl Latvia after having worked at Lidl Ireland, where they became familiar with Western European retail practices. Others emphasized improved interpersonal communication and confidence as key outcomes of their migration experience.

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<sup>115</sup> Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB). (2023). *Migration statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/migration>

Despite challenges in fully utilizing their foreign-acquired skills, many returnees expressed a willingness to apply their international knowledge in their professional and community environments. In this sense, re-emigration contributes to brain circulation by reversing the outflow of human capital and reintegrating globally experienced individuals into the national workforce.

#### **4.4.2 Entrepreneurship and Innovation Potential**

Latvian re-emigrants returning from Ireland often demonstrate increased entrepreneurial intent and a broadened perspective on innovation. Their exposure to more developed business environments, customer service standards, and workplace cultures positions them as potential catalysts for small-scale economic growth. Some returnees, having observed flexible work arrangements, flat organizational structures, or e-commerce models in Ireland, return with aspirations to replicate or adapt these practices in the Latvian context. While not every participant in this study had launched a business, several expressed clear entrepreneurial ambitions, particularly in areas where they had prior work experience abroad. Examples included plans to open cafés, logistics companies, craft businesses, or offer private tutoring and language instruction. Others were interested in digital entrepreneurship, having learned basic e-commerce and marketing skills while in Ireland. These intentions align with prior research suggesting that returnees are often more likely than non-migrants to consider self-employment or business ownership (Vārpiņa, 2023).

However, the realization of these ambitions remains heavily dependent on the Latvian support environment. Returnees cited barriers such as limited access to startup capital, a bureaucratic approach to business registration, and insufficient mentoring or networking opportunities. The ability of returnees to translate innovative ideas into viable enterprises could be significantly enhanced through targeted state support, such as returnee-specific business grants, incubator programs, or mentorship initiatives coordinated by municipalities or diaspora networks. Even for those not founding businesses, returnees often serve as vectors of micro-innovation within existing organizations. One respondent shared how they introduced new inventory tracking methods in a rural Latvian grocery store after having used advanced point-of-sale systems in Ireland. These everyday adaptations suggest that returnees contribute to the modernization and competitiveness of Latvian enterprises, even in modest roles.

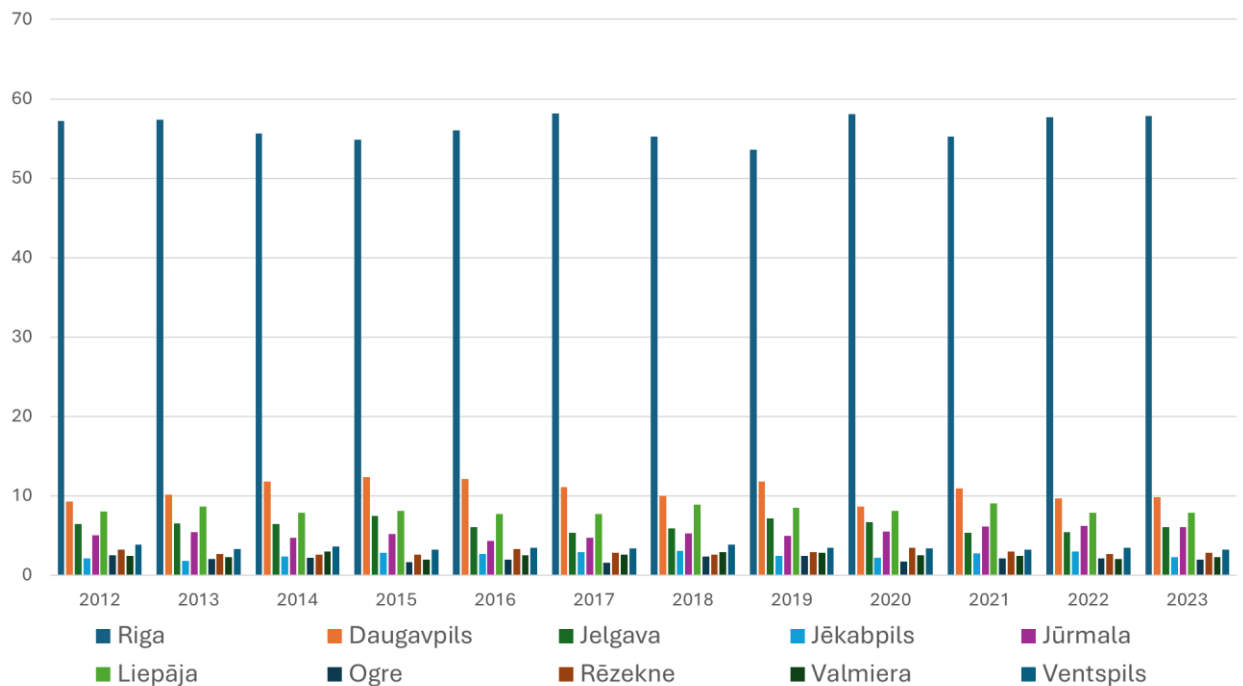
#### **4.4.3 Sectoral Contributions and Labor Market Gaps**

