

## WHY DID THEY NEED TO COME NOW? COVID-19 CRISIS STRAINS RELATIONSHIPS WITH RETURNING AND VISITING COMPATRIOTS

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**Abstract.** *One of the first areas severely hit by the Covid-19 pandemic was international travel. In March/April, with commercial flights coming to a near halt, the governments were struggling to help their stranded citizens to return home. Extra flights and ferry trips were organised, and the opportunity to return was used by many emigrants worried about the uncertainty and the possible future development of the pandemic. This paper containing both data collected through survey and in-depth interviews with people aged 50+ in Latvia, is the first to explore the reactions of the society to repatriation policy implemented by the government of Latvia, and to explore how the Covid-19 situation has affected the attitudes towards return migrants in general. Importantly, it demonstrates how education moderates these attitudes. The results show that most of the population consider returning migrants as a significant source of infections, and many had doubts if they follow self-isolation and other rules responsibly. Those with the higher education were in general more supportive of the repatriation policy demonstrating the importance of education and explaining difficult decisions in order to reduce tension and fear.*

**Keywords:** *return migration, Covid-19, public attitudes, education.*

### Introduction

One of the somewhat unexpected consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been an increased willingness of emigrants to return to their home country. This was demonstrated in a recent survey conducted by the researchers of the University of Latvia in September-October 2020 where one out of ten diaspora parents admitted that the conditions related to the pandemic – particularly the facts that the situation in the world was becoming too unpredictable, Latvia had a less stringent regime, “more normal” life and that they could no longer visit their relatives in Latvia as often as they would like to - had made them wish to return to Latvia (Mierina et al., 2020). Estimates of the total size of the Latvian diaspora differ, but Hazans (2020) argues that since 2000, 315 thousand people had emigrated from Latvia, and until the pandemic, every year approximately 5000

people returned to Latvia after having spent at least one year abroad (Hazans, 2020). The respondents' answers indicate that we can expect this number to increase.

In March 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized so-called repatriation trips to enable compatriots "stuck" abroad to return to Latvia which were used both by those returning after business or tourist trips abroad, and also by those nationals willing to return permanently or at least visit Latvia for a longer period of time. Overall, in March and April of 2020 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had helped more than 5000 people to return to Latvia using planes, trains, and ships (Vārna, 2020). Nevertheless, the news articles in the Latvian media as well as stories on social networks pointed to ambiguous reactions and sometimes contained openly hostile statements towards compatriots returning to Latvia during this period of time. Such reactions were in stark contrast to the government efforts in the recent years to strengthen relationships with the diaspora and facilitate return migration, culminating in the adaptation of Diaspora law in 2019. Thus, we ask – what was the cause of such reactions of the public?

Xenophobia arising from health concerns is certainly not new - it has its roots as far back as the 1800s (Huang & Liu, 2020, Mierina & Koroleva, 2015, White 2020). Xenophobic response to infectious diseases has been observed since the 19th century with the spread of smallpox, as well as various tropic diseases threatening Europeans, and such health-driven xenophobic sentiments were not exclusive to Europe (White, 2020). Most recently, in Europe it flared up again during the migrant crisis of 2015, reflecting in debates and media articles, for example, in Germany and Denmark. As part of the dehumanising narratives, immigrants and refugees were often portrayed in the media as spreading infectious diseases (Esses et al., 2013). However, the role of health concerns in attitudes towards immigrants has so far been understudied in academic articles (although see, for example, Sunpuwan & Niyomsilpa, 2012; Haslam & Holland, 2012), researchers focusing much more on other determinants of xenophobia such as competition for resources (jobs, social benefits) or cultural tensions (Mierina & Koroleva 2015).

Over the years, researchers have been addressing the belief that migration spreads disease, and particularly communicable diseases. In regards to some diseases the myth has been dispelled, yet research showed that rates of TB and HIV/AIDS are indeed higher among immigrants than natives, mainly because many migrants come from countries with a high incidence of these conditions (Lillebaek et al., 2002; Norredam et al., 2014). In Latvia, as well as in most other European countries, at the onset of the pandemic many COVID-19 cases were brought in from abroad, resulting in various travel restrictions and providing a fact-based justification for anti-migrant sentiments. Huang and Liu (2020) were among the first to raise concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic becoming

another event that due to uncertainty, misinformation, and, in some cases, existing covert xenophobia can exaggerate racism and fear of people of certain ethnic or national origin. While they point to fears toward people of Chinese origin in the USA, one would not be surprised to find heightened fear and marginalisation of immigrants or minorities in Europe during the latest pandemic as well.

Referring to evolutionary psychological reasoning, Faulkner et al. (2004) demonstrated in four empirical correlation studies and two experiments that chronic and contextually aroused feelings of vulnerability to disease provoke negative reactions to foreign peoples. Thus, older people as of the risk category of COVID-19 can be expected to be more concerned about immigration and hold more negative attitudes towards immigrants during the pandemic. Interestingly, though, the authors also found that participants under high disease-salience conditions expressed less positive attitudes toward foreign (but not familiar) immigrants and were more likely to endorse policies that would favour the immigration of familiar rather than foreign peoples (Faulkner et al., 2004). Thus, the fear should be less pronounced (or absent) in regard to ones 'own people' such as repatriates or visiting nationals from abroad.

Of course, one needs to consider the specifics of the situation, mainly, who are the ones that travel, visit or return during the pandemic. The so-called 'salmon bias' or 'remigration bias' hypothesis implies that severely ill migrants or those with poorer health are more likely to return or to move closer to their origin communities in order to be cared for by their relatives in a familiar environment (Pushmann et al., 2017; Spallek et al., 2011). One can assume that during a pandemic such as COVID-19 the threat of falling ill and having to deal with an unfamiliar health care system (and possibly pay for the treatment) provides an extra motivation for migrants to return. On the other hand, the 'healthy migrants' hypothesis holds that those who are healthier are generally more likely to migrate or travel (e.g., Pushmann et al., 2017, Norredam et al., 2014). Both hypotheses have found some support meaning that the situation and context plays a big role. So how does the Latvian society see their returning compatriots?

The aim of this study is to test the hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a part of Latvian society to become more negative in its attitude towards repatriates and visiting compatriots, straining relationships between the members of diaspora / migrants and stayers. The novelty of our study is the proposition that the threat of COVID-19 can lead to marginalisation and stigmatisation of not just immigrants, but own nationals returning from abroad as well. This has not been explored before, moreover, in the context of an ongoing pandemic.

## **Data and Methods**

The quantitative data was collected as part of a special module developed in Latvia adjacent to the 8th wave of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). Unlike other phases of the study, the special extra module implemented in Latvia after the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, was conducted using paper assisted telephone interviews (PATI). The target population of the SHARE survey consisted of permanent residents of European countries over the age of 50 and their spouses. The survey at the end of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic was conducted from June 2020 to September 2020. The sample consisted of SHARE longitudinal panel participants, SHARE wave 7 respondents, as well as those respondents in the wave 8 update who managed to be interviewed before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The final achieved sample size consisted of 977 individuals.

In order to ensure the representativeness of the data and a balanced composition of respondents according to the general population of Latvia, the data were subjected to a weighting procedure by gender and age groups (Central Statistical Bureau data). The data was analysed in IBM SPSS 22 using univariate and bivariate statistics. The statistical significance of differences between groups was tested using Chi-square tests as well as dispersion analysis (ANOVA).

