

Caroline Hornstein Tomić – Maja Kurilić – Dora Bagić

CROATIA'S (HIDDEN) POTENTIAL



Highly skilled, young remigrants
as agents of change

ELABORATI

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INSTITUT DRUŠTVENIH
ZNANOSTI IVO PILAR



KONRAD ADENAUER
STIFTUNG



znanje na djelu
wissen am werk

Caroline Hornstein Tomić
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Zagreb, 2023

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PREFACE TO THE PILOT STUDY „CROATIA’S (HIDDEN) POTENTIAL – HIGHLY SKILLED, YOUNG REMIGRANTS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE”

Dear readers,

Migration from Central and Southeast Europe is, from the perspective of Western and Northern European states (especially EU members) a one-way street: Workforce from those regions is constantly migrating into the Western and Northern part of the EU, where there is a dire need for people working in a lot of sectors, such as medical care and care for the elderly, construction, service industries and hospitality to name but a few. It is often assumed that people leave their countries of origin in search of better opportunities, meaning higher wages and better living conditions.

There is some truth to that assumption: the balance of all the countries concerned is overall negative. However, especially in the case of Croatia, the reality is far more complex. I would like to highlight some of the factors, often not taken into account:

- Although, in comparison to previous waves of migration from former Yugoslavia and later on Croatia to Western Europe, the number of people willing to return after their studies or a period of working abroad, is smaller than it used to be, there is still a considerable amount of people willing to return or to go back and forth between the country they migrated to and Croatia. So **remigration and circular migration** are considerable factors with regards to a consistent view on migration as a whole.
- There is an interest from people originating from Croatian roots to “return” to Croatia and live and work there. This mainly concerns **second and third generation Croatians living abroad on all continents**. There seems to be a sentiment, although these people were not born in Croatia and sometimes do not speak the language, a sense of belonging, which may be reinforced by the fact that relatives, although at times distant ones, are still living in the country.

- Croatia has, over past few years, seen a change in the migration scenario. Because of the shrinking population, caused by emigration and ever lower birth rates, it became more and more necessary to attract workers from outside the country and the region, mainly from Asia, to fill the gaps in industries such as construction and hospitality. Thus, Croatia has turned from a country **of mere emigration to a country of emigration and immigration**, a fact that will bear consequences to the social fabric of the society, the social and educational systems, which have not been understood yet completely by a lot of people, and to which the country must prepare itself for.

Although the amount of people emigrating still outnumbers those, who are returning, remigration and circular migration have become an important factor to the situation in Croatia. The pilot study about returnees from the generations Y and Z explores the reasons, why people would like to return and what conditions they find themselves in, when coming back; what their experiences are after arriving, what can be done to create a conducive environment for return and what people returning can bring to the table for the further development of Croatia and its society.

For us as Konrad-Adenauer- Foundation, the interest in this study is twofold: to enhance all kinds of activities, in this case scientific research, which helps to move the Croatian society forward, is part of our understanding of support to our host country. From a German perspective, especially since Germany has developed into the country with most Croats living abroad (more than 500.000 in the first, and including the second and third generations, an estimated million), the question of migration also has profoundly influenced the situation of the German society and still is doing so. To better understand the dynamics in that regard, is very important.

What makes the study on hand special, is that it puts a special focus on those, who are returning and to give them a voice, which hopefully benefits them and also us. We would therefore like to thank our partners, the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar and Znanje na djelu for joining us in the effort. A special thanks goes to Dr. Caroline Hornstein Tomić from the Ivo Pilar Institute, who led and conducted the whole effort as well as to Dora Bagić, and Maja Kurilić from Znanje na djelu, for teaming up with Caroline to produce an, in our view, excellent and very important contribution to the research of migration in Croatia.

Kind regards,

Holger Haibach
Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation
Country Director for Croatia and Slovenia

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1. RESEARCH DESIGN

1.1. Focus and topics

This pilot study addresses the transnational mobility and migration of Croatian millennials – young people born between 1981 and 1996 who today are between 27 and 42 years of age, the youngest overlapping with the next generation, generation Z (born from 1997 onwards).¹ It inquires specifically into the return paths of Croatian millennials who have intensively engaged in transnational mobility, especially since Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013. Croatian academic and public discourses on the mobility and migration of well-educated – or highly skilled – young Croatian citizens have often focused on their reasons for leaving, but much less on their reasons for coming back.

The main interest of this study is to better understand what motivates highly skilled young Croatian citizens who have gone abroad for further education, work experience, and their professional careers to return to Croatia. We also wanted to find out what drives young Croats who have grown up and been educated abroad, and perhaps hold another citizenship alongside or instead of the Croatian one, to remigrate to their (family's) country of origin. While exploring the motives, experiences, thoughts, and ideas expressed by these young people about 'return' – both those who grew up and attended school in Croatia, and those who grew up in another country – we reframed our focus to acknowledge the variety and heterogeneity of the mobility and (re)migration experiences of Croatia's millennial generation, which we suggest represents a genuinely transnational community.

Why do young, highly skilled Croatian millennials who participate in transnational migration and mobility or grew up outside of Croatia choose to leave their lives and future perspectives in another country behind? How do they pursue

¹ Michael Dimock. (2019). *Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/> [accessed 25 March 2022].

and push ahead with their professional careers in Croatia? What do they bring back with them? How do they think about the benefits of mobility for advancing development and change, not only on a personal and professional, but on a societal level? These are the questions that guide our exploration of 'Croatia's (hidden) potential' against the background of the major social challenges that Croatia faces today, such as an ageing society and shrinking population, high emigration, a lack of labour force in key economic sectors, and an uninterrupted brain drain.

1.1.1. The 'millennials' or 'transition generation'

The highly skilled young people dealt with here, like their peers in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe (CESEE), have experienced the year 1989 as a turning point. The end of the Cold War was a formative historical event in their lives and with the political, economic, social, and cultural transformations it triggered, it marked their childhood and youth. The transition from socialism to democracy and a market economy affected the families and communities this generation was part of. Peaceful revolutions and (re)integration took place in some countries, disintegration and violent conflict in others. The post-socialist transition as a historical period and the disruptions it caused played a crucial role in forming today's millennials in CESEE into a 'transition generation' with a specific 'generational consciousness'. We would argue that this 'transition generation' also includes those who grew up and were schooled outside of Croatia, in the diaspora.

The concept of 'generational context' developed by the sociologist Karl Mannheim almost a century ago links important historical events, periods, and circumstances with specific age cohorts that have collectively experienced them. Mannheim's concept supports to grasp the values, attitudes and cultural practices generated within specific generations and their shared frames of references (Mannheim, 1927/1928, 1952). For example, during the period leading up to the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2019, a discourse about the *Dritte Generation Ost* (third generation east) took shape in the new *Bundesländer* in the eastern part of Germany which had belonged to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The discourse leaders claimed a generational experience, specific 'transformation competencies', and a consciousness profoundly distinct from that of their West German contemporaries.² The *Dritte Generation Ost* embraced the new possibilities of inner-German, east-west, and also transnational mobility and migration after the fall of the Wall.

In Southeast Europe, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the rise of nationalist independence movements, nation-state building processes, violent conflicts and war – in Croatia the Homeland War – have been key events that overshadowed the

² More information in German, available at: <https://netzwerk.dritte-generation-ost.de/>

childhood and youth of the millennial generation in the region – and in various ways, also in the diaspora. The transition from socialism to democracy and a market economy, institution-building and transformation, integration into NATO and preparation for accession to the European Union (still pending for the Western Balkan countries) represent further frames of reference, or wider generational context as a shared experience for millennials and their families for more than three decades.

Other formative events for the millennial generation in CESEE, throughout Europe and beyond, include the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the economic recession following the financial crisis of 2008, Brexit, the migration crises, and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of climate change, and the presence of war. Securing peace, safeguarding democracy, and managing climate change are existential for the future of this generation.

Constant connectivity resulting from the emergence of digital technologies, new forms of media consumption, online entertainment, and exposure to echo-chambers and fake news has been an ongoing condition that has shaped the coming of age of the millennial generation. Finally, this generation is characterized by its intense participation in transnational mobility, a cultural practice that has gone hand in hand with the advancement of communication technology (Internet, social media, no-cost online calls, etc.), the availability of affordable transportation (cheap flights, bus lines, car-sharing, etc.), and above all with an accelerated internationalization of the education and career markets. In most of the new European Union member states in CESEE,³ accession to the Union and their embrace of the EU's four freedoms, along with economic and labour market transformations, have fuelled transnational mobility, as is particularly evident among millennials.

1.1.2. Exploring remigration

When we started our research in early 2020, COVID-19 had just appeared on the horizon. The fact that it would become another formative event, not only for millennials but for all of us, would only slowly become apparent. We had begun to conduct pilot interviews with recent young returnees – remigrants or return migrants⁴ – to Croatia from other European states. Then, COVID-19 was categorized as a pandemic and along with the first cases to appear in Europe, debates about containment measures intensified. We continued interviewing, now mostly online, and discovered that a few of our interview partners had not only experienced inner-European mobility but transatlantic as well, through

³ The eastern enlargement process took place in three rounds: in 2004 the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined; in 2007 Romania and Bulgaria, and lastly Croatia joined the EU in 2013.

⁴ For an explanation of terminology, see section 1.2.

temporary work, volunteering, or participation in educational programmes. As the pandemic unfolded and lockdown regimes were introduced all over the world, we increasingly came across and interviewed remigrants who were born or had lived outside the country for most of their lives: the offspring of former emigrants and labour migrants, members of the European or overseas diaspora – most, though not all, with Croatian citizenship – and some with non-Croatian partners or family accompanying them to Croatia. We repeatedly heard that remigration, or ‘homeland return’, whether temporary or long-term, had been a dream cherished for long, sometimes over generations. For some, the lockdown measures in their place of residence had finally pushed them to make the move real in 2020, while others had arrived in earlier years. As unforeseeably and swiftly as mobility constraints were introduced – first internationally, then soon within countries and between regions – ‘coming home’, at least temporarily, emerged as a fast, reactive adaption strategy to pandemic containment measures and lockdowns.⁵ Besides first-hand empirical and anecdotal evidence, social media discourse and media coverage in leading Croatian outlets indicated the growth of return migration related to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The context of the pandemic meant that we readjusted our original focus on internationally mobile millennials who had grown up in Croatia to take a more comprehensive approach and to include young adults who had grown up outside of Croatia.⁶

Finally, media coverage of an influx of ‘digital nomads’ to the coastal areas and the capital Zagreb in 2020 also motivated us to extend our inquiry for reasons of comparison. Digital nomads are usually defined as third-country nationals with tourist or temporary resident status, working remotely, and engaged in ‘serious leisure’ (Yuen Thompson, 2018). By randomly following social media communication (Facebook groups, LinkedIn) we discovered that many ‘nomads’ were of Croatian origin, indicating an intersection or a commonality with the Croatian remigrants likewise navigating various lockdown regimes. Apparently, the pandemic had put Croatia with its comparatively liberal entrance regime on the map as a destination and potential hot spot for this specific consumer group. As the global digital nomad community shifted its attention to Croatia, this even prompted a policy response, and changes to the existing legal framework were swiftly introduced in early 2021 to allow for temporary residence, tailored to accommodate the needs of digital nomads.⁷

⁵ Similar COVID-19 related return mobility and remigration has been observed in other countries of the region.

⁶ Returnees do not necessarily register with the Croatian authorities or deregister in their previous country of residence. Double residence is likewise common, as well as temporary return. Where registration is completed, this information enters Croatia’s general immigration statistics which also list countries of origin.

⁷ The relevant visa became known as the ‘digital nomad visa’ – see section 2.2.3.

Why do we consider it relevant to explore remigration and its (hidden) potential? Most countries of CESEE have an ageing population and are therefore particularly sensitive to the consequences of migration. While people of working age have turned their backs on their countries in disproportionate numbers, social welfare systems have come under strain (pension funds, health care, public services, etc.). This has been pointed out by, among others, international organizations like the International Monetary Fund.⁸ Jointly with Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Latvia, Croatia is one of the European Union member states with the fastest shrinking populations in global comparison, largely due to a combination of low fertility and high emigration. Demographers have warned for a long time that the ongoing population decrease and the ageing of Croatian society – in 2022 the median age was 44.3 years⁹ – is being further accelerated by emigration, particularly as the country's youth leave for further education or to work abroad, and even more so when young families pack their bags. And, if emigrants leave the country with significant educational and skill levels and if they are not attracted back, investment in education and innovative potential is lost.

We are convinced that an international environment in which competition for talent is global requires policy measures that will facilitate the return of highly skilled and educated citizens, support transnational mobility and brain circulation, and ease temporary residence for both nationals and their non-national peers. What efforts has Croatia made to compete for and leverage its hidden potential? What kind of support is extended to people who return? Which obstacles prevent or hamper (re)integration?¹⁰ We hope that our findings may inform further policy measures by considering the perspectives of young Croatians involved in transnational migration, mobility, and return.

1.1.3. Research communication and outreach

Despite its focus on return / remigration, this pilot study acknowledges the fact that emigration trends are continuing and that returnees are still significantly outnumbered by people who have chosen to leave. We are aware of the sound reasons for seeking employment, career advancement, further education, and well-being abroad. We understand the importance of and value international and inner-European mobility as a core principle at the heart of the European project and have benefited from international mobility ourselves. Indeed,

⁸ Atoyan, R. et al. (2016). *Emigration and Its Economic Impact on Eastern Europe*, IMF Staff Discussion Note 16/07. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2016/sdn1607.pdf> [accessed 14 June 2022].

⁹ Croatian Bureau of Statistics. (2023a). *Average age of population and life expectancy mid-year estimate*. Available at: <https://podaci.dzs.hr/media/vblae2vm/procjene-stanovnistva.xlsx> [accessed 22 July 2023].

¹⁰ The terms integration and reintegration are used interchangeably throughout the study, since we refer to people who grew up outside of Croatia and rather need to integrate, while reintegration refers to people who grew up in Croatia. The term (re)integration is used to encompass both.

because of the many good reasons for leaving home, we were curious to explore the good reasons behind return.

An informed understanding of what it takes, and needs, to remigrate and (re) integrate, may help to develop strategies to enhance return migration and to elaborate measures to facilitate and assist the process. And, by hearing from internationally mobile young professionals about how they have benefitted from transnational migration and mobility and why returning to Croatia mattered to them, we seek to find out more about their visions and plans for advancing development, and the action they have already taken to leverage their potential as agents of change.

This study targets not only an expert audience in academia, international organizations, public administration, policymaking, and the media, but addresses a wider public concerned with these issues and interested in their debate.

1.2. Methodology

Our research was motivated by the opportunity to learn from the experiences of young, highly skilled Croatian citizens who have been or are involved in transnational migration and mobility. It is therefore based primarily on qualitative interviews: we conducted thirty-four semi-structured interviews in total, between January 2020 and June 2021. Twenty-two were with young, highly skilled remigrants, sixteen of whom had grown up in Croatia, and six in another country. In addition, six interviews were conducted with self-declared digital nomads – third-country nationals – as a comparative group. Besides, we conducted six expert interviews: two with government agency representatives, two with members of the business sector, one with a representative of the public broadcaster, and one with a member of a civil society organization (CSO) / non-governmental organization (NGO) dealing with the Croatian diaspora and returnee community. In addition, a focus group discussion was organized in January 2021 with six young professionals who had been out of Croatia on and off for several years, mostly to move their careers forwards or to pursue advanced university degrees. All interviewees and focus group participants gave their written consent to the recording of the interviews, the publication of interview excerpts and references to their data prior to the interviews.¹¹ The recorded interviews were transcribed and anonymized.¹²

Most of the interviews took place online, via Zoom, Teams, or Skype. The interviews were conducted mainly in English or Croatian, and several in German. The interview partners were approached via direct contacts, recommenda-

¹¹ All data is stored in a cloud and accessible only to the research team.

¹² We refer to real names only in the case of those interview partners who agreed to be portrayed in Chapter 4 of this study. Where we quote from those interviews in other sections, anonymized names are used.

tions, and social media communication (Facebook groups). Attention was paid to gender balance, regional diversity, and age range. The dialogue followed a rough outline, exploring commonalities and differences in experiences of return and (re)integration, and especially inquired into motivations and intentions behind either permanent or temporary return. Given the fact that our interview partners considered moving to Croatia as ‘return’,¹³ we chose to flexibly apply the terms ‘return migrant’, ‘remigrant’, and ‘returnee’, and to use them synonymously in this text. Indeed, most of our interview partners had experienced repeated migration, temporary return, return visits to their home and host countries, and further migration to third countries, while some moved regularly back and forth – or circulated – between countries, usually keeping double residence. The usage of terms such as ‘home’ and ‘host’ country appeared not to be self-explanatory for most remigrants from the diaspora who had grown up and were schooled outside Croatia. Nevertheless, they mostly referred to Croatia as either the ‘homeland’ or ‘country of origin’.

The interviews followed an outline based on the following key questions (see the detailed outline in Appendix C):

- What were the **main motivations for return**, whether temporary or permanent? What was decisive for permanent resettlement in Croatia?
- How was **(re)integration experienced** – in professional, administrative, and social terms and contexts?
- How did remigrants intend to **contribute to development** and social change and what professional and social activities did they perform to that effect?

Regarding returnees who took only temporary residence in Croatia and worked or studied remotely (just like their non-Croatian digital nomad peers), we investigated to what extent they had become embedded in and connected to local communities. We also asked about their experiences with administrative regulations and institutions, and with legal provisions (i.e. tax regulations, access to health care, education, temporary residence regulations, etc.) and whether these adequately catered to the needs and interests of temporary residents in Croatia. We addressed their future plans, the idea of establishing permanent residence in Croatia, and what that might mean for their families and careers. We asked whether and how they planned to invest their knowledge, skills, experiences, and resources in Croatia. Finally, we tried to identify the crucial factors in their decisions to stay or move on.

In the six expert interviews, we mainly inquired into initiatives and policies aimed at encouraging transnational mobility, reaching out to the diaspora, and incentivizing and supporting the return and (re)integration of remigrants.

¹³ Excluding expert interviewees and digital nomads.

The following table gives an overview of the young, highly skilled remigrants interviewed for this study. It integrates young adults who grew up in Croatia (sixteen in total) and migrated to other countries, and young Croats who grew up abroad and migrated to Croatia (six).¹⁴

Table 1 – Overview of the young, highly skilled remigrants interviewed

Name (anonymized)	Age	Educational level	Country where the interviewee grew up	Country/ies of migration	Total years spent abroad / in migration	Multiple migration and return experiences
Antonio	late twenties	tertiary	Croatia	China, Belgium	one	yes
Asja	early thirties	tertiary	Croatia	Qatar	five	no
Cvita	mid-thirties	tertiary	Canada	Croatia	eight	yes
Danica	early thirties	tertiary	Croatia	The Netherlands	three	no
Domagoj	early thirties	tertiary	Croatia	Germany, Italy	five	yes
Duje	late twenties	tertiary	Croatia	France, Slovenia, Spain	four	yes
Ivana	early thirties	tertiary	Croatia	Cambodia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Namibia, Sweden, UK, USA	twelve	yes
Josipa	mid-thirties	tertiary	Germany	Croatia	four	no
Karlo	early thirties	tertiary	Croatia	United Kingdom, USA	four	yes
Katarina	late twenties	tertiary	Croatia	The Netherlands	three	no
Klara	mid-thirties	tertiary	Australia	Croatia	five	yes
Lea	early twenties	tertiary	USA	Croatia, Scotland (UK)	six	yes
Lidija	mid-twenties	tertiary	Croatia	United Kingdom	four	no
Lucija	late twenties	tertiary	Sweden	Croatia	three	yes
Marta	early twenties	tertiary	Croatia	United Kingdom	five	no
Mia	early thirties	tertiary	Croatia	Japan, the Netherlands	three	yes
Mihael	mid-thirties	tertiary	Austria	Croatia	three	yes
Nika	early thirties	tertiary	Croatia	United Kingdom	sixteen	yes
Sara	early thirties	tertiary	Croatia	Buthan, Hungary, Sri Lanka, Sweden	four	yes
Tamara	late twenties	tertiary	Croatia	Austria, United Kingdom, USA	four	yes
Tomislav	early twenties	tertiary	Croatia	Austria	five	no
Zvonimir	late twenties	tertiary	Croatia	Germany, Luxembourg, Scotland, England (UK)	three	yes

In addition, we monitored migration statistics to gain insight into migration patterns over the years in Croatia. Unless indicated otherwise, official migra-

¹⁴ The table does not include the non-Croatian digital nomads.

tion data (immigration, emigration, net migration) include Croatian citizens and foreigners with temporary or permanent residence in the Republic of Croatia. We also monitored media discourse throughout our research: we followed daily and weekly reports in mainstream media (print and electronic media outlets and portals) and posts on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn groups), and regularly visited selected websites (see section 2.5.).

1.3. Academic discourse

The following chapter touches upon some of the central topics and arguments brought forward in academic discourse that have inspired our exploration and analysis.

1.3.1. Effects of European Union labour and career mobility on sending countries

Migration researchers have identified free access to employment and further education as one of the key drivers or *pull* factors of inner-EU migration and mobility from east to west following eastern enlargement.¹⁵ However, wage and income disparities between eastern and western European states, imbalances in the performance of welfare and public services, varying standards in education and training systems, among other factors, already encouraged migration from eastern to western European countries in the early years of transition prior to EU accession. In most of the post-socialist states to join the bloc though, east-west migration gained momentum once more with the implementation of free labour mobility following membership. Academic discourse has drawn attention to the fact that east-west labour and career migration has limited the labour supply on domestic labour markets in the sending societies, in the (high-)skilled and low-skilled sectors, thus aggravating the economic development of these countries (Black, Okolski, Engbersen and Pantiru, 2010; Okolski, 2012; Nadler, Kovacs, Glorius and Lang, 2016; Oso et al., 2022: 118). Moreover, the westward brain drain from CESEE, a characteristic feature of post-socialist transition, has reduced innovative potential and additionally spurred demographic decline throughout the region.

Although (high-)skilled migration has traditionally been characterized by substantial circularity in the EU15,¹⁶ the thirteen new members states that joined

¹⁵ The literature review in this chapter corresponds partly with the respective review sections, in: Parutis, V. et al., 2023. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review. In: V. Čiubrinskas, I. Gečienė-Janulionė, C. Hornstein Tomić and V. Parutis (Eds.), *Returning – Remitting – Receiving: Social remittances of transnational (re) migrants to Croatia, Lithuania, and Poland*. Zurich: LIT VERLAG. 57-64.

¹⁶ EU15: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and until Brexit the United Kingdom.

the EU from 2004¹⁷ have struggled to stimulate the return of (high-)skilled migrants. It has been pointed out in a study by the World Bank Group that “around 30 percent of the migrants in the EU return to their home countries within a decade. This share increases to more than 40 percent among highly skilled migrants from the EU15, while return rates among highly skilled migrants from the NMS13 are significantly lower” (Bossavie et al., 2021: 59).¹⁸ To compensate workforce loss and balance the emigration of a young and highly skilled segment of the population, many countries of the region have generated policy responses to incentivize the return migration specifically of highly skilled migrants and to support circular migration. In addition, measures have been put in place to facilitate the employment of foreign workers and attract migrants of various skill levels, often third-country nationals, resulting in the ‘migration transition’ of those countries from emigration to immigration (Okolski, 2012: 23). The structural misbalance displayed in prosperity disparities between the older, western EU member states and its new members (and non-members) in the east has been declared by Thomas Faist a ‘transnationalized social question’ (Faist, 2021) and poses a paradigmatic policy challenge not only for countries in the region, and thus for Croatia, but for the European Union as a whole.

1.3.2. Transnational mobility, temporary migration, multiple belonging

Transnational, temporary, and repeated mobility for employment is a common migratory practice pursued by many new European Union citizens from the CESEE states who tend to hold residence both in their countries of origin and destination at the same time (Nadler et al., 2016) and frequently neglect to de-register in either country. Migratory practices and dynamics between new and old EU member states have also been characterized by Godfried Engbersen as *liquid*, which means fluid, flexible, often circular, and unpredictable, and integration into host societies and identification with the host culture as rather low (Engbersen, 2018: 66–67). Post EU-accession migration has been observed as a temporary practice for example for the Polish context by Izabela Grabowska and Godfried Engbersen (2016) and also by Mariusz Dzieglewski (2020), as is reflect-

¹⁷ The new EU member states since 2004: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

¹⁸ In Croatia, there is no requirement to provide details about professional background when completing residence registration. Consequently, the availability of information on the skill levels of returnees is limited. The Croatian Ministry of Internal Affairs in email correspondence draws attention to the fact that “... information on occupation is optional information that is entered in the Collection of information on residence and temporary residence of citizens (this Ministry is not responsible for keeping records on a person’s occupation), and data processing cannot be carried out on the basis of a person’s occupation” (translated from the Croatian original by the authors). The original statement in Croatian is as follows: “Napominjemo da je podatak o zanimanju neobvezan podatak koji se upisuje u Zbirci podatak o prebivalištu i boravištu građana (ovo Ministarstvo nije nadležno za vođenje evidencije o zanimanju osobe) te se obrada podataka niti ne može izvršiti prema zanimanju osobe.”

ed in the labour and career migration of Croatian citizens (compare Župarić-Ilić, 2016; Hornstein Tomić, Bagić and Kurilić, 2021), though demographers and media reports suggest that today's emigrants tend to be moving for good (for more on this issue, see Chapter 2.).

Dichotomies of *here* and *there*, *home* and *host* tend to blur in practices of shifting back and forth between two or more countries. Individuals who move frequently have therefore been coined 'transmigrants': they maintain bonds across national borders, and by doing so create, act in, and develop identities in 'transnational social fields' or 'spaces' (Glick Schiller et al., 1995: 1; Faist, 2008). Over time, transmigrants might develop a sense of belonging to more than one place, or a 'double belonging' as Steven Vertovec has pointed out, potentially transforming them into 'transnational agents' (Vertovec, 2004: 975), or on the other hand they might develop "... feeling[s] of never belonging completely anywhere, with migrants interpreting their situation as living split lives", as highlighted by Anne White (2014: 81).

1.3.3. The migration and development nexus, social remittances, change agency

The nexus of migration and development has been a subject of debate in migration research for decades, shifting between 'pessimist' to 'optimist' approaches (de Haas, 2010). 'Pessimist' approaches to the topic stress that migration jeopardizes development as it drains a country of its most important resource, human capital, while 'optimist' approaches see migration as essentially contributing to homeland development through the transfer of financial remittances, the building of transnational connections and networks between home and host country and the diaspora, and the import of a variety of resources such as knowledge, skills, and values by returning migrants. Such resources have been termed 'social remittances' by Peggy Levitt: "the ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country" (Levitt, 1998: 927). Levitt's concept has been widely adopted by migration researchers and further elaborated and refined, lately by Janine Pinkow-Läpple and Judith Möllers (2022) who speak of 'intangible' remittances. Vitalie Varzari et al. have discussed highly skilled migration and the brain drain as representing both a threat and an opportunity for general development processes in Southeast Europe, arguing that the acquisition of new skills and higher earnings for emigrants on the one hand, and the reduction of unemployment in the home country along with an inflow of remittances on the other, could over time positively affect development (Varzari et al., 2013). Similarly, Hein de Haas earlier pointed out that "migration and remittances seem to be transformative rather than [a] disruptive force" (de Haas, 2007: 19). Understanding migration as "an integral part of wider social and development processes" (de Haas, 2010: 228), he

stressed though that “the sociocultural and economic impacts of migration and remittances are notoriously difficult to disentangle from more general processes of social change” (de Haas, 2007: 19). This was reiterated later by Peggy Levitt and Deepak Lamba-Nieves, who highlighted the contribution of social remittances to economic development and social, political, and cultural change in the countries of origin, underlining “the role that these resources play in promoting immigrant entrepreneurship, community and family formation, and political integration” (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011: 3). The norms, practices, identities, and social capital transferred by remigrants enable them to act as ‘bridge builders’ who translate global norms into local contexts (Levitt and Merry, 2009). This was confirmed by Vytis Čiubrinskas, for example, who has pointed out how ‘resources’ such as behavioural norms imported by remigrants have confronted paternalist, hierarchical, and bureaucratic conduct in post-communist countries (Čiubrinskas, 2018).

For social remittances to be absorbed in the home context – whether in the private, public, or work sphere – attention must be paid to the processes and dynamics of reintegration. According to Katie Kuschminder, the reintegration of remigrants is a multidimensional process, with legal, economic, social, cultural and psychological dimensions. Successful reintegration requires returnees to be reaccepted, which is essentially a two-way responsibility (Kuschminder, 2022: 201). What Kuschminder discusses is the ‘interpersonal dimension’ of the migration and development nexus after policies, which at best provide a framework for reintegration and the transfer of social remittances, have done their part. Like reintegration, the transfer and absorption of social remittances is a two-way process full of friction and controversy about the ‘right’ way of doing things and marked by competition over resources and resistance against change. Such processes unfold in so-called ‘contact zones’, conceptualized by Mary Louise Pratt as “... social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power ...” (Pratt, 1991: 34). For such processes to unfold, ‘change agency’ is required; the preparedness and capacity of “a person or thing that encourages people to change their behaviour or opinions”.¹⁹ The terms ‘change agency’, ‘change agents’ and ‘agents of change’ are commonly applied in business and organizational contexts. However, they have long been appropriated by the social sciences for non-business-related, wider social and political contexts to refer to social actors who influence and instigate change, transform ways of viewing, doing, and of managing processes either within or outside organizational contexts. To be effective, change agents need competences such as strategic communication, mediation skills, and readiness to compromise. Such competences are crucial for remigrants to succeed in transferring social remittances. Furthermore, allies

¹⁹ Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/change-agent> [accessed 12 October 2023].

must be found among peers, for example colleagues in workplaces to deal and cope with system inertia, hierarchies, and in-groups and their entitlements. And finally, for development to take place, trust must be placed in the idea that it is beneficial for all (Hornstein Tomić, 2023: 193–198).

The change agency of remigrants in shaping transformation has been addressed in case studies covering several countries in former socialist Eastern Europe and presented in a volume edited by Caroline Hornstein Tomić, Robert Pichler, and Sarah Scholl-Schneider (2018). For Poland and the wider CEE context, Anne White and Izabela Grabowska have discussed the potential of return migrants to act as agents of change in the transition environments of their home countries through the non-material transfer of knowledge, experience, skills, and international contacts (White and Grabowska, 2019). Laima Nevinskaite (2016) has worked through similar topics for the context of Lithuania, while the local reactions, resistance, and closure towards change processes triggered by return migrants have been described with a focus on Poland by Mariusz Dziegowski (2016, 2020) and Mihal Garapich (2016).

1.3.4. Remigration and development in Croatian academic discourse

Remigration to Croatia is generally still under-researched in comparison to emigration. While this is the case in other CESEE countries, too, the Polish example indicates that with the increased return of migrants who departed following EU accession, attention is shifting from emigration to return migration (Dziegowski, 2020: 25–33). A number of cultural anthropologists and sociologists in Croatia have addressed return migration more prominently over the past decade, for example Marieta Rajković Iveta who has traced transnational and transcontinental migratory pathways (Rajković Iveta, 2011), and Jasna Čapo and others who have investigated transnational and return practices specifically in connection with Croatian labour migration to Germany, the most prominent migration destination for Croatian citizens (Čapo Žmegač, 2010; Čapo, 2012, 2019; Novinščak, 2011, 2012; Hornstein Tomić and Ivanda Jurčević, 2012). The nexus of migration and development was repeatedly touched on in academic and expert discourse already before Croatia joined the European Union, for example in a critical assessment by Silva Mežnarić and Paul Stubbs of the social impact of emigration in rural communities (Mežnarić and Stubbs, 2012), or in cross-sector debates on migration trends, labour market needs and immigration policies organized by the Croatian Chamber of Commerce in 2008 (Barbić, 2008, 2014) and again in 2014, though remigration was touched upon only marginally (Puljiz, Tica, and Vidović, 2014). From a historical and sociological perspective, the nexus was addressed in connection with stages of modernization throughout the twentieth century by Ivan Rogić and Ivan Čizmić (Rogić and Čizmić, 2011). Krešimir Peračković identified an entrepreneurial mindset

amongst Croatian return migrants, who due to their migration experience and exposure to western democratic and liberal values appeared more suited to living in a market economy, thus suggesting that the knowledge, values and attitudes encountered abroad equipped remigrants to act as agents of change (Peraćković, 2006).

Following Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, researchers from various disciplines took up and critically discussed regional and transnational migration trends in the light of demographic developments and population decline. If return was brought up at all, it was mostly considered of negligible relevance (Župarić-Iljić, 2016; Horvatin and Rajković Iveta, 2017; Jurić, 2018, 2020; Draženo-
vić, Kunovac and Pripužić, 2018; Potočnik and Adamović, 2018; Rajković Iveta, Kelemen and Župarić-Iljić, 2019; Žanić et al., 2021). However, regional immigration, especially from neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, was discussed as a form of co-ethnic return migration. Such studies addressed the nexus of return migration and political and economic development with respect to state-building in the early years of transition, and later in connection with returnee entrepreneurship and financial remittances. But they questioned any remarkable impact of remigration on development (Knezović and Grošinić, 2017: 17, 34).

The first comprehensive, ethnographic volume of accounts of return experiences, based on interviews with returnees from several countries with large Croatian diasporas, was published in 2014 (Čapo et al., 2014). While stressing the heterogeneity of these experiences, the volume highlighted those shared for example by returning members of the second generation – the offspring of former emigrants and labour migrants, who had been raised and educated in western Europe and overseas. Despite feelings of multiple belonging, many thought of their return to the country of origin of their parents or ancestors as a 'homecoming'. Repeatedly, they expressed a sense of acting as agents of political, economic, and socio-cultural change in Croatia's ongoing post-socialist transformation (see the contribution by Hornstein Tomić in the mentioned volume). In recent years, academic discourse has more frequently addressed return migration, cultural transfer, change agency, motivations to contribute to transformation, and the actual impact of returnees (Hornstein Tomić, 2014, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Oroz and Urem, 2015; Hornstein Tomić and Scholl-Schneider, 2016; Čapo, 2020; Hornstein Tomić, Bagić and Kurilić, 2021; Mesarić Žabčić and Perić Kaselj, 2018; Mesarić Žabčić, 2021).

2. LOCAL CONTEXT

2.1. Migration dynamics

Inter-regional, rural-urban, and transnational migration has been an integral part of modernization and a key livelihood strategy familiar to Croatian families over generations. Consequently, according to the Central State Office for Croats Abroad, the Croatian diaspora of 3.2 million almost equals the home population,²⁰ which in the most recent census (2021) stood at roughly 3.9 million (see below, 2021 census data).

2.1.1. Croatia's 'tradition' of emigration

The beginning of significant migratory movements dates back to the late nineteenth century. At that time, emigrants mostly headed for destinations overseas. In the interwar period, migration increasingly took place within Europe. During and in the years following World War II, Croats predominantly migrated to Latin America, mostly for political reasons, although other emigration destinations included the United States, Europe, and countries in the Middle East. In the 1950s, the Yugoslav regime began to tolerate labour migration. This developed into an official government policy set down in bilateral agreements with selected western European states during the 1960s, for example with the Federal Republic of Germany in 1968. *Gastarbeiter* migration continued throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s. Within two decades, it had transformed into a migratory practice affecting whole families, villages, and regions, with different generations reunifying in the host countries. The large diaspora communities that emerged continue to attract newcomers to this day. Contrary to the expectations of policymakers and of many migrants themselves, the *privremeni boravak* (temporary stay) abroad was often

²⁰ Central State Office for Croats Abroad (2022). *Welcome to the website of Central State Office for Croats Abroad*. Available at: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/welcome-to-the-web-site-of-central-state-office-for-croats-abroad/777> [accessed 18 September 2022].

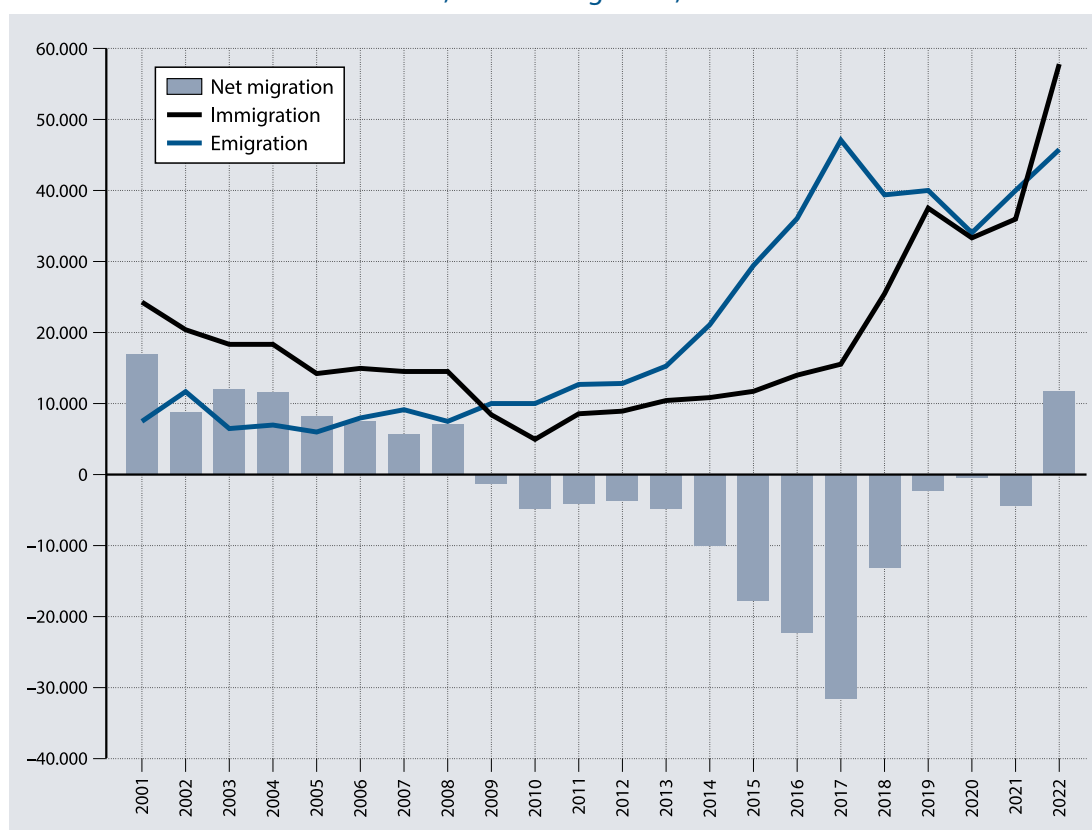
extended and eventually turned into permanent settlement abroad. Croatian labour migration to Germany represents a prime example (Brunnbauer, 2009; Čapo-Žmegač, 2003, 2005; Čapo, 2012, 2019; Hornstein Tomić and Jurčević, 2012; Novinščak, 2012). In the early years of post-socialist transition, marked by the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation and Croatia's struggle for independence, emigration continued, driven by overlapping security, political, and economic factors, as well as by career considerations. Throughout all these migration phases, or what are often referred to as 'waves', return and remigration also took place, though they were usually less taken note of than emigration (Čizmić and Živić, 2005: 61; Čapo-Žmegač, 2010). To understand today's emigration dynamics adequately, it is important to take these historical precursors into account, as even most recent migration dynamics link to Croatia's 'tradition' of emigration.

2.1.2. Migration trends before and after EU accession

While the disruptive 1990s were marked by the Homeland War, state- and nation-building, and related migratory dynamics, the first years of the new millennium saw a degree of political stabilization and economic growth. During this period, emigration rates dropped; combined with immigration (including regional return and immigration and movements from further afield), this resulted in positive net migration, as shown in Figure 1. However, in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, net migration dipped from 2009 onwards as immigration declined and emigration rose. Another significant drop in net migration due to accelerated emigration was registered after Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013. It should be noted that Croatia joined the EU during the lengthy recession period between 2009 and 2015, which was accompanied by high levels of unemployment. In 2017, despite a brief economic upswing, net migration peaked at nearly -32,000, with 47,000 recorded emigrants (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Until 2022, an average of 34,998 people emigrated annually following EU accession. Some researchers have pointed out that official statistics underestimate emigration numbers. For example, Ivana Draženović, Marina Kunovac and Dominik Pripužić (2018) established that between 2013 and 2016, 230,000 people left Croatia for core EU countries, a figure that is 2.6 times higher than that conveyed in official statistics.

Emigration decisions are generally complex and driven by a variety of factors. While the (post-)conflict and post-socialist political and economic transition environment of the 1990s fuelled emigration, continuing economic difficulties in the new millennium along with comparatively low wages, unsatisfactory living standards, and general dissatisfaction with governance and public services pushed Croatia up among those states with the highest emigration rates (see Knezović and Grošinić, 2017: 10).

Figure 1 – Immigrants to and emigrants from Croatia; persons, annual flows, and net migration, 2001–2022.



Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023.

Comparing statistics between 2019 and 2022, emigration evidently fell in 2020. In 2019, Croatia still showed negative net migration of -2,422. In 2020 however, this number changed significantly to negative net migration of -632, only to drop again to -4,512 in 2021. In 2022, net migration was positive, at 11,685. This figure clearly reflects increased immigration to Croatia from outside the EU due to labour market needs (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Looking at the statistics for 2020, various factors appear to have contributed to relatively low net migration. Most prominently, the COVID-19 pandemic, from its early phase in spring 2020, spurred ‘homeland return’ as one of those factors. As a swift escape strategy from lockdown regimes, this worldwide trend was also reflected in Croatia. Croats (mostly with, but also without, Croatian citizenship), young Croatian millennials studying or working abroad, members of the first or second migrant generation and the offspring of former emigrants in the diaspora (with Croatian or non-Croatian partners or family), decided to shift their domicile – however temporarily – from different parts of the world to Croatia. Many of them wanted to escape the pandemic in their respective countries of residence, and – crucially for young migrants in education or at an early career stage – to save living costs, often by working remotely from their families’ home. Similar trends towards ‘homeland return’ were reported from other

CESEE countries, especially Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, and Lithuania, which in 2020 likewise registered a considerable influx of nationals returning from abroad. Lithuania, for example, saw more citizens arrive than leave for the first time in years. The Economist journal commented: "... politicians in eastern Europe had long complained of a 'brain drain' as their brightest left in search of higher wages in the west. Now the pandemic, a shifting economy and changing work patterns are bringing many of them back".²¹

The fact that Croatia in 2020 popped up on the global map as a destination for digital nomads – so-called lifestyle workers who travel the world while working remotely – contributed additionally to the migratory dynamics at work in Croatia that year. The country saw an influx of 33,414 immigrants, composed of third-country nationals, returnees, digital nomads, and others – all of whom are included in the annual immigration statistics based on the issue of residence permits.²² In 2021, the influx of immigrants was again slightly higher than in previous years, totalling 35,912. This was also the result of changes to legal provisions, which further eased immigration for work. In addition, by June 2021, 46 visas granting temporary residence for digital nomads had been issued.²³ Two years later, at the end of June 2023, 778 such visas had been issued to digital nomads altogether, according to data from the Ministry of Interior. Publicly accessible data on visa applications, which became available at the start of 2022, shows that from then on slightly over 2,000 foreign citizens applied for this type of visa from around the world, with many applicants from Russia and Ukraine.²⁴

Statistics registered more emigrants than immigrants up until 2022, when the trend shifted. Since then, Croatia has registered higher immigration than emigration numbers. It is important to note that the total number of immigrants from abroad includes displaced persons from Ukraine who were granted temporary protection in Croatia.

²¹ The Economist. (2021). *How the pandemic reversed old migration patterns in Europe*. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/01/28/how-the-pandemic-reversed-old-migration-patterns-in-europe> [accessed 5 May 2022]. Other observers of the trend towards remote work driven by the COVID-19 pandemic pointed out that highly skilled migrants tended to be more often employed in jobs that can be performed from home or that require little face-to-face interaction compared to people with lower levels of education (Bossavie et al., 2021: 62).

²² Croatia's immigration statistics include persons with Croatian citizenship and those without it registering for temporary residence (*privremeni boravak*) i.e. for any stay over three months and up to one year, or permanent residence (*stalni boravak*) in a given year. The Croatian Bureau of Statistics describes the data accordingly as follows: "*Podaci o migracijama obuhvaćaju državljane Republike Hrvatske i strance na privremenome ili stalnom boravku u Republici Hrvatskoj*".

²³ Tportal.hr. (2021). *Digitalni nomadi u Hrvatskoj od sad do viza mogu i preko online aplikacije*. Available at: <https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/digitalni-nomadi-u-hrvatskoj-od-sad-do-viza-mogu-i-preko-online-aplikacije-20210301/print> [accessed 12 May 2023].

²⁴ Ministry of Interior. (2023). *Statistics: Digital Nomads*. Available at: <https://mup.gov.hr/pristup-informacijama-16/statistika-228/statistika-digitalni-nomadi/287347> [accessed 12 May 2023].

Given the income gap between Croatia and most other EU countries, the number of Croatian citizens leaving the country will continue, for the time being, to be higher than the number of those returning, while due to labour market shortages and the continuation of the war in Ukraine, the trend of foreigners immigrating to Croatia is also likely to continue. In 2022, when 10,340 Croatian citizens and 47,628 foreigners immigrated to the Republic of Croatia, while 32,739 Croatian citizens moved abroad, the number of emigrants with Croatian citizenship was still almost three times higher than that of immigrants with Croatian citizenship (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023, see Table 2).

Table 2 – International migration by region of origin/destination and citizenship, 2022.

Region of origin/ destination	Immigrants				Emigrants			
	Total	Croatian citizens	Aliens	Un- known	Total	Croatian citizens	Aliens	Un- known
Total	57.972	10.340	47.628	4	46.287	32.739	13.543	5
Europe	42.651	8.755	33.895	1	42.247	31.063	11.182	2
European Union	10.877	5.933	4.943	1	25.415	24.441	972	2
Asia	11.869	107	11.761	1	2.129	227	1.902	—
Africa	680	32	648	—	75	21	54	—
North and Central America	826	513	313	—	817	687	130	—
South America	345	63	282	—	103	27	76	—
Oceania	362	293	69	—	258	241	17	—
Australia	328	268	60	—	230	215	15	—
Unknown	1.239	577	660	2	658	473	182	3

Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2023), adapted by the authors.

2.1.3. Age structure of the emigrant population

The age structure of Croatia's emigrant population is a recurring topic in expert debate. Researchers regularly alert the public to the ever-increasing participation of a young segment of the population in emigration compared to their share in the overall population, in the light of societal ageing (Jurić, 2018; Izenkova et al., 2015). The 2021 census indicated the total population of the Republic of Croatia as 3,888,529 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), compared to 4,437,460 in 2001 and 4,284,889 in 2011 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2002, 2012). Migration from the new to old member states in the European Union following the last three rounds of enlargement seems to have augmented the natural drop in populations throughout most of the new member states in Central Eastern Europe (Bossavie et al., 2021: 47). New statistics for Croatia confirm that societal ageing has been accelerated by the declining share of young age cohorts in the overall

population: “... the average age of the total population of the Republic of Croatia was 44.3 years (men 42.6, women 46.0), which places it among the oldest nations in Europe. The ageing process was to a great degree caused by the multi-year drop in the share of youth (0–19 years of age) in the total population” (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023a). In addition, the largest group of persons to emigrate abroad in 2022 was aged 20–39 (44.1%) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).²⁵

Data on the emigration of different age groups in 2012 (before Croatia's accession to the EU), 2016, and 2022 is presented in the following table.

Table 3 – Emigrants from Croatia in 2012, 2016, and 2022, grouped into five-year units.

Age group	Number of emigrants		
	2012	2016	2022
0-4	154	1,580	1,098
5-9	311	2,192	1,644
10-14	331	1,737	1,476
15-19	596	1,569	1,719
20-24	971	3,145	4,383
25-29	1,269	5,263	5,781
30-34	1,181	4,774	5,322
35-39	1,180	3,825	4,942
40-44	1,131	3,284	4,498
45-49	1,009	2,721	4,017
50-54	972	2,042	3,382
55-59	1,039	1,232	2,746
60-64	1,019	1,027	1,854
65-69	666	976	1,459
70-74	521	523	1,158
75 and more	527	546	808
Total	12,877	36,436	46,287

Source: Adapted by the authors based on information provided by Nenad Pokos (2017: 22) and the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023.

As previously mentioned, educational levels of emigrants are not captured in the official statistics. Interestingly, we came across two sources that both referred to data presented in the Global Competitiveness Report released by the World Economic Forum in 2019. Both sources claim that Croatia, next to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, and other countries in Southeast Europe, ranked second among those countries with the most significant brain drain worldwide:

²⁵ This data again includes both Croats and foreigners. It indicates the total numbers of immigrants and emigrants, including non-Croatian nationals who were issued with residence and/or work permits.

“On a scale of 1 to 7 (1= all talented people leaving the country; 7= all talented people staying in the country), BaH scored 1.76, followed by Croatia (1.88), North Macedonia (2.13), and Serbia (2.31).”²⁶ Despite our efforts to trace the data in the Report, we were unable to identify the exact indicator from which it was retrieved.²⁷ Whether additional computational methods were applied to arrive at this conclusion, or whether data was perhaps misinterpreted we cannot say with certainty. Still, we consider it imperative to share this striking information.

2.2. Policy and legislative responses

In the following section we look into policy responses to the dynamics sketched above, including emigration trends, societal aging, the age structure of the emigrant population, and indications for high levels of brain drain. Whether geared towards opening up the Croatian labour market for third-country nationals, towards fostering mobility and internationalization or incentivizing and supporting the return of Croats living abroad, all policy responses are based on the assumption that transnational migration and mobility, including return, positively – if not essentially – contribute to development.

2.2.1. Diaspora outreach and strategies to attract return

In 2012, Croatia established the State Office for Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia, since renamed the Central State Office for Croats Abroad, an administrative body entrusted with maintaining relations between the republic and Croats in the diaspora. Its Welcome Office provides assistance and consultancy services to people deciding to move back to Croatia.²⁸ The programmes and activities of the Central State Office so far have exclusively focused on Croats permanently living in the diaspora in overseas countries like Argentina, Australia, South Africa, Canada, Peru, and the United States, and their descendants, as well as on Croatian minorities in the wider CESEE region, and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Hornstein Tomić et al., 2022). Meanwhile, however, Croatia’s ‘National Development Strategy 2030’²⁹ has explicitly identified return as a policy

²⁶ The Economist. (2020) *The countries with the biggest brain drain*, Instagram post from 31 January 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B7_5SOQFrW6/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=bd4d356e-9cf2-4320-b14b-3be0248af858 [accessed 27 February 2022].

European Western Balkans. (2020). *WEF: Four Balkan countries top global ranking with biggest brain drain*. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/02/03/wef-four-balkan-countries-top-global-ranking-with-biggest-brain-drain/> [accessed 27 February 2022].

²⁷ World Economic Forum. (2019). *Global Competitiveness Report 2019*. Available at: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf [accessed 27 February 2022].

²⁸ The Central State Office for Croats Abroad (2023). *About us*. Available at: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/opcenito-o-djelokrugu-rada-i-ustroju-sredisnjeg-drzavnog-ureda/778> [accessed 25 November 2021].

²⁹ Government of the Republic of Croatia. (2021). *Nacionalna razvojna strategija 2030*, Available at: <https://hrvatska2030.hr/rs2/sc6/> [accessed 27 February 2022].

objective, thus reiterating the role of the Central State Office for Croats Abroad, which is now also to extend assistance to Croats born and raised in Croatia, who have moved abroad temporarily for educational or career purposes, and who intend to return. A strategic document titled ‘Situation Analysis and Description of Development Needs and Potentials for the Administrative Area of Relations Between the Republic of Croatia and Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia’³⁰ has correspondingly widened the scope of action and the tasks laid out in the ‘National Plan for the Development of Relations Between the Republic of Croatia and Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia 2021–2027’³¹ (Central State Office for Croats Abroad, 2021, 2022). Besides people returning from the overseas diaspora, returning migrants originally resident in Croatia are now considered one of the main target groups for support by the Central State Office. Reiterating the lack of accurate and reliable official data on remigration and return, the two strategic documents nevertheless confirm the trend of return and ‘immigration’ from the Croatian emigrant and diaspora community.³²

Diaspora outreach and strategies to attract remigration are today supported across party lines. Various measures and programmes are in place to strengthen cooperation between Croatia and its diaspora, simultaneously aiming to incentivize and support return. One such programme is *Biram Hrvatsku*, set up by the Croatian government in December 2021.³³ The programme aims to strengthen economic activity in the less developed and demographically weaker areas of the country, and to encourage the return of an active working population from abroad.³⁴ Monetary incentives of up to 20,000 EUR for the duration of twenty-four months have been made available to encourage self-employment, both for transnational returnees and internal migrants relocating to less devel-

³⁰ Hereafter: the Situation Analysis Document.

³¹ Hereafter: the National Plan.

³² “U kvantitativnoj analizi predmetne ciljane skupine naglašava se kako procjene službenih izvora kvantitativnih podataka o povratnicima i useljenicima iz hrvatskog iseljništva/dijaspore ukazuju na porast tendencije remigracije u RH. Iako se naglašava manjak/nedostatak preciznih službenih javno dostupnih izvora podataka o osobama koje remigriraju u RH (što se primarno odnosi na osobe koje nemaju hrvatsko državljanstvo), ograničeno dostupni kvantitativni podatci ukazuju na trend povratka i useljavanja iz hrvatskog iseljništva/dijaspore.” Central State Office for Croats Abroad, 2022: 16.