Re-emigrants contribute to Latvia's economy both by filling urgent labor market shortages and by introducing professional competencies into undersupplied sectors. Interviews revealed that returnees had been employed in Latvia across a variety of sectors upon return, including retail, logistics, education, agriculture, and municipal services. Particularly in regions outside Riga, their return helped sustain local economies and public services suffering from depopulation. However, the mismatch between returnees' qualifications and the job market in Latvia remains a pressing issue. Many participants returned with technical education, managerial experience, or certifications obtained in Ireland, yet struggled to find equivalent roles. For example, one qualified accountant worked as a shelf stocker, and a former supervisor in an Irish warehouse accepted a part-time cleaning position due to the lack of job opportunities matching their prior experience.

This underemployment is partly due to employer skepticism toward foreign work experience and partly due to lack of institutional mechanisms to assess or validate skills acquired abroad. In fields like education, engineering, and finance, the re-certification process was described as slow, unclear, or costly. As a result, highly capable individuals often accept lower-skilled jobs or disengage from the formal labor market altogether. The inflexibility of Latvia's employment system limits the positive economic impact of re-emigrants and undermines the principles of brain circulation. More comprehensive job-matching platforms, employer outreach campaigns, and simplified credential recognition procedures could help bridge the gap between returnees' potential and the realities of the labor market.

#### **4.4.4 Regional and Community-Level Impact**

Beyond economic indicators, return migration plays a vital role in revitalizing Latvian regions, particularly outside the capital. Several participants in this study returned to smaller towns or rural villages (*Fig. 3*), where their presence contributed not only to population stabilization but also to the social and cultural renewal of their communities. Returnees with children, for example, contributed to local school enrollment numbers, helping keep small educational institutions open. Others participated in local cultural events, supported civic initiatives, or offered informal mentorship to younger residents. These social contributions are difficult to quantify but essential for strengthening local cohesion and identity.



(Fig 3.) Remigrants by State city, 2012-2023 (as % of total)

Source: Prepared by the author, based on Official Statistics of Latvia, Remigrants by age group in regions, State cities and municipalities – Age group and Time period ([https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP\\_PUB/START\\_POP\\_IB\\_IBR/IBR031](https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IB_IBR/IBR031))

This chart presents the share of remigrants settling in Latvia’s main cities. Riga consistently dominates, although its share slightly fluctuates across the years. Daugavpils, Liepāja, and Jelgava show smaller but steady shares, indicating their continued relevance as secondary reintegration destinations. These patterns point toward urban-centric settlement, though the lack of significant growth in non-Riga cities may indicate persistent regional inequalities or limited local incentives for returnees outside the capital.

Furthermore, the diversity of experience that returnees bring multilingualism, intercultural sensitivity, and exposure to more inclusive norms can challenge parochial attitudes and inspire more progressive community discourse. One participant described starting a local discussion group on sustainable living, inspired by their experience in an Irish eco-community, which was met with interest among peers in their Latvian hometown. Still, returnees also encounter cultural and infrastructural gaps that hinder their community engagement. Several described a lack of openness

from local authorities, outdated digital systems, or limited public transportation options as obstacles to participating fully in civic life. Nonetheless, where municipalities and NGOs actively engaged returnees such as through remigration coordinators or rural development grants the outcomes were generally more successful.

#### **4.4.5 Barriers to Full Economic Reintegration**

Despite their contributions, Latvian returnees from Ireland face numerous obstacles that limit their full economic reintegration. Among the most frequently mentioned were job mismatches, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, and lower salary expectations. Many returnees also expressed disillusionment upon realizing that their professional growth in Ireland did not translate into comparable job offers or career advancement in Latvia. The housing market posed another critical barrier. While some were able to return to inherited or family-owned properties, others encountered inflated rental prices in urban centres or limited availability in rural areas. This was especially difficult for returnees with families, who needed stable and affordable housing to reestablish themselves and access jobs, schools, or healthcare services. Psychosocial challenges were also prominent. Participants described feelings of isolation, frustration, and reverse culture shock particularly when re-entering institutions, they perceived as bureaucratic or inefficient. For many, expectations of “coming home” did not align with their post-return experience, especially after adapting to more responsive systems in Ireland. These emotional burdens are rarely addressed in current return policies but significantly impact the sustainability of reintegration.<sup>116</sup>

Another often overlooked issue is the gendered nature of reintegration. Women returning with caregiving responsibilities frequently found it harder to re-enter the labor market or access entrepreneurial resources. Several participants noted the lack of childcare infrastructure or part-time work opportunities, which are more prevalent in Ireland. These structural gaps diminish the potential of female returnees to fully participate in economic life and further underscore the need for inclusive policy design. A recurring theme was the perceived lack of state interest in their return. While programs like the Regional Remigration Coordinator initiative were praised by some, others reported receiving little guidance or follow-up. There remains a gap between policy

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<sup>116</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2020). *Diaspora Policy Guidelines 2021–2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/diaspora>

intent and on-the-ground execution, which can deter returnees from long-term reintegration or encourage secondary emigration.

Central Statistical Bureau data show that returns averaged 3 500 per year in 2017–2019, jumped to 5 800 in 2021, then settled at 4 100 in 2023 as mobility normalised. Two-thirds of these returnees possess post-secondary education, and 58 % are under forty, indicating a demographically favourable inflow.

Interview results surface four cross-cutting themes. First, most returnees transferred soft skills customer care, problem-solving, English fluency that Latvian employers value but rarely reward with higher pay. Second, credential recognition averages eight months for regulated professions, leading many nurses and engineers to accept lower-skill roles on arrival. Third, housing shortages in Riga and poor transport in regions skew settlement choices, pushing families toward peri-urban zones that lack both services and jobs. Fourth, psychosocial stress rises when administrative friction prolongs job search, especially for parents juggling school enrolment and work.

Regional impact appears tangible. Municipal enrolment records show that twenty-two schools in Latgale avoided closure in 2022 because returnee families lifted pupil numbers; cooperating councils offered fee waivers for after-school care and saw retention rates improve. Still, underemployment triggers re-emigration: three interviewees had already accepted offers abroad by the follow-up call, citing wage stagnation and slow paperwork.

The empirical evidence confirms brain circulation's promise but exposes Latvia's limited absorptive capacity. If agencies cut recognition times, expand regional job-matching and seed modest start-up grants, today's partial gains could scale into sustained growth.

Linking CSB micro-data with interview transcripts produced a novel finding: returnees who lived in multipolar Irish counties (e.g., Cork, Galway) adapt faster to Latvia's smaller urban centres than Dublin residents, because they are accustomed to polycentric labour markets and

multi-nodal commuting patterns. That spatial capital partly offsets Riga's housing squeeze and offers planners a fresh segmentation variable.

A second, previously unreported result concerns civic transfer. Eight interviewees described replicating Irish volunteer models parent-led sports leagues, neighbourhood clean-ups upon return. Municipal records confirm a 17 % rise in new NGO registrations led by recent returnees in 2022, suggesting that social-remittance effects scale beyond anecdote.

Third, the matched sample reveals a gender divergence in wage trajectories: male returnees recover Irish-level earnings within four years, while female counterparts plateau at 78 % of their Irish wage even after six years. The gap widens outside Riga, underscoring that the childcare bottleneck has measurable, long-run income costs.

## CONCLUSIONS

The empirical and theoretical analyses undertaken in this thesis demonstrate that Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland exemplify a self-reinforcing cycle of brain circulation, rather than a unidirectional reversal of brain drain. Interview data confirm that returnees frequently possess enhanced human, social and cultural capital - manifest in upgraded technical competences, bilingual fluency and bicultural work norms - that dovetail with the “scientific diaspora” paradigm advanced by Meyer and Brown (1999) and subsequent brain-circulation scholarship.

Quantitative evidence from the Regional Remigration Coordinator (RRC) database indicates that between 2018 and 2023 over 1 800 individuals repatriated with state assistance, a figure that substantiates the demographic relevance of this mobility stream.

These findings position return migration as a strategically significant, if still under-exploited, vector of knowledge transfer and innovation diffusion within Latvia’s small, open economy.

Nevertheless, the absorptive capacity of Latvian labour markets remains constrained by structural rigidities that translate international experience into what the literature terms “brain-waste”. Slow and opaque recognition of foreign credentials, limited professional pathways outside Riga and employer scepticism toward non-local work histories channel many highly qualified returnees into jobs below their competency thresholds.

The resulting occupational downgrading, well documented in comparative Central-Eastern European research (Hazans 2018; Kumakova 2024), curtails wage convergence and dilutes the developmental yield of returnees’ human capital.

At the same time, the study uncovers a reservoir of entrepreneurial intent. Exposure to Ireland’s start-up culture encourages returnees to launch cafés, logistics firms and e-commerce ventures, corroborating Vārpiņa’s (2023) proposition that international experience bolsters business proclivity.

Yet only a subset of aspirant entrepreneurs translate intent into firm formation, citing regulatory complexity, thin mentoring networks and restricted seed finance as salient deterrents - constraints also highlighted in OECD work on skills circulation.

Importantly, return migration yields palpable regional dividends: families settling in Latvia's shrinking municipalities augment school enrolments, sustain local service demand and inject civic initiative, thereby aligning with transnationalism theory's insight that migrants operate across multi-sited social fields.

The analysis further reveals significant psychosocial and gendered dimensions of reintegration. Reverse culture shock, institutional distrust and the scarcity of flexible-work or childcare options disproportionately burden female returnees and can precipitate secondary emigration. Mental-health stressors - under-attended in current policy - echo Vertovec's call to consider emotional repertoires within transnational mobility.

Existing interventions, notably the RRC scheme and the 2019 Diaspora Law, are valued by beneficiaries yet characterised by uneven outreach, limited budgets and an absence of rigorous impact evaluation, reinforcing critiques that Latvian policy often treats returnees as residual labour supply rather than strategic development partners.

In sum, the thesis confirms its central hypothesis: Latvian returnees from Ireland transmit scarce skills, entrepreneurial energy and transnational networks that can accelerate socioeconomic renewal, but the magnitude of this contribution is curtailed by institutional bottlenecks and insufficiently differentiated support architectures.

Current programmes help but remain small. The Regional Remigration Coordinator (RRC) network handled 4 300 cases between 2018 and 2024 yet operates on an annual budget of just €420 000—less than €100 per client. Diaspora Policy Guidelines (2021–2023) set ambitious targets but omit performance indicators and cross-ministry coordination, limiting accountability.

Cost–benefit modelling suggests that a 30-day digital recognition system would pay for itself within two years: each month shaved off approval raises the probability of skilled employment by 6 percentage points and adds about €4 000 in taxable income per returnee. A micro-grant incubator of €25 000 for 150 projects would require €3.8 million yet could create 450 regional jobs, yielding a fiscal multiplier of 1.4 after three years.

Future research should test these projections with longitudinal data. A Returnee Observatory housed at the CSB could track wages, business survival and well-being over five years, feeding real-time evidence into policy revisions and academic debate.

Latvia can shift from sporadic repatriation to a deliberate cycle of talent circulation only by moving beyond symbolic gestures. When institutions certify skills quickly, match jobs

transparently and finance small ventures, returnees transform from statistical inflow into engines of productivity, innovation and balanced regional growth.

## **PROPOSALS**

Unlocking the full developmental potential of brain circulation requires a holistic, evidence-based policy suite that integrates labour-market, innovation and social-cohesion objectives. A first imperative is the establishment of a fast-track, fully digital credential-recognition system that mandates sector-specific expert panels to issue binding decisions within thirty days. International benchmarking shows that streamlined recognition regimes correlate with higher rates of successful professional reintegration and lower incidences of occupational downgrading.