In addition, 16 partially structured in-depth interviews were conducted with people aged 50 to 80, from various parts of Latvia, representing different types of settlements (capital city, other cities, towns or the countryside); among them, there were 6 women and 10 men. 10 respondents had higher education. Written instructions were developed for the study participants, which included a brief description of the study, as well as confirmation of the participation in the interview. All interviews were transcribed and anonymized, the real names of the respondents being replaced with pseudonyms. Qualitative data analysis was based on the Grounded Theory Approach, which offers a systematic process of qualitative data coding. Coding of one data element (expression), continuous comparison and contrast with all other elements was performed to develop a theoretical basis for a possible relationship between different data elements. Both inductive and deductive approach was used.

## **Research Results**

### ***Attitudes towards repatriation and repatriates***

This survey finds that, however, at least half of respondents admit that repatriation was necessary in these difficult circumstances to get people back home.

*“There can be different experiences, both good and bad, who was lucky who was not, but the positive thing is that they did something, that people somehow got home, maybe not quite one hundred percent, but it also hardly possible, so...”* (Normunds, 52).

At the same time, the in-depth interviews reveal dissatisfaction among some in regard to how the repatriation was organised, mainly, that the arriving people were allowed to simply go on their way.

*“For those repatriation trips, when those people arrived and boarded the 22nd bus in a friendly way and their first trip was to eat at Lidins in Spice [restaurant at a popular shopping mall], that was a simply a phenomenon. [...] They all needed, I don't know, a hospital where they would all be examined but well...”* (Didzis, 53).

Another proposal included testing travellers against COVID-19 abroad, and only then allowing them to travel to Latvia. Another interviewee mirrors these sentiments:

*“[...] renting out the hotels for some isolation time, accommodating people there, so that they have at least state-paid purchase of products and everything else, I would understand that, but to bring people home and to let them out by a supermarket is simply stupid, the government's action was stupid”* (Normunds, 52).

He also complains about uncoordinated government action, lack of specific instructions how to act in different situations (e.g., shopping, transportation to the Covid-19 testing site).

Some respondents believe that the government should not have helped those who travelled abroad already when it was clear that there was a pandemic, because they did not want to lose their reservations or tickets. They were characterised as selfish, irresponsible, or abusing the system.

*“Those who travelled on tourist trips in the last days before the emergency and when the emergency started, they should have had to get home on foot”* (Elita, 60).

One interviewee (Inara, 57) complained that repatriation trips were extremely expensive – three times more expensive than normal. Still, majority of interviewees are hesitant to criticise the government:

*“Thinking rationally, we were all in such a situation for the first time, so how to act and what to do, how to do it exactly, this is what everyone is learning from mistakes, it is human to make mistakes. To give an accurate assessment of whether it was really good what they did or if it could have been better, I cannot do that”* (Guntis, 57).

Most also express empathy and understanding of their compatriot's willingness to return:

*“It is simply a human desire to escape and save one's life, but when money is needed again, they will leave, they are people who have always been so flexible and looking for the best decision for their life, because they fled I think not to visit - maybe also to use this opportunity - but they fled from the situation that began to develop there, that there could be very severe health risks, they could be exposed to Corona” (Aiga, 50).*

And, in some ways, are happy about migrants returning home:

*“Well, ee ... from the statehood point of view it certainly was good and also the familial point of view, it was pretty good, and, and apparently a man is somehow genetically encoded so that when the situation turn bad, he wants to get home. [...]” (Armands, 53).*

Most respondents consider returnees from abroad to be a significant potential source of infection (Figure 1). This was illustrated by one of the interviewees:

*“[...] well, as far as I know many were already terribly dissatisfied that they [the government] dragged from there [abroad] all this garbage to here, if I can say that. That's all I can say. What concerns me, I was outraged that all those sick people needed to be called back here” (Normunds, 53).*

Another interviewee (Armands, 53) also directly blames repatriates for the spread of disease in Latvia. From this point-of-view some interviewees consider the Latvian nationals returning or visiting Latvia during the pandemic as irresponsible. *“I wouldn't go back at this time. I would stay there at that moment, because [by returning] I would also endanger those who are here”*, strict in her assessment is Dzintra (59); her sentiment mirrored by several other women. Zigismunds (77) also notes that visitors from abroad just create stress, anxiety and unnecessary risk for pensioners like himself, and that communication opportunities on Skype, WhatsApp etc. are enough for keeping in touch at the moment. Nevertheless, he points to situations where returning would be justified:

*“Well, you see, those whose parents are helpless here, because the children have left and then they are left alone and those children, whether they want it or not, have to run back, that's another thing, isn't it? But then if they respect all measures this is not so bad. However, I do not support the principle of circulating [back and forth]” (Zigismunds, 77).*

Only 20% believe that those arriving from abroad followed the established quarantine and other regulations in good faith, while 35% have the opposite opinion (Figure 1). The in-depth interviews reveal a general consensus that there were those who followed the rules, and those who were reckless and did not. Most interviewees knew someone who has not abided by the rules after returning, and some specifically point to such information in the media:

*“We talked to some people, they really organized distancing for their loved ones [who had return from abroad] and it was all right, but what could be read*

*on the Internet is that a person is caught seven times, well five times, that he leaves his house, which means that ...*” (Aiga, 50).

Still, some believe that returnees were very responsible:

*“Very responsible. Those who returned and those who drove, they observed all those rules, self-isolation, wearing masks. I know this, when my son-in-law returned to my family, he observed it perfectly or not and he even blamed me when I treated it so lightly”* (Egils, 69).

While others think that almost no returnees abided by the rules:

*“Of those who returned to Saulkrasti no one obeyed the rules. I reported [them] to the police several times. [...] Simply, they had to live in isolation [but] they met local people, walked through the shops, shook hands, as if nothing had happened”* (Elita, 60).

The answers reveal anger towards those who did not follow the rules, especially about their arrogance. Interestingly, several interviewees noted that *their* relatives or children who returned from abroad did follow the rules, or even delayed traveling in order not to endanger anyone. One can notice a stark contrast between those ‘others’ who break the rules and their ‘own people’ who do not.

Several interviewees noted that due to health concerns they felt uncomfortable around those who had just returned from abroad and tried to stay away from them. However, this caution does not refer to their closest family members. When asked if he was not worried to meet his own son who had returned from abroad, Normunds (52) answer was: *“No, what fear, this is my child and what is there to fear. I know he's healthy, he's an athlete. No, there was no fear. Everything was OK.”*. This shows that people tend to underestimate threat coming from those closest to them.

Gunta (70) believes that it is practically not possible in her small rural locality not to obey the rules, as distancing comes naturally. Some (Normunds, 52) put the blame for some returnees not obeying the rules on the government who should have provided clearer instructions, explanations, and control.

Interestingly, there is no significant correlation between the three parameters, i.e., the fact that respondent believes that those arriving from abroad pose a significant risk does not affect their belief about the need for repatriation flights, and is not particularly connected to the belief about how strictly those returning follow the regulations (Spearman correlation coefficient  $<0.3>$ ). The only weak correlation worth mentioning is between the belief that those returning from abroad comply with rules and regulations, and the support for repatriation flights (coeff.=0.29, Sig.<0.001).

The analysis of demographic differences shows that those with the lowest level of education were more often than others not sure whether those returning from abroad pose a significant risk of infections, and those with the higher education more often felt sure of it (48%). Nevertheless, those with higher

education were also more often fully supportive of the repatriation flights (31%) while those with the basic education were often not sure if they were necessary.