³³ More information on *Biram Hrvatsku* available in Croatian at: <https://mjere.hr/mjere/biram-hrvatsku-mobilnost-radne-snage-povratak-u-rh/>; information about a Croatian language learning programme available at: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/programi-i-projekti/program-ucenja-hrvatsko-ga-jezika-u-republici-hrvatskoj/805>; information about a scholarship programme available in Croatian at: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/programi-i-projekti/program-stipendiranja/804>; information on a funding programme to support the needs and interests of Croats outside the Republic of Croatia available in Croatian at: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/programi-i-projekti/program-financiranja-posebnih-potreba-i-projekata-od-interesa-za-hrvate-izvan-republike-hrvatske/810>; [all accessed 30 March 2022].

³⁴ The programme initially included countries belonging to the European Economic Area (EEA), Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, while at the beginning of 2023 overseas countries were added: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, USA, Chile, Peru, Canada, and New Zealand.

oped areas.³⁵ In spite of the programme's positive stance towards return as beneficial for local development, Croatian media published critical comments targeting its bureaucratic approach, along with criticism of excessive taxation, the structural hurdles for investment, and corruption as the main drivers of initial emigration and impediments for return. The opportunity to found a business with the allocated monetary reward appeared inadequate to attract significant levels of return migration.³⁶ According to data provided by the Croatian Employment Service, a total of 187 applications were approved between 1 January and 9 May 2023. Of these, 154 persons accessed the measure on returning from abroad, while thirty-three took advantage of additional incentives provided by the state as part of the measure to relocate and set up a business in less developed areas in Croatia.³⁷

2.2.2. Academic mobility and internationalization strategies

A series of measures were already initiated in the early 2000s and later expanded to encourage internationally mobile scientists to return from the diaspora, albeit with doubtful success. Internationalization programmes in the academic sector for many years fostered mobility and transnational cooperation particularly, but not exclusively, for and with Croatian scientists living and working abroad. Some specifically supported return, such as the Unity Through Knowledge Fund (UKF), which was initiated in 2007 by the Ministry of Science and Education (then Ministry of Science, Education and Sports) and was terminated in April 2020, and later NEWFELPRO (2013–2017). The National Action Plan for the Mobility of Researchers (2017–2020),³⁸ however, meant to improve working

³⁵ Croatian Employment Service (HZZ), 2022. *Biram Hrvatsku – mobilnost radne snage (povratak u RH)*, available at: <https://mjere.hr/mjere/biram-hrvatsku-mobilnost-radne-snage-povratak-u-rh/> [accessed 30 March 2022]. The self-employment incentive is regulated by a ten-page contract with HZZ. Co-financing is provided for a period of twenty-four months. Article 3 of the contract specifies the obligations of the recipient (reporting, visibility, use of funds, etc). Part or the whole amount plus interest must be returned only if the obligations are not met (Article 5 and Article 6). The draft contract is available at: <https://mjere.hr/app/uploads/2022/11/HZZ-Ugovor-Samozaposljavanje-17.03.22-v12.pdf> [accessed 30 March 2022].

³⁶ Novi list. (2021). *Poduzetnik iz Irske čuo da nude 200.000 kn za povratak u Hrvatsku, njegova reakcija sve govori*. Available at: https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/poduzetnik-iz-irske-cuo-da-nude-200-000-kn-za-povratak-u-hrvatsku-njegova-reakcija-sve-govori/?meta_refresh=true [accessed 16 June 2023].

Index.hr. (2021). *ANKETA Biste li se vratili u Hrvatsku za 200.000 kuna?* Available at: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/anketa-biste-li-se-vratili-u-hrvatsku-za-200000-kuna/2327545.aspx> [accessed 19 June 2023].

24.sata. (2021). *Plenkovićeva mjera nasmijala iseljenike: 'Mijenjajte Hrvatsku, otišli smo zbog korupcije'*. Available at: <https://www.24sata.hr/news/plenkovicewa-mjera-nasmijala-iseljenike-mijenjajte-hrvatsku-otisli-smo-zbog-korupcije-804847> [accessed 16 June 2023].

³⁷ Data acquired via e-mail correspondence with the Croatian Employment Service in May 2023.

³⁸ Agencija za mobilnost i programe EU. (2017). *Usvojen novi Akcijski plan za mobilnost istraživača za razdoblje 2017.- 2020*. Available at: <https://www.mobilnost.hr/hr/novosti/usvojen-novi-akcijski-plan-za-mobilnost-istrazivaca-za-razdoblje-2017-2020/> [accessed 11 March 2021].

conditions generally for researchers coming to Croatia from abroad, to ease regulations for temporary residence, and to set up a system of (mobility) support. Other instruments like the Swiss-funded Tenure Track Pilot Programme (TTPP, 2017–2023) provide foreign researchers and their teams with financial support and favourable conditions for work in Croatian research institutions. The importance of mobility, internationalization, and return for knowledge-based development in Croatia was reiterated in 2020 in the ‘Zagreb Call for Action on Brain Circulation’, an output of Croatia’s presidency of the EU Council.

State efforts to attract researchers from abroad today mostly disregard nationality and Croatian origin and run parallel to the private sector recruitment of workers from abroad.

2.2.3. Legal provisions to attract international workforce and temporary residents

Over the past years Croatia has significantly facilitated the employment of a seasonal workforce by adjusting the legal framework of fixed-term contracts. Recruitment agencies have created a lucrative business by bringing in workers from ‘third’ countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, or the Philippines. However, measures facilitating the recruitment of a highly skilled expert workforce are still missing and mainly left to individual companies, supported by headhunting firms. The tech industry leads the field, offering competitive salaries, family-friendly work packages and praising the country’s lifestyle as a competitive advantage.³⁹

Changes to the legal framework were ushered in through amendments to the Croatian Citizenship Act⁴⁰ which entered into force on 1 January 2020, as well as in the form of the new Aliens Act,⁴¹ which came into force one year later, on 1 January 2021. The amendments to the Citizenship Act eased the process of acquiring Croatian citizenship for members of the diaspora population. The newly passed Aliens Act streamlines and expedites the issue of residence and work permits to foreign nationals in a broader sense (elaborated below), and to both immediate family members and the life partners of Croatian nationals.

The Aliens Act furthermore provides a definition for digital nomads and it regulates their stay (making Croatia one of the few countries in the European Union, and the world, to undertake such a legal endeavour). Digital nomads are defined as “third-country nationals who are employed and perform work via commu-

³⁹ Based on an interview with Ajna Harčević, HR Business Partner at Rimac Technology, recorded on 28 May 2021, and on a series of videos available online titled ‘Mondays with Mate’. One of the videos is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BlmZlirsw0> [accessed 11 June 2021].

⁴⁰ Zakon.hr. (2020). *Official Gazette (Narodne novine) 102/19 (in Croatian)*. Available at: <https://www.zakon.hr/z/446/Zakon-o-hrvatskom-dr%C5%BEavljanstvu> [accessed 12 May 2023].

⁴¹ Zakon.hr. (2020). *Official Gazette (Narodne novine) 133/20 (in Croatian)*. Available at: <https://www.zakon.hr/z/142/Zakon-o-strancima> [accessed 12 May 2023].

nication technologies for a company or their own company established abroad, and who do not perform work for or provide services to Croatian employers”.⁴² A foreign national may apply for digital nomad status in Croatia which is approved for an initial period of up to one year, with the possibility of extension. Digital nomad status does not apply to EU nationals, whose stay in Croatia is determined by a separate set of regulations. The Croatian policy on digital nomads differs from similar policies within the European Union as it exempts the income of digital nomads from taxation in Croatia, in accordance with Article 9 of the Income Tax Law.⁴³ The tax loss is arguably compensated by consumption, since income is spent in Croatia primarily on housing, food, travel, and entertainment, which in turn yields economic benefits.⁴⁴ The digital nomad policy ensures favourable conditions for internationals interested in working remotely from Croatia in numerous professions. As such, the visa opens up the possibility for Croatia to attract highly skilled migrants to spend a longer period in the country. As mentioned above and elaborated in Chapter 3, of the remigrants we interviewed, several were third-country nationals with Croatian roots. Because this group partially overlaps with digital nomads, they have also been able to take advantage of the policy.

Jan de Jong, a Dutch businessman permanently resident in Croatia who had advised the Croatian government institutions during the process of introducing the ‘digital nomad visa’ underlined in an interview we conducted with him in March 2021, the government had understood that this was an opportunity to position and promote Croatia as a destination for remote work where people could enjoy the attractions of a country in the heart of Europe, with a beautiful coast and stunning nature, as well as affordable living costs.⁴⁵

In sum, besides legal measures to ease the hiring of third country national workers, adjustments to legislation aimed at facilitating international mobility, knowledge transfer, (re)migration and temporary residence are increasingly being introduced in Croatia, reflecting its ‘migration transition’ from being a country of emigration to a country of immigration. Like in the wider CESEE

⁴² Ibid., Article 3.

⁴³ Zakon.hr. (2022). *Official Gazette (Narodne novine)*, 151/22 (in Croatian). Available at: <https://www.zakon.hr/z/85/Zakon-o-porezu-na-dohodak> [accessed 12 May 2023].

⁴⁴ Poslovni turizam. (2021). *Digitalni nomadi jedno su od rješenja za razvoj cjelogodišnjeg turizma u Hrvatskoj*. Available at: <https://www.poslovniturizam.com/intervjui/jan-de-jong-digitalni-nomadi-jedno-su-od-rjesenja-za-razvoj-cjelogodisnjeg-turizma-u-hrvatskoj/3586/> [accessed 12 June 2023].

⁴⁵ In a LinkedIn message to the Croatian Prime Minister in summer 2020 – which gained considerable visibility – Jan de Jong, underlined the development potential of ‘digital nomads’, triggering a remarkably quick response. Within two weeks after posting his message, de Jong succeeded in meeting with the prime minister. He explained how the ‘digital nomad visa’, already introduced in several other countries, worked and the positive effect it could have for the Croatian economy. The creation of a ‘digital nomad visa’ for Croatia would ease temporary residence for foreigners working remotely and regulate their status. De Jong was regularly consulted during the subsequent policy drafting process and worked closely with government institutions.

region, they are acknowledged by policy makers as beneficial for development and prosperity. Furthermore, strategies to incentivize return are supported by public officials who recognize the potential of returnees to contribute to development and to enhance innovation and competitiveness. Although the potential of young and highly skilled (re)migrants to boost economic and social development was previously often underrated, the appearance of digital nomads has spurred awareness of how the country may benefit from young, even temporary, residents. Yet despite the legislative and policy responses sketched above, the problem of how to strategically attract internationally mobile and highly skilled Croatians back to their country of origin and convince them to build their lives and invest their skills and knowledge there remains unresolved. And there is still a way to go from scattered legislative and policy responses to a comprehensive re- and immigration policy.

2.3. Remigrants in media discourse

Media coverage on return migration did not figure prominently in the years that followed Croatia's EU accession. The focus was mostly on emigration, with dramatic headlines about the numbers of Croatian citizens leaving the country, and the large share of young and highly skilled citizens among them.⁴⁶ Likewise, the coverage of immigration mostly centred on problematic aspects of immigration or conflict situations.⁴⁷ In 2020, and along with the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing media coverage on Croatian citizens who decided to come back to their country of origin was noticeable.⁴⁸ Features and reports about the influx

⁴⁶ Deutsche Welle. (2019). *Hrvati ne odlaze trbuhom za kruhom, oni traže sigurnost i poštenije društvo*. Available from: <https://www.dw.com/hr/hrvati-ne-odlaze-trbuhom-za-kruhom-oni-tra%C5%BEe-sigurnost-i-po%C5%A1tenije-dru%C5%A1tvo/a-49590953> [accessed 13 February 2022].

Večernji list. (2020). *Odlaze cijele obitelji: Iz Jugoslavije se iselilo 350.000 Hrvata, a iz Hrvatske 400.000*. Available from: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/iz-jugoslavije-se-iselilo-350-000-hrvata-a-iz-hrvatske-400-000-1439700> [accessed 13 February 2022].

⁴⁷ Dnevnik.hr. (2020). *Jačanje pritiska: Iz kojih sve zemalja dolaze migranti i koliko je doista čvrsta istočna granica Hrvatske?* Available from: <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/cvrsta-granica-istoka-hrvatske---596738.html> [accessed 14 February 2022].

Deutsche Welle. (2020). *Napadi na migrante u Zagrebu: traže se dečki u crnom*. Available from: <https://www.dw.com/hr/napadi-na-migrante-u-zagrebu-tra%C5%BEe-se-de%C4%8Dki-u-crnom/a-37048778> [accessed 15 February 2022].

Jutarnji.hr. (2020). *Migranti sinoć zalutali u središte Zagreba, policija ih pronašla kod ulaza u zgradu MUP-a!* Available from: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/crna-kronika/migranti-sinoc-zalutali-u-srediste-zagreba-policija-ih-pronasla-kod-ulaza-u-zgradu-mup-a-15019386> [accessed 13 February 2022].

⁴⁸ Nacional.hr. (2020). *Grlić Radman: Sutra se vraća stotinu Hrvata iz Tirola koji su zbog koronavirusa ostali bez posla*. Available from: <https://www.nacional.hr/grlic-radman-sutra-se-vraca-stotinu-hrvata-iz-tirola-koji-su-zbog-koronavirusa-ostali-bez-posla/> [accessed 17 February 2022].

Total Croatia News. (2020). *3 Female Returnees Bring Digital Nomad Work, Play & Living to Diocletian's Palace*. Available from: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/digital-nomads-in-croatia/48376-digital-nomad-work-diocletian-s-palace?fbclid=IwAR0acKoe0hWz549eUjX0hATM5l-3RKxSb4AH3yBvMUfHZMN0ec7flJFTUdBk> [accessed 13 February 2022].

of digital nomads and the introduction of the digital nomad visa in Croatia followed.⁴⁹ Also, international media reported on digital nomads discovering Croatia as an attractive destination and promoted Croatia as a safe and rewarding destination for all-year tourism.⁵⁰ While the effects of media promotion on tourism are difficult to assess, we can only assume that it might have contributed to post-pandemic tourism growth as noted by the Croatian Ministry of Tourism and Sports.⁵¹

Human interest stories about individual remigrants and their return experiences have been narrated in Croatian media already for some time, framing returnees as either ‘homecomer’, ‘entrepreneur’, or ‘changemaker’. The introduction of strategies to attract returnees back to Croatia, such as the above-mentioned *Biram Hrvatsku* that was introduced in late 2021, has additionally provoked media attention to return migration.

2.3.1. The ‘homecomer’

Media present the ‘homecomer’ as a person who has returned from afar, usually from the overseas diaspora where they have lived for many years while preserving ties to the homeland, nurturing their cultural belonging within the emigrant community. The homecomer has never abandoned the idea of returning to the homeland. The social distance they might have maintained towards the host society

Epodravina.hr. (2020). *Razgovarali smo s fizičarem Andrejom Dundovićem koji se iz Italije vratio u Križevce: Povratak mi je bio tiha želja, jer želim mlade zainteresirati za znanost i prirodoslovlje, inspirirati ih da se bave istraživanjem*. Available from: <https://epodravina.hr/razgovarali-smo-s-fizicarem-andrejom-dundovicem-koji-se-iz-italije-vratio-u-krizevce-povratak-mi-je-bio-tiha-zelja-jer-zelim-mlade-zainteresirati-za-znanost-i-prirodoslovlje-inspirirati-ih-da-se-bav/> [accessed 19 February 2022].

⁴⁹ Total Croatia News. (2021). *Meet Melissa Paul, Owner of Croatia’s First Digital Nomad Visa*. Available from: https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/50036-melissa-paul-digital-nomad-visa?fbclid=IwAR00LLKuYeeei9JNSe4thCJZCcDQx4zgEx7mwzUGtThgHXKIPzZ2_J6PRgA [accessed 20 February 2022].

Tportal.hr. (2021). *Digitalni nomadi u Hrvatskoj od sad do viza mogu i preko online aplikacije*. Available from: <https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/digitalni-nomadi-u-hrvatskoj-od-sad-do-viza-mogu-i-preko-online-aplikacije-20210301> [accessed 21 February 2022].

Lider Media. (2020). *Jan de Jong: Veseli me što će Hrvatska postati vodeća zemlja u svijetu u privlačenju digitalnih nomada*. Available from: <https://lider.media/poslovna-scena/hrvatska/jan-de-jong-veseli-me-sto-ce-hrvatska-postati-vodeca-zemlja-u-svijetu-u-privlacenju-digitalnih-nomada-133936> [accessed 21 February 2022].

⁵⁰ Washington Post. (2020). *Banned almost everywhere else in Europe, U.S. tourists are finding their way to Croatia*. Available from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2020/12/07/croatia-open-americans-europe-ban/> [accessed 21 February 2022].

CNN. (2020). *Croatia wants tourists to move there. These people are doing just that*. Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/croatia-digital-nomads/index.html> [accessed 21 February 2022].

⁵¹ “... in the first nine months of 2021, there were 70 percent more arrivals and 53 percent more overnight stays than in the first nine months of 2020”, Ministarstvo turizma i sporta. (2021). *Brnjac: U rujnu ostvaren značajan turistički promet i prihodi*. Available at: <https://mint.gov.hr/vijesti/brnjac-u-rujnu-ostvaren-znacajan-turisticki-promet-i-prihodi/22670> [accessed 30 January 2023].

may stem from difficult integration, failed success in their professional life, experiences of personal discrimination, or discrimination against close family members or friends. These can include obstacles in accessing jobs or housing, non-recognition of degrees or work experience, being bullied in the neighbourhood or at school or the workplace. Despite being a long-term resident and sometimes naturalized citizen of the country they live in, the homecomer's ascribed (and maybe assumed) identity as a stranger is a recurring topic in personal accounts. A critical stance towards the society they are surrounded by, and a curiosity and longing to return to their country of origin, may be an outcome of such migrant experiences.

In an interview for the Croatian news portal Dnevnik in 2017, for example, Eugene Brčić Jones, an Australian with a Croatian family background, said that he had chosen to return with his wife and children because of the fast-paced and competitive lifestyle in Australia. He felt convinced that life in Croatia would be socially more rewarding and suited to ensuring his family's well-being. Returning to his cultural roots thus could be interpreted as an act of care, and as a prevention strategy or recovery plan from migration stress and alienation.

Figure 2 – Media excerpt. Source: Dnevnik.hr



The actual process of return and (re)integration the homecomer goes through, however, often proves to be 'bitter-sweet', or ambivalent at best. They frequently experience friction in their interactions with locals (the social dynamics in the contact zones mentioned in Chapter 1), i.e. difficulties in expressing themselves in the local language (if they left the country in early childhood or were born

abroad) and in understanding local customs, habits, and cultural practices, or certain types of humour. Thus, the homecomer becomes aware of their cultural distance from the ‘homeland’ they might never have lived in, or at least not for long. Eugene, for example, stressed that Croatia could be “a difficult place to live for someone unprepared for the mentality”, and the “socialist legacy” that interfered with everyday affairs.⁵² We have also encountered the homecomer in other interviews conducted for this pilot study, and in the framework of other research projects, including the figure of the homecomer in fictional literature (see Gramshammer-Hohl, Hornstein Tomić and Kirndörfer, 2018). Originally introduced in a seminal text by the philosopher Alfred Schuetz, himself an emigrant who fled Nazi Europe to settle in the United States in 1939 (Schuetz, 1945), the homecomer must integrate into, and reorientate themselves in, a world that has undergone profound change during their absence, as they themselves have been changed through their sojourn abroad.⁵³

Accounts of homecomers’ difficulties on return rarely make it into the media. Instead, media coverage rather indulges in celebrating the ‘homeland’ through their eyes: its natural, unspoilt beauty, the warmth and kindness of local people, their links to tradition, and a family culture seemingly untouched by the challenges of modern times.

2.3.2. The ‘entrepreneur’

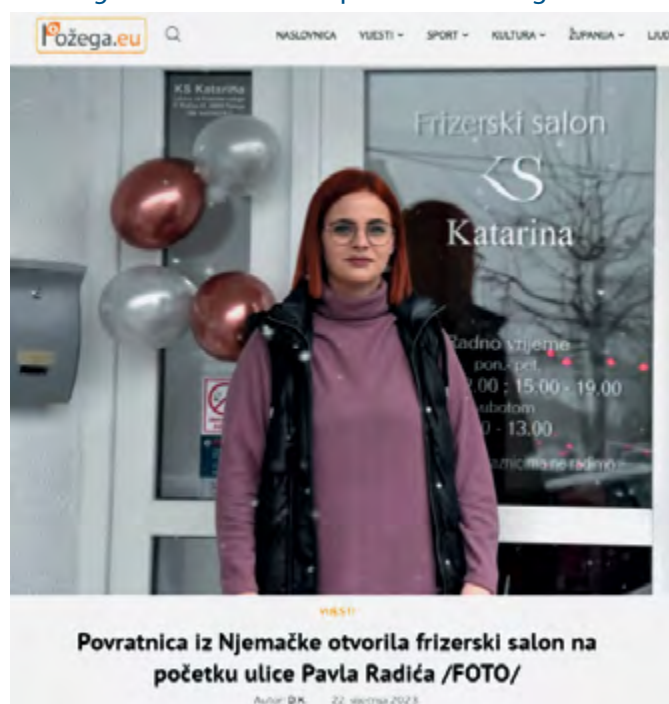
In contrast to the romanticized narrative of the homecomer, media generally feature the returnee ‘entrepreneur’ as a pragmatic, hands-on person, ready to enter a business venture back in their home country. Undeterred by bureaucratic hurdles and red tape, and driven by an entrepreneurial mindset, they have come back to start something new. The entrepreneur brings material and immaterial resources to the ‘homeland’, financial and ‘social’ (Levitt, 1998) or ‘intangible’ (Pinkow Läpple and Möllers, 2022)⁵⁴ remittances: knowledge, experience, education, and the financial means to invest in development and growth.

On the portal *vecernji.hr*, a typical narrative featuring a successful returnee/entrepreneur tells the story of a Croatian woman from Australia who ran her own business there before moving to Croatia. Having identified a promising niche, she established a business organizing luxury weddings for foreign guests in Croatia. Tapping into her social and cultural capital, she was able to convert

⁵² Dnevnik.hr. (2017). *Vraćamo se u Hrvatsku. Umorni smo od ove utrke štakora na Zapadu*. Available at: <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/eugene-brcic-jones-odlucio-je-s-obitelji-napustiti-australiju-i-vratiti-se-u-hrvatsku---466393.html> [accessed 8 January 2023]; translations of quotes from the Croatian original into English by the authors.

⁵³ “The home to which he (sic) returns is by no means the home he left or the home which he recalled and longed for during his absence. And, for the same reason, the homecomer is not the same man who left. He is neither the same for himself nor for those who await his return” (Schuetz, 1945: 375).

⁵⁴ See section 1.3.3.

Figure 3 – Media excerpt. Source: Vecernji.hr⁵⁵Figure 4 – Media excerpt. Source: Pozega.eu⁵⁶

connections and know-how into economic gain in the country she remigrated to. As a lifestyle entrepreneur, she is active in a segment in the tourism industry with considerable growth potential and thus supports Croatia's aspirations to become a prime destination for luxury tourism in Europe. Her story reinforces a widely repeated tourism narrative of Croatia as an Adriatic gem.

⁵⁵ Večernji.hr. (2019). *Svoj dom u Perthu zamijenila splitskom adresom: Rekli su mi da sam luda*. Available at: <https://mojehrvatska.vecernji.hr/price/svoj-dom-u-perthu-zamijenila-splitskom-adresom-rekli-su-mi-da-sam-luda-1249047> [accessed 7 September 2023].

⁵⁶ Požega.eu. (2023). *Povratnica iz Njemačke otvorila frizerski salon na početku ulice Pavla Radića*. Available at: <https://pozega.eu/?it=28068> [accessed 7 September 2023].

The story of a young returnee from Germany published on the local portal Pozega.eu highlights the possibility of regional revitalisation. Having opened a hair salon in a small town in western Slavonia, a region with an ageing population and suffering from demographic decline, she and her business stand for hope and a better and more promising future. A young woman's choice to return from Germany to Croatia and invest in an economically depressed part of her home country offers an optimistic counter-narrative to the trend of youth emigration widely covered in the media.

However, media portals such as Zagreb.info and jutarnji.hr have also featured less optimistic stories of disillusioned, disappointed, young entrepreneurs who gave up their attempts to come back from abroad and start a business in their home region. Government programmes such as *Biram Hrvatsku* (see section 2.2.1.) were criticized as failed policies by investigating the experiences of two returnees, Ante and Filip.

Figure 5 – Media excerpt.
Source: Zagreb.info⁵⁷



Figure 6 – Media excerpt.
Source: jutarnji.hr⁵⁸



Both were prepared to return and invest in parts of the country with a weak economy and structural deficits. However, overwhelming bureaucracy and scarce resources frustrated their mission. Such narratives of disappointment

⁵⁷ Zagreb.info. (2022). *Ante se htio vratiti u Liku, ali se šokirao kada je vidio što sve mora napraviti za famoznih 200 tisuća kuna*. Available at: <https://www.zagreb.info/hrvatska/ante-se-htio-se-vratiti-u-liku-ali-se-sokirao-kada-je-vidio-sto-sve-mora-napraviti-za-famoznih-200-tisuca-kuna/394791/> [accessed 7 September 2023].

⁵⁸ Jutarnji.hr. (2022). *Vratio se u Hrvatsku zbog 200.000 kn pa odustao: 'Imao sam najbolju volju, a evo što me dočekalo'*. Available at: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/vratio-se-u-hrvatsku-zbog-200-000-kn-pa-odustao-ima-sam-najbolju-volju-a-evo-sto-me-docekalo-15202863> [accessed 7 September 2023].

and disillusionment expose the structural problems of an inefficient administration, a lack of resources, perceived unequal chances, clientelism and corruption, that had initially driven these young people to leave their home region or even the country. The reports suggested that as long as these primarily structural problems remained unsolved, entrepreneurship, development, and innovation would be hampered, and return would not pose a convincing option for young, entrepreneurial potential remigrants.

2.3.3. The ‘changemaker’

The third type of remigrant introduced in Croatian media is young, highly educated, innovative, and most of all, cares for their home community. A changemaker wants to ‘give back’ and contribute to the common good. Their ‘return with resources’ (Čiubrinskas, 2018) – knowledge, experiences, skills, contacts: the ‘social’ or ‘intangible’ remittances introduced above – is beneficial for the development of the home society. Both types, the ‘changemaker’ and the ‘entrepreneur’ challenge the depiction of the young emigrant who turns their back on their country forever, only to invest their education and skills elsewhere.

Figure 7 – Media excerpt. Source: epodravina.hr⁵⁹



By building an educational centre in Croatia with EU funds, Andrej Dundović is presented on the portal epodravina.hr as a changemaker returning the re-

⁵⁹ Epodravina.hr. (2020). *Razgovarali smo s fizičarem Andrejom Dundovićem koji se iz Italije vratio u Križevce: Povratak mi je bio tiha želja, jer želim mlade zainteresirati za znanost i prirodoslovlje, inspirirati ih da se bave istraživanjem*. Available at: <https://epodravina.hr/razgovarali-smo-s-fizicarem-andrejom-dundovicem-koji-se-iz-italije-vratio-u-krizevce-povratak-mi-je-bio-tiha-zelja-er-zelim-mlade-zainteresirati-za-znanost-i-prirodoslovlje-inspirirati-ih-da-se-bav/> [accessed 7 September 2023].

sources society has invested in him. Dundović, whose centre introduces children to STEM subjects, is portrayed as investing in his home country's future generation.

2.4. Social Media

Embarking on this study, we decided to track social media communication about the topics in focus. Over a period of seventeen months (from April 2020 till September 2021), we regularly visited the social media platforms LinkedIn and Facebook, following groups, pages, and connections dealing with issues of remigration, temporary residence, and remote work, most prominently:

Table 4 – List of social media outlets

Facebook	LinkedIn
Hrvatski iseljenički kongres (page)	Going Remotely (page)
Hrvati izvan Hrvatske (group)	Udruga hrvatskih studenata u inozemstvu (page)
Udruga hrvatskih studenata u inozemstvu (page)	Jan de Jong (connection)
Digital Nomads Split Croatia (group)	Dean Nimrod Kuchel (connection)
Digital Nomads Croatia (group)	Tanja Polegubic (connection)
Expats in Zagreb (group)	Vuk Vukovic (connection)
Balkan Digital Nomads (page)	
Digital Nomads Croatia (page)	

On Facebook, the following topics and issues recurred frequently:

- Inquiries about finding a job in Croatia and how to work remotely, as a freelancer/digital nomad
- Information on housing/accommodation; locals advertising their accommodation, foreigners looking for accommodation
- Common administrative issues regarding obtaining a residence permit or a digital nomad visa
- Search for new acquaintances/friends
- Search for information about Croatian cities and destinations on the coast
- Advertising for personal YouTube channels and blogs on Croatia and its lifestyle, culture, etc.
- Organization of events for exchanging experiences and exploring Croatian culture and lifestyle

- Exchanging information on COVID-19 measures and testing, etc.
- Information on health and travel insurance
- Education/school recommendations for digital nomads and/or their children

On LinkedIn, the following topics and issues recurred frequently:

- Positive stories on Croatian remigrants and the changes they are making in their local communities
- Celebrations of Croatia in terms of its culture, nature, Mediterranean environment, relaxed lifestyle, and social life
- Digital nomad visa requirements, administrative procedures, and deficits in immigration policy
- A need for establishing mutual trust between Croats abroad and in Croatia
- The digital nomad industry, or local spending by digital nomads as an opportunity for the Croatian economy (Jan de Jong's regular posts on LinkedIn and invitations to Croats abroad to invest in the country)
- Critical feedback on the potential negative impact of the digital nomad industry on local rental prices

Posts to the Facebook group *Hrvati izvan Hrvatske*, for example, discussed reasons for returning from abroad and swapped information about return experiences, including the process of acquiring citizenship and other administrative issues. But also, the Facebook group *Expats in Zagreb*, which has more than 19,600 members, likewise offered a platform for discussions and posts on returning to Zagreb from abroad and what to expect. Moreover, in the digital nomad groups listed above, remigrants talked about 'coming home' and settling in the local community, sharing their experiences, advice, and information with other returnees and expats living in Croatia. Messages on both social media platforms commented the influx of returnees and digital nomads, and the similar, reoccurring questions and topics of interest clearly indicated an intersection of both groups.

Along with media coverage, social media contributed to increase public awareness of homeland return triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Because they caught the attention of decision- and policymakers, social media can be seen as a factor in the process of developing legislative and policy responses focusing on the facilitation of temporary residence and the introduction of the digital nomad visa.

3. INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

To explore 'Croatia's (hidden) potential', we conducted interviews and one focus group discussion with young, highly skilled professionals who had returned to Croatia mostly from inner-European and in some cases transatlantic migration and mobility (see section 1.2.). We approached individuals who had been abroad for a minimum of one year or more, or who had left the country repeatedly for several months for further education or work assignments to advance their careers. In addition, we spoke to young Croats who had grown up and were educated abroad, in the European or overseas diaspora, mostly had Croatian or dual citizenship, and who had decided to move (back) to Croatia. All interview partners were tertiary-educated and either already well established professionally or on their way to becoming established in their field.

Since the interviews followed a semi-structured outline, the analysis is structured accordingly: (3.1.) main motivations for return: social aspects and life cycle (3.1.1.), identity and belonging (3.1.2.), employment and economic stability (3.1.3.), and lifestyle (3.1.4.); (3.2.) (re)integration experiences: in professional (3.2.1.), administrative (3.2.2.), and social (3.2.3.) terms and contexts; and finally (3.3.) contributions to development, be it through professional activities (3.3.1.) or social engagement (3.3.2.).

3.1. Main motivations for return

3.1.1. Social aspects and life cycle

Those interview partners who had lived in Croatia prior to emigrating unanimously prioritized social rather than reasons linked to their professional careers for returning. They emphasized reunification with their families, reconnecting with relatives, and being closer to friends as among the main motivations for return. They talked about plans relating to stages in the life cycle, such as for starting their own family, their expectations of raising children and the

opportunity to have family support nearby. Some expressed the need to take care of elder family members. The distance to family and friends while abroad was often mentioned as a down-side of transnational mobility, and close contact was kept through regular visits in both directions, either of family, or friends. In a similar way, returnees from the diaspora in turn kept close ties with their families back in the country of previous residence.

Karlo grew up in Croatia and is now in his early thirties. He spent four years abroad in the UK and US for graduate and post-graduate studies, and for work, and returned in 2019:

The main reason was quality of life. Support from our parents with the kids. And the fact that we wanted to have children and we are already waiting for the third one. So, these were the main reasons. So, we always thought maybe we are going to go back abroad one day, but let's have the kids here. Let's have them grow up here.

Tomislav grew up in Croatia and is now in his early twenties. He spent five years in Austria for his studies and returned in 2020:

It was a five-year long decision. I moved pretty often, I travelled back and forth, from Croatia to Vienna, it was a bit tiring and I knew I couldn't commit one hundred percent to Vienna and if I chose to stay I would be doomed to travel back and forth, and so I decided to come back here to be closer to my family, to my girlfriend, and I was very... let's say optimistic about life in Croatia.

Tamara grew up in Croatia and is now in her late twenties. She spent four years abroad in Austria, the UK and US for graduate studies, and returned in 2019:

... my dad would send messages every month, "Honey, when will you return to Croatia?" So, there was actually more pressure from the family side to return to Croatia, but actually I was also encouraged in the sense that I noticed that my parents were getting older, my brother had children, and I simply noticed that being at a distance from the family was getting harder and harder for me...⁶⁰

3.1.2. Identity and belonging

Being a foreigner in host countries and in diaspora was repeatedly mentioned in interviews with both returnees from inner-European academic and career mobility as well as from the overseas diaspora as an ambivalent experience. For the former, besides the excitement of living abroad and independently from family

⁶⁰ Original quote in Croatian: "Moj tata je vjerojatno svakih mjesec dana slao poruke 'Kćeri zlatna kada ćeš se vratiti u Hrvatsku?'. Tako da zapravo je postojao više pritisak s obiteljske strane da se vratim u Hrvatsku, ali zapravo je i meni bio neki poticaj u smislu da, ono primjećujemo da roditelji nam stare, brat mi je dobio djecu i jednostavno sam primjećivala da mi je ta udaljenost od obitelji sve teže pada."

and friends, the limited integration in host societies could be felt as socially isolating, a feeling that for some had nurtured loneliness and latent though constant homesickness. Cultural ties and social proximity were highlighted repeatedly as crucial for sustaining a sense of belonging, and cultural estrangement and social distance experienced in some cases as limiting wellbeing. To (re)create belonging hence ranked high amongst the main motivations for homeland return.

Mia grew up in Croatia and is now in her early thirties. She spent three years abroad: in Japan on a cultural exchange programme, and then in the Netherlands for work, and returned in 2020:

I felt extremely lonely, I didn't manage to make... not friends, but... for me, relationships with people were just not sufficient. I started missing my family, I started missing my friends. Also, I think that my private life... not in the sense of a romantic relationship, but everything outside of work, was barely existent... I was constantly looking forward to going back to Croatia, a bit too much. So, those friends that I took for granted, it turned out that I did miss them too much and I decided to come back.

The opportunity to use one's own language, access to social networks, adherence to culinary habits, and observation of local customs and celebrations that give meaning to daily life and structure the year were factors pointed at as relevant for creating a sense of belonging. Along those lines, interview partners, who were raised and educated abroad underlined their desire to acquire Croatian language proficiency, to learn about the social and cultural background of their families, to engage in domestic cultural practices and customs, and to find out more about collective memories as an unexplored part of their own identity. They planned to travel the country, sometimes with friends or relatives joining them from abroad, and to search local family ties and roots. The importance of a sense of belonging and of feeling at home was pointed out unanimously by returnees who were brought up in Croatia and also by returnees from the diaspora as a factor motivating return migration. For them, the prime motivation for return indeed was related to questions of identity.

Lucija grew up in Sweden and is now in her late twenties. Since 2016, she has spent four years on and off in Croatia:

I wanted to learn the language better because at home we never spoke it with my dad, because my mom is Swedish. Since I was a kid, I always felt like I should know Croatian because it's my heritage and my father is Croatian... and then when I was younger he would speak to me, but he would stop when I was around three or four and I never really developed my language skills. Because here I am in your country and I am half-Croatian and I'm making everyone speak in English, it's stupid.

Cvita grew up in Canada and is now in her mid-thirties. Since 2006, she has spent eight years on and off in Croatia:

I've been here for eight years now. And it's been ups and downs. There's been a couple of years when I've gone back to Canada just to kind of... do I want this? Do I really want to be in Croatia? Here I am, I always come back... so that's interesting.

Interview partners from the diaspora, many of whom identified themselves as 'hyphenates', Croatian-American, -Australian, -Argentinian or otherwise, mostly felt the need to further explore the Croatian part of their identity and therefore returned to what they perceived as their cultural homeland. The remigrants who had grown up in Croatia frequently mentioned that the migration experience had raised their awareness of cultural belonging, and had also broadened their horizons, their preparedness to appreciate cultural difference and diversity, and to integrate cultural elements of their host societies and multiculturalism in general into their ways of life – cuisine and customs, clothing, behavioural norms, values, and mindsets – which they were eager to introduce and share at home.

3.1.3. Employment and economic stability

Throughout the interviews, remigrants emphasized opportunities to earn a living as another important criterion for return. Employment perspectives, whether in business, public, or academic sectors, were central to the idea of remigration to Croatia, especially if planned long-term or even for good. The expansion of possibilities for remote work were an important factor, too, particularly given the fact that some interview partners continued to be engaged professionally abroad as well. Although they discussed professional considerations as important aspects when thinking about return, career was usually a side issue rather than a driving force. Nobody thought of return to Croatia as a career move. More often, return represented a non-strategic career choice, sometimes even a step back down the ladder, or a slowdown in their career trajectory. However, returnees accepted possible career regression when it was outweighed by other motives, which they felt were more important at the time. Some left open whether they would go abroad at a later stage to develop their careers once again, or they had managed to arrange a transnational and remote form of employment or income generation which brought greater financial security and helped them to navigate the income cutback of return.

Karlo (introduced above):

Living in Croatia is much better than living in London in certain aspects, right? In terms of career, we would have made much more money if we had stayed in London. But then the question is at what cost? It's a great city for

building careers, amazing, huge opportunities. You can earn a lot of money but then the thing is, if we wanted to afford the best possible schooling or kindergarten for a child, we would have to do jobs that require sixteen hours of investment banking or stuff like that. Which means you are basically working the whole day, you don't see your child, and this is not a life that we wanted.

Lidija grew up in Croatia and is now in her late twenties. She spent four years abroad in the UK for graduate studies and returned in 2018:

So, then I slowly started looking for jobs here [in Croatia] ... the reason why I didn't look at first was because I didn't expect there to be many options in my profession. And... yes, then I started, as I said, to look into it more, I found out that there are some data analyst... data scientist options, even though very few. And so, in the end, in April of 2019, I got that first job which is not the one I'm doing now.⁶¹

Remigrants who had chosen to live in Croatia for a limited period mostly worked remotely for a foreign employer or were self-employed. In rare cases did they consider or take on employment locally. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people in the early stages of their careers and university students especially highlighted the opportunity to save living costs as a motive for remigration, for example from western European cities where expenses were much higher. A majority of them intended to pursue their education and to work remotely from their family homes for some time.

Weighing up salary levels against the daily expenses and living costs in host and home countries, some interview partners considered the comparatively lower wages offered on the Croatian labour market as temporarily acceptable since expenses for household consumption, accommodation, and leisure were all in all more affordable than abroad. Asked about possible plans to remain permanently in the country, those temporary returnees, whether still in education or already in employment, unanimously indicated job security abroad, higher wages than those paid in Croatia, and the overall prospect of financial stability as key factors in favour of leaving again. Some raised the issue of political stability as well. Overwhelmingly, remigrants saw local wages and job security as non-competitive. For many, these were the main reason for questioning permanent settlement in Croatia.

⁶¹ Original quote in Croatian: "Tako da sam onda ... krenula sam lagano gledati tu [u Hrvatskoj]... razlog zašto u početku nisam gledala tu jer nisam ni očekivala da ima nešto previše u mojoj struci. I... da, onda sam krenula, kao što sam rekla, više gledati to, skužila sam da postoje neke opcije *data analyst*-a, *data scientist*-a, i to, iako jako malo. I ništa, na kraju sam u četvrtom mjesecu 2019. sam dobila tu taj prvi posao koji nije ovaj koji sad radim."

Antonio grew up in Croatia and is now in his late twenties. He spent a year in Belgium and China on exchange programmes, and returned in 2017:

Especially in the field of law, you are always underpaid for what you do... Friends in other countries are putting in similar hours to me and I feel that if I worked in those countries and in those companies, I would be paid more appropriately for the amount of money I am actually bringing the company.

3.1.4. Lifestyle

General lifestyle considerations frequently expressed in the interviews suggested that Croatia was a place for comfortable, affordable, and easy living: factors included the level of overall safety, daily living costs, a perceived healthy way of life, access to leisure around cultural heritage and historical architecture, the Adriatic coast and beautiful nature in all parts of the country, and a wide range of outdoor activities. Also, Croatia's geographical location in Central Europe, albeit disputable transport connections, and the simultaneity of continental and Mediterranean cultures were pointed out as composing an attractive living environment. The interviewees often described the lifestyle in contrast to where they had previously lived as more relaxed and accommodating. Both permanent and temporary remigrants who had taken residence for example during the COVID-19 pandemic shared these assessments. A few also hinted that they had taken refuge from political tensions around the COVID-19 containment measures and a polarized social environment in their countries of previous residence.

Lucija (introduced above):

So, I would say that the working culture [in Croatia] was a bit more chilled, like people went for breaks whenever they wanted and it was a lot of coffee breaks, and it was long coffee breaks, long lunch breaks... But at the same time, it was very interesting and very developing, I must say, to experience working in a different country, that's something I've never done before, I really cherish the experience I got from it.

Lea grew up in the US and is now in her early twenties. She moved to Croatia in 2020:

The most positive aspects are being close to the Croatian part of my family and friends, close to the coast, much cheaper living costs than I would pay in Germany or the US. With my internship salary, here I can cover all my living costs, which would be unimaginable either in Germany or the US.

Tamara (introduced above):

I think that the quality of life in Croatia is better in the sense that in England housing is terribly expensive and you can work like a horse and still have to share an apartment with three people, and in general the infrastructure is on average worse than in Croatia. Closeness to family and quality of life in my opinion compared to England, and that's it.⁶²

3.2. (Re)integration experiences

3.2.1. Professional terms and contexts

Only some of our interview partners who had gone abroad for work or further education found (re)integration after their return to Croatia easy. In most cases, they had firmly planned to return home after gaining academic degrees or completing work assignments. Almost all had prepared for professional (re)integration while abroad; they had maintained contacts to peers and colleagues and reconnected to home institutions and potential employers while visiting families and friends. However, concerns about whether academic degrees and specifically work experience would be fully recognized at home, and be transferable without administrative obstacles, proved to be founded. This applied even more to returnees from overseas who repeatedly experienced problems in obtaining recognition of their academic and professional qualifications. In general, remigrants found that Croatian institutions did not sufficiently promote and value international mobility, let alone establish it as a condition for employment or further advancement. For example, summer school attendance abroad and grade transfers were not always approved, as some explained, and if, then mostly by individual university professors who themselves had extensive international experience.

Obviously, realizing return required knowledge of how to access the domestic labour market in various sectors, and (re)integration needed strategic preparation and networking to open chances for employment and avenues for joining professional networks. Since employment was the key to acquiring a regulated status and integration into the health and pension systems, return without employment prospects meant not only economic instability and limited self-sustainability, but wider social risk. Getting a suitable job posed a challenge both to those who had grown up and lived in Croatia most of their lives prior to leaving the country, and for their peers from the diaspora – both inner-European and overseas – especially when it came to effectively communicating and ‘selling’ the skills and resources accumulated abroad.

⁶² Original quote in Croatian: “Mislim da je u Hrvatskoj kvaliteta života bolja u smislu da u Engleskoj su nekretnine užasno skupe i onako možeš raditi kao konj i dalje dijeliti stan s tri osobe i općenito infrastruktura je lošija u prosjeku nego u Hrvatskoj. Blizina obitelji i kvaliteta života po meni u odnosu na Englesku i to je to.”

Integrating into the Croatian job market was even more challenging for young and highly skilled returnees from the diaspora, given their limited language skills and greater difficulties in having academic degrees and work experience recognized compared to their European peers. Most returnees born, raised, and educated in the overseas diaspora – for example in Latin America – found local professional networks difficult to access, formal recognition criteria untransparent, and they faced dim prospects of having previous work experience recognized, as was described by medical doctors and educators we interviewed. On the other hand, returnees who created their own businesses and hence were self-employed were able to build a stable income over time and considered settling more permanently. Almost all mentioned reconsidering and evaluating return decisions on a regular basis, highlighting for example differences in salary levels and employment rules and standards.

Ivana grew up in Croatia and is now in her early thirties. From 2006 she spent twelve years abroad, moving from the EU to Asia and Africa for education and work, and returned in 2019:

So, salaries are very low. Also, at the same time I feel like not only my company, but other companies too, don't really pay overtime at a higher rate than your usual hourly wage, and they don't pay overtime to your bank account as overtime pay but give it to you in cash or pay it to your bank account as a bonus or something. I don't like that.

3.2.2. Administrative terms and contexts

The majority of interviewees mentioned tedious and lengthy administrative procedures and criticized a lack of efficiency when trying to regulate their status as a remigrant. They often experienced administrative requirements as partly incomprehensible, sometimes non-transparent, and difficult to handle due to excessive paperwork and deficient digitalization. Returnees from the diaspora who had limited Croatian language skills had to engage costly translation services, since English-speaking public officials were scarce. In general, public institutions were criticized for their lack of customer orientation and inexperience in serving foreigners.

Mihael grew up in Austria and is now in his mid-thirties. He moved to Croatia in 2020.⁶³

The bureaucracy is a big issue. Very slow... a lot of papers, but I heard that there was this e-Gradani⁶³ going on. ... I never used it so far because I didn't

⁶³ e-Gradani (e-Citizens) is a digital platform developed by the Croatian government, designed to cater to the needs of Croatian citizens, residents, and businesses. This platform offers convenient access to government services and facilitates the execution of various tasks online, eliminating the need for in-person visits to government offices.

have access. In Zagreb, I need to always take this ticket [a queue number in public institutions] and to wait quite long. And then, when you are there they say "This is not the right place, you need to go to another place!" And yeah, it goes round and round a little bit. And from my point of view, all the people working there, all the officers, they are not on the same level, I would say, of knowledge. So, there is one who knows a lot and others who don't know that much, and if you go to the one who doesn't know that much, it's a problem. But in the end, I could handle this really easily because I do speak the language, so it's way easier.

Cvita (introduced above):

It's almost like, I feel Croatia has a 'make-work' project, where back in God-knows-when times they just created one job for one person that was completely irrelevant. And that person doesn't know anything more than what they are supposed to do, which is [to stamp documents with] 'a stamp'. And if you ask them any other questions, that's not their problem. Then they just move you to another building, and it takes you like a month to do something. And God forbid you don't remember that one piece of paper, you lose like six months of procedures, and they don't care. So, that's a bad thing.

On the other hand, many interview partners praised Croatia's new regulations for temporary residence and the digital nomad visa as an adequate response to the needs specifically of Croats without Croatian citizenship, mostly returnees from the overseas diaspora. But second-generation returnees from Europe, for example the children of former labour migrants with foreign citizenship, also took advantage of the visa. At the same time, the possible extension of the visa beyond one year was highlighted as an issue of concern, indicating a desire for easier transition to permanent residence. The provision that digital nomads were exempt from paying local income taxes for the work related to their visa, and only paid VAT when consuming products and services, was appreciated and highlighted as special to Croatia. However, some commented the fact that a double taxation agreement had not yet been signed with a number of countries, most prominently the United States, extremely critically.⁶⁴ It is important to note that different forms of earnings, such as income generated through work not associated with the digital nomad visa or linked to profits from investments, are liable to taxation based on individual tax residency.

⁶⁴ The Double Taxation Avoidance Treaty between the United States and Croatia was signed in December 2022, after the interviews were conducted.

3.2.3. Social terms and contexts

Impressions differed quite widely between remigrants on how they were received and welcomed by the local community. Some of our interview partners highlighted positive experiences, others mentioned negative ones. Generally, people who had been abroad only for a limited period found a welcoming environment of family and friends. Also, remigrants from the diaspora who had come to Croatia on family visits before, found a welcoming social context and people they could attach to. However, responding to questions about whether they felt they really belonged, remigrants from the diaspora both overseas and in Europe, especially members of the second migrant generation brought up abroad, talked about their conflicted experiences. Some found it insulting to be perceived as someone with a different cultural background, and therefore to feel like they did not fully belong.

Josipa grew up in Germany and is now in her mid-thirties. She moved to Croatia in 2017:

It makes me terribly angry when I go somewhere and they say “Švabo”.⁶⁵ Actually, it doesn’t make me so angry anymore, it depends on who says it. ...Then I told them once: I have citizenship like you. I came here as a Croatian citizen, don’t call me a foreigner. All my life I was a foreigner in Germany, now I’m not a foreigner here.⁶⁶

Others who lacked closer family ties tried to overcome language and cultural barriers by attending Croatian language courses and participating in recreational activities in their neighbourhood, for example by joining sports clubs or cultural associations and attending events. At the same time, they found other foreigners in the expat and digital nomad on- and offline communities or ‘bubbles’, many of whom took similar efforts to familiarize themselves with the Croatian language and culture and to integrate into local communities. Our interview partners frequently pointed out that a welcoming culture was crucial for making long-term plans to stay on, and for encouraging transnationally mobile peers to remigrate to Croatia as well. They referred to a welcoming environment both in social terms as well as in connection with structural conditions for (re)integration and the related regulations, such as access to the labour market, affordable housing, health care services, education systems, and schooling for children. Both remigrants who had lived in Croatia before going abroad, or who had come from the diaspora, highlighted that

⁶⁵ Croatian colloquial term for a German.

⁶⁶ Original quote in Croatian: “Užasno me ljuti kad negdje dođem i onda kažu ‘Švabo’, zapravo više me ne ljuti toliko, ovisi tko to kaže. ... onda sam im rekla jedanput, imam domovnicu kao i vi. Ja sam ovdje došla kao hrvatski državljanin, nemojte mi govorit stranac. Cijeli život sam bila stranac u Njemačkoj, sad ovdje nisam stranac.”

the decision to build a future, start a family and bring up children, or to enjoy retirement, in Croatia were options only if suitable economic and social conditions were in place. Many found the conditions not satisfactory enough for long term plans and permanent residence. Mixed attitudes to and experiences with services such as health care were frequently expressed in that context. Some interview partners displayed a lack of trust in the quality of health treatment, and remigrants from the diaspora specifically underlined the lack of regulation surrounding the treatment of foreigners in hospitals, as well as language barriers. Most decisive, however, seemed to be whether people found social acceptance.

Mihael (introduced above):

Whether I can become part of society, it depends. I guess I can, why not? I do know the language and the mentality, although a big part of my mentality is still Austrian when I deal with things. ...Whether I will be accepted or not, I don't know, that's another point, but I'll do my best.

3.3. Professional and social contributions to development

3.3.1. Professional activities

Most of our interview partners planned to contribute to the development of the sector in which they worked, whether academic or business, private or public. For example, several had detected new business niches or fields for research they would like to establish. Others had initiated community projects to enhance access to knowledge and information for socially disadvantaged groups or in poorer regions of the country. A few had set up or were preparing to launch start-ups which they felt could succeed as innovative enterprises in the Croatian ecosystem, and also be competitive internationally. Across sectors, many remigrants intended to invest their knowledge, skills, and perspectives to advance innovation, and to promote liberal and entrepreneurial values they deemed essential for a social and cultural environment in which new and diverse approaches, ideas, and initiatives could be welcomed and tried out. They highlighted the need for an entrepreneurial and risk-taking spirit, and for a culture that was tolerant towards failure and supportive of learning from mistakes. Civic responsibility, democratic culture, and concern for the common good, gender equality, respect for diversity, and non-discrimination were stressed as values crucial for social development. Honouring privacy, the rule of law, and transparent and just procedures were underlined as essential for economic development, as was the need for environmental protection and for safeguarding natural resources and biodiversity for sustainable development. Both in professional and private contexts, many talked about introducing routines and procedures related to values they

had found cherished in a variety of contexts abroad, such as the gender-equal sharing of care duties and household chores, transparency in accounting and workforce recruitment, and environmental protection measures like garbage separation or energy saving both at home and at work.

Young professionals also wanted to open international networks they had been able to join while abroad for their Croatian peers. Some spoke out about and promoted such approaches, values, and principles both in private and public. The media featured some as innovators and changemakers, while others had founded non-profit or professional associations to bring together likeminded partners or joined already existing civic or professional networks and initiatives. Playing a role in advancing internationalization, knowledge transfer and sharing, and international mobility ranked high on many of their agendas. Often, they expressed the need to 'give back', i.e. a sense of patriotic responsibility to engage in development and innovation in their home communities or regions, which was taken up and reflected in media discourse (see section 2.3.3.).

Karlo (introduced above):

The Voice of Entrepreneurs, the association that I co-founded. We are promoting all these reforms for... we call it 'Croatia 2.0', a new, improved Croatia. Completely de-politicized. Removing the personalization of government institutions. (...) When this group kind of got together, we were growing by... the first weekend it was five thousand people, but at the end of the first week, when we were already negotiating with ministers, it was twenty thousand people and then fifty, sixty, seventy thousand people on Facebook, right? ...Based on our proposals for measures that we introduced, the government basically introduced eighty percent of those we asked them to do. And this is our strategy.

Domagoj grew up in Croatia and is now in his early thirties. He spent five years abroad in Germany and Italy for graduate and post-graduate studies, and returned in 2020:

I always feel some social responsibility to the community that I'm part of. All my life I've been trying to work through NGOs, or to help the community. And it's really hard when you're in another country, you always feel like an outsider. (...) The thing is, the background I had in Križevci, the many connections with local NGOs, made this plan [to set up an educational centre for young people] much easier. Also, at the same time, young people won the election in 2017 in Križevci (...) I asked whether we would have some support from the local government, if we tried to do this. And they said, "absolutely, yes"... and that was the crucial moment when we decided to do this [project] in Križevci.

3.3.2. Social engagement

Ideas about participation and a commitment to community development likewise circulated around the sharing of knowledge, skills, values, and principles. Whether through teaching in formal or non-formal educational settings, volunteering, or by sharing experiences with local non-profit organisations, civic initiatives, and associations – for example, giving advice on project acquisition and management, marketing and communication, public relations, and fundraising strategies – interview partners repeatedly expressed the wish to contribute to safeguarding a civic ecosystem and a pluralistic, democratic culture. Some contemplated or took steps to start social enterprises; others imagined tapping into transnational networks to arrange and offer practice-based learning and internship opportunities, or to provide career guidance. Indeed, many of our interview partners had already moved from discussing ideas to putting them into practice. Remigrants who had been through the Croatian educational system had suggestions on how to improve it. Furthermore, in the interviews many of the remigrants explored ideas focused on initiating social networks and infrastructure for newcomers and foreigners, co-working spaces for startups, and various services for temporary residents.

Domagoj (introduced above):

... I think that the local community will see a lot of benefits. As we know, there is a lot of need for science, technology, engineering, and math skills, and generally this is supported by European social funds. It's supported by national programmes. It correlates with economic growth. So, in that sense, we want to strengthen this area in Križevci which doesn't have any... people here, they don't have good education in this area. They always need to move to Zagreb. And here we are providing something locally, so they don't need to go (...). If I compare to myself, here I didn't have any, let's say... I didn't have anywhere outside of school to hear about this. I didn't even know what scientists do. I didn't have a clue where to find answers [to my questions] about the universe, about nature. Here, we have a lot of kids and a lot of smart pupils coming who want to learn and that's really fulfilling. It's not like you are closed off in your office and are writing your research papers, calculating something. It's also... you have this other responsibility, your role... I would say it's really engaging.

4. CROATIA'S POTENTIAL

Finally, we will introduce some of our interview partners. They have given us permission to reproduce their names and some basic data in order to showcase their individual experiences of migration, mobility, and (re)integration, and foremost to present their ideas and activities directed at change and resulting from mobility – their ‘change agency’. The individuals introduced in this chapter point at the heterogeneity of migration and return experiences and the corresponding diversity of the remigrant community in Croatia today. Five grew up in Croatia and since high school or university have participated in international education programmes or trained and worked abroad. Two arrived in Croatia from the overseas diaspora, the offspring of emigrants, to spend some time in the country and stayed on. One was raised in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later moved to Zagreb where she returned to live after completing further education and longer periods of work abroad. Three interview partners were the first in their family to obtain a higher educational degree abroad. All interview partners moved back to Croatia as highly skilled, young professionals, bringing with them non-material resources essential for development and change. They have collected insights, skills, and knowledge from different sectors (academic, public, business, and civic), and all are fluent in several languages. The multiple perspectives adopted through their experience of moving and working internationally have equipped them with the ability to navigate social and cultural differences by comparing and mediating between societies, regions, and professional ecosystems. They have taken inspiration for potential improvement, innovation, and change in their country of origin by integrating awareness of different cultural contexts. They are applying the multiple perspectives they have encountered through mobility and migration into their daily thinking and acting. All our interview partners are active as ‘change agents’ in one way or another, whether in their work environments, in local communities, or in society as a whole.

Ana Budimir⁶⁷

Project coordinator at the World Bank Office in Croatia; manager at *Leading Utilities of the World*, a global network of successful and innovative water and wastewater utilities

Migration and mobility

- A high-school year in the United States. First family member to go abroad for a longer period.
- Political sciences and economics studies in Zagreb; Erasmus in Vienna; brief work experience in Chile; postgraduate studies in international development in Oxford.
- Two-year employment in the UK after graduation.
- Return in 2019 to work at the World Bank Office in Croatia.
- Prime return motivation: closeness to family and friends.
- Option to search employment again abroad as potentially better career choice.

(Re)integration

- Manages a UK-based NGO; works part-time remotely, part-time as a project coordinator at the World Bank, and as external lecturer and PhD candidate at Zagreb University.
- Appreciates the quality and affordability of life in Croatia.
- Integration after return took longer than expected.
- Clashes with “absurdly” complicated bureaucracy.



I find it interesting how you, with the same views, can be perceived as liberal in one country and conservative in another.

Change agency

- Being abroad widened her horizon and brought her in contact with people of different cultures, enhancing her capacity for self-reflection, tolerance, and appreciation of cultural diversity.
- Promotes respect for privacy; people “meddle too much in the lives of others”.
- Underlines that intellectual stimulation, encouragement of critical and original thinking, and appreciation of international experience are missing in the Croatian education system.
- Is critical of hierarchies and the promotion system in Croatian academic and public sectors.
- Is concerned that people are unprepared to change, with fatalistic and negative attitudes passivity prevails.
- Wants to encourage young people to stay in Croatia or to return from abroad.
- Stresses the need to support young families to allow both parents to work, to purchase real estate, to receive tax reliefs.

⁶⁷ The interview was conducted on 20 January 2021 in Croatian. The quotes were translated into English by the authors.

Ivan Luetić⁶⁸

Zagreb University law graduate, Harvard law post-graduate; two-years-work experience at a US law firm in London

Migration and mobility

- A high-school year in Germany.
- Law studies in Zagreb; one-year graduate studies at Freiburg University.
- Student volunteer in an orphanage in Tanzania.
- Internship at the EU parliament in Brussels during university.
- One-year post-graduate studies at Harvard University, Cambridge/MA.
- Work at a law firm in London, and remotely for one year.
- Prime motivation for return: family.

(Re)integration

- Employment in a Zagreb-based international law firm.
- Return out of commitment towards society: “giving back”.
- Embedded in a densely knit family support net, with his wife and small children.

Change agency

- Studying abroad raised awareness of what Croatia's educational culture is missing.
- Sees a need to foster the joy of learning.
- Informal access to professors at Harvard crucially strengthened his self-confidence.
- Appreciates positive competition “between the best” as a boost for academic performance and excellence.
- Envisions taking on a role in public life as a social responsibility.
- Wants to help further integrate the Croatian state and society into the EU.



My current plan is to get exposed to the big world, to the top of my profession, where I can get top-notch experience of doing law (...) and then try to somehow implement it here. As the world is getting more and more international, EU-oriented and centred, people in order to navigate this world (...) they really need to have people who know how to navigate this world, how to interact in this world, who have the necessary connections...

⁶⁸ The interview was conducted in English on 10 June 2020, as part of another project.

Tanja Polegubić⁶⁹

Founder and manager of *Saltwater Nomads Agency*

Migration and mobility

- Parents emigrated to Australia in the late 1960s (father) and 1970s (mother); Tanja was raised in Canberra.
- Returned first in 1992 visiting with her family.
- Second return in 2001 on her own, then again in 2006 and 2009.
- Frequent visits to Croatia while studying in Italy, up until 2015.
- Final remigration in 2017 (after father's death).
- Plans to go back and forth between her family in Australia and Croatia.
- Might remigrate again to Australia later in life, given the quality of health and care services for the elderly there.

(Re)integration

- Sense of belonging to both Australia and Croatia.
- Shares the positive energy, solidarity, and commitment of people who want to contribute to development in Croatia.
- Well-integrated, has local family connections, local and international friends.
- Originally a remote worker, she founded her own company aimed at developing the digital nomad community and industry in Croatia.

Change agency

- Sees a need for and engages in projects developing agro-business, education, health, gender equality, and financial inclusion; consultant work in international projects.
- Criticizes slow administration, corruption, lack of transparency and accountability.
- Underlines the need for tenant protection to improve the business environment.



... there are really, really cool people here, doing cool things. (And) when you persevere, push through, and do things, you are making a change – not just people with Croatian origin, but other foreigners who want to live here and who want to contribute. (...) They love being here and they want to make those improvements.

⁶⁹ The interview was conducted in English on 13 April 2021.

Andrej Dundović⁷⁰

Astrophysicist, PhD from Hamburg University; founder and manager of the *Cosmological Centre* in Križevci

Migration and mobility

- MSc in physics from Zagreb University.
- Left Croatia in 2014, returned after six years: PhD from Hamburg University in astrophysics, work as a research assistant, post-doc in Italy/Gran Sasso Science Institute.
- Returns to implement a successfully acquired EU project: the construction of an educational research centre in his hometown of Križevci, the *Cosmological Centre*.
- Might go abroad again for another post-doc, to Germany or the Netherlands.
- Starting his own family would keep him permanently in Croatia.

(Re)integration

- Decided against a “normal academic career” and the “nomadic life” of a researcher.
- Despite the institutional support programme for returning scientists, no desire to join the Croatian academic sector.
- Well-networked in the community, cross-sector cooperation with NGOs and local government.
- Had to deal with many administrative obstacles.
- Appreciates being close to family and friends.

Change agency

- Has gained confidence while abroad.
- Is “giving back” to his home community by creating something new.
- Tackles the lack of STEM skills and education, and of extracurricular science activities in Croatia.
- Acts against the brain drain from his local community.
- Encourages young people to dream about what they want to do in life.



...as a researcher you are fulfilling your secondary role of not only producing useful research but also giving something concrete back to the community, to the society that is financing you. (...) There is also some need... let's say: to look at the stars! People are too dragged down by practicalities and most of the time they... forget about dreaming.

⁷⁰ The interview was conducted in English on 15 February 2021.

Nina Pušić⁷¹

MA in environmental law from the University of Edinburgh; export finance climate strategist at *Oil Change International*

Migration and mobility

- Born and raised in the US by an Italian mother and a Croatian father; double citizenship.
- Regular summer visits to Dubrovnik, her father's home town, where he now lives again.
- Undergraduate and postgraduate environmental law studies in Scotland.
- After graduation, during the COVID-19 pandemic, internship with a Bonn-based UN organization; then move to Croatia and remote work – relates to digital nomads.

(Re)integration

- Lives in close contact with extended family and childhood friends, praises the quality of life and nature in Croatia.
- No integration problems.
- Socializes with digital nomads, expatriates, and other Croatian diaspora remigrants.

Change agency

- Engaged in local community organizations, *Impact Hub Zagreb*, *Zagrebpreneurs*, etc.
- Provides expertise to NGOs on climate change and green transformation.
- Collects and disseminates information on sustainable living in Zagreb for non-Croatian speaking residents.



Given my work and background in sustainability and climate policy, I hope I can contribute this knowledge and expertise to Croatia. I primarily see myself doing this by helping raise awareness within the city of Zagreb on how people can live more sustainable lifestyles, support sustainable small businesses, and inform communities and local government on how to mitigate their impacts on the climate, and adapt to a changing climate.

⁷¹ The interview was conducted in English on 8 March 2021.

Vuk Vuković⁷²

Economist, PhD from Oxford University; university lecturer, entrepreneur, co-founder of a UK-based company analysing networks to improve predictability; co-founder of a private business association in Croatia

Migration and mobility

- Summer schools and study visits at Berkeley and Harvard Universities while studying at Zagreb University; Masters at the London School of Economics plus one year of work after graduation in London.
- Return to Zagreb, teaching at the Zagreb School of Economics and Management (ZSEM).
- PhD at Oxford University, his wife and child remained in Croatia.
- Return to settle with family (now three children) in Croatia.
- Once the children are older, he might further develop his business in the UK or US.

(Re)integration

- Smooth integration into Croatian academia.
- Works remotely on expanding his UK-based company.
- Cherishes the quality of life in Croatia; the lower salary level compared to the UK is compensated by lower living costs and more time for his family in Croatia.
- Enjoys the help of parents in raising his children.

Change agency

- Addresses inefficient bureaucracy and improves the business environment in Croatia.
- Demands that government institutions stop clientelism, provide full budget transparency, that politicians are held accountable & corruption is effectively fought.
- Advocates economic, structural reforms, advises the association *Glas poduzetnika* ('voice of entrepreneurs') established to represent SMEs during the COVID regime.



I have a feeling that things are changing. Hopefully in the right direction. Plus, I think there is kind of a shift of generations ... finally happening to a certain extent, where younger people like myself, who are in their thirties, (are...) getting to more serious positions in their companies, which is slowly making the shift happen.

⁷² The interview was conducted in English on 17 February 2021.

Darija Sesar Petrić⁷³

Law graduate from the University of Mostar; project manager at *THE CIVICS Innovation Hub*, civic education and sustainable development expert

Migration and mobility

- Raised and educated (law studies) in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Work and further education abroad, each between four months and a year: Spain 2013-14, Belgium 2018, Austria 2018-19, Italy 2019-20.
- Employment in Zagreb during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Settling in Zagreb with future husband, starting a family, friends close by.

(Re)integration

- Employed in public administration and IOs as project assistant/manager.
- Permanent project manager position in non-governmental organization (NGO) fostering sustainable development and civic education.
- Invests and expands her international and cross-sector work experience.

Change agency

- Involved in the international NGO *Club Alpbach Croatia*.
- Participates in public gardening and cleaning activities in her neighbourhood.
- Shares information on her social media channels and offers career counselling to people interested in job and education opportunities in Croatia and abroad.



Through my experiences abroad and my current pursuits I have developed a deep appreciation for the importance of community engagement and social responsibility. I believe that by leveraging my skills and knowledge, I can make a meaningful contribution to the local community.

⁷³ Informal conversation in both English and Croatian, and written statement in Croatian, in April 2023.

Mario Špadina⁷⁴

PhD in chemistry from the University of Montpellier; founder and CEO of SEA-CRAS

Migration and mobility

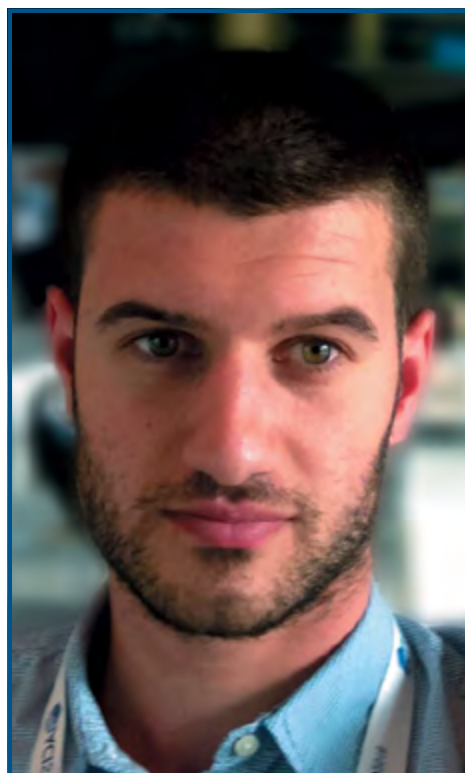
- Moved from Dalmatia to study chemistry in Zagreb.
- PhD studies at the University of Montpellier (2015-19); research at the French Atomic Energy Commission in collaboration with the University of Ljubljana.
- 2019-20, post-doc research at the European research centre EIT Climate-KIC, the University of Valencia, the University of Ljubljana.
- Return to Zagreb to a post-doc position at the Ruđer Bošković Institute in 2020.

(Re)integration

- Return motivation: lifestyle in Croatia, proximity to friends and family.
- Employment in the academic/research sector.
- Founded a startup based on international experience; using novel technology, analysing satellite imagery to monitor marine environments; wins national and international awards for innovation.
- Experiences a cultural gap and tensions with local researchers and administration; is criticized for his business endeavours besides conducting research.

Change agency

- Sees the need to reduce inefficiency and digitalize bureaucracy in academia.
- Points at system inertia as a major obstacle to development and innovation.
- Promotes financial and technical support for innovative startups, and regulations to protect intellectual property.
- Promotes civic/democracy and media literacy education aimed at young people assuming their rights and responsibilities as citizens.
- Has experienced efficient, well-established state administration in France; however, sees problems with multiculturalism and prevailing racism in society.



Of course, there are cultural frictions [when you return] ... from a more competitive environment you come to a less competitive environment, that's a first friction mechanism. A second friction mechanism is novel ideas. For example, my having a startup was not really well accepted ... [at the institute].

⁷⁴ The interview was conducted in English on 12 February 2021.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Croatia is an example of a CESEE country with an ageing population that is particularly sensitive to the consequences of emigration, especially as a significant share of emigrants are young and highly skilled. Like other countries of the region, Croatia has witnessed high levels of emigration since the early phase of post-socialist transition, and an acceleration of emigration again after its accession to the European Union. Like other central and eastern European Union member states, Croatia though has seen increasing return and remigration as well.

Given the predominant focus on the reasons and dynamics of emigration in public discourse, our research was driven by the wish to highlight and better understand the reasons behind the decisions of young Croatians living abroad to remigrate. We explored their return motivations and (re)integration experiences which proved to be multidimensional with legal, economic, social, cultural, and personal / psychological aspects. Inquiring into the ideas of remigrants about how they envisaged their contribution to development and prosperity in Croatian society, we captured their (hidden) potential to act as change agents.

