

# IMPACT OF REMIGRATION ON THE WORK SPHERE UNDER COVID-19: THE CASE OF LITHUANIA

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Received 10 October 2020  
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-4-6  
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*Remigration is the return of a country's citizens from emigration. Remigrants carry with them ideas, knowledge, values, and skills. Although the work sphere is where these social remittances can be used most efficiently, the social remittance literature pays very little attention to employee experience. The primary aim of this article is to explore the types of social remittances, the ways they are transmitted, and how they are used in the work sphere. Employment has been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as many workplaces are closing amid quarantine restrictions and social distancing requirements. Another aim of this contribution is to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the transfer of social remittances to the work sphere. The article presents findings from 15 interviews with highly qualified remigrants and five interviews with their Lithuanian co-workers. The interviews were conducted in May–July 2020 within the project ‘Social remittances of (re) migrants for society welfare growth: challenges and experiences in a comparative perspective’, financed by the Research Council of Lithuania.*

**Keywords:**

remigration, work sphere, COVID-19, social remittances.

## **Introduction**

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The regaining of independence in 1991 lifted the Iron Curtain of the Soviet regime, and Lithuanians started moving freely across the world. Yet after a short period of euphoria over potential family reunions and the freedom of choice of domicile, the economy of Lithuania went into a downward spin caused by the collapse of industry and market liberalisation. Economic hardship forced part of the Lithuanian population into economic migration. Over the past 30 years, Lithuania's emigration rate has been among the highest in the European Union;

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**To cite this article:** Geciene-Janulione, I. 2020, Impact of remigration on the worksphere under COVID-19: the case of Lithuania, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 12, no. 4, p. 103–127. doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-4-6.

almost one-fifth of the population has left the country<sup>1</sup> (Migration in numbers, 2020). This has led to a decrease in the number of young, employable people as well as to workforce shortages. The current halt in emigration and the return of emigrants is viewed as a way to solve these problems.

Remigration is the return of citizens from immigration; remigrants carry ideas, knowledge, values, and skills with them. Social remittances have lately been a primary focus for many researchers. It is expected that ‘by returning to their home country, circular migrants bring new skills and ideas, which encourage innovation and progress’ [1, p. 3]. Still, as emphasised by Haynes and Gasińska [2], the social remittance literature has so far paid very little attention to employee experience. Most of the studies investigate what social skills emigrants acquire when working in the host country [2–4] rather than how social remittances are transmitted by returnees and what impact they have on workplaces in their country of origin. The primary aim of this article is to explore the types of social remittances, the ways they are transmitted and how they are used in the work sphere.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious effect on the work sphere as many workplaces are closing because of quarantine restrictions and social distancing requirements. Besides, travel restrictions have impacted on migration trends. Thus, the other aim of this article is to look into how COVID-19 has affected the migration situation and the transfer of social remittance to the work sphere in Lithuania.

This article presents findings from interviews (15) with highly qualified (re) migrants and five with their colleagues working permanently in Lithuania. The interviews were conducted in May–July 2020 within the project ‘Social remittances of (re) migrants for society welfare growth: challenges and experiences in a comparative perspective’, which was financed by the Research Council of Lithuania. This article defines ‘returned migrants’ as individuals who lived outside Lithuania for 12 months after 1990 but were residing permanently in the country as at the time of the study.

## **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this article is an array of research assumptions about social remittances and employee experience. The term ‘social remittances’ was first introduced by Peggy Levitt to refer to ‘norms, practices, identities and social capital’ and emphasise the importance of social and cultural non-direct impact on the transformation of home countries [5, p. 927]. Migrants may bring home democratic — cultural and associational — practices, information, and know-how, as well as knowledge of how the system works in other countries

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<sup>1</sup> Migration trends, 2020, *Migration in numbers*. URL: <https://123.emn.lt/en/> (accessed 14.09.2020).

[6, p. 10]. The mobilisation of migrants' expertise and skills may contribute to the development of their countries much more than any financial remittances or investment [7, p. 73; 8; 9]. The circulation channels for social remittances have been identified in the literature. These are migrants' journeys or return to their countries of origin, migrants' social networks [10], and the media [2; 11].

Social remittances can have a major impact on the country of origin. Migrants are potential transmitters of research and innovation, responsible for technological transfer and skills improvement [12, p. 20]. The cultural capital that migrants have acquired in host countries benefits the countries of origin, which imbibe civil consciousness and experience [13, p. 77]. An important corollary is 'the subtle and dynamic effects of migration's "social remittances" on reshaping political understandings, expectations, and norms' [14, p. 19]. Social remittances can also change organisational routines in the home country, for example, by inculcating an attitude of accountability and transparency [6, p. 10–11].

The last decade has seen publications about social capital transferred by Central and East European migrants into their countries of origin [3; 4; 15–23], the influence of social capital on social change in the countries of origin [24; 25], and obstacles to the receipt of social remittances [26–29].

Work is one of the three main spheres where social remittances can be used, alongside family life and politics [30]. Nevertheless, 'very little attention is paid to the workplace in the social remittance literature' [2, p. 2]. Most studies examine what knowledge and social skills emigrants acquire through working in another country [2–4]. Potential social remittances are norms, values, ideas, practices, behaviours, knowledge, social skills, work culture, know-how, strategies, identities, social capital, etc. Grabowska defines workplace social skills as 'cognitive skills, self-management and discipline, contacts with others and work organisation skills' [4, p. 88]. Some skills are specific to returned migrants: they can ' (1) interact and interrelate cross-culturally; (2) deal with emotional work; and (3) take the initiative and act independently' [3, p. 6]. All this necessitates a study of how 'return [ed] migrants reflect and use their migratory experiences and possibly acquired work-related social skills after their return' [3, p. 5].

The factors in the transmission of workplace social remittances are timing, patterns of interaction in the workplace, and the receipt of social remittances. Timing is the key factor: the longer migrants are immersed in the working routines of a host country, the more their attitudes change and the more they become accustomed to 'the rules of the game' [2, p. 3]. Timing is also important for primary socialisation — if it occurs outside the country of origin, returned migrants 'will have more difficulty adjusting and/or giving back' [31, p. 503]. Moreover, 'sometimes there is a time lag due to a lack of opportunity to deploy their skills [obtained abroad] and competences upon return', for example, this applies to the command of languages spoken in a host country [3, p. 14].

The second factor is the pattern of interactions in the workplace. Grabowska investigates the ‘patterns of interaction with the host society’, particularly the learning patterns in the host-society workplace, since ‘migrants differ in their attitude and approach to learning and the ways they communicate with the host and origin workplaces and employment-related situations’ [3, p. 4]. It is also of interest to examine personal capabilities and different patterns of transmission of social remittances in workplaces in the countries of origin. For example, Karolak writes that the actualisation of social remittances in the workplace depends ‘on the coping strategies adopted by returnees’, stressing that ‘re-emigration, activism, adaptation and/or entrepreneurship were the returnees’ main strategies in this respect’ [19, p. 35].

The third factor is the patterns of receipt of social remittances in the workplace in the country of origin; workplaces may differ significantly in this respect. The main obstacles for remittance receipt are low incomes and the country of origin’s work culture, which deals ‘less with formal rules than with wider workplace culture and human relationships’. The latter include greater pressure, a stronger hierarchy, the lack of ‘softer skills’ (teamwork skills, negotiation, compromise), the lack of rules such as the ‘work-life balance’, attitudes to customers, etc. [2; 19]. Another obstacle is society’s rather unfavourable attitude towards returned migrants and their migration experience: ‘regardless of how much human capital returned migrants bring from abroad, the successful integration of returnees is unlikely if their migration experience is not considered as an asset by the home country’s labour market’ [1, p. 12].

## **Data**

This article utilises statistical migration data and semi-structured in-depth interviews with returned migrants and their co-workers. The statistical migration used is open data from the Lithuanian Department of Statistics and other sources. These figures paint a clear picture of the migration situation in Lithuania and aid in assessing the impact of COVID-19 on Lithuanian migration.

Qualitative data were collected from 15 interviews with returned migrants and five with their colleagues working permanently in Lithuania. The interviews were conducted in May–September 2020 via Skype or a different messenger application in compliance with COVID-19 rules. They were carried out in the interviewee’s language of choice — Lithuanian or English — and were recorded with the informed consent of the participants. The names of the respondents, places, companies, etc. have been anonymised. The interview data are used below to explore different types of social remittances, the way they are transmitted, and their receipt in the work sphere.

Returned interviewees were reached by using a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling to draw a reasonably heterogeneous sample. There

were two main selection criteria — residing abroad for at least 12 months and a university degree. The first criterion applies because respondents needed to have spent sufficient time in the host country to acquire new knowledge and social skills, adapt, and gain cultural experience. The second criterion is based on theoretical assumptions and earlier findings showing that highly qualified migrants could offer the most to their country of origin [9; 12; 32–35].

Besides these two criteria, returned migrants were selected using the maximum variation sampling principle to ensure differences in gender, age, profession, and the time of emigration and return. The sample was balanced in terms of gender (8 females, 7 males), age (6 in their late 20s and 30s, 9 in their 40s; the sample did not include any older respondents as, statistically speaking, Lithuanian migrants are very young), and profession, which ranged from researchers, IT specialists, finance and e-commerce experts, engineers, business managers, librarians, and educators to culture workers. Some of them left Lithuania in 1993–1997, and some in 2012. The majority spent about 8–10 years abroad. Some returned to Lithuania as early as in 2006, and some came back only in 2018. All respondents had work experience abroad and spent sufficient time back in Lithuania to integrate into the local work sphere. Nevertheless, not everyone re-entered employment immediately upon returning to Lithuania because some did not find suitable work or simply wanted to take a break.

The interviews were designed to investigate qualitative biographical data from respondents, who were asked to share their migration stories: why they decided to emigrate, what their experience of study and work (if applicable) abroad was, and how they have lived since returning to Lithuania. Although the questionnaire had large blocks on family, workplace, and participation in public activities, this article will focus on the work sphere. The interviews sought to identify types of social remittances, the ways they are transmitted, the factors determining the success of social remittance receipt, and the impact of these remittances on the lives of the local population, localities, the country, and society. Respondents also answered questions about the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their family and work situation.

The interviews with returned migrants' co-workers used the 'matched interviews' approach as it is employed in Ahmadov and Sasse's study [36] (they applied it when interviewing respondents' family members and friends). According to Ahmadov and Sasse, this technique 'goes one step beyond the self-reported attitudes and behavior in stand-alone biographical narrative interviews and allows us to add a comparative dimension by comparing the migrants' narratives with those of a family member or friend in the country of origin' [36, p. 11] Furthermore, 'this matching helps to validate what the migrants themselves report, but it also points to changes in their attitudes or behavior which they might not recognize in themselves' [Ibid.].

We surveyed workplace colleagues because they could provide valuable insight into types of social remittances and their receipt at a workplace. Returnees were asked to nominate a suitable candidate. Overall, we carried out five interviews with co-workers. Recruiting workmates for matched interviews was rather problematic. Since returnees were looking for people they could trust to express the same views, bias could have crept in the results of data analysis. The questionnaire for work colleagues mirrored that for returned migrants. Data from these interviews are used in this article to explain attitudes towards returned migrants at their workplace, to describe social remittances they were transmitting, and to evaluate the impact of these remittances.

### The Lithuanian migration situation and its causes: 1990–2020

Official data show that, since 1990, the Lithuanian population has diminished through emigration by 699,000 people, which is about a fifth of the country's residents.<sup>2</sup> This figure may actually be higher because not all migrants report their departure. For example, in a 2019 study of migrants, 13% of respondents stated that they had not made their departure official.<sup>3</sup> The number of emigrants has varied quite significantly over the years (Fig. 1).

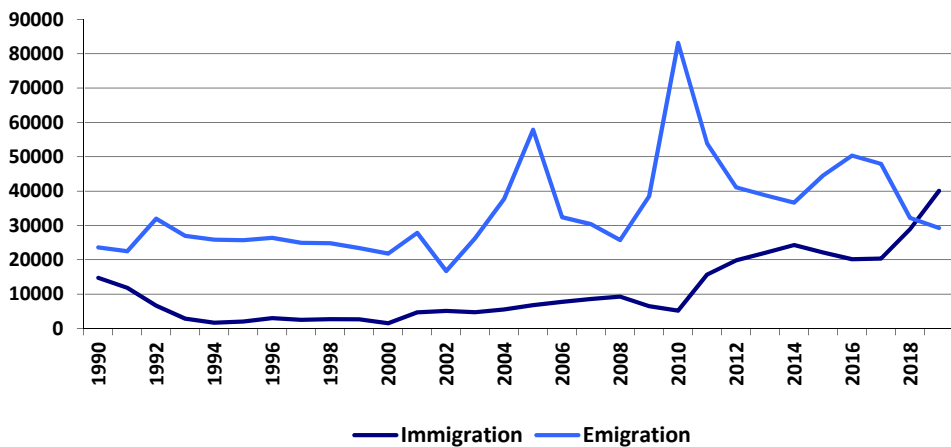


Fig. 1. Migration and immigration flows, 1990–2019

Source: Statistics Lithuania<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Migration trends, 2020, *Migration in numbers*. URL: <https://123.emn.lt/en/> (accessed 14.09.2020).

<sup>3</sup> Užsienio lietuvių apklausa apie jų būklę ir poreikius, 2019. URL: <https://urm.lt/uploads/default/documents/ULA%202019%20URM%20TINKLALAPIUI.pdf>. (accessed 23.09.2020).

<sup>4</sup> Lithuanian official statistics Portal, 2020. URL: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/EN/> (accessed 01.09.2020).

Figure 1 shows two emigration peaks: the first occurred after Lithuania's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the second — after the 2008 global financial crisis. The 2010 peak was partially due to changes in the public health-care scheme, requiring all permanent Lithuanian residents to pay monthly premiums. Emigrants who had reported their departure, including those who emigrated before 2010, were relieved of this obligation. Therefore, 'as paying health insurance premiums became mandatory, reported emigration spiked in spring 2010, giving an idea of the unreported emigration numbers of previous years' [37].

Most Lithuanian emigrants are young people: in 2019, more than 72.7% of emigrants were aged between 15 and 44, while this age group makes up about 36% of the entire Lithuanian population.<sup>5</sup> The three decades of emigration of young, employable people have given rise to many demographic, social, and economic issues: birth rates are falling, and there is a critical shortage of specialists in certain fields and overall workforce deficit. Moreover, 'a shrinking population of working people must support a growing number of the unemployed' and pensioners [ibid.].

Lithuania's migrants mostly choose the UK, Germany, Norway, and Ireland as their countries of destination.<sup>6</sup> The UK, however, is becoming less popular: in 2017, it was the destination of 47% of Lithuanian emigrants; in 2018, of 38%; and in 2019, of 35% (ibid.). This is mostly related to the political factor Brexit, which has added to uncertainty and created further obstacles for immigrants in the country. There is also considerable emigration to Ukraine and Belarus, mostly accounted for by citizens of these two countries who have come to Lithuania for temporary work.

Dissatisfaction in the work sphere remains one of the main reasons for emigration from Lithuania. A 2018 study of migrants revealed three most common reasons for emigration: expectations of a higher income (56% of all respondents); the desire to test oneself (20.7%); leaving behind Lithuanian authorities of all levels (dissatisfaction with the government, poor relationships with employers and the state, a low income) (20.3%).<sup>7</sup> Another study of emigrants, conducted in 2019, showed that main reasons to be disappointed with employment in Lithuania were low salaries (23.7%); limited career opportunities (12.9%); a lack of jobs (5.9%)<sup>8</sup>. A comparison of migrants' work conditions in Lithuania

<sup>5</sup> Migration trends, 2020, *Migration in numbers*. URL: <https://123.emn.lt/en/> (accessed 14.09.2020).

<sup>6</sup> Migration trends, 2020, *Migration in numbers*. URL: <https://123.emn.lt/en/> (accessed 14.09.2020).

<sup>7</sup> Tyrimas atskleidė, dėl ko emigruoja lietuviai: per maži atlyginimai — tik viena iš priežasčių, 2018, *DELFI.lt*, 8.10.2018. URL: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/tyrimas-atskleide-del-ko-emigruoja-lietuviai-per-mazi-atlyginimai-tik-viena-is-priezasciu.d?id=79259323> (accessed 22.09.2020).

<sup>8</sup> *Užsienio lietuvių apklausa apie jų būklę ir poreikius*, 2019. URL: <https://urm.lt/uploads/default/documents/ULA%202019%20URM%20TINKLALAPIUI.pdf> (accessed 23.09.2020).

and in emigration gives a gloomy view of Lithuania's work sphere: 89.3% of respondents said that employees were respected abroad, and barely 36%, that they were in Lithuania; 69.3% rated the level of stress at their workplace in emigration as acceptable, compared to just 25.5% who said the same about stress levels at home; 74.8% and just 19.1% spoke of good career opportunities abroad and in Lithuania; 80.6% and 38% respectively, that their merits were appreciated.<sup>9</sup> In the light of the above, Lithuania can hardly expect a steady stream of returnees.

Since 1990, immigration to Lithuania has been markedly lower than emigration (Fig. 1). Until 2017, most immigrants were Lithuanians who had left the country earlier, e. g., in 2011, 89.3% of immigrants were Lithuanian citizens; in 2016, 70.6%.<sup>10</sup> No reliable sources indicate how many of the returned citizens stayed in Lithuania and how many emigrated again. Sometimes people leave Lithuania and return several times, creating circular migration. Since 2017, immigration of non-Lithuanian citizens to the country has been increasing. In 2017 non-Lithuanians comprised 50.1% of all immigrants (of these, 3.4% were EU citizens; 46.7%, non-EU citizens). The number of non-Lithuanian immigrants increased 1.8-fold, compared to 2016. The proportion of immigrants in 2019 was similar: non-Lithuanian citizens accounted for 49.06% (of these, 2.2% were EU citizens, 46.9%, non-EU citizens). In 2019, the majority of non-Lithuanian immigrants were Ukrainians (45.1%) and Belarusians (32.5%). Most of them are economic migrants seeking to join Lithuania's workforce.

In 2020, the immigration situation changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data from the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, since March, the pandemic has brought home almost 14,000 Lithuanians. At the same time last year, returned Lithuanians numbered 11,000. In March-August 2020, 8,597 Lithuanian citizens left the country; in the same months of 2019, this figure was 12,251. These data suggest that 'the pandemic has brought Lithuanians home, and kept those at home from leaving' [38].

The Lithuanian economist Žygimantas Mauricas says that this situation could as well be due to other factors such as 1) recent years' economic improvement in Lithuania; rapid growth in incomes and a reduction in tax liabilities; as compared to other European countries, the economic difference has significantly diminished; 2) Lithuania has not felt the effects of the COVID-19 crisis as strongly as many other countries in Western Europe, to which Lithuanians often emigrate,

<sup>9</sup> Tyrimas atskleidė, dėl ko emigruoja lietuviai: per maži atlyginimai — tik viena iš priežasčių, 2018, *DELFI.lt*, 8.10.2018. URL: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/tyrimas-atskleide-del-ko-emigruoja-lietuviai-per-mazi-atlyginimai-tik-viena-is-priezasciu.d?id=79259323> (accessed 26.10.2020).

<sup>10</sup> Migration trends, 2020, *Migration in numbers*. URL: <https://123.emn.lt/en/> (accessed 14.09.2020).



thus the stimulus to emigrate has become less powerful; people are afraid of going to other countries as they do not know whether travel restrictions will be reintroduced or whether they will find a job; 3) the third reason is Brexit, as the hard variant is becoming more and more likely [38].

The study of society's attitudes towards Lithuanians returning from emigrations shows that although the majority thought well of returnees, 20% of respondents were more sceptical about them (14% had a 'negative attitude' towards remigrants, and 6%, 'very negative').<sup>11</sup> Compared to the results of a similar survey conducted over a decade ago, in 2008, the number of people with a negative attitude towards Lithuanians returning from migration has risen considerably: then, only 3% of the population viewed returning émigré Lithuanians negatively (ibid.). This increase in unfavourable attitudes may have been due to articles in the press linking a sudden increase in crime with Lithuanians who have come home because of the pandemic.

There are no guarantees that, when the COVID-19 pandemic is over, emigration will not surge once again. In a representative survey of Lithuanian citizens carried out in July 2020, 62% said that they would not be considering emigration once the quarantine restrictions had been lifted; 16% said they were preparing to emigrate: of these, 3% had already made plans, while 13% were entertaining the idea but did not have concrete plans; 22% of respondents said that they were not planning to emigrate at present, but they would think about it should the opportunity arise.<sup>12</sup> Thus, one might expect another rise in migration once the travel restrictions are relaxed.

### **Returned migrants' social remittances in the work sphere**

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There is hope that returned migrants will integrate into the work sphere in their home country. The employment strategies of our respondents varied considerably: some had found work in Lithuania before returning and felt more secure; others did not seek employment for some time (a year or two) for various reasons — some wanted to take a break, others had returned to study (e. g., doctoral studies); some worked on personal projects (e. g. finishing a book) or had health concerns; some were raising young children, etc. Those who were searching for work found employment quite quickly since their competencies are in great demand in the country (e. g., a German-founded company urgently needed an engineer with a good command of German). Still, some respondents

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<sup>11</sup> Grįžtamoji migracija auga — bet ar visi grįžtantieji laukiami? 2020, *IOM International Organization for Migration*, 19.08.2020. URL: <http://www.iom.lt/lt/naujienos/364> (accessed 28.10.2020).

<sup>12</sup> Visuomenės požiūris į migracijos procesus COVID-19 kontekste kaitos tyrimas, 2020, *IOM International Organization for Migration*, July 2020. URL: <http://bit.do/renkuosilietuvatyrimas202007> (accessed 26.10.2020).

could not find a job that matched their competences or their income expectations. For example, one respondent who had spent a long time abroad working as a manager in finance did not want to work in an executive position in Lithuania because of her kids and, at the same time, considered salaries of non-management employees too low:

Yes, I was looking [for work], I spoke to people and looked around. [...] I wouldn't really want to be a director. A management position is a huge responsibility. If you're doing something, do it well. If I'm doing my best, I can't have a flexible schedule. When I can't say at work 'Sorry, but I need to pick up my kids from school and make dinner'. [...] I don't want to abandon my kids or family. If there is something in between, they tell me '1,000 euros and you're hired', but I don't want 1,000 euros.

*(F, late 40s, Latvia, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland, 11 years)*

Lower salaries were frequently mentioned by respondents as a shortcoming of Lithuania's labour market. Yet some respondents calculated that even with a lower income they would afford a better quality of life once they came home. Others decided to take steps to increase their income in Lithuania. For example, one respondent applied for six research positions, and all six employers were ready to hire; another found employment in a different field but with a company offering a higher salary; a third started their own business; a fourth began a career as a real estate agent.

When talking about their competences, skills, and attitudes brought from abroad, respondents highlighted their foreign language skills, which, as we see from the matched interviews, are sought-after and habitually used in their current workplaces:

Also, if we continue talking about her competences, her excellent knowledge of English is very useful, as she's the person who always translates the texts that need to be translated, or goes over them whenever you ask her.

*(F, late 20s, matched interview)*

Both respondents and their colleagues said that the former had some difficulty with the Lithuanian language. Although causing inconveniences, this circumstance was not considered a major drawback:

Because I used to speak English all the time, my Lithuanian was so bad when I came back that if I had to write emails in Lithuanian, it took me forever. [...] And still, even with my manager, when we are chatting on Slack, every other word that I use is English.