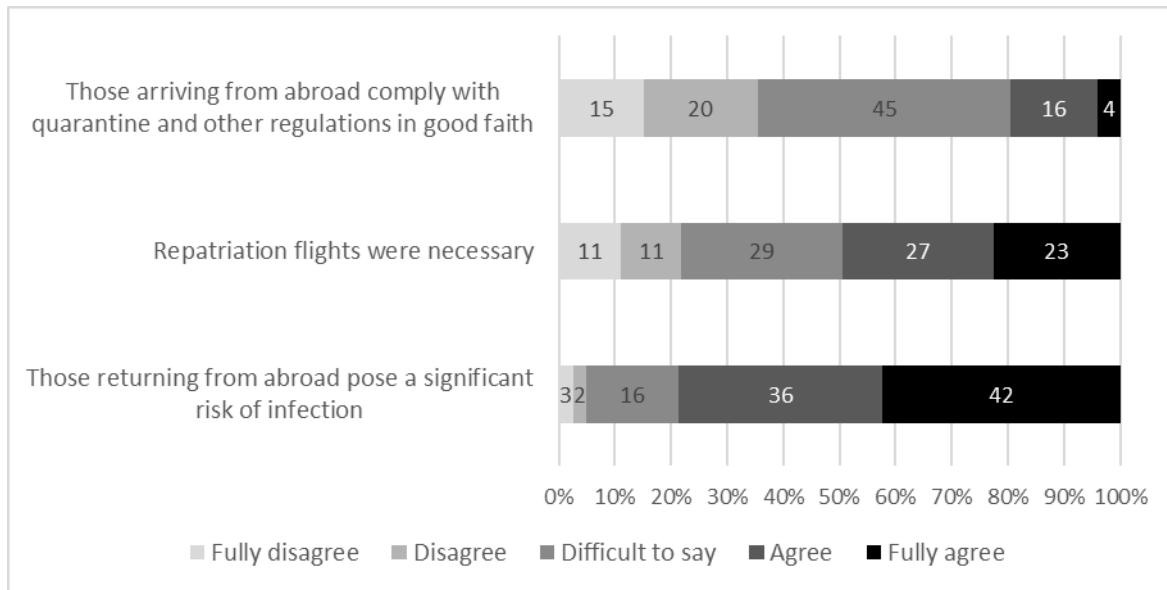


Figure 1 Perception of Return Migrants and Repatriation Flights (%)

Interestingly, there are significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) differences in attitudes between those from larger cities or other types of settlements. Those from smaller towns, villages or countryside more often thought that those returning do not comply with regulations, and much less often supported repatriation flights.

Regarding the possibility of Covid-19 reaching the size of a pandemic again in the autumn, the majority of respondents believe that the government's actions in various areas should be the same as in the spring. Relatively, most elderly people would like the government to implement different solutions in the autumn regarding assistance for the repatriation of compatriots from abroad (23%) and restrictions on movement (20%). Open responses suggest that, for fear of being a potential source of infection, immigrants would like to see stricter rules on quarantine, including ensuring that it is actually complied with, and possibly testing immediately. According to one respondent: *"It is necessary to help, but to control and ensure immediate isolation, to place in empty hotels, etc."*. Some consider that repatriation flights should not have been organized at all *"in order not to import the disease"*. As to why the Latvian state should not help repatriates, there are sometimes indications of seeming disloyalty to Latvia: *"If you make money and pay taxes in other countries, you also solve your problems there"*, for their higher income: *"If the money is enough to travel or make a profit abroad, Latvia is unlikely to have to fund return and treatment"*, as well as the fact that it



is their own responsibility: “People’s own irresponsibility should not be addressed at the expense of others”.

*Table 1 Attitudes towards Repatriation and Repatriates among Different Groups (%)*

		Education			Type of settlement	
		Basic education or lower	Secondary education (incl. professional)	Higher education	Smaller town, village, countryside	Large city
Those returning from abroad pose a significant risk of infection	Fully disagree	2.0	1.6	4.2	2.0	3.7
	Disagree	0.8	2.9	3.0	2.7	1.7
	Difficult to say	26.7	15.6	11.0	15.0	19.0
	Agree	32.9	38.9	34.1	39.6	30.3
	Fully agree	37.6	41.0	47.8	40.7	45.4
Repatriation flights were necessary	Fully disagree	8.9	12.2	13.0	13.8	5.7
	Disagree	6.4	14.5	10.2	12.6	7.1
	Difficult to say	38.2	29.6	19.9	30.6	25.1
	Agree	27.7	28.2	26.0	29.6	21.7
	Fully agree	18.8	15.5	30.8	13.4	40.5
Those arriving from abroad comply with quarantine and other regulations in good faith	Fully disagree	12.0	16.1	15.9	15.6	14.1
	Disagree	15.3	23.4	21.9	22.9	15.4
	Difficult to say	57.3	40.8	37.4	41.9	50.9
	Agree	11.3	16.8	19.2	16.8	13.4
	Fully agree	4.1	2.9	5.5	2.8	6.2

With regard to movement restrictions, 20% would like to see a different government reaction. Most who would like a different government response in the autumn point to the need for tighter controls on both migrants and emigrants, up to and including the complete closure of the border, like "strictly restrict cross-border movement, only allow if necessary", and introduce immediate quarantine and greater monitoring of isolation. Some would like an immediate test for immigrants. There are also some respondents who want less stringent restrictions, such as 'do nothing to ruin the economy', but there are extremely few of them in the general context of those in favour of tighter and longer restrictions. However, it should be noted that at the time of the survey, the prevalence of Covid-19 in the community was indeed relatively low, with a large proportion of cases being

'imported' from abroad. At the moment, it is very possible that the opinions of the population may have changed.

Interestingly, those with higher and secondary education significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) more often think that in the next possible wave of the pandemic the government should act differently with regards to organising assistance for the repatriation of compatriots from abroad (26-27% in comparison to 16% among those with basic education).

## Conclusions and Discussion

According to the survey conducted in the autumn 2020, in the conditions of the pandemic the majority of the population consider the members of diaspora returning or visiting Latvia as a potential source of infection. 78% of people aged 50+ agreed with the statement: "*People returning from abroad pose a significant risk of infection*". Many Latvian residents believe that those who have arrived from abroad do not observe the rules of self-isolation, quarantine or other regulations, or are not sure whether they observe them. Partially caused by negative information in the media and social networks, this situation has led to suspicion, lack of trust and bitterness on both sides, weakening emotional connections and leaving a lasting impression on relations with the diaspora. In the aforementioned diaspora parent survey (Mierina et al., 2020) 4% of the respondents have indicated that the COVID-19 crisis has reduced their desire to return to Latvia.

Interestingly, the study reveals that people are much less cautious and suspicious about their own relatives following the established rules and being a potential source of infection, but more about the 'others'. This provides some support to the Faulkner et al. (2004) thesis about the threat being attributed much more to unfamiliar immigrants.

When asked directly whether the COVID-19 pandemic has *changed* their opinion of the members of diaspora or returnees, all but a few deny that it has. In this regard it is important to remember that even before the pandemic, the Latvian population did not hold a uniformly positive opinion of emigrants. This can be seen from the in-depth interviews where several respondents characterised them as essentially footloose, not loyal to Latvia, who came to Latvia during the crisis when the situation is bad, but will leave as soon as the situation improves.

*"This set of people, constantly moving back and forth, is such a bunch... It is difficult to change, and they will never change, and in principle, with the change of generations, those who are now freer and have the financial means to travel around somewhere, they will"* (Arturs, 53).

This study, unfortunately, does not include the opinion of returnees themselves – it is a topic for future studies that would provide a clearer answer about their motivations and attitudes towards COVID-19 related restrictions.

### Acknowledgements

This research has been conducted as part of the VPP-COVID-2020/1-0011 project “Impact of COVID-19 on healthcare system and public health in Latvia; ways in preparing health sector for future epidemics, 2020. It has also benefited from the support of National Research Programme “Towards sustainable development and inclusive society in Latvia: response to demographic and migration challenges” (Nr. VPP-IZM-2018/1-0015) and the Latvian Council of Science, project “Exploring Well-Being and Social Integration in the Context of Liquid Migration: A Longitudinal Approach”, project (Nr. Izp-2018/1-0042).

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