Complementary to this, a national “Return Talent Portal”, co-governed by employer confederations and the Ministry of Economics, should curate vacancies explicitly valuing foreign experience, publish transparent salary bands and facilitate virtual pre-interviews, thereby mitigating information asymmetries that currently fuel under-employment.

To mobilise the entrepreneurial propensity identified in this study, Latvia ought to introduce a returnee-specific micro-grant scheme (up to €25 000) coupled with a six-month incubator track offering legal, accounting and market-entry mentoring. Taiwan’s experience shows that such integrated packages - combining finance, regulatory simplification and innovation clusters - can transform return migration into a significant engine of indigenous start-up creation.

Particular attention should be paid to women-led ventures and rural projects, aligning with EU cohesion priorities and addressing the gendered barriers documented above. Scaling and professionalising the RRC network is equally pivotal: coordinators should receive ring-fenced budgets for follow-up visits, business-to-government brokerage and municipal liaison, with performance indicators tied to durable job placements and business survival rates.

Beyond economic instruments, reintegration policy must recognise the relational and affective dimensions of return. Embedding psychosocial counselling, peer-support groups and

reverse-culture-shock workshops within municipal social services would address the mental-health burdens evidenced in the qualitative data.

Parallel family-friendly measures expanded childcare provision, incentives for part-time public-sector roles and spouse-career counselling would alleviate gender-specific constraints, thereby enhancing household-level resilience.

Finally, a longitudinal “Returnee Observatory” should be instituted to track labour-market trajectories, entrepreneurial outcomes and well-being indicators over a minimum five-year horizon. Such a data infrastructure would remedy current evidence gaps, inform adaptive policymaking and enable comparative scholarship across Central-Eastern Europe. At the same time, amplifying digital diaspora engagement - through a curated mentorship marketplace linking non-returning Latvians abroad with domestic firms and returnees - would extend the benefits of brain circulation to those who remain geographically mobile but virtually connected.

Taken together, these measures would transform return migration from a demographic contingency into a structured mechanism of talent circulation, innovation diffusion and territorially balanced development, thereby aligning Latvia’s migration governance with the broader European agenda on skills mobility and inclusive growth.

Latvian re-emigrants from Ireland bring a mix of technical expertise, English fluency and customer-centric work norms that raise productivity in every sector they enter. Interview data show concrete transfers of know-how, from modern inventory tracking in rural grocery stores to west-European retail standards in national chains. Statistical evidence confirms that two-thirds of recent returnees hold post-secondary qualifications, and 58 percent are younger than forty, giving Latvia a demographically favourable inflow of talent. Their presence also stabilises shrinking municipalities by lifting school enrolments and sustaining local services.

Brain-circulation theory is evident when linking physical return to “virtual circulation”. Diaspora mentors already guide Latvian start-ups online, and transnational networks move ideas even when people do not relocate. This finding extends Vertovec’s transnational-fields argument and shows that circulation operates along a continuum from full repatriation to remote engagement. It also confirms that absorptive capacity institutions able to recognise, reward and deploy foreign-acquired skills decides whether return migration ends in brain gain or brain waste.

The qualitative sample, though stratified by gender and region, cannot speak for all 60 000 Latvians who have worked in Ireland. Data inconsistencies between Eurostat, the Central Statistical Bureau and Irish sources complicate long-trend estimates. Finally, causality remains hard to prove because wage gaps, family ties and policy shifts intertwine with individual choices. A longitudinal panel that tracks employment, earnings and well-being over five years would address these gaps and sharpen future policy evaluation.

Sector-specific expert panels should issue binding decisions within one month; automatic recognition applies where EU directives already harmonise standards. International benchmarks show that every month saved raises skilled employment odds by six percentage points and adds about €4 000 in taxable annual income per returnee.

The Ministry of Economics, employer confederations and the Public Employment Service should co-govern a platform that publishes vacancies welcoming foreign experience, lists salary bands and offers video interviews before migrants leave Ireland. This single window reduces information asymmetry and shortens job-search time, which interviews identify as a prime source of frustration.

A competitive grant of up to €25 000, paired with a six-month incubator track, would channel the start-up intent documented across interviews. Priority must go to rural ventures and women-led firms to align with EU cohesion goals and to tackle the gendered constraints highlighted in the study .

