

## Migration as a Tool for Social Resilience: Lessons From Two Case Studies\*

Daniel Göler, Zaiga Krišjāne

**Abstract:** Following the fall of socialism in East and Southeast Europe, widespread destabilisation of living conditions was accompanied by immense skill and cost mismatches. Both of these factors continue to contribute to substantial levels of brain drain, brain waste and de-skilling. We propose and discuss the migration-resilience nexus as a new paradigm that emphasises the instrumental dimension of movements and migrants' agency in terms of the aspiration-capabilities framework. In this paper, we look at migration-specific contexts in two countries suffering from long-term emigration for different reasons. Migratory movements, including emigration and circular and return migration, are interpreted as "tools for social resilience".

In many cases, migrants do not necessarily have the aspiration to migrate. Nevertheless, they can do so when conditions in their individual situation, such as material income, individual well-being or family status, change. Thus, in contrast to the few studies that have looked at migration and resilience so far, we focus on aspirations, decisions and movements as fundamental elements of a resilience strategy adopted by individuals to cope with permanent existential risk, constant harassment, socio-psychological stress or other threats. Our analysis pursues a comparative empirical approach. To cover the broad scope of this phenomenon, we chose Latvia and Albania as the study's examples. Data on Albania is gathered using qualitative methods, while a quantitative approach is adopted in Latvia.

**Keywords:** Migration · Resilience · Agency · Albania · Latvia

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## 1 Introduction

In their groundbreaking contribution to understanding international migration at the end of the millennium, *Massey et al.* in 1998 stated their credo “development creates migration”. The authors aimed to point out that a global surplus in socio-economic terms contributes to intensifying migratory movements. Since then, the number of international migrants worldwide has increased from 173 million in the year 2000 to a pre-pandemic estimated figure of 281 million in 2020, representing 3.6 percent of the world’s total population (*IOM GMDAC* 2021). With a view to the transition contexts of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, we can easily rearrange the aforementioned quotation and determine that *transition creates migration*. The dissolution of the Eastern Bloc contributed to a massive post-socialist mobilisation (*Fassmann/Münz* 2000, 2001) that continues in some countries to this day. The main drivers of this trend were the migrants’ search for employment and income in the face of massive socio-economic disparities, particularly between the global North and South.

With this in mind, we will ask two questions about the contribution. Firstly, and concerning transition contexts, to what extent *does migration create development*? As a result, the so-called migration-development nexus, an approach that underlines the relationship between migration and development due to transnationalism, emerges (see *Faist et al.* 2011, among others). The assessments of the nexus so far range from migration as a “new development mantra” (*Kapur* 2004) and a warning against another “round of enthusiasm” (*Faist* 2008: 22) to the effects of migration in regions of origin. The positivistic and more critical assessments depend on changing phases of global development dynamics, including economic crises. What is interesting for our consideration in discussions like these is that migration is not understood solely as a problem but also as a resource, i.e. as part of a possible solution to a problem people face. Secondly, and this is the central question for our considerations, the extent to which migration thus represents a means of social resilience must be clarified, as this would provide a new perspective for future analysis. The study will show that changes in individual living conditions – concerning material existence, family situation or personal well-being – stimulate migration. Even if there is little aspiration towards mobility, people may often migrate (*de Haas* 2021; *Carling/Schewel* 2018). In this respect, aspirations, decisions, decision-making and the characteristics of movements are central factors in the resilient strategies of individuals who use migration to counter permanent risks and uncertainty or other threats. The individual context of migration and migrants’ strategies are therefore the main focus of this study in empirical terms in order to develop a new perspective on the relationship between migration and resilience. With this aim in mind, we will first explain the conceptual and empirical approach in the paper, and then use findings from the examples considered to support the thesis of migration as a means of social resilience. Taking these findings into account, the next part will provide further detail on the theoretical foundation.

## 2 The migration-resilience nexus as a new perspective

Adger (2000: 347) defines social resilience as “the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances resulting from social, political and environmental change”. A more differentiated definition distinguishes three dimensions, comprising coping capacities (the ability of actors to cope with crisis), adaptive capacities (the ability to valorise past experiences about future livelihood) and transformative capacities, i.e. the power “to craft sets of institutions that foster individual welfare and sustainable robustness towards future crises” (Keck/Sakdapolrak 2013: 5). Both studies, like many others, interpret social resilience using an actor-related (agent-based) approach and address the resilience of migrant groups after migration. In line with this, many scholars (see references in Bourbeau 2018: 85) analyse how migrants adapt to the new situation following arrival with needs such as social integration, education and access to the labour and housing market. This shows that the topic of “resilience of migrants” is well established in relation to “a wide range of issues including social, economic and psychological stressors associated with settlement and integration process” (Akbar/Preston 2019: 11). Last but not least, to broaden the range of very different perspectives on the view, the field of political science sees resilience as a “neoliberal form of governmentality that emphasises individual adaptability” (Joseph 2013: 38). This “way of mobilising social agents” (Joseph 2013: 38) leads to a more dynamic, agent-based reading of what resilience could be.

Revisiting the dimensions by Keck/Sakdapolrak (2013), actors in (post-socialist) transition societies have various options to cope with the crisis beyond migration. In contrast, the “adaptive capabilities” (Keck/Sakdapolrak 2013: 5) mentioned above are absent in the case of Albania and “transformative capacities” are at best questionable in some countries of East and Southeast Europe, including both Albania and Latvia, at least as regards sustainable robustness in times of crises such as the pandemic or the war in Ukraine.

As part of theoretical reflections such as these, and based on our previous research (Göler/Krišjāne 2016) and our own current empirical studies (Doka/Göler forthcoming; Apsite-Berina et al. 2022), we propose adding a new approach by switching perspectives to understand migration as a kind of ‘a means to an end’. This new paradigm, the migration-resilience nexus, interprets migration as a ‘tool’ for social resilience, i.e. the strategy for solving an individual or collective problem. Thus, it is an element of migrants’ agency, keeping in mind at the same time that “To be resilient is not to have eliminated vulnerability” (Stark 2014: 68). We see the paradigm in line with *de Haas’s* aspirations-capabilities framework, an approach that also emphasises “the instrumental (functional, means-to-an-end) dimension of migration [that] reflects the role of migration as a way to achieve other [...] goals such as increased income, education, living standards or, in the case of refugees, personal safety” (*de Haas* 2021: 21). In this perspective, migration is the reaction of individuals to personal threats and/or socio-economic instability. The latter is true for millions of inhabitants of East and Southeast Europe in subsequent times of societal and/or turbulent economic transition. In many cases, this meant a drastic destabilisation

of the living conditions in most parts of the former socialist world. Often enough, for those affected, these processes were accompanied by a deterioration in quality of life, de-skilling and devaluation, marginalisation and a sense of having been left behind, and not least the loss of identity. All these aspects are related to the blind spot of migration studies, i.e. "Psychosocial Wellbeing" (Vathi/King 2017), which also plays a prominent role in migration and decision-making. This was also true in the two countries we selected for our case studies, with all their similarities and differences described in the next section.

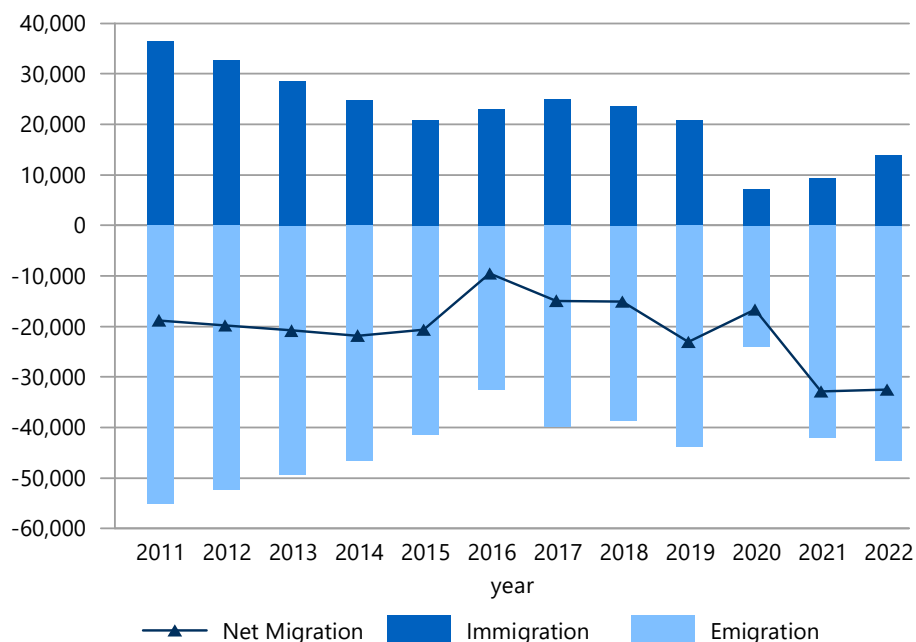
### 3 The conceptual and empirical approach

In this section, our aim is to underline the migration-resilience nexus as a new perspective, using empirical evidence from research conducted in two spatial contexts from Eastern Europe's periphery. Our study refers to the Baltic region and the Western Balkans or, more precisely, to Latvia and Albania. This enables us to view the migration-development nexus through the lens of both directions, i.e. emigration and return. From the conceptual point of view, this is a necessity for social resilience related to mobility. Furthermore, we use the comparison and counterposition of experiences of migrants with different origins to better understand the compound consequences of movements in the short and long term. This means that we have included two countries with diverse economic, political and historical framing, an explanation of which is required.

#### 3.1 The Albanian migration society: from Kurbet to Asylum

Generally, every (human) geographic phenomenon in Albania is connected to migration: The country is living with and from migration. For good reason, King (2005) labelled the country a "laboratory for migration studies". Albania is a "migration society" (Göler 2017). Migration culture is deeply rooted in Albanian history, which can be seen if we go back to the 15th century and think about the "Kurbet" when Arbëresh (i.e. Christian Albanians) migrated to Italy due to the expanding Ottoman Empire (Rother 1968; Hall 1994: 50). *Kurbet* is still present in the Albanian language and means living in exile or, respectively, diaspora (King 2005: 135), which is the norm rather than an exception. Even the chosen path of consecutive self-isolation and Stalinist socialism after the Second World War, when all forms of migratory movement were tightly regulated by the state, could not alter this in any way. Consequently, emigration was a repeated motive immediately after the end of communism and the lifting of mobility restrictions, when several thousands of migrants boarded the vessel *Vlora* in 1991 during the so-called "Exodus", and, the post-1990 mass migration of Albanians to Italy and Greece started (King 2005).

Migration is still a tool for social resilience in Albania. One of the striking results of the census in 2011, two decades after opening the borders, was that almost half of the population had had a personal international migration experience (45.4 percent; World Bank 2011). Figure 1 shows that the exodus has continued unabated since

**Fig. 1:** Migration balance of Albania 2011-2022

Source: data: INSTAT 2020: 8; INSTAT 2023

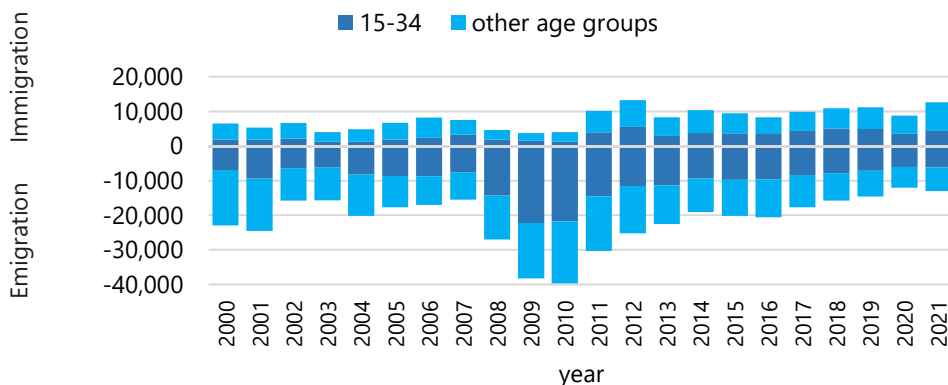
then. With fluctuating migration volumes, the annual balance was negative and amounted to another 246,000 people, equivalent to 8.7 percent of the country's total population of around 2.8 million.

According to official data from 2019, 1.64 million Albanians (equivalent to 36 percent of the total number of Albanian citizens) live abroad (*Exit News* 2020). Most emigrants stay in Greece (677,000) and Italy (523,000). Other destinations are the United States, Canada and Germany. The main driver for emigration is the search for employment and income (83.7 percent). World Bank data report annual remittances of an estimated USD 1.5 billion on this basis, equivalent to 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and substantially impacting the national economy. Other non-economic motivations are family reunification (9 percent) and (mainly academic) education (3.5 percent).

Albania has remained a candidate for membership of the European Union (EU) since 2014, while Latvia has been a member since 2004, offering its citizens the privilege of full access to the EU labour market – one of the striking differences between both countries in terms of labour migration.

### 3.2 The case of Latvia

Latvia, in the 21st century, is a country of emigration. The 20th century was characterised by a changing "migration landscape", especially after the Second World

**Fig. 2:** Migration balance for Latvia 2000-2021

Source: CSBL 2022

War. It was described as forced migration when many refugees went to the West or were deported to Siberia (Hazans 2019) but massive immigration also took place. Latvia was annexed to the Soviet Union during the second half of the 20th century and experienced four decades of constant immigration, mainly from the Russian Federation (Krišjāne 2008; Eglīte 2009). As a result, the dissolution of the Soviet Union provoked a significant wave of return migration in the early 1990s, followed by a substantial increase in migration movements and demographic change over the next 30 years (Heleniak 2004; Eglīte 2009; Krišjāne et al. 2016; Hazans 2019). Net migration has constantly been negative since then. Enlargement of the EU in 2004 significantly increased emigration from Latvia, particularly during the 2009-12 economic downturn (see Fig. 2). Return migration by Latvian nationals accounts for a sizeable portion of immigration flows, for example, 68.1 percent and 53.5 percent of all immigrants in 2013 and 2020 respectively (CSBL 2022).

Significant modifications to migratory patterns were brought about in 2004 by Latvia's accession to membership of the EU. This created numerous options for migration, but the unrestricted movement of labour was particularly advantageous. At first, only the UK, Ireland and Sweden – three of the 15 so-called old EU Member States (EU-15) – offered similar options to the new Member States (EU-8). In 2011, Germany and Austria finally lifted limitations on Latvia and the other EU-8 states.

The 2008 global economic crisis had a significant impact on migration. As a result of the economic downturn, Latvia's GDP fell by 18 percent, and unemployment rose sharply in all regions of the country (Martin 2009; Smith/Swain 2010). This, in turn, contributed to an increase in emigration. In the post-crisis period, migration volumes also stabilised as the economic situation improved (CSBL 2022, see Fig. 2).

The UK and Ireland were the primary destinations in the early years of EU enlargement. The UK began to take the lead during the global financial crisis, with fewer people travelling to Ireland on account of the economic hardship that it was experiencing. As of May 2011, when work and residency permits for nationals of the EU-8 were no longer necessary, many Latvians relocated to Germany. Although

migrant flows to Germany rose significantly post-crisis, the UK remained a key destination (Göler *et al.* 2015; Hazans 2019). Furthermore, they increased in Norway while decreasing again in Ireland. This is a product of Ireland's strong social networks, which are seen as a source of support despite the country's dismal economic position. Individuals seeking a secure base are drawn to Norway because of its independent financial stability and potential prosperity (Sechi *et al.* 2021; Zabko *et al.* 2019). The study's further examination of the distribution of respondents found that it also accurately depicted the geographic location of migratory movements.

### 3.3 The comparative approach

Regardless of the diverse framing in Albania and Latvia, "international migration in the periods of transition and crisis" (Göler *et al.* 2014) intensified at the start of the 1990s. Since then, both countries have displayed a pattern of continuous outmigration. In fact, and this is the connecting bracket in our comparative analysis, both countries belong to those parts of the former socialist world which were massively affected by long-term outmigration in times of transition. This makes them interesting for geographic migration studies, as related effects such as a widespread diaspora, population decline, brain drain and "peripheralisation" (Lulle 2019) seem comparable. The authors used this argument in an earlier migration-related comparative study on transnationalism and transregionalism (Göler/Krišjāne 2018). For good reason, Lulle (2019) draws a similar Balkan-Baltic comparison with a focus on underlying peripheralisation processes at a later stage. Thus, we consequently analyse how far migration patterns fit with the perspective of migration as a tool for social resilience by following hypotheses. First, after socialism, there were fewer limits on immigration, which increased mobility and occasionally perpetuated earlier migratory trends. Second, emigration is a person's reaction to the existential crises they encountered throughout the shift and an effort to improve their circumstances. Third, migration may be used as a social resilience tactic under some conditions.

Migration as social resilience thus covers individual needs in the short and medium term. It may contribute to protecting the shortcomings of the labour market in the receiving context; vice versa, the nexus can lead to long-term development impulses through transnational lifestyles and possible return. Research on the first component of the working hypothesis is best done using qualitative studies on Albania's transition, and on the second component using quantitative empirical data from Latvia. At the same time, findings on the third component are derived from both parts of the study. This needs detailed explanations of research methods, which are given in the following section.

### 3.4 Research methods

The study uses a mixed methods approach. Findings on Albanian migration are gained through qualitative fieldwork in several research projects which started in 2006 (see Göler 2017). These surveys are based on semi-structured in-depth interviews. During the study on migration and entrepreneurship in 2006, we gathered information on



a total of 34 companies and entrepreneurs (see *Göler 2007*), while the study on return migration in 2012 contained 40 biographical interviews with returnees and addressed, additionally, relevant institutions in southern Albania (see *Göler/Doka 2015; Göler 2017*). The third study addressed asylum seekers from Albania and Kosovo who were temporarily housed in a refugee reception centre in Bamberg (Germany) in 2016. There, we conducted 20 qualitative interviews in the migrants' native language. Additionally, we had the chance to carry out another interview with a family that had returned from Bamberg to Elbasan (Albania) in May 2016.

In contrast, findings on the Latvian case are gathered using a quantitative approach to investigate mainly the emigration motivations in the sense of migration as a tool for social resilience. Evidence is based on a one-of-a-kind dataset, collected and analysed from an online internet poll of 2,567 Latvian individuals living in five key destination countries, namely the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland, Germany, Sweden and Norway. We utilised a customised data collection strategy to reach an appropriate target group. The survey took place in 2016 and was carried out on a Latvian social media site ([www.draugiem.lv](http://www.draugiem.lv)) which serves as a well-known communication platform among Latvian migrants. When the first survey was conducted in the UK to investigate Latvian residents living abroad, it was done so in collaboration with [draugiem.lv](http://www.draugiem.lv) (*Apsite-Berina 2013*). The top 5 migration destinations were the subject of the second survey conducted in 2012. New question blocks have been added to each subsequent survey while potential bias has been recognised and the sample selection has been improved.

Participants for the survey were chosen based on the profile of the typical user in the destination country (including gender and age criteria relevant to each country). The data gained reflect the concentration of Latvian immigrants in other countries, as their geographical location or IP address recognised registered social media site users at the time of the poll, and thus represents a significant source of information (*McCullum/Apsite-Berina 2015; McCullum et al. 2017; Sechi et al. 2021*).

The increasing availability of information and communications technology (ICT) and the current state of human mobility are inextricably linked (*Kellerman 2012; de Haas et al. 2019*). The widespread use of ICT expands the possibilities for more forms of international migration and adds a new dimension to migration research (*Oiarzabal/Reips 2012; Smith/King 2012; Pötzschke/Rinken 2022*). Sample size and selection vary depending on the general population: the possibility of bias in internet survey mode, which excludes non-internet users a priori, must be considered. In contrast to statistical data obtained at the macro level, primary and unique data from the survey have an advantage. They provide information about the participants' motives for departure and reveal specific concerns not addressed by conventional statistics.

The completed study sample totalled 2,567 people, including 1,028 Latvians living in the UK, 500 in Ireland, 500 in Germany, 239 in Sweden and 300 in Norway.

Young people have typically accounted for a sizeable share of intra-EU migration. This is also the case with Latvia. Young adults (15-34 year-olds) form the group with the highest mobility (Fig. 2; *CSBL 2022*). The respondents' ages range from 16 to 69 years, with the 16-34 years age group having the highest proportion of emigrants.



The questionnaire was completed by 976 men and 1581 women (62 percent). Two interconnected factors may explain the higher proportion of female respondents. Women are not only more active users of digital social media platforms (Hargittai 2003), but they are also more likely to be involved in the scientific investigation (Galea/Tracy 2007).

## 4 The case studies

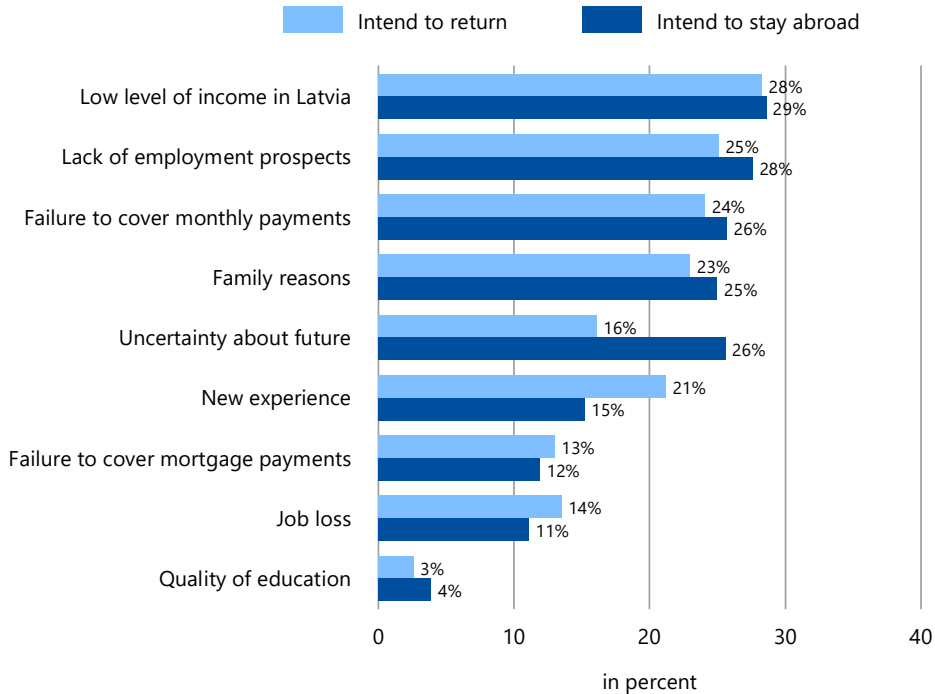
### 4.1 Voices from Latvia: Reaction to the economic crisis shifts from absorptive to transformative response

Migrants who have moved overseas must decide whether to stay or return to their native country. This query is relevant to both the life trajectory and future migration plan. Social resilience is undeniable in demanding times and takes, according to *Dagdeviren* and *Donoghue* (2019), three primary forms. These are agentic responses to the economic crisis, each with a different temporal frame: absorptive, or coping capacities, in which people make short-term adjustments to deal with the shock of a sudden worsening of their circumstances, frequently at the expense of their well-being; adaptive capacities, where people make decisions to safeguard and stabilise their well-being over the long or medium term; and transformative capacities, when individuals alter their lives in ways that improve them and make them less susceptible over time.

In their study, *Czaika et al.* 2021 emphasise that “migration decisions are made at significant turning points in people’s lives, determine and are determined by long-term life trajectories, and bring lasting consequences for the decision-maker and people affected by the decisions” (*Czaika et al.* 2021: 15f). In this sense, our data on Latvian migration is exceptional for studying return intentions because they offer insight into migratory behaviour and are distinctive regarding migrant characteristics. The study asked questions relating to the respondents’ demographics, their socio-economic standing, reasons for emigrating, advantages and particular livelihood aspects. Respondents were asked to select three main reasons for emigrating to other European countries (Fig. 3). The authors contend that emigration is a person’s attempt to improve their circumstances and respond to the existential crisis experienced throughout the shift to address the hypothesised question. The motivation for leaving was made explicit by indicating three key factors behind individuals’ decision to emigrate. Latvian ex-pats most frequently cited low pay, a shortage of jobs at home, and an inability to make repayments as the main reasons they left. As seen in this figure, the inability to make daily payments and the lack of employability were mentioned as the main reasons by both migrant groups who intended to stay in or return to Latvia. Poor wages were regarded as the primary reason for both migrant groups, with family motives also playing a crucial role.

Uncertainty about the future is one of the factors that both migrant groups value differently (16 percent for potential returnees and 26 percent for persons staying abroad). Differently valued opportunities for new experiences are also

**Fig. 3:** Reasons to leave Latvia

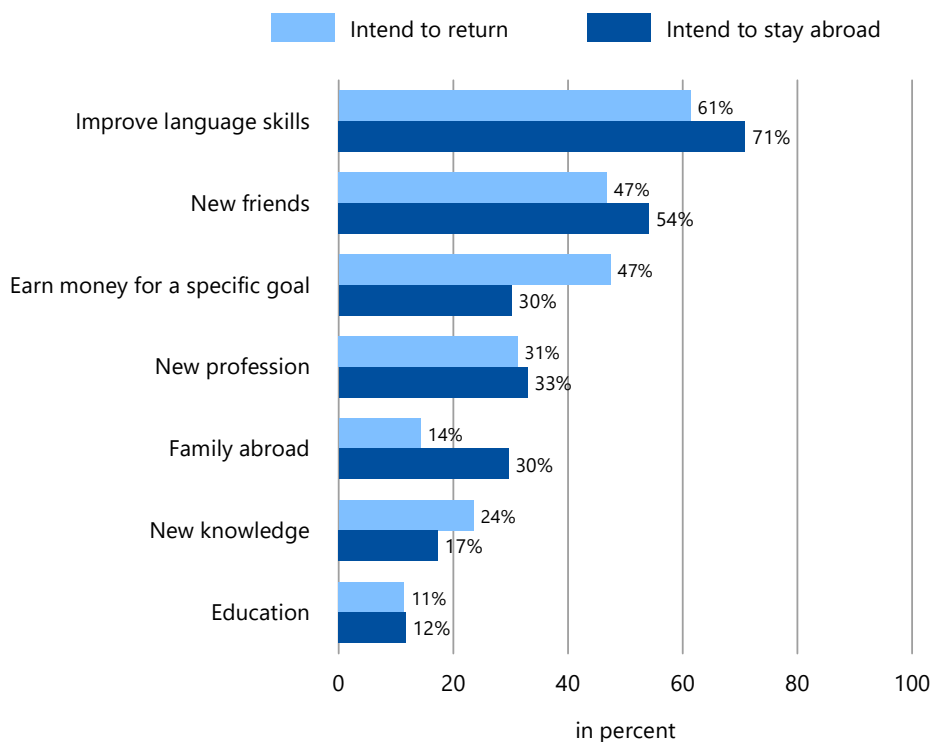


Source: authors' own survey

mentioned more frequently (21 percent) by migrants who intend to return to Latvia. Unemployment has been mentioned more frequently by potential returnees as a reason for leaving.

Uncertainty about the future reflects the impact of the crisis on the migrant's psychosocial well-being and is one of the reasons that discourages them from returning to their homeland. Similarly, *Kešāne* (2019), through an analysis of post-Soviet emigration from Latvia towards the West, establishes the relevance of the inequality-emotion link in migration on the migration-emotion nexus (*Boccagni/Baldassar* 2015). It marks both an absorptive, adaptive, and transformative response.

Respondents were asked to list the top three advantages of emigration. Figure 4 demonstrates the numerous advantages of investing in human capital. Both potential returnees and stayers mentioned that their ability to speak a new language had improved, and they had acquired new skills and knowledge. For potential returnees, earning money for a specific purpose is a decisive benefit (47 percent). This money could be used, for instance, to repay a loan. Opportunities for professional development and new life experiences are also important (*King et al.* 2016). Although earning money for a particular cause is an absorptive solution, it may also be a guarantee for a transformative one.

**Fig. 4:** Benefits to be gained from a stay abroad

Source: authors' own survey

A number of different family situations are also mentioned, with family matters becoming more essential attributes. Besides having greatest relevance for young people, the aspiration to travel and seek out new experiences demonstrates the importance of transnational links between countries. These elements correspond to international migration traits (King 2012) and show that lifestyle migration has become more common in addition to economic and family migration (King 2018). Polish immigrants had a similar experience, and non-economic causes are becoming more significant (Janicka/Kaczmarczyk 2016).

In the context of return, we should also pay attention to psychosocial wellbeing, which underlines the importance of contacts, social and emotional harmony, and the individual experience (Vathi/King 2017: 6).

Binary regression analysis was used to determine the degree to which the traits of potential return migrants differed from those of stayers (see Table 1). The study's model is based on the reasons for and advantages of migration for likely stayers and returnees.

The model's findings indicate that men are more likely than women to return to Latvia. Compared with other age groups, younger migrants (aged 16-24) may return more frequently. A partner in Latvia increases a migrant's likelihood of returning.

**Tab. 1:** Comparison of characteristics among migrants' intending to stay abroad (0) and those intending to return to Latvia (1)

Variable	B	Sig.
<i>Gender (ref. women)</i>		
men	0.326*	
<i>Age group (ref. 16-24 years)</i>		
25-44 years	-0.447***	
older than 45 years	-0.556**	
<i>Family status (ref. single)</i>		
have a partner in Latvia	0.462**	
have a partner abroad	0.051	
<i>Family type (ref. no children)</i>		
have children in Latvia	0.039	
have children abroad	-0.413**	
have children in Latvia and abroad	0.756	
<i>Education (ref. vocational)</i>		
primary or lower	-0.363	
secondary	0.054	
tertiary	0.107	
<i>Period of emigration (ref. 2009-2012, crisis)</i>		
pre-2009 (pre-crisis)	-0.036	
post-2012 (post-crisis)	0.356**	
<i>Place of residence in Latvia (ref. urban areas)</i>		
rural areas	0.068	
<i>Place of residence abroad (ref. urban areas)</i>		
rural areas	0.368***	
<i>Countries (ref. UK)</i>		
Germany	-0.731***	
Ireland	0.182	
Norway	-0.138	
Sweden	-0.356*	
<i>Employment abroad (ref. non-working/inactive)</i>		
low-skilled worker	0.193	
qualified worker	-0.008	
service sector worker	-0.150	
managers, professional	-0.165	
<i>Migration experience (ref. first migration)</i>		
repeated migration	0.038	
<i>Remittances (ref. not sending money)</i>		
sending money	0.004	

**Tab. 1:** Continuation

Variable	B	Sig.
<i>Motives behind moving abroad (ref. failure to cover monthly payments)</i>		
job loss	-0.409*	
failure to cover mortgage payments	-0.269	
low level of income	-0.638***	
lack of employment prospects	-0.465*	
family reasons	-0.004	
better quality of education	0.141	
uncertainty/insecurity about the future	-0.280	
gain new experiences	0.346	
other	-0.307	
<i>Experience abroad (ref. earned money for a specific goal)</i>		
education abroad	-1.555***	
new profession, qualification	-0.941***	
benefits, new knowledge abroad	-1.071***	
learn language	-1.220***	
new friends	-1.162***	
new family	-1.162***	
other	-0.046	
Constant	-0.316	
Observations	2,567	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.134	

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

Source: own calculations

The same applies to rural migrants, particular when compared with migrants living in urban areas. A comparison of destination countries clearly demonstrates that Germany and Sweden have lower return rates than the United Kingdom.

Less likely to return are those who left due to unemployment, lack of employment prospects and low-income levels. On the other hand, there are no differences between those who cited a lack of prospects and those for whom migration is a repeated experience. Comparing this with prior studies (Krišjāne et al. 2016), it is unique. Those who used to be jobless in Latvia were also able to return because of significant increases in employment rates since the end of the economic crisis. Nevertheless, low salaries deter people from returning to Latvia. However, relatives and friends abroad may diminish the likelihood of returning to Latvia. The possibility of leaving Latvia can also increase with acquired language skills, new professional skills and education abroad. Migrants who left during the crisis are more likely to return than those who left during the post-crisis period. According to the findings, post-crisis migrants appear to feel less obliged to stay abroad and the time spent

since the emigration may have had an influence; the longer a person stays abroad, the less likely they are to return.

Overall, migration motivations that are influenced by the economic context are driven by necessity; those who move to another country for a specific short-term goal or to save money for a particular purpose are more likely to return than those who benefit from new knowledge and skills abroad.

Psychological stress and future uncertainty affect crisis migrants more than other groups, thus illustrating the relationship between migration and social adaptability. A lack of employment prospects nevertheless means that there is less of a desire to return to Latvia.

The model results show that migration can be used as a tool for social resilience or as a response to a shock that demands swift action, thereby endorsing the earlier hypothesis. When someone loses his or her job or source of income, they cannot make daily or credit payments on time. The person decides to travel abroad as a result of this. The possibility of competitive pay and, consequently, the capacity to earn for a specific purpose, attract migrants. It supports the hypothesis that emigration is both a personal response to the crisis and a point of departure while looking for a short-term solution.

Additionally, migration is seen as a strategy to protect and stabilise their well-being in the medium or longer term. People look for better working conditions, career options, and prospects abroad because of low income, a lack of job opportunities, and worries about the future. The advancement of a migrant can be viewed as an investment in new knowledge and language learning that makes them better off in the longer term.

## **4.2 Voices from Albania: Effects of three decades of a migrant society**

Generally speaking, Albanian emigrants are well integrated into the host countries, both economically and socially. However, the majority of emigrants continue to have a strong relation with their country of origin, whether through visiting relatives and friends during the summer holidays and attending family celebrations or 'merely' virtual contacts through social media. Many Albanian emigrants are actively embedded in transnational networks. That kind of mass emigration is often connected with complex back-and-forth movements and bears a high potential for an eventual return. In fact, Albania is also a good example of migratory counter-movements as a lot of migrants have returned in the past 30 years. The respective spatial and temporal context is decisive, not only as regards to form, intensity and direction, but also, and in particular, in terms of socio-economic effects. The returnees of the 2000s were able to take advantage of the windows of opportunities in Albania, whereas the crisis migrants from Greece and Italy between 2010 and 2013 were confronted with problems on the labour market and challenges of re-integration, especially among the returning second generation. The same applies to those returning from the failed bid to seek asylum in Germany in 2015/16, when many Albanians left in order to follow the large number of refugees on their migration to Europe. As far as resilience is concerned, return was often just the starting point

for a new migration project. Below, we will draw on three examples to explain the shifting aspects of migration as a tool for social resilience in the case of Albania.

The summary of the first biographical example will give an impression not only of the highly volatile, liquid and elusive character of migration in the 1990s and 2000s but also of the economic effects in the sense of the migration-resilience-nexus of return in that period:

The interviewee from Vlorë is the co-owner of a medium-sized furniture company. His migration biography is a sequence of back-and-forth movements. After having earned a university diploma in engineering in the late 1980s, he worked in the state-owned oil industry for a short period but became unemployed following the fall of the socialist system. Like many others, he began running an informal kiosk selling small goods. Gradually, he started importing food and, later on, wooden chipboards. In 1997, he opened a bigger shop, which failed due to the riots in Albania. Two years later, in 1999, he began to trade internationally once more, specialising in furniture parts. In between all of these different activities, the interviewee reported several temporary yet limited periods of time spent abroad where he was mainly employed in construction in countries such as Italy, Spain and Dubai. On returning to Albania permanently, he invested the money that he had saved to set up his own company in 2003. The fact that the company still existed almost ten years later, when we repeated our visit, may indicate the success of that migration-based start-up.

This previous study, based on entrepreneurs' biographies, clearly showed that private financial transfers from abroad are crucial in the foundation of small and medium-sized enterprises in the service and secondary sectors (Göler 2007). Only one out of 34 entrepreneurs in that sample was *not* in a state of emigration prior to starting a business in Albania. Preparation for the foundation of a company usually comes in the form of a stay of up to ten or more years abroad, mainly in Italy or Greece. The first decade of the 21st century was a rather dynamic period for Albania's national economy, not least due to the mushrooming migration-based private entrepreneurship (returnees' business), one of the characteristic elements of the nexus between migration and development.

The determinism of entrepreneurship and migration is a rule in Albania. Migration, as described above, is a tool of social resilience in a dual respect: leaving home and seeking employment of any kind abroad is the reaction to critical living conditions following a change in system, while the decision to stay abroad – often in precarious working conditions with low wages and social deprivation – is made with a view to becoming self-employed upon returning at a later date.

It is a truism that a migration project's success or failure depends largely on the socio-spatial and temporal context. In our first example, the migrant was able to decide voluntarily the moment of return. Back home, he was met by a rapidly evolving environment where he could contribute to the economic dynamism, together with many other returnees. In contrast, almost a decade later, a specific proportion of migration and return took place in less favourable circumstances, as our example below shows:



The interviewee had just returned to a village near Himarë in southern Albania. As was commonplace in the early 1990s, he had left for Greece alone, but was followed by his wife and child after he had found a job. A daughter was born and the family moved into an apartment in Athens and integrated into society. The son earned a university degree and our interviewee moved into a better professional position. In 2011, with the emergence of the financial crisis in Greece, our interviewee accepted the compensation offered and returned alone to Albania. The son was already working and remained in Greece. The wife continued working in the service sector but had to accept several wage cuts due to the crisis. The striking argument as to why to stay for as long as possible, without spending too much of the savings before returning, was the daughter. She was born in Greece, was still attending school and only spoke a little Albanian. The parents wanted her to graduate from school so as to give her the chance of a brighter future abroad. The returnee himself, now in his mid-50s, runs a small-scale farm on his property in Albania, like his ancestors did and like he himself did before emigrating. "With agriculture you always have something to eat and might have your livelihood, even if the crisis worsens," he remarked, almost fatalistically, at the end of the interview.

Both migratory movements were required for economic reasons, but were also necessary for resilience. The first one was an expression of a profound existential crisis. In contrast, the second migration, in the form of a "split return" (*Carling/Erdal* 2014: 6) associated with an emotional burden, is tantamount to returning for retirement and for the lower costs of living at the place of origin. This equates to a coping strategy to avoid the family spending too much of their savings.

A third strategy of migration as an example of social resilience in post-socialist Albania is related to the European "refugee crisis" around 2015, when migrants from Western Balkan countries made up around 25 percent of the total number of refugees in Germany (*BAMF* 2015: 8), but failed to meet the relevant criteria as set out in the Geneva Convention. 12.2 percent of the arrivals came from Albania. Many of the nearly 54,000 individuals came indirectly from Greece and, to a lesser extent, Italy, with a kind of stop-over in Albania before arriving in Germany. Like our second interviewee, they were affected by the economic crisis in their previous destination countries, but in contrast, they had no resources to make a living in Albania then. A case study from Elbasan may serve to illustrate the problem briefly:

The couple is in their late 40s and have three sons. One of the sons lives permanently in Italy while the other two left to seek asylum in Germany but were forced to return in April 2015. Nevertheless, the parents moved to Germany in May, where they spent a couple of months in Bamberg. The main driver at the beginning was to be part of this mass movement. As asylum seekers, they received the request to leave in October, and they left the country on their own but made plans for re-entry simultaneously. "We only came to Germany to work. We do not want social assistance. We came for economic reasons. We are dissatisfied here [in Albania]. We liked it so much [in Germany]. But next time, we want to pay more attention to the rules."

In retrospect, the 2015 migration of Albanians “into asylum” was potentially one of the biggest misunderstandings in the age of migration. With only a few exceptions, it was a desperate and often spontaneous but ultimately failed attempt to ascribe value to migration in terms of social resilience, following a common coping strategy established in the decades and centuries beforehand. Most Albanian asylum seekers found themselves back home a couple of months later, facing the same problems as before and thinking about another migration project, but this time with even more limited resources (see also *King/Gëdeshi* 2021). These cases may confirm the thesis of returnees as potential future emigrants, as return in this particular context represents another stage in sequential migration biographies rather than a genuine prospect.

At present, especially among younger people and those who have gained experience abroad (and there are many of them now!), the belief that one can ‘do one’s thing’ in Albania seems to have been lost. Statistical data from Figure 1 show a sharp increase in emigration following a smooth interruption in 2021 due to the pandemic, and may underline the argument that the common pattern of migration is being perpetuated. Between 2021 and 2022, the number of emigrants almost doubled. The decrease in inward migration at the same time indicates that Albania does not offer an attractive environment for remigrants, especially if they have to establish a livelihood and earn a living there. This could be different in a few years’ time, when the returnees include retired people who may be able to live well on small pensions from abroad, given that the cost of living in the country is still relatively low. Return migration could then once again become part of (return) migration as a tool for social resilience.

## 5 Findings and discussion

In the last 30 years, a broad range of demographic groups participated in emigration from Latvia. Emigration and working abroad have always been popular strategies employed by Latvians, especially during economic crises and periods of instability (*McCollum et al.* 2017; *Hazans* 2019). The example of Latvia shows that migration as an immediate solution is considered to be a tool for social resilience. The same is true for Albania, but with a slightly different background regarding two contextual factors. The first is the state of isolation during socialism, with the result that, despite a strong affinity towards migration, there was no experience of dealing with international migration during the 1990s. This led to spontaneous, chaotic and sometimes tragic migratory movements. It is no exaggeration to say that this was the re-birth of Albanian emigration as a means of social resilience, now in the post-communist transition crisis (*Göler* 2017). We see a similarity of motives, symbols and narrations over the centuries, with the exception being a period of almost five decades of socialism during which migration was highly controlled. The second factor is the still unresolved status of EU membership and the subsequent limited freedom of movement and access to labour markets. Both factors made Albanian migrants one of the most vulnerable groups on the European migratory landscape.

Through our short empirical sketches, we demonstrated the ability of migration systems to cope with internally and externally caused shocks, such as the economic downturn (LV) or the new freedom to travel (AL), to re-organise during these processes in a novel and sometimes creative manner and, if necessary, to define a new social system which offers more stability. From an individual perspective, migration is a robust resource and one of the means with which people cope with the problems they face. Our empirical findings show that this is true, especially under conditions of rapid change, when migration may serve as a part, albeit not the only part, of the solution in the short term. Then, migration is an appropriate answer to uncertainty and threats.

However, suppose we return to the general question of the degree to which migration creates development. In that case, the answer must be differentiated, especially if we think beyond macroeconomic factors such as wage gaps or remittances. From an economic point of view, migration definitely supports development in both countries of origin and destination. This positive assessment is put into perspective when we also consider the manifold social costs of migration, i.e. the intangible effects. The consequences of transnational lifestyles are complex and can be associated with high psychological stress and social costs resulting from family separation or lack of integration (see *Vathi/King* 2017), even following an eventual return. One of the tailored social resilience solutions, especially in the short term, is one-way or, if necessary, repeated back-and-forth migration with shorter periods of time spent outside the country of origin.

Both of the systems analysed are characterised by a widespread multi-local social network in which migration, individual migration experiences and migration culture play a leading role. In our study, migrants are interpreted as agents of societal transformation, adapting social practices from different economic, social and cultural contexts. Factors like social practices and social capital are becoming engrained in Albania and Latvia. All in all, this approach enables us to introduce the concept of social resilience into an agent-based interpretation of the consequences of migratory movements in both origin and host societies. Such resilience as a performed social practice is based on various factors: experience, knowledge and other individual skills, as well as the personal capacities of the network participants. The hypothesis of migration as a tool for social resilience can be assumed to be a rule under conditions of uncertainty at the macro level and individual threats at the micro level, as the cases from Albania and Latvia clearly showed.

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Prof. Dr. Daniel Göler (✉). University of Bamberg. Bamberg, Germany.  
E-mail: [daniel.goeler@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:daniel.goeler@uni-bamberg.de). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0377-0724>  
URL: <https://www.uni-bamberg.de/migtrans/prof-dr-daniel-goeler/>

Prof. Dr. Zaiga Krišjāne (✉). University of Latvia. Riga, Latvia.  
E-mail: [zaiga.krisjane@lu.lv](mailto:zaiga.krisjane@lu.lv). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3422-1958>  
URL: <https://www.geo.lu.lv/par-mums/geografijas-nodala/cilveka-geografijas-katedra/zaiga-krisjane/>

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