*(F, late 20s, US and UK, 8 years).*

She inserts English words both with the accent and without, but its all very organic. In certain situations, it seems easier for her to say things in English than in Lithuanian, even though her Lithuanian is excellent.

*(F, late 20s, matched interview)*

Another important competency of returned migrants is the professional skills and experience they bring with them, which aid in performing professional and non-work-related tasks:

I brought a lot of knowledge about selling real estate because over there I had to go to a lot of seminars, I had to read a lot, and I had a lot of experience.

*(Aras, M, early 40s, US-Estonia, 17 years)*

[I don't work in the field I was trained in], but at the same time, I am using all the knowledge I used for architecture and business.

*(F, UK, mid-30s, 7 years)*

Another strongly accentuated aspect was the importance of returned migrants' social capital for their current workplaces. Migrants' connections with people in a host country were particularly important when working in Lithuania:

Another thing that took off was my various contacts with foreign curators and art and culture organisations. It was based on these that we [...] [created] a platform for selling art with which we participated in the Collect Art Fair. This project happened purely through my contacts.

*(F, early 30s, UK, 13 years)*

We worked with the diaspora media, which was quite good; she was able to find contacts, which is something we benefit from to this day. She knows who's who over there, who is part of the American Lithuanian community if you need a contact. She's like a bridge because you don't need to search blindly, she can tell you straight-off — 'yes, I know someone, I can get you their contact details'.

*(F, late 20s, matched interview)*

The language skills and professional knowledge, experience and social contacts of returned migrants are very welcome in Lithuanian workplaces as the matched interviews with the co-workers of our respondents reveal. Meanwhile, some respondents stated that it was essential to find a job abroad that would give them important competences:

When you're in emigration, it's very important what you end up doing there. [...] If you're going away to work, then at least find a job where your knowledge will grow. It's a different situation if you return from emigration having worked hard in construction or something like that, compared to having worked in some kind of a normal job from where you return with a different skill set. That second group, which comes back with the good "baggage", these people are in high demand in Lithuania. Just about anyone will hire them. Their work culture and emotional intellect are totally different. As is their experience. Bring in this kind of people. They're needed all over Lithuania.

*(M, early 40s, US-Estonia, 17 years)*

All respondents stated that, aside from the above competencies, they brought back something extra — the so-called ‘soft skills’. These are a different type of work ethic (punctuality, organisation, responsibility, a results-orientated approach), a culture of communication (politeness, positivity, warmer relations with co-workers, respect for employees, a shorter social distance), liberal values and a Western mindset (e. g., greater sensitivity regarding nationality, race, LGBT rights).

Some workplaces were ready to embrace these soft skills. This is particularly true of private companies, institutions or large businesses rather than smaller, more aggressive or innovative businesses, or cultural initiatives:

The culture sector is not commonly known for organisation, planning, clear argumentation, preparation ahead of processes, or keeping to deadlines. These things mean a lot in developing a company or participating in international projects. [...] [She] enhanced our team in terms of the culture of communication as well, in communicating via email.

*(F, late 50s, matched interview)*

On his very first day, he said: ‘None of this *jūs* [the formal second-person pronoun in Lithuanian], it’s *tu* [the general second-person singular pronoun], we’re going to be working together here, we’re a team’. It’s like there’s no need for that distance. That’s what really came across, that shortening of the distance [...] I could really feel a kind of humanity and understanding coming from him, compared to other managers if I was sick or my child was sick, that would be the most important and critical thing.

*(F, early 30s, matched interview)*

These workplaces are more open to experiments and new ideas, which give employees more freedom to show initiative; they are eager to try new work methods and not afraid of tackling tasks where they might not have a lot of experience:

My boyfriend is in IT, and I think what he is experiencing, and maybe I am to some extent as well, is a little bit more freedom almost to do whatever you want to. [...] I think if you come back from abroad and you have seen how things are done abroad, and you want to implement those ideas, people [in Lithuania] would be more open to that. [...] I feel like in Lithuania there is always an idea that it’s a small sandbox, it’s a small place where we can experiment and do things, and then sell the real thing abroad.

*(F, late 20s, US and UK, 8 years)*

Returned migrants who work in these kinds of workplaces established by Lithuanians or foreign nationals rarely complain about work culture or having their ideas ignored:

Overall, my relationships in my current workplace are great, both with my colleagues and with my managers, they are respectful, they consider my ideas, so, perhaps even more attentively than in the US. [...] They give me tonnes of responsibility and they are absolutely open.

*(F, late 20s, US and UK, 8 years abroad)*

At the same time, returned migrants working for state-owned enterprises or institutions emphasise stagnancy, overpowering bureaucracy, and strong hierarchy:

[In my workplace] there is a strictly hierarchical system. There are 500 employees, and even now, any document that you need to be signed, you can't just send by email, like anywhere else, you have to physically go downstairs, knock on someone's door and ask them to sign it. The bureaucracy is so enormous, yet I understand it's a government agency and it certainly doesn't depend on me as to when those aspects will change.

*(F, mid- 40s, US, 14 years)*

At government agencies and organisations, returned migrants are faced not only with bureaucracy and hierarchy but also a different work culture. For example, one of the respondents who had worked in the United States for both federal and private companies said that there were certain similarities between Lithuanian and US federal employees, yet some differences put Lithuania in a bad light:

In America, federal employees, like I said, they don't rush, they fiddle around having found some kind of problem, they come up with some kind of answer, but slowly. [...] But they understand that they need to reach a result, they need to do something, their work needs to be productive. The fact that they do this slowly, not very effectively, well, that's the same here in Lithuania and in America. In Lithuania, federal [government] employees don't feel like they need to come up with a result. [...] They think that they have it good as it is, someone paid them, someone gave them an award, a wage supplement, yet they don't feel they need to pay that back somehow through work.

*(M, late 40s, US, 10 years)*

As to differences in work culture, respondents often said that it was very difficult to pass on their experience or implement new ideas because their initiatives were often rejected. As one of the respondents stated, 'they drag you down, "it'll never work, what a stupid idea"'. They come up with 100 reasons for not doing something, rather than simply encourage someone, you really miss that".

*(F, early 40s, Switzerland, Monaco, Spain, 11 years)*

The same was noticed by co-workers:

It's like going against an avalanche or a tsunami. It's like you're the one, lonely drop in the sea, and you often have to face 'oh you're an American, that's their culture, we don't do things like that here, it's different here', but then, after a number of years, one drop after another, if you're in a collective and they see you as an example, and take notice of it, then that's effective, this comes with time. Only, you'll never be a prophet in your own backyard.

*(M, early 40s, US-Estonia, 17 years)*

He tries to adapt some kind of a model from America; they used to do that, but we do things like this, so, we do it this way, and he's so fired-up, but our lot are so soberly Lithuanian, and that enthusiasm of his is put out, like it or not. [...] Because people don't accept it, or just say 'oh, that's so American, it'll never work here'.

*(F, early 30s, matched interview)*

Some respondents stressed that, in their work experience, they had encountered directors who were more inclined to take recommendations or new ideas into account, whereas co-workers had difficulty accepting those:

A lot of things were accepted, but many more were rejected. From the management side, a lot was accepted, but among the co-workers, the majority [of ideas] met with a rejection reaction. [...] People can obviously see that I'm successful at work, I do well with my projects and articles, and my studies, but somehow in Lithuania my co-workers, they feel that this only drives them further into a corner and they're only more inclined to take on that categorical position where 'oh, he's an American, let him do things as he likes, but we'll stick to what we've always done'.

*(M, late 40s, US, 10 years)*

This phenomenon seen in respondents' comments echoes the results of Nevinskaitė's research, where she explains that the readiness of management to involve returned migrants does not necessarily mean that lower-level staff are just as inclined to adopt the migrants' experiences: their 'dominant attitudes and work culture may be opposed to the new influences introduced by the diaspora, or may simply not be capable of exploiting its potential effectively' [28, P. 148].

This kind of opposition from co-workers often discourages returned migrants: they are critical of their workplaces, mentioning inert attitudes and a lack of competency and acceptable work culture. What they find even more disillusioning is that they could work even better, but no one seems to need or want it:

Compared to abroad, the work culture in Lithuania is utter pain, for example, how can anyone not answer an enquiry for 10 days, or an email. Or, 'why should we change if it's good as it is'. [...] I've reached some clarity as to how I could make sense of what's wrong with this country — indifference and incompetency, which is really obvious. [...] The saddest thing is that you can do much more, but no one really needs it. [...] You might want to do more, do better, for everyone else to do better, the company in general would do better — but no, it's not necessary. With time you forget, you even regress.

*(F, early 40s, Switzerland, Monaco, Spain, 11 years)*

Despite all these obstacles, returned migrants try to implement new ideas and succeed in doing so. Several ideas that had been put into practice were mentioned: company staff training, new science projects, new approaches to customer relationships, a new product development process, the introduction of superannuation payments, new ways of organising work in a laboratory, new methods for working with students, joint projects between scientific institutions and businesses, new inclusive cultural education programmes, etc.

What is the impact of these innovations? The results of the survey suggest that some co-workers have realised that imported examples are workable, and some innovations have been successfully adopted by their organisations:

I used to organise weekly work meetings to talk about the progress of a project, or about the so-called budgetary topics. At first, everyone was very surprised, but later on, this thing started to be accepted, in several groups they've started holding weekly meetings to talk about what's going on, what's happening.

*(M, late 40s, US, 10 years)*

When we had just hired her to work with exhibition contracts, she was responsible for educational activities, and one of the tasks was to involve at-risk groups. With her participation at the biennale, these themes took off.

*(F, late 50s, matched interview)*

That one method that he had obviously experienced and used in America, and then shared with us here, that really caught on.

*(F, early 30s, matched interview)*

When looking into the advantages and disadvantages of social remittances in the work sphere, respondents highlighted the importance of being encouraged to transmit their knowledge, skill, and work culture. They also emphasised that, instead of giving up, one had to look for another workplace where novelties would be welcome:

From the experience of my friends I saw that people come with lots of experience and they are rejected, they start to think that they're not needed, but [...] this does not mean that they're not valuable, it just means that they're like the swan among the ducklings. That swan just needs to find its own swans. Or start something on their own. Then they'll feel how valuable they truly are.

*(M, early 40s, US-Estonia, 17 years)*

Returned migrants' co-workers also stated that the ideas, knowledge and skills, as well as the work culture of returned migrants, help change how work is organised in Lithuanian workplaces. Social remittances affect both work culture and society as a whole:

The more people return with zero tolerance for various authoritarian or disrespectful forms [of behaviour] in the workplace, the sooner our society will get better. [...] The more people who have worked or studied in another country return to Lithuania, the more chances there are for us, as a society, to grow out of our aggression, the bullying culture, intolerance, and similar things.

*(F, late 50s, matched interview)*

## The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on remigrants' workplaces

Respondents found it difficult to evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected migration or to say whether more Lithuanian citizens had returned to Lithuania, as the interviews were conducted at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic. They nonetheless tended to attribute the increase in return migration to another macro-level factor — Brexit. In their opinion, the laws concerning migration, employment, international students, etc. just started to change in 2020. The only link they saw between growing immigration and the pandemic was the loss of employment by Lithuanian nationals working abroad:

I would probably relate this [returning migrants] more to Brexit than the COVID-19 pandemic. Unless these are people who have lost their jobs. Perhaps they have been fired from factories, they can no longer earn a living, they are not completely settled down — perhaps one of the reasons lies here.

*(F, mid-30s, UK, 3 years, matched interview)*

The idea that low-skilled workers are bearing the brunt of the pandemic is well in line with the insights of Gary Rynhart, a senior official at the International Labour Organization (ILO). He believes that such migrants suffer the most in the pandemic because of the situation in 'the sectors they work in' and 'the poor conditions in which many lower-skilled migrants live and work'. Running a greater risk of losing their jobs and contracting the virus, 'many workers are returning to their countries of origin'.<sup>13</sup>

Other studies also demonstrate that the effects of the COVID-19 crisis vary across different economic sectors and different types of workers. In the spring of 2020, analysts from Scorify investigated the impact of the pandemic on different industries. They concluded that 'the most affected sectors in Lithuania are culture and arts, healthcare and social services. The impact on retail, services, and wholesale will be from moderate to great'.<sup>14</sup> Another international study, conducted in March and April 2020 on the initiative of Paylab.com, revealed that Lithuanian employees had been exposed to the repercussions of quarantine restrictions in varying degree. 'A majority of respondents (24%) were working from home in 2020; for 11%, nothing changed that year, 9% were not able to work during the lockdown; 8% lost their jobs; the salaries and bonuses of 8% were reduced; others took a childcare or annual leave; some were working part-time

<sup>13</sup> Uncertain future for migrant workers, in a post-pandemic world, 2020, *UN News*, 19.09.2020. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1072562> (accessed 27.10.2020).

<sup>14</sup> Išanalizavo, kaip koronavirusas paveikė Lietuvos verslus: išskirti ekonomikos sektoriai nugalėtojai ir pralaimėtojai, 2020, *DELFI.lt*, 24.05.2020. URL: <https://www.delfi.lt/verslas/verslas/isanalizavo-kaip-koronavirusas-paveike-lietuvos-verslus-isskirti-ekonomikos-sektoriai-nugaletojai-ir-pralaimetojai.d?id=84340395> (accessed 27.10.2020).



instead of full-time; some took an unpaid leave'.<sup>15</sup> Qualified workers across all surveyed countries were more likely to work from home than low-skilled ones. Service-sector employees were affected the most — about 10% lost their jobs due to the pandemic [ibid.].

Our respondents shared their experience of COVID-19 consequences. Interviews with returned migrants confirmed that many of them had been affected by travel restrictions in spring 2020. The spouses of some respondents who still worked abroad at the time were unable to leave Lithuania; others could not go on business trips:

Right before the borders were closed [my husband] did not fly out, and now the borders are closed, he cannot go back. Of course, we're not too sad about that, but he would like to go back, to put his [work] affairs into order.

*(F, UK, mid-30s, 7 years)*

Of course, with that pandemic going on I'm not travelling anywhere anymore, but before, every one or two months, there'd be some kind of work trip abroad.

*(F, early 30s, UK, 13 years)*

The travel ban interrupted work and forced people to alter their plans. One of the respondents said that she had had to cancel the visit of a project curator from abroad, and this had stalled the project since it was impossible to get first-hand knowledge in Lithuania. Another respondent had to change her plans for going to the US to teach at a university and had to revert to online remote teaching.

In certain fields, the amount of work has significantly reduced, or work has become impossible altogether due to quarantine restrictions. For example, event management has come to a standstill because, as one of the respondents stated, 'a lot of events were cancelled, a few are still on towards the end of summer, so we're hoping the virus won't interfere there anymore' (M, mid-30s, UK, 7 years). Unfortunately, the number of interviews was insufficient to find more examples of the negative impact of COVID-19 on workplaces across different sectors.

Some respondents said that little had changed in their field, except for remote working. Respondents saw both advantages and disadvantages in shifting to homeworking. They appreciated the opportunity to be able to concentrate better and work more productively at home rather than at a noisy office where they were constantly interrupted by colleagues:

Basically, nothing has really changed at work for me. I would even say productivity has increased because I can concentrate better on my tasks, there's no one around, no colleagues coming over, no one saying let's have a coffee. So the work is being

<sup>15</sup> Darbas koronaviruso pasaulyje, 2020, *Paylab.com (in Lithuania — Manoalga.lt)*, 20.05.2020. URL: <https://www.manoalga.lt/analyses/darbas-koronaviruso-pasaulyje/50616> (accessed 28.10.2020).

done quicker perhaps, but generally nothing has really changed, I do my work on the computer, there aren't any meetings, or if there are then everything happens on Skype. Nevertheless, my communication is mainly with Germans, who work in Germany, via Skype. So in terms of work, nothing has really changed.

*(M, mid-30s, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, 7 years)*

This respondent's insight resonates with the findings of a different study, which shows that professionals who need to perform complex tasks not requiring intensive communication with their colleagues are more in favour of and are more productive when working from home [39]. This applies exclusively to childless respondents whose work is computer-based or can be easily computerised, e.g. work in education or project management. As schools were closed in the lockdown, families of preschoolers and primary-school pupils were experiencing many difficulties with working from home and looking after young children simultaneously, as well as with having to help children with remote lessons. Besides, there is evidence that productivity falls when working from home under COVID-19 conditions [40].

Another negative aspect of working from home is the intense feeling of isolation from family, friends, and colleagues:

I really miss those people, you miss a live meeting and not just with your family, but with colleagues as well, with friends. I've never experienced anything like this in my life. So now I understand just what that means, how important it is, that live communication because you do truly miss it a lot.

*(M, mid-30s, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, 7 years).*

The literature describes this alarming aspect of remote working while focusing on anxiety, loneliness [40; 41], and the loss of social connections at work.<sup>16</sup> Of course, psychological distress over the pandemic adds to these grievances and leads to 'increased personal financial pressure, social isolation, fear of infection, or the threat of job loss' [41].

Moreover, in some fields, working from home means working more slowly, which is explained by poor work culture:

When the quarantine regime was introduced, a recommendation came through that we had to work from home. [...] All six [of my staff] stayed to work from home and all six of them thought that this was some kind of holiday. [...] So what, we're still being paid [they thought], this is like a holiday. The kids need to be helped with online distance learning, you need to go to the shop to look for some kind of masks, and what, we're still expected to work [?!].

*(M, late 40s, US, 10 years)*

<sup>16</sup> Impact of COVID-19 on working lives, 2020, *CIPD*, 3.09.2020. URL: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/goodwork/covid-impact> (accessed 27.10.2020).

Some respondents said that, as quarantine restrictions had been imposed, their workloads had increased, which was related both to a rise in e-commerce turnover and the need to rethink work strategies and the ways projects were run, etc.:

I had just been hired to open an online store, so everything was happening on the internet anyway, phone-calls with those people who could help us [do] those things, you know, all sorts of colleagues, so it really didn't feel like you couldn't do something because of the quarantine, just that there was a lot of work and you had to do everything as quickly as possible so that we could offer clients the chance to buy online.

*(F, UK, mid 30s, 7 years)*

All of us in our organisation work remotely. The work has certainly not stopped, it has even increased, because all of our projects are based on mobility and travel, so a lot of things had to be reconsidered.

*(F, early 30s, UK, 13 years)*

In a study conducted in May and June 2020, the UK CIPD draws similar conclusions about workloads increasing in the pandemic: 'key workers are more likely to have too much work through the COVID-19 pandemic'.<sup>17</sup> Our survey of remigrants showed that a higher workload was associated not only with key workers in certain workplaces but also with certain workplaces in particular sectors, for example, e-commerce or IT. These industries belong in the list of 'essential' or 'life-sustaining' COVID-19 front-line sectors, which includes healthcare, social care, food sales, courier services, and alike.

Thus, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine restrictions has varied across different economic sectors and in different workplaces. Those who have lost their jobs or shifted to part-time work are experiencing appreciable financial losses, whereas those who have kept their jobs and social guarantees are doing as well as before. As one of the respondents said: 'I am still working, and because my husband is working in England, the social guarantees are even better there, a wage is still being paid, so we have not felt cut short somehow, we've been very lucky in this crisis. So far, at least' (F, UK, the mid-30s, 7 years). Highly qualified returned migrants are experiencing the COVID-19 crisis just as other highly qualified workers in Lithuania do. Still, self-confidence acquired in emigration and years spent outside the comfort zone work to their advantage in the pandemic.

## **Conclusions**

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Since the regaining of independence in 1990, Lithuania has experienced intense emigration. Although remigration has been insignificant since then, the years 2019–2020 witnessed a dramatic increase in immigration, accounted

<sup>17</sup> Impact of COVID-19 on working lives, 2020, CIPD, 3.09.2020. URL: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/goodwork/covid-impact> (accessed 27.10.2020).

for by both foreign nationals and Lithuanian citizens. This change in migration flows is due to three macro-factors: the improving economic situation in Lithuania, Brexit (the UK is the most popular European destination for Lithuanian migrants), and the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to other countries, Lithuania has performed well in the pandemic in both medical and economic terms; among other things, this is encouraging Lithuanians to remigrate.

Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that once COVID-19 is over, emigration from Lithuania will not surge again. The culture of migration has been developing over three decades. A large part of the population is still considering leaving the country. Limited employment opportunities amid the pandemic make Lithuanians revisit the idea of emigration. Another reason why returned Lithuanians might emigrate again is the poor receipt of remigrants and their social remittances. Push factors include society's negative attitude towards returned migrants amid the pandemic and the opposition to the innovations brought by remigrants.

Returned Lithuanian citizens have varied employment experiences. Some easily adapt their competencies and transmit social remittances (knowledge, skills, work ethic, and culture), whereas the ideas and practices introduced by others encounter stiff resistance. The main factors are related to three aspects: (1) the type of knowledge, skills, and experience acquired abroad (highly qualified specialist are appreciated much more than low-skilled workers); (2) how much the returned migrant wants to transmit, and how actively they do this; and (3) how prepared the workplace is to use social remittances.

The above research showed that the greatest remittance-related problem in Lithuania was the unwillingness of state-owned enterprises and institutions to embrace novelties. The interviews revealed that while the management valued, more or less, the competences of returned migrants and their work culture and welcomed the recommendations and innovations they proposed, co-workers were rather sceptical about innovations. Despite the opposition, respondents have managed to introduce some innovations: company staff training, new science projects, new approaches to customer relationships, new product development processes, new ways of organising work in a laboratory, new methods for working with students or autistic children, joint projects between scientific institutions and businesses, new inclusive cultural education programmes, etc.

Remigrants' potential for innovation must be reinforced by governmental and municipal measures helping recruit highly qualified returned migrants into the public sector. The more returnees hold decision-making positions, the sooner the public sector will become more effective. Half of the Lithuanians approve of measures to encourage the return of migrants and believe that Lithuania should seek the return of 'Lithuanian citizens who are highly qualified or who have created successful businesses, whose knowledge and connections can contribute to the progress of the country'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Grįžtamoji migracija auga — bet ar visi grįžtantieji laukiami? 2020, *IOM International Organization for Migration*, 19.08.2020. URL: <http://www.iom.lt/lt/naujienos/364> (accessed 26.10.2020).

The return migrants who took part in our study faced the same pandemic-related problems in their workplaces as other highly qualified Lithuanian workers did. Those who could continue their work from home maintained their income levels. Respondents spoke of both positive and negative aspects of homeworking. For some, it was easier to concentrate at home and they were able to boost their productivity. Others struggled to get their work done because they had preschool or school-age children at home all the time. The experience of isolation from other family members, friends, and colleagues was difficult for many.

The impact of COVID-19 on the work sphere depends on the field of work, the nature of work, family situation, work ethic, and work culture.

Even in the pandemic, highly qualified respondents, who had every opportunity to work from home, enjoyed a better situation than low-skilled workers. In this way ‘remote work worsens inequality by mostly helping high-income earners’ [42]. Less likely to work remotely, low-skilled workers run a greater risk of contracting the virus or losing their jobs. Moreover, the pandemic has forced society to embrace technology, automation, and artificial intelligence in almost all sectors, particularly those that traditionally employ low-skilled migrants.<sup>19</sup> In the long run, the pandemic may result in reduced demand for low-qualification workplaces that are usually filled by migrants. The pandemic has made remote working, education, and professional development more widespread. This new circumstance may also slow down the economic emigration of highly qualified workers by making it possible to choose domicile irrespective of the workplace location.

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<sup>19</sup> Uncertain future for migrant workers, in a post-pandemic world, 2020, *UN News*, 19.09.2020. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1072562> (accessed 27.10.2020).

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