ETF Working together Learning for life

European Training Foundation

THE EU AGENCY SUPPORTING COUNTRIES TO DEVELOP THROUGH LEARNING

SKILLS AND MIGRATION IN CHANGING LABOUR MARKETS

EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH FOR NEW POLICIES AND ACTIONS

WORKING PAPER - MAY 2026

This report has been prepared by the European Training Foundation.

Authors: Victor Michael Aihawu, Erka Çaro, Nkiru Perpetua Duru, Zebo Isakova Murodovna, Mariavittoria Garlappi, Bresena Kopliku, Mihaela Matei, Judith Möllers, Nermin Oruc, Janine Pinkow-Läpple, Iva Vukčević, Marija Rashkovska, Slavica Taseva, Rano Turaeva-Hoehne.

Editors and peer reviewers: Mariavittoria Garlappi, Mihaela Matei

Manuscript completed in April 2026

When citing this report, please use the following wording:

European Training Foundation (2026), *Skills and Migration in Changing Labour Markets. Research evidence for new policies and actions*, Turin

PREFACE

The skills' potential of migrants can play a significant role in addressing demographic shifts and structural transformation of economies, societies and labour markets. Across regions, technological change, sectoral restructuring, digitalisation and evolving production systems are reshaping demand for competences. In this context, countries rely, to varying degrees, on the skills, qualifications, and experience of foreign labour from highly specialised expertise to medium and lower-skilled occupations, across a wide range of sectors. Placing skills at the centre of policy making can make labour migration a 'triple win' for the countries of origin, countries of destination, and migrants themselves. This calls for forward-looking strategies that place identification, development, recognition and utilisation of skills at the centre of migration governance. This also call for robust and effective institutional coordination and partnerships between public authorities, education and training providers, employers and social partners.

In the European Union, the migration skills agenda has gained renewed strategic importance. The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Talent Partnerships initiative, the Talent Pool, and the Union of Skills framework all underscore the need to link migration policies with skills development, qualifications recognition and labour market integration. Talent Partnerships in particular aim to foster mutually beneficial cooperation between EU Member States and partner countries, combining mobility pathways with investment in skills systems and institutional capacity. These frameworks put emphasis on ethical recruitment, the portability of qualifications, brain circulation, and sustainable development in countries of origin.

Against this policy background, in 2025 the European Training Foundation (ETF) launched an international community of experts on skills and migration established under the ETF Skills Lab Network of Experts, called MIGCOM. The aim of MIGCOM is to deepen analytical and policy understