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Diverse return mobilities and evolving identities among returnees in Latvia

Dr Aija Lulle, Loughborough University a.lulle@lboro.ac.uk
Prof Zaiga Krisjane, University of Latvia zaiga.krisjane@lu.lv
Dr Andris Bauls, University of Latvia bauls@lanet.lv

More than twenty years ago Russell King (1996; 2000) wrote that return migration is the unwritten chapter in migration scholarship. Since then, literature on return migration has flourished. This more recent literature has also explored the diversity of return experiences and modalities, including different temporalities of return – so that it is more appropriate to speak of return mobilities rather return migration because mobilities can take very diverse forms, including visits, tourism etc (King and Christou 2011). Return migration, on the other hand, has been more associated with the end of the migration cycle and permanent return. In this chapter of the Latvian case, we engage in conceptual debate and empirical analysis of comparisons and syntheses across both dimensions – return mobility and migration – and how these are related to transnational return. The latter implies that people can return either permanently or temporary, but they keep ties across borders and, moreover, their return can be enabled by transnational networks.

Firstly, conceptually and methodologically, we need to set alongside each other two historical waves of Latvian emigration and diaspora formation, which we label here for the sake of initial simplicity ‘old’ and ‘recent’ emigrants. Such historical attentiveness is crucial for understanding how transnational cultural values and norms are changing (Portes 2010) in different groups of return migrants in Latvia. Secondly, we comparatively explore three different temporal modes of physical return: ‘permanent’ return, diaspora tourism from the
‘old’ emigration, and the practice of recent migrants returning to visit friends and relatives. However, rather than build our analysis by boxing our data into discrete categories, we wish to investigate similarities, blurrings and connections between the different return types, mobilities and experiences.

The Latvian case also illustrates the differential feasibility of return for different diaspora/emigrant groups. Return for those who escaped the Soviet occupation of Latvia during the Second World War and after – whom we call the ‘old’ migrants – was hardly possible until the late 1980s, since the USSR regarded emigrants as traitors. Unable to return, the Latvian exiled communities abroad, especially in Western countries, developed a strong diasporic identity. They emphasised that they left Latvia for political reasons; their goal was to campaign for Latvian independence from the Soviet Union, not least because this would enable them to return to their homeland.

In contrast to the ‘political exile’ identity of the older diaspora, those who left Latvia after independence was re-established in 1991, and in much higher numbers after the country joined the EU in 2004, are usually perceived as ‘economic migrants’, even if not all of them self-identify with that totalising label. For this second wave of emigration, there are no restrictions on return of any kind. Yet these migrants frequently express disappointment with the lack of opportunities in present-day Latvia, which prompted them to emigrate in the first place and are a deterrent to permanent return.

Two different reference points exist when it comes to the primary reasons for emigration from Latvia: political and economic. However, in these simplistic constructions of historical waves and types of Latvian emigration and diaspora formation, perspectives on return
mobilities are somewhat overlooked. From Ankrava’s (2011) research comparing the two migrant waves to the UK we see that exiles saw the return as a dream and as an obligation, and therefore made special efforts to safeguard their Latvian identity in exile. By contrast, the departure point of many recent emigrants was mixture of disappointment and distancing from Latvia.

Hence our first objective in this chapter is to articulate conceptually and methodologically the strength and nature of these two different reference points of value systems and norms between the earlier exiles (and their descendants) and the recent migrants, and to see whether and how these differences are changing over time. When it comes to actual returns, only a few exiles were able to come back in Soviet times: they arrived on short tourism visits and their movements and activities were constrained by the restrictions imposed by the Soviet security services. But soon after independence, thousands visited Latvia, especially for the song festivals – by far the country’s most celebrated event for mass gatherings. Some diasporans relocated back to Latvia, and some of these then left again. In fact, throughout the first two decades of the 21st century, we can observe what we might call mixed returns – by former exiles and by recent emigrants simultaneously. Moreover, these return mobilities are transnational by nature – keeping ties across borders, acquiring and maintaining social networks and homes in two or even more places, and reaching out to communities of former exiles and migrants both ‘here’ and ‘there’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Our chapter develops a conceptual understanding of the simultaneity of diverse returns. In doing so we interweave macro and meso-level processes with interviewees’ everyday reflections on their return motivations and experiences, expressed through the realities of the three types of return: permanent relocation, diasporic tourism, and visiting family and friends.
The second question which underpins this chapter concerns with the three types of physical return that we identify. Specifically we ask what transnational patterns and nuances do the different return mobilities express? And thirdly, we ask: how does return foster emerging socio-cultural identities of returnees; and what kinds of social change are taking place consequent upon the return of the two émigré groups? This is crucial in understanding how return leads to social changes in collective identities of these groups. In order to approach all these questions, we link these temporalities of return to Latvia’s emigration history and its contemporary social context. We then follow with the analytical sub-sections on permanent return, diaspora tourism and visiting friends and relative. In the conclusion we reflect on our contribution to the scholarly debate on transnational return in the contemporary world.

**Latvian emigration, identity reference points and transnational ‘returns’**

Latvia is a country with a long history of emigration. Currently, more than 370,000 people of Latvian origin live outside the country. In relative terms this is large proportion, given that the total population of the country was less than 2 million in 2017, and is rapidly declining due to the combined effects of emigration and a low birth rate. The largest emigrant communities are in Europe (especially Great Britain and Ireland, but also in Germany, Sweden and Norway), the USA, Canada, Australia, Russia and Israel. Representation of the many Latvian communities abroad takes place under the umbrella organisations of the World Free Latvians Association and the Association of European Latvians. Both bodies have taken an active role in policy planning back in Latvia. Especially in previous decades, considerable influence was held by those who emigrated during the Second World War. It was common to call these emigrants ‘exiles’ or ‘foreign Latvians.' Soviet ideology regarded those who lived outside the Soviet Union with extreme suspicion. Cultural ties were forged, but only under
the close surveillance of the Communist Party and its institutions. When returning to independent Latvia they could be recognised by their ‘foreign’ everyday behaviour, for instance, in shopping, or in their topics of conversation. However, there is an important nuance here: ‘foreign Latvians’ were usually those returned from Western countries but not from Russia, which was the major destination for deportations and voluntary moves within the USSR. In this latter case, the common references were, and remain ‘Russia’s Latvians’ and ‘former deportees.’

When recent emigrants return – except in the case of the youngest generation of children who have largely been brought up abroad – they are still familiar with the Latvian scene, although admitting that the country is rapidly changing. However, both older émigrés and recent returnees are ambiguous about how to call themselves. ‘Migrant’ comes with negative connotations, whilst ‘return migrants’ sounds too formal. The alternative term – ‘diaspora’ – only became current in public discourse very recently, in the 2010s, and this now reflects a clear political incentive to move away from the term ‘emigrants’ with its excluding and stigmatising associations.

As in the experience of the other countries, the diffusion of the word ‘diaspora’ is meant to create an ‘inclusive’ atmosphere to foster allegiance to the nation-state, and to encourage diasporans to contribute to its economic development (by investing) and to its demographic salvation (by returning). Whilst some of our participants were ready to embrace their designation as members of the newly-minted notion of a Latvian diaspora, many remained uncertain as to how to label themselves and instead used verbs, not nouns, by saying, for instance, ‘I returned’ or ‘I came back home.’
Brubaker (2005) has explored the various emerging identities which are constitutive of the contemporary understanding of ‘diaspora’ – an understanding which goes beyond the much earlier ‘victim’ and ‘historical trauma’ definitions of the term (cf. Safran 1991; Cohen 1995). For Brubaker (2005: 12) a diaspora ‘implies both a historically embedded social formation of quasi-permanent residents and their descendants abroad’ and also ‘a community of practice … an idiom, a stance, a claim.’ Applying this creative construction to return migration/mobility, we need to acknowledge the different ‘social formations’ of emigrants from the past in order to understand ongoing social change in a society with large-scale emigration and simultaneous, albeit lesser in size, trends of return. Furthermore, as Cassarino (2004) argued in his landmark paper on theorising return migration, existing power relations fundamentally shape returnees’ experiences and their capacities to integrate and to innovate. Latvian migration has always been cast within geopolitical structures of foreign occupation, regime change, uneven capitalist development and ongoing economic uncertainty. These macro-scale structures have governed both, on the one hand, the dynamics of migration and the ability to engage in transnational practices, and, on the other hand, the possibilities and incentives to return, thereby reinforcing the important point that the role of capitalism is overlooked in the field of transnationalism studies. At the meso and micro scales, returning emigrants often face social structures of power relations that either enable or prevent them adjusting, innovating, or developing a feeling of belonging to Latvia. At the same time, the past and current encounters between those who are ‘back’, either short-term or permanently, and non-migrants have the potential to alter these structures and initiate change in ways that are both fundamental and mundane. Before we analyse these return-focused interactions in more detail, next come two scoping sections, first on types of return mobility, and second on methods.
A three-way typology of transnational return

Return migration has been a recognised reality ever since human migration was first identified as a scholarly field of study. Much more recently, ‘guestworker’ schemes in early postwar Europe, notably in Germany, implied that return to the country of origin would take place once the temporary migrants’ work contracts were fulfilled. Likewise, the common conception of refugee movements has generally included the understanding that the refugees would return home permanently once the danger that they were in had passed; this was especially the case if their status was one of ‘temporary protection.’ Theoretically, discursively, and policy-wise, therefore, return has been imagined as the closing stage in the migration cycle, involving lasting resettlement; in other words, permanent return (Gmelch 1980; Cassarino 2004). However, at the end of the guestworker schemes, in the mid-1970s, it is well documented that many previously temporary workers stayed on and did not return (Castles et al. 1984). Instead they, and later their descendants, continued their transnational lives and identities by making more or less frequent trips to their homelands, to visit family members and also for holiday purposes. Moreover, these different types of return mobility – visits, tourism, temporary and permanent relocation – can overlap and intersect in complex ways that can also evolve through time.

To take an example, return visits and keeping in transnational touch with relatives, friends and the ‘culture’ of the homeland, can replace the more irrevocable decision to permanently return (Bauböck and Faist 2010). This is especially important for the first-generation migrants but can also apply to second and third-generation diasporans too. In some cases they can pass as ‘locals’ but in other circumstances their diasporic, and hence ‘non-local’ identity is unmasked in everyday activities – in their accent, dress, behavioural traits, consumer habits
and so on (see Wagner 2015). There is a noteworthy trend in recent years for the theme of ‘roots’ or diaspora tourism to be the subject of scholarly study (Coles and Timothy 2004; Marschall 2017). The essence of diasporic tourism is the combination of a holiday visit in the ancestral homeland with connecting with one’s roots, including both family connections and historical/natural sights. Such diasporic holidays can be independently organised or, more often, are facilitated by migrant networks and diaspora-owned travel agencies. One of the empirical questions that we investigate below is how diaspora tourism can lead to other types of ‘return’.

If diaspora holiday visits also involve seeing relatives and acquaintances, then this return mobility merges with our third type, visiting friends and relatives, commonly or ‘VFR’ (Janta et al. 2015). There is also an emerging literature on this subfield of (return) mobility studies, but much of this comes from tourism studies and has no relation to migrant and diaspora populations. Research which focuses on this latter perspective stresses how VFR mobilities are often an essential part of migrants’ transnational practices, being enfolded within the longer-term mobilities of emigration and return migration (see for instance Humbracht 2015; King and Lulle 2015; Mueller 2015). VFR mobilities are often frequent and regular – one or several times per year, coinciding with statutory holidays from work and school, and also with significant events in the homeland – religious holidays, cultural festivals, key family occasions etc.

So, recognising that there are complex connections between return mobilities and transnationalism (King and Christou 2011; Carling and Erdal 2014), we move to interrogate how transnationalism plays a role in these three types of return mobility. Given the relatively small size of Latvia and the scale of past migration waves, the diverse modalities of return are
likely to have a noticeable, even indelible impact on social conditions and social change there, all the more so in an era of unfettered to and fro mobility and cheap air travel.

**Methods**

This chapter draws on a programme of mixed-method research on Latvian emigration carried out during 2014-2015 under the aegis of the Centre of Diaspora and Migration Research and the Department of Geography at the University of Latvia. An online quantitative survey was implemented to delineate the broad contours of recent emigration, especially as regards return migration and visits (Krisjane and Bauls 2014). We use this survey only as background data for the main source we draw on for our account here – in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 returnees (10 each from the ‘old’ diaspora and recent emigrants) plus eight interviews with people engaged in activities and positions related to return migration and diaspora tourism, including real-estate agents, event organisers, returnee business owners and policy-makers. To some extent these two groups overlapped, for instance being both a returnee and running business involved with diaspora tourism. This is an interesting finding in itself, since it illustrates how socio-economic change takes place via migration and return. Selection of interviewees was based mainly on the snowball method, starting from several entry points to maximise diversity of different ages, generations and social-class backgrounds of the participants selected.

Our analysis is focused on the three return types discussed above – permanent returnees, diaspora tourists, and visits to relatives and friends. But we were deliberately open to new links between these types: for instance, how VFR and diaspora tourism relate to permanent return. We also pay attention to the mundane ways and expressions through which
participants who fit into one theoretically defined category talk about ‘others’ – for instance, members of ‘old’ diaspora reflecting about the behaviour of ‘recent’ returnees. Finally, we examine social changes taking place as a result of different return mobilities, including policy initiatives.

**Permanent return**

The first two examples of permanent return cases are concerned with the ‘old’ diaspora- the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Latvians who emigrated during the Second World War - while later examples will illustrate the returns of more recent emigrants. Our aim is to focus on differences that are felt or that exist structurally among these returnees, and to question the very notion of ‘permanent’.

Elita (aged 31 at the time of interview) was born in Canada. Through her studies in Canada and in the UK, Elita arrived at an awareness that she waned to understand more about her ancestors’ homeland and started researching Latvian history. In parallel to this interest, Elita nurtured the idea of moving to Latvia. However, due to her Canadian citizenship - a ‘third country’ from the Eurocentric point of view - such a move would be bureaucratically cumbersome and would require proof of stable income, which, as a student, Elita did not have that time. Then in October 2013 the Latvian parliament made a historical change to the Citizenship Law (1994) allowing dual citizenship for those whose ancestors were Latvians. Elita recounts:

> I started writing my blog in English about the Latvian ancestors because many of my generation do not speak Latvian anymore, but they are nevertheless very interested in Latvia. More people started writing to me personally, requesting help
in understanding or searching for their ‘roots’. Over several years I accumulated clients and was able to make a roots-searching service as my income and I decided to move to Latvia permanently. I started travelling to Latvia during summers but lived in Canada the rest of the year. As soon as the changes in the Citizenship Law were introduced, I immediately applied for dual citizenship and I booked a flight to Latvia the very same day I got my passport.

As we can see, Elita did not ‘return’ to Latvia immediately. Her idea of a permanent return grew from her study of history, and from the global network she built of clients with Latvian ‘roots’. Moreover, prior her return, she had engaged in diaspora tourism, visiting the country several times as a diasporic tourist. Yet there is a dissonance between how she sees herself – as ‘returning’ to her ancestors’ homeland – and her legal status as an immigrant born in Canada. She refers to herself as ‘a foreign Latvian’ and notes that others also call her so. She dislikes the part ‘foreign’ because she insists that she is a Latvian and returned to Latvia in her special way as she could. ‘Our parents or grandparents were born here, but we are, nevertheless, returning to our families’ homeland,’ she stated.

In our second example, Davis’ (aged 27) participation in a folk-dance group was one of the reasons he first came to Latvia. He had visited Latvia as a teenager with his parents but being in Latvia together with other Australian-Latvian youth for Dziesmusvētki, the traditional Song and Dance festival (more about this later), created a special feeling of belonging. Due to the highly positive impression of Latvia he had at that time, he decided to travel to Latvia alone the next year. He had just turned 18 when he arrived to spend three summer months in Latvia. I met wonderful people! I made really nice acquaintances and felt deeply that I belong here. Dziesmusvētki was my first stimulus – incredible euphoric sense of
belonging and togetherness. It had a huge impact on me, although I was playing with thoughts that I could live in Latvia for a year or so to understand where my grandparents come from. And then my own trip the following year … I had this sense that all doors are open—the world belongs to me, everything is possible.

Davis was studying in an Australian university and, at the same time, was pursuing his ‘dream’ vocation - becoming a chef. He left his studies in Australia and moved to Latvia. This turned out to be a permanent move. At the time of the interview he had already been living there for eight years. He arrived with few possessions, and did not have big plans to move permanently or temporarily. He sent his CV out here and there, but then at some point decided to open a café. Starting a business was not in his plans but, as often happens in migration stories, the conditions for business or self-employment can be more favourable than accessing paid employment in established structures due to his ‘foreign’ background. The success of his venture was helped by other diasporic returnees and visitors from diaspora:

We are a kind of ‘minority’ here. There are relatively few of us, but we understand each other well. We do have different ways of thinking to some extent, and we have different life experiences, therefore we try to support each other. If one of us [diaspora Latvians] tries to start something new, the others usually support it. I actually had to send just a few phone messages and the word spread about my café. Everyone knew and of them most came.

Although they are relatively few in number, Davis describes the capacity of the ‘old’ diaspora to innovate and bring change. Thus, a strong exilic identity to support each other transfers also to Latvia, after return. This further produces social change in terms of capacities to
influence social structures: to maintain and grow a business, where social and identity-based support plays a crucial role.

The next examples are from recent emigrants who are returnees from the so-called ‘young’ diaspora. Elmars, an artist (aged 31) lived in the UK for several years. Although he studied and had a job, he did not like life there. According to Gmelch’s typology of return (1980), one could say that it was a return of ‘failure’. However, Elmars himself put it differently - more in terms of feelings:

I did not like it in England. But I don’t think I will stay in Latvia either. I have a plan, but I need at least a year to work it out before I can move away again, and it will not be to England. In this short excerpt we can see the complexity of return: Elmars travels back to London from time to time as his partner and child still live there. He did not like living in England, but thanks to the free movement of European citizens within Europe, he can return and travel to and fro relatively easily. And yet, he does not think of his return as permanent; Latvia is a temporary stop-over, where he will rethink his options for onward migration to another country.

In a different example, Eliza (aged 24) studied and worked in the UK and returned by responding to a special return incentive, funded by the Latvian government (2015), intended to attract foreign-educated youth back to Latvia. She considered returning to Latvia if she could find a job, because she had to repay her study loan obtained from Latvian banks. She did get a job through the return scheme but was disappointed how little change and innovation she could make:

They [governmental institution] did not actually try to understand the unique skills and abilities I have. These come not only from my education abroad but also
from two years of professional work. I was asked to do the simplest tasks, those which were left over. I felt quite bad because I was applying for this programme and all this idea of return was very purposeful to me. And I ask this question to myself from time to time – did I really have to study abroad to do these very simple tasks now? But I try to work with my attitude and I try to take it easier, simply as my way of how I managed to return to Latvia.

Her return, institutionally envisaged as innovative, was not felt as such by Eliza herself. Social change was blocked by ‘old’ structures in the institution she was assigned to. However, Eliza’s own motivation to return was more complex, including longing to be within networks of her friends and relatives and, in relation to her perception of class and lifestyle, to live in a place where her extended family owns land:

One more thing I understood in London: I lived in a very tiny flat, and it was terribly expensive but we have a big plot of land and a big country house back in Latvia. And it is so easily accessible from Riga [as a weekend home].

Note how, in contrast to Davis, Eliza expresses her belonging(s) in economic ways: she, together with her extended family, owns a property, and this seems to be more important than her political identification with Latvianess. Her current friends in Riga are mostly people who have also studied in the UK and have returned. She needs to stick to these people because sometimes she thinks the return was a mistake for her career and only those who have had similar experiences could understand her.

In sum, the meaning of a permanent return for recent migrants or returnees from the ‘old’ diaspora differs in their motivations for return and their emphasis on Latvianess as a historically constructed form of belonging. Moreover, the notion of permanence is highly
relative, both in the examples presented here as illustrations and backed up by evidence from the wider corpus of interview and survey data.

But there are also similarities: Davis did not have any savings but he succeeded in establishing his own café. This reality of return would bring him closer to ‘economic’ migrants. In the meantime, the dominant discourse citing economic difficulties in Latvia is also being challenged by recent returnees. Some of them have established an association in Latvia, *Your Move*, with the aim of advertising workplaces for qualified returnees and promoting return to Latvia as a lifestyle choice too, with opportunities to have an interesting social life, cheaper living costs and better housing than in London or other world metropolises (Kreilis 2018).

**Diaspora tourism ‘returns’**

Diasporans are, by virtue of the one of the defining criteria of diaspora, oriented towards the improvement of their homeland (Safran 1991). Through interaction with their personal networks, and sometimes in response to state programmes, diasporans often initiate and participate in large-scale cultural events, local gatherings, visiting ancestral graveyards, genealogy tourism, and more. Summer activities for diaspora children and families are an increasingly important activity, combining networked tourism events in Latvia with encouragement for the younger generation to understand life in Latvia, improve their language skills, and, potentially, consider returning to Latvia permanently some day.

In this section we illustrate three such touristic returns: genealogy tourism; searching for one’s ‘roots’; and Song festivals, which are highly influential large-scale events across all
three Baltic states. These returns are not only transnationally relevant for identity processes but are also interlinked with permanent return and VFR.

Elita, whom we introduced in the previous section, had engaged in developing a tourism activity, and also moved to Latvia herself. Here she describes her main clients:

They are middle-age people mainly, or older, born around the 1950s or the 1960s. Usually they do not speak Latvian anymore because only one of the family members went abroad. One group are the children of those who were sent to Germany as foreign workers [Fremdarbeiter, people who were forced to work during World War Two]; the parents fully integrated into the local society and did not tell anything to their children and other family members. But now, when a person who was in forced labour has died, their children want to know everything of what he or she did not tell them. Usually this is the main story for most clients.

The above quote, and the network of diasporic clients she has developed, are relevant in several ways, but one aspect is glaring: the emigration of previous generations was, to a great extent, silenced; parents or grandparents did not want to tell their offspring about the past. After Elita started advertising these activities online, her network of clients began to grow, and roots-searching visits increased. Although we do not have statistics regarding these visits, the numbers of such returnees are qualitatively relevant to identity processes. The social change takes place at historical, individual and organisation levels. After decades of silence, they want to unpack the history of their family, and search for possibilities to do so. The increasing interest by such individuals allows Elita and similar specialists to make a living by organising tours back to Latvia.
Moreover, Latvia’s capital Riga has always been multicultural with a prominent presence of Germans, Jews and Russians, including many as property and business owners, and playing an important role in arts, culture and science. A special role belongs to the Baltic German minority in drafting the legislation of independent Latvia in the early 20th century. However, just before the World War Two, they had to suddenly leave their homes in an accelerated repatriation to Germany.

The case of the Baltic Germans illustrates the situation for both diasporans and, the so-called ‘affinity diaspora’, which Ancien et al. (2009: 6) define as ‘a collection of people, usually former immigrants and tourists or business travellers, who have a different national or ethnic identity to a nation state but who feel some special affinity or affection for that nation state and who act on its behalf, whilst resident in the state, after they return home, or from a third country’. During the Cold War in the 1970s and 1980s, some Baltic German representatives living in the Federal Republic of Germany were vocal in their call for restoration of Latvian independence. Vivid stories and memories about life in pre-war Latvia had been transmitted over generations. One representative of a Baltic German organisation in Latvia describes the diasporic return trips they have been organising since the early 1990s:

[Baltic Germans] knew best where they wanted to go on excursions. They grew up here themselves [in Riga or other places in Latvia]. Descendants of barons, famous artists, they knew art works and places by heart. All life, traditions, everyday things, seasons in Latvia, crossing the frozen Daugava river by foot in the winters, summers spent at Jurmala resort, all these memories were so alive. They could tell us more than we could tell them, and through these memories new friendships emerged [among Baltic German visitors who met in Riga]. Some
stayed in hotels, but usually there were friends and relatives who hosted our guests in their homes. There is no need to encourage them to visit Latvia. (..) We have our ‘golden guests’: a lady, in her 90s, she takes a six-hour trip from Germany and as soon as she gets back to Germany she calls [her friends] on the phone and says that she wants to come back to Riga. On every visit [the Baltic Germans] photograph their native homes in Riga. And so it goes, year by year.

One of the liveliest examples of diasporic returns are the Song and Dance Festivals. A tradition that began in the late 19th century, these were the first activities that diaspora members world-wide sought to organise, even in displaced persons camps after World War Two. As networked events, they brought together Latvians as well as their relatives and friends on a geographical basis: the song festivals were held regularly in Australia, Germany, and in various parts of the US. Since independence, the participation of diaspora choirs and dance groups has grown steadily over the years, and for many recent emigrants, establishing a choir or dance group is motivated by both the desire to maintain ties with each other abroad through practising Latvian culture and with the aim of returning to Latvia, at least for this event (Carpenter 1996). For Davis (introduced earlier) attending these festivals triggered a permanent return too. He emphasises that that his grandparents always lived with the dream of returning to Latvia, whilst his parents followed a common tactic to instil the idea of return in their children:

They had this vision that each child would spend at least some time, a year or so, in Latvia and would see life there through their own experience. Such personal experience was important in my parents’ vision so that we children would understand why it was important to maintain and nurture our Latvianness abroad, and why we had to study the language.
Thus, diasporic tourism would serve as a trial, which could lead to a personal choice to return or not. More importantly, it was a choice that was already transnationally interwoven through everyday efforts in maintaining the language while abroad. But Davis also challenges the view that exiles are politically motivated to return: ‘My generation is very diverse; not everyone has enough motivation to save up money and come to (visit) Latvia. Others don’t have enough motivation to speak Latvian’. However, he does contrast the ‘old’ diaspora to recent emigrants:

I have spoken about returning with some who have left recently and live abroad, and then people say: ‘Yes, I would like to return but it is so difficult in Latvia, I cannot survive.’ As if everything is so bad here; well, I don’t know. What I know is that belonging makes life colourful. ... For me everything started changing when I undertook a leadership role in a Latvian organisation; through singing and dancing, my awareness of Latvianness grew. I am Latvian through and through, I am not Australian. It’s a nice place, but I never really felt that I fully belong there.

And so his migratory path evolved: from taking a leadership in diasporic events in Australia, to visiting Latvia during Song festivals, and finally to permanent return.

**Visiting friends and relatives**

VFR mobility is motivated by a multitude of reasons, including transnational home-making, holidays in the parental country, visiting doctors or spas, going to the theatre, and renewing travel documents (King and Lulle 2015). Much VFR is seasonal, tied to summer holidays, but many visits are also spontaneous. Our interviews with diaspora members and policy-makers reveal that there are dividing lines in VFR practices: clients from the ‘old diaspora’ tend to stay in hotels. Indeed, one popular hotel established by diaspora owners is called *Radi and*
Draugi [Relatives and Friends]. The clients tend to be elderly. When more recent emigrants come back to Latvia they usually stay with friends and relatives, often their parents or grandparents, or in their own homes; they do not need hotels. Medical consultants praise diasporans who ‘spread the word’ about services in Latvia and act as ‘good-will ambassadors’ who tell their neighbours, work colleagues, and family members about Latvia.

In a nutshell: from the business and policy point of view, VFR mobility is beneficial.

Among our interviewees and survey respondents the following reasons are frequently cited: ‘home’ is still there also relatives; the need to renew documents; combining visits with cultural events and medical check-ups with familiar doctors and in the native language (important for recent emigrants). From the ‘old diaspora’ Anita, from the UK, who is in her 70s, visits Latvia at least twice a year. She has an apartment in Riga, she sets up meetings with friends and acquaintances, does work in archives as she writes about Latvian diaspora, and makes her cultural agenda: ‘I hardly got tickets to opera. All are sold out already a month before. And they say that Latvians lack money’. She makes this sarcastic reference to money possibly due to the ingrained division which we mentioned before - between political and economic reasons for emigration, and also those who regularly express disappointment with Latvia’s low salaries. From the recent diaspora, Daiga, also from the UK, who emigrated in 2009, jumped on the plane every month as she was still doing her diploma back in Latvia and combined this with her work in a hotel in London.

VFR mobility is by far the most numerous and wide-spread form of return mobilities, yet it is largely overlooked by policy-makers and in public discourse. However, people themselves attach great importance to this mobility, both as a facilitator and replacement for, permanent return. Latvia clearly remains a hub for both VFR mobility and diaspora events. According to
our survey data (Krisjane and Bauls 2014), those who live abroad alone visit Latvia more often than those who live with at least one other family member. Men tend to travel back to Latvia more often than women. Furthermore, there is a very significant difference in terms of qualifications: those with higher educational degrees tend to visit Latvia more often than lower-educated respondents. Personal aspirations to return to Latvia influence frequency of travel as well. Those who aspire to return to Latvia travel 2.3 times a year on average, while those who do not actively plan to return to Latvia average 1.4 times per year. Moreover, the longer people live abroad, the less frequent are their visits back to Latvia. This is at odds with the existing Repatriation Law (1995) on support for return: permanent return and longer time spent abroad are favoured over those who have left recently. Initially, repatriation was possible for those who left Latvia before 1991 – Latvia’s independence, but in the 2010s changes were introduced and now return support is available to those who have spent at least 10 years abroad.

VFR is a quantitatively and qualitatively relevant type of transnational return; it is linked to networks of family and friends, managing properties back in Latvia, and running transnational errands regarding necessary official documents. Besides, choosing a place to stay – either in hotels, with relatives or friends, or at their own properties, poses further questions regarding our understanding of the nature and location of transnational ‘home’ in today’s mobile world.

As pointed out in our introduction, little is known about how meso-level initiatives influence the institutionalisation of transnationalism. Two important legal initiatives stand out. First, the Citizenship Law (1994) enables both an easier return for those who previously had only
one citizenship, and also enables the forging of stronger ties with current states of residence outside Latvia. But here comes a caution: the law does not allow for dual citizenship, for instance, with Russia, which is not part of the EU or NATO, but is home to Latvian descendants from several waves of migration, including the forced deportations that took place during and after the World War Two. In this way, geopolitical differences are strengthened.

But the most important changes are related to the Diaspora Law (2018) - the latest initiative with innovative suggestions that came directly from the ‘new’ and ‘old’ diasporas residing in Europe, represented by the The European Latvian Association. This law envisages declaring a second residence in Latvia precisely due to widespread practice of VFR and the prior difficulties which returnees face: they must de-register from Latvia, albeit many see it as ‘home’; de-register cars; they have difficulties with understanding why, when and how to pay tax in Latvia etc. Therefore the old and new diaspora members together proposed to introduce a new norm, whereby émigrés can register their second residence in Latvia and can vote in municipal elections if they hold a property in Latvia. Such changes would create a category of transnationals who reside abroad but also visit Latvia frequently and not only feel belonging but can legally practice it.

Conclusion

In this chapter we, firstly, considered, conceptually and empirically, reference points of value systems and norms between the earlier exiles and the recent migrants in order to trace certain manifestations of social change. ‘Old’ diaspora members generally emphasise their political and sentimental obligations towards Latvia, while recent migrants are often rather
disappointed with the country’s economic state. However, in the contemporary regime of increased opportunities for travel and return, such divisions get blurred: ‘old’ diaspora returnees do have economic motivations, alongside responsibilities to nurture Latvianness in their children and grandchildren. And recent returnees try to change the division by emphasising pragmatic gains and the possibilities of a ‘better life’ upon return to Latvia. In terms of evolving social change, more similarities may evolve through returns of the second generation of recent migrants. Permanent return to Latvia is not seen only as an obligation or as a result of failure to integrate abroad (Cassarino 2004; Gmelch 1980), but as a pathway of opportunities, which may also lead to emigration again.

Secondly, we examined three different modes of return to understand how mundane practices reveal themselves in such transnational patterns of mobilities. Along with the taken-for-granted idea that return is the final move which closes the migration cycle, we included diasporic tourism and VFR (Janta et al 2015) as actually existing return mobilities which shape identities and belonging to contemporary Latvia. Diasporic return relates more to the ‘old’ diaspora and deepens our understanding of historically formed identities and social changes in Latvia. Exilic experiences and the silence of relatives about reasons why they left Latvia, can be altered again through ‘roots’ tourism. Members of the ‘old’ diaspora open tourism services, restaurants and hotels to cater for their relatives and friends, among a broader clientele. But both diasporans and the recently emigrated prepare on an everyday day basis, wherever they live, to come back to Latvia for the Song festivals, taking place once every five years and gathering tens of thousands of participants. Despite their infrequency, Song festivals are born out of a transnational everyday process, leading towards the potential return: as visits, as diaspora tourism and as permanent return. But preparation for and participation in this event can also lead to permanent return, as we saw.
In terms of the sheer scale of border-crossing, VFR is the most popular form of return mobility. Transnational connections of families and friends across borders lead to visits, and Latvia remains the centre of such visits. It is also driven by many other everyday activities that people want to perform in Latvia: attend cultural events, look after properties, and have medical checks and procedures. Permanent return, diaspora tourism, and VFR enfold into, encourage, or also deter each other. All three types of return lead to more pluralised understanding of transnational return as evolving social change. Some of these are negative for returnees; for instance, during VFR mobility or diasporic tourism, returnees are legally treated as ‘foreign residents’. Moreover, return mobilities, such as shorter tourism visits enrich understanding of diaspora by including ‘affinity’ diaspora (Ancien et al. 2009) and belonging of people who are not ethnic Latvians but want to return there regularly.

Finally, and responding to our third question on how does return foster emerging socio-cultural identities and what kinds of social change are taking place, we see shifts towards stronger transnationalisation in society (Portes 2010). While existing legislation tended to favour permanent return, actual practices of multiple returns create a tension with such restricted understanding of return. We argue that bottom-up policy initiatives that stem from returnees’ own experiences can channel social change that is already emerging in collective identities. With the example of ‘old’ and ‘new’ diasporans working together in proposing legislative changes to enable non-resident Latvians better more opportunities to maintain a second residence in Latvia and participate in local political life, Latvia paves a way towards more fundamental changes in a country where various forms of transnational return are becoming constitutive of its future.
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