Fluidity and complexity of decision-making

The Croatian millennials interviewed for this study see mobility as part of their lives. Besides income disparities between Croatia and western destination countries, crucial push and pull factors for mobility include imbalances in the performance of welfare and public services, as well as varying standards in education and training systems and chances for career advancement. Rising income levels in Croatia have recently made the country more attractive; but as we have seen, return decisions are driven by diverse factors which constitute overall well-being and quality of life. We found that the idea of permanently returning to and settling in Croatia was strongly linked to family ties and social bonds,

which alongside appreciation of the local lifestyle crucially mattered for family planning. When social relationships helped remigrants to integrate locally, those with temporary residence status were more likely to explore the possibilities of living in Croatia permanently, too.

In the transnational, mobile lifestyle of the millennial generation, remote work is a common professional practice made possible by digital technology. Some of the remigrants included in this study worked for employers or had founded companies or organisations based abroad, and they frequently moved between Croatia and other countries. Although the focus of our study was on Croatian millennials, we discovered in our interviews with non-Croatian peers staying as digital nomads that both groups appreciated the quality of life in Croatia, a fact that was crucial in choosing temporary residence.

We established that remigrants to Croatia were often registered as permanent residents abroad and did not deregister when arriving in Croatia, thus maintaining double residence. Conversely, they failed to deregister when they moved abroad. In some cases, when remigrants did not hold Croatian citizenship, they made use of the legal provisions for temporary residence in place for digital nomads. They also tapped into similar local infrastructures for finding accommodation and participating in leisure opportunities and services developed to meet the demands of this specific consumer group. Notably, digital nomads have sparked the expansion of an industry that serves their needs as temporary residents, as well as those of Croatian temporary remigrants.

In the interviews, remigrants agreed that the non-competitive work environment and salary levels, widespread administrative inertia and red tape, and the lack of service orientation were critical downsides of Croatia, and for some these proved real obstacles to long-term residence. This assessment was reiterated by their non-Croatian digital nomad peers. To take the step from temporary residence to a permanent status, remigrants generally suggested that the Croatian labour market needed to become more attractive and wages more competitive, and a more business-friendly environment would be conducive, too. Also, higher education in Croatia was criticized as not competitive for building an international academic career, nor was it sufficiently tailored to the needs of industry, thus producing a skills mismatch with a crucial impact on employability. Moreover, some remigrants pointed out that education reforms were missing that would establish effective standards with respect to educational processes and learning outcomes. Most remigrants considered advancing their professional careers further by going abroad again at a later stage.

A sense of 'belonging' and of sharing a Croatian identity – in spite of belonging also elsewhere, or of holding multiple identities – was frequently addressed in the interviews, independently of whether the interviewees had chosen temporary or permanent residence. This indicated the fluid character of both statuses.

A sense of belonging and identity formed a strong basis for ‘staying on’, unlike for the digital nomads we interviewed who in terms of lifestyle and self-understanding were principally not ‘here to stay’.

Confidence to act as agents of change

We found that international mobility experience had helped to strengthen the self-confidence of our interview partners. Understanding that they could compete with foreign peers, despite coping with a ‘knowledge shock’ in higher education institutions abroad, came up in various conversations as a crucial push forward. The ability to contribute to and willingness to engage for innovation and change are certainly connected to confidence, i.e. the conviction that knowledge, skills, values, and contacts brought back (the social or intangible remittances introduced above) can be made fruitful for social, economic, political, and cultural development. While social remittances and the change agency of remigrants were obviously recognized as beneficial by private sector employers and considered an asset in comparison to competing applicants without international experience, this seems to have been much more contested in public sector employment or even academia.

Some of the remigrants we spoke to either invested their knowledge and experience by volunteering in non-governmental organisations, or they supported reform processes in the sectors in which they worked. Others tried to encourage change through offering consulting services and by initiating public debate. Some established new civil initiatives, non-profit organisations, or business associations. Motivation for civic engagement and political participation was also linked to the idea of ‘giving back’. According to some, a patriotic attitude was best expressed through active commitment to social welfare by contributing to development and change, and by acting as ‘bridge builders’ when translating global norms into local contexts (Levitt and Merry, 2009). This included, for example, convincing relatives, colleagues, and friends to support environmental protection and sustainability, to adhere to democratic and liberal values, to respect gender equality, the rule of law, and to care for the common good. Becoming involved in politics, however, even among those remigrants with a genuine interest, represented a bigger step. Clear ambition and orientation as to what form such involvement could take was largely missing. Most kept a critical distance from political parties which they usually connected with intolerable levels of clientelism and corruption in public office.

To sum up, our interview partners clearly challenged the depiction of the young emigrant who turns their back on their country forever, only to invest their education and skills elsewhere.

Outlook

Remigration should be understood as of vital interest for Croatia's development and prosperity in the light of demographic decline and continuous population shrinking. If remigrants are not reached out to and attracted back while abroad, investment in education and innovative potential is lost. Remigrants represent a key potential for their home country's development; governments should therefore encourage and support their efforts to build careers through transnational mobility, to expand knowledge and experiences in their professional fields, and to enhance not only competence but confidence in their capacity to contribute to the advancement of their home country. An international environment in which competition for talent is global demands measures to support both transnational mobility and the return of highly skilled citizens, and internationalization strategies must facilitate temporary residence for both nationals and non-national (re)migrants. Continuing reform of the educational system and investment in its competitiveness would further contribute to a more attractive (re)migration environment.

Croatia's response to the transnational migration and mobility of its young, highly skilled millennials has so far lacked proactive steps to reattract them. The same holds true for their peers from the diaspora. With the policy measures laid out in Chapter 2, including programmes to foster transnational mobility and cooperation in academia, provisions for easing temporary residence, as well as governmental development strategies which explicitly mention outreach to young Croatians in western European countries – important steps have been taken in that direction. However, measures and strategies are still scattered and have not yet been systematized to form part of a comprehensive immigration policy, which needs to include outreach to highly skilled potential (re)migrants. With respect to the labour shortage in key sectors of Croatian industry, attracting a highly skilled workforce in demand internationally across sectors and industries as well as in research and innovation, alongside opening the domestic labour market for less specialized work performed by hired third-country nationals, must be a policy imperative.

Demographic decline and an ageing population require structured policy responses targeting young individuals and families in particular. As our interview partners repeatedly stressed, the well-being of young families must be secured by paying special attention to reconciling parenting and care responsibilities in the family in relation to children and elderly in need with professional inclusion and career-building opportunities regardless of gender. Thus, caring must be recognized as a shared responsibility, and policies geared towards supporting gender-equal care leave. This would foster the greater labour market participation of women and enhance their chances of advancing to leadership positions

– both crucial factors for highly skilled, transnationally mobile female Croatians when considering return. At present, grandparents and extended family support networks still compensate under-staffed childcare infrastructures throughout the country, against the background of a lack of regulations to facilitate and incentivize, for example, part-time work. A recurrent topic in this context is affordable housing for young people, and the difficulties they face in finding and financing a home. These are some of the standard issues discussed throughout the European Union today, and they need to be tackled in Croatia, too.

Finally, to encourage remigration, it is crucial for Croatia to foster a welcoming culture that aids the process of (re)integration and to cultivate a socially inclusive environment that accommodates, embraces, and is comfortable with the cultural diversity introduced and the ‘social remittances’ Levitt (1998) transferred by remigrants. It also means addressing and enhancing the local preparedness and capacity to absorb such transfers of different values, ideas, or behavioural norms. Obviously, remigration is an integral part of the ‘migration transition’ (Okolski, 2012) occurring in Croatia, and local reactions to return migrants reflect the heterogenization of society spurred by migration. That change processes are not without friction in the ‘contact zones’ (Pratt, 1991) of daily life clearly shows that reintegration is a two-way process and change requires agency both on the local’s and (re)migrants’s sides.

Despite its focus on remigration, this pilot study acknowledges the fact that emigration trends are continuing, and returnees are still significantly outnumbered by people who have chosen to leave. Their reasons for seeking employment, career advancement, further education, and well-being abroad are obvious. The importance of international and inner-European mobility as a core principle at the heart of the European project is unquestionable. Indeed, because of the many good reasons for leaving home, we were curious to explore the good reasons behind return. We hope that an informed understanding of what it takes, and needs, to remigrate and (re)integrate may help to develop strategies to enhance return migration and to elaborate measures to facilitate and assist that process. And, by hearing from internationally mobile young professionals about how they have benefitted from transnational migration and mobility, and why returning to Croatia mattered to them, we hope to have revealed their (hidden) potential as agents of change.

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Abstract

Croatia is one of the countries in the European Union with the fastest shrinking and ageing populations. It is therefore particularly sensitive to the consequences of emigration, especially since a significant share of emigrants are young and highly skilled. High levels of emigration and a continuous brain drain not only marked the country's post-socialist transition; like other central and eastern European Union member states, Croatia witnessed an acceleration of emigration again after its accession to the European Union. However, it has recently attracted increasing return and remigration. Policies and legal measures so far have been geared to respond to the effects of emigration by easing access to the domestic labour market for third country nationals, internationalisation strategies support academic mobility, brain circulation and brain gain, and the 'digital nomad visa' facilitates temporary residence. These measures stand for Croatia's 'migration transition' – from being a country of emigration to a country of immigration. A thorough understanding of how to foster the remigration of internationally mobile, highly skilled Croatian millennials from abroad, however, is still missing.

The pilot study addresses this knowledge gap. It explores the reasons behind remigration decisions and the (re)integration experiences of young Croatian citizens who have been involved in transnational migration and educational and career mobility. Based on qualitative research, most of all semi-structured interviews, it reveals the benefits of mobility and the capacity and preparedness of remigrants to contribute to the prosperity and development of the Croatian economy and Croatian society, capturing their (hidden) potential to act as agents of change.

Sažetak

Hrvatska je jedna od zemalja Europske unije s najbržim smanjenjem i starenjem stanovništva, stoga je posebno osjetljiva na posljedice emigracije, tim više što značajan udio iseljenika čine mlade i visokokvalificirane osobe. Visoke razine emigracije i kontinuirani odljev mozgova nisu obilježili samo postsocijalističku tranziciju zemlje. Hrvatska je, poput ostalih članica Europske unije srednje i istočne Europe, nakon ulaska u Europsku uniju ponovno svjedočila ubrzanju iseljavanja. No, također privlači sve veći povratak i remigraciju. Dosadašnje javne politike i pravne mjere bile su usmjerene na odgovor na učinke iseljavanja olakšavanjem pristupa domaćem tržištu rada za državljane trećih zemalja, strategije internacionalizacije koje podupiru akademsku mobilnost, cirkulaciju i dobitak mozgova, a 'viza za digitalne nomade' olakšava privremeni boravak. Javne politike i pravne mjere predstavljaju „migracijsku tranziciju“ Hrvatske iz zemlje emigracije u zemlju imigracije. Međutim, još uvijek nedostaje temeljito razumijevanje načina poticanja remigracije međunarodno mobilnih, visokokvalificiranih hrvatskih milenijalaca iz inozemstva.

Pilot studija se bavi ovim jazom u dostupnom znanju. Na temelju kvalitativnog istraživanja, ponajviše polustrukturiranih intervju, istražuje razloge odluka o remigraciji i iskustva (re)integracije mladih hrvatskih građana koji su sudjelovali u transnacionalnoj migraciji, obrazovnoj i karijernoj mobilnosti. Prednosti mobilnosti te sposobnost i spremnost remigranata da doprinesu prosperitetu i razvoju hrvatskog gospodarstva i društva, otkriva njihov (skriveni) potencijal da djeluju kao pokretači promjena.

About the authors

Caroline Hornstein Tomić (PhD) is Senior Researcher at the Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences in Zagreb where she focuses on highly skilled and return migration, diaspora and identity politics, post-socialist transformation processes in Southeast Europe, and civic education. Besides engaging in academia and the civil sector – as co-founder and managing partner of *THE CIVICS Innovation Hub*, co-founder and management chair of the Croatian-based foundation *Znanje na djelu*, and board member of the foundation *European Forum Alpbach* – she has also worked in the public sector as Head of the Operative Division at the German Federal Agency for Civic Education (2016–2018). From 2000 until 2005, she was Resident Representative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Maja Kurilić holds an MA in public policy from the Central European University in Budapest and a BA in political science from the University of Zagreb. Currently, she works as a hub manager at *THE CIVICS Innovation Hub*. Prior to this role, Maja advised the public sector in her home country of Croatia on projects like the European Social Fund evaluation. She has ten years of active engagement in the non-governmental sector and in academia, conducting research and co-authoring articles on remigration, brain drain and policy-making in Croatia. She is actively involved in the work of the Croatian-based NGO *Znanje na djelu*, which provides practice-based education to pupils, and in European networks like the European Forum Alpbach. Maja currently serves as a board member in Club Alpbach Croatia.

Dora Bagić is a business analyst in the Global Business Process Management team at Teva Pharmaceuticals. She has also worked as a consultant for the World Bank and the OECD on projects in connection with business environment reforms in Croatia. Since 2019, she has been involved in the Zagreb-based NGO *Znanje na djelu*. Dora holds an MSc in international politics from Leiden University and a BA in political science from the University of Zagreb. In her master's thesis, she focused on the relationship between political trust and youth emigration from Croatia to the Netherlands.

Appendix A – Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in the study ‘Croatia’s potential: (Re)Migration, (temporary) return, and change agency of a young, highly skilled generation’. The study is conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, and funded by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The focus of the pilot study is to inquire into the contribution of new ideas, resources, and competencies by people with migration experience and their reception at workplaces, in social networks/peer groups, and in the private sphere (families, partners, friends, etc.). Correspondingly, we investigate responses to highly skilled (re)migration and (temporary) return by governmental as well as non-governmental organizations, agencies, and institutions in Croatia, as well as media discourse.

The purpose of this form is to obtain your written consent for participation in this study. Please read the statements below and if you agree with them, please sign the form with your initials at the bottom of this page.

- I confirm that I have read the information about the project and had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that my participation in the project is voluntary, that I do not have to provide information that I do not wish to share, and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time (without indicating a reason) by contacting the researcher via the contact details given below.
- I give my initial consent for the interview to be recorded on audio.
- I understand that my responses will be kept confidential.
- I give consent for anonymized excerpts from the interview to be used in subsequent reports and publications.

- I agree to take part in the above research project.

Researchers on this project will follow strict data protection rules. All personal information relating to the study participants will be kept securely, and used only to contact participants for this study. The Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar is the organization responsible for storing personal data on this project in compliance with the Data Protection Directive (EC Directive 95/46 or Regulation (EU) 2016/679). Any inquiries or complaints should be sent to the following address: Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (Dr. Caroline Hornstein Tomić), Marulićev trg 19/I, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

- Caroline Hornstein Tomić, PhD, project leader (Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb)
- Dora Bagić, junior researcher (Znanje na djelu/Wissen am Werk)
- Maja Kurilić, junior researcher (Znanje na djelu/Wissen am Werk)

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix B – Confirmation of the Ethical Commission



Marulićev trg 19/1, HR-10000 Zagreb; p.p. 277; Tel: ++ 385 1 4806-800, Fax: ++ 385 1 4820-296;
E-mail: ured@pilar.hr; <http://www.pilar.hr>; OIB: 32840574937; IBAN: HR3323600001101455340



Broj: 11-73/21-243
Zagreb, 04. veljače 2021.

Dr. sc. Caroline Hornstein Tomić
Znanstvena savjetnica
Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar
Marulićev trg 19/1
10 000 Zagreb

POTVRDA ETIČKOG POVJERENSTVA INSTITUTA PILAR

Uvidom u dokumentaciju predloženog istraživanja „Potencijal Hrvatske: (Re) Migracija, (privremeni) povratak i sredstvo za promjenu mladih visokokvalificiranih generacija“ (Croatia's potential: (Re)Migration, (temporary) return, and change agency of a young high-skilled generation), voditeljice dr. sc. Caroline Hornstein Tomić, povjerenstvo ne nalazi predviđene postupke i procedure koji bi bili protivni Etičkom kodeksu Instituta društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, strukovnim etičkim kodeksima, te drugim važećim zakonima i propisima Republike Hrvatske.

ETIČKO POVJERENSTVO INSTITUTA PILAR:

Dr. sc. Andreja Brnjša Žganec

Dr. sc. Ines Sučić

Dr. sc. Ivo Turk

Dr. sc. Zdenko Zeman

Dr. sc. Lynette Šikić Mićanović

Appendix C – Interview questionnaire

Interview questionnaire for returnees (approx. 40 min – 1 hour)

INTRODUCTION

5 min

- Introduction of research and researcher
- Introduction of the interview partner
- Please introduce yourself: your name, country of origin
- Country of residence/migration (host country)
- Age? Job? What brought you here? Who did you come with?

(RE)MIGRATION SITUATION

10-15 min

- What is your background? Where have you lived?
- What is your family history? Who went abroad first? When and why?
- What made you decide to come back to Croatia?
- Do you remember the day when you decided to come back to Croatia?
- How did your friends and family react?

EVERYDAY LIFE IN CROATIA

20-25 min

- What does your daily routine here in Croatia look like? How does it fit in with the routine of work colleagues?
- Have you made new friends since you were here? Do you follow the media? Are you still following media in your home country?
- Do you follow the political situation in Croatia? Does it influence your daily life?
- How did you make friends and social contacts in the town you live in now?

- How much do you feel that you have become part of society?
- What are the most positive aspects of your being (back) in Croatia? Are there specific things you enjoy?
- What are the most negative aspects of your being (back) in Croatia? What do you find hard to get used to in the place of return?
- Have you learnt something new about Croatia that you were not aware of before?

FUTURE IN CROATIA?

8-10 min

- What are your plans for the future? Are you planning to stay in Croatia?
- What would motivate you to settle down in Croatia? Can you imagine working and living in Croatia?
- What do you think is missing in Croatia?
- What do you believe needs to change and develop in Croatia that would encourage you to stay?

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CROATIA'S (HIDDEN) POTENTIAL –
Highly skilled, young remigrants as agents of change



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