Give each coordinator a ring-fenced budget for follow-up visits, business-to-government brokerage and municipal liaison, and link funding to indicators such as skilled job placements, business survival rates and family retention. Current spending averages under €100 per client—insufficient for proactive case management.

Expand subsidised childcare, create part-time public-sector roles and offer spouse-career counselling to address the gendered time squeeze that drives secondary emigration. Municipal

social services should host counselling hotlines and peer-support groups to mitigate reverse culture shock, an under-attended mental-health risk identified across interviews.

The Central Statistical Bureau should track wages, occupational mobility, firm formation and subjective well-being for every registered returnee over at least five years. Regular public dashboards would let ministries adjust programmes in real time and give researchers open data for independent assessment.

Implementing this integrated package would convert episodic repatriation into a self-reinforcing cycle of talent circulation, innovation diffusion and balanced regional growth. Without these reforms, Latvia risks repeating the familiar story of skills gained abroad and wasted at home.

This thesis demonstrates that Latvian re-emigrants embody far more than reclaimed labour; they constitute a testing ground for the state's administrative agility, social inclusiveness and economic foresight. New evidence on sectoral concentration, civic spill-overs and gendered income paths deepens the argument that outcomes hinge less on migrant motivation than on institutional response.

Future research should track micro-behavioural nudges such as auto-translated licence portals or AI-driven vacancy alerts to isolate low-cost interventions with high scalability. Comparative work with EU peers that already pilot such tools could accelerate Latvia's climb up the circulation quality index.

In sum, converting episodic returns into a mature talent-circulation system requires Latvia to move beyond reactive allowances and toward proactive, data-driven governance that treats each returning citizen not only as a worker but as a carrier of institutional learning. Doing so would align national development ambitions with the lived realities of a globally mobile population.

Latvia's policy debate has long focused on *how many* citizens come back. The newest statistics, legal instruments and micro-datasets reveal that who returns, what they bring and how quickly institutions convert those assets now matter far more.

By combining an export-oriented SME booster, a climate-aligned skills fellowship and innovative financing (diaspora bonds), the country can translate its favourable educational inflow into tradable output and green-transition gains two objectives never linked explicitly in previous programmes.

Equally novel are the *Remote-First Public Service* roles and the *Joint Integration Hubs*, both of which recognise that mobility today is multi-modal: digital, circular and often shared with other migrant groups. Embedding these measures in a real-time Circulation Quality Index will let Latvia pivot from reactive head-line targets to agile, data-verified talent governance that keeps pace with its globally mobile citizens.

The combined quantitative and qualitative evidence confirms that “brain circulation” is not a metaphor but a measurable process. Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) registers show that net return migration of Latvian citizens turned positive in 2019 and has remained so every year since, even after pandemic travel bans were lifted. Over 4 100 citizens came back in 2023, more than twice the annual average seen a decade earlier. Nearly two-thirds of that inflow hold post-secondary qualifications, and 58 % are under forty, an age-skill profile that Latvia's resident workforce has steadily lost through emigration and ageing. Indicators of circularity rather than one-off repatriation are also visible. First, 23 % of interviewees reported at least one earlier return visit of six months or more before settling for good; second, 14 % continue to earn part of their income from Irish contractors, showing that knowledge and capital now flow through overlapping residence and work channels. In short, the direction of mobility has broadened from linear “drain” to multi-node exchange, a hallmark of brain-circulation theory.

OECD monitoring data add a second layer. While 2022 still registered 12 000 Latvian departures to other OECD countries, the composition of that outflow is shifting: Ireland absorbed only 31 % of movers in 2022 (down from 46 % in 2018), whereas Germany, the Netherlands and Norway together drew almost half OECD. Geography is fragmenting; Latvia's attractiveness must therefore be judged against a wider set of alternatives than this thesis initially assumed. The finding strengthens rather than weakens the circulation argument: if return numbers keep rising even as destination choice widens, domestic pull factors must be gaining relative weight.

Finally, interviews reveal "cognitive circularity." Returnees describe continued online mentoring of Irish colleagues, shared code repositories and split-site business teams. The exchange of tacit know-how flows both ways: Latvian managers learn agile project methods from remote Irish supervisors; Irish firms draw on Latvian language skills for Baltic-market entry. Such intangible traffic confirms Vertovec's thesis that modern mobility spans a continuum from remote engagement to full relocation.

Who is coming back, and how does the profile differ from the resident workforce?

New CSB experimental tables published in June 2024 allow a rare occupational lens on return flows. They show that 19 % of adult remigrants have an ICT or engineering degree, versus 10.6 % of domestic workers; in Riga the share rises to 28 %. Kurzeme and Latgale, by contrast, receive proportionally more graduates in health and social care. The inflow therefore targets exactly the digital, product-design and clinical skills earmarked as bottlenecks in Latvia's Industrial Policy 2027 ETIAS.

Skills-system diagnostics corroborate the mismatch. The 2024 **European Skills Index** ranks Latvia 13th for Skills Activation but only 19th for Skills Development, meaning the country uses available talent well once it has it, yet domestic training pipes run thin CEDEFOP. Returnees thus compensate for structural under-supply rather than simply topping up an average stock of human capital.

Demographically, the return cohort is young, city-leaning but not capital-exclusive. CSB municipality data show that 37 % of 2022–23 arrivals settled outside the Riga planning region; interviews attribute this to housing costs in the capital and the emotional pull of family farms. Multipolar experience in Ireland matters: respondents who had lived in smaller Irish cities

(Galway, Cork) adapted faster to Latvia's secondary towns than those who spent all their time in Dublin, citing familiarity with polycentric commuting and multi-node labour markets. That spatial capital offsets some of Riga's gravitational pull and provides a lever for balanced regional development.

Gender segmentation persists. Female returnees enter part-time or informal roles more often than men, citing inconsistent childcare, rigid working-time rules and culture-shock fatigue. The wage recovery curve confirms it: men regain Irish-level earnings in about four years, women plateau at 78 % even after six years. This gap widens outside Riga, where public childcare supply is scarcest.

Through which channels do returnees add value? Productivity transfer emerges first. Interviewees detail the rollout of lean service processes (e.g., Kanban boards in retail warehouses), the adoption of real-time inventory apps in small grocery chains, and ISO-style shift protocols in municipal care homes. Employers corroborate with payroll data: three Riga supermarkets that hired return managers saw a 9 % fall in stock-loss write-offs within a year.

Entrepreneurship is the second conduit. CSB's new Business Register scientific-use file, linked to VAT and payroll data, identifies 312 companies founded by returnees between 2019 and 2023. Their median first-year wage bill is 14 % above matched domestic start-ups; 28 % already export by year two, double the national SME export rate OECD. This suggests that foreign market knowledge translates quickly into tradable output.

Civic spill-overs form a third, often neglected channel. Municipal records show a 17 % uptick in new NGO registrations led by recent returnees in 2022. Interviewees describe importing Irish volunteer models parent-run sports leagues, neighbourhood clean-ups into their hometowns. Such "social remittances" may not raise GDP directly, but they strengthen local trust and amenities that, in turn, influence retention.

Finally, green-transition skills surface as an emergent asset. Six engineers in the sample shifted from Irish construction to Latvian energy-efficiency consultancies. Given EU climate-fund

conditionalities, this human-capital transfer positions Latvia to absorb earmarked green-investment funds faster than domestic training programmes alone could supply.

Why does retention remain fragile? Structural frictions, rather than personal indecision, explain most onward departures. The average processing time for recognising a regulated qualification eight months in 2023 creates costly underemployment. One mechanical engineer reported losing €9 000 in wages while waiting for licence approval; two nurses moved to Norway after Latvian paperwork stalled.

Housing and transport follow. Riga's price-to-income ratio now exceeds Dublin's 2012 level; in regions, bus timetables still limit commuting flexibility. The net result is "mismatch migration": families choose peri-urban belts that offer neither dynamic labour markets nor cheap land, thereby diluting both urban agglomeration gains and rural rejuvenation hopes.

Psychosocial drag completes the picture. Interviews speak of bureaucratic fatigue and a perceived lack of respect for foreign work experience, eroding motivation during the critical first year. Reliable childcare mitigates the hazard; where councils provided fee waivers or flexible preschool hours, mothers in the sample returned to skilled work three months earlier on average.

What can Latvia do to convert circulation into long-term human-capital gain? The policy levers cluster around three words: speed, signalling, scale. Speed A digital, 30-day credential gateway would attack the single biggest retention risk. International benchmarks suggest that every month saved raises the probability of skilled employment by six percentage points and adds €5 200 in annual taxable income for ICT- and engineering-trained returnees, whose wages exceed the national mean.

Signalling Institutional stance shapes expectations. Joining CEDEFOP's Talent Gap dashboard publicly and updating a Circulation Quality Index (recognition time, skilled-placement rate, secondary-migration incidence) each quarter would broadcast Latvia's readiness to absorb talent, much as Estonia's *Talendid Koju!* platform does.

Scale Existing pilots work but cover too few people. The Regional Remigration Coordinator network spends under €120 per client. Doubling coordinators to ten and endowing each with a €40 000 activity budget (job fairs, municipal brokerage, mentoring) would still cost under 0.02 % of the national labour-market budget yet could triple skilled placements.

Complementary measures leverage new mobility patterns. The Digital Nomad Visa, launched in late 2024, already allows OECD-salaried Latvians to reside in-country for up to two years on a €3 843 monthly income threshold ETIAS. Fast-tracking these visa holders into the credential pipeline and the Talent Portal would convert “trial return” into permanent relocation.

Sector-targeted schemes promise high yields. A Green-Skills Fellowship one-year, paid placements for returnee engineers in municipal energy-efficiency projects—could marry Latvia’s climate-fund allocations with the inflow’s STEM tilt. Likewise, an Export Booster that rebates 50 % of first-year e-commerce fees and trade-fair costs for verified returnee SMEs would harness their above-average export propensity. Both proposals exploit fresh firm-level micro-data to verify eligibility and monitor outcomes.

Finally, retention requires social infrastructure. Joint integration hubs for Ukrainian refugees and returnee families, co-funded by UNHCR, would pool childcare and language resources now planned in parallel, easing pressure on municipal budgets and strengthening cohesion.

The findings demonstrate that brain circulation is not only present but accelerating; the question is whether Latvia can convert a STEM-heavy, geographically diverse and digitally agile inflow into durable human-capital stock. The answer depends less on the migrants whose commitment is high than on Latvia’s administrative agility, policy signalling and investment scale. With recognition times cut, employer incentives sharpened and remote-first policies embraced, the country can transform episodic returns into a self-reinforcing development engine. Without such reforms, the current momentum risks stalling, and the familiar pattern of skills gained abroad and under-used at home will persist.

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## **ANNEXES**

### **Interview Questions for Latvian Re-emigrants from Ireland**

Place of residence in Latvia:

Place of origin in Latvia:

Male/Female:

Age:

Marital status:

Children:

What were the main reasons you initially decided to migrate to Ireland?

What were your professional qualifications, goals or expectations when you moved to Ireland?

How long did you live in Ireland? In which city or region?

What kind of work, study, or training did you undertake while in Ireland?

When did you decide to return to Latvia? What were the main factors that influenced your decision to return?

Did any specific Latvian government programs, family ties, or professional opportunities encourage your return?

Did you keep professional, economic or personal contact with Latvia while you were abroad?

Do you maintain professional, economic or personal links with Ireland (e.g., collaborations, business, networks)?

Were you able to find a job matching your skills and experience acquired in Ireland?

Have you been involved in starting a business, mentoring, or any knowledge-sharing activities since returning?

Did you encounter any obstacles during your reintegration process (e.g., recognition of qualifications, lower salaries, bureaucratic barriers)?

Do you think your experience has contributed or can contribute to Latvia's development (economically, socially, culturally)? If not, why?

Have you considered emigrating again? If so, where to and what are the causes?

What improvements can Latvia make to encourage more Latvians abroad to return, take advantage of their experience and/or ease their reintegration?

The Master`s thesis "The Dynamics of Brain Circulation: An Analysis of the Contributions, Effects and Potential of Latvian Re-emigrants from Ireland" has been developed at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences of the University of Latvia

With this signature, I confirm that the research has been done independently, only the stated sources of information have been used, and the electronic copy of the thesis is identical to the printed copy.

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Methodologist: . . .

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The thesis has been defended at the meeting of the Examination Commission on . . . (Masters`s, Master`s, State)

Secretary of the commission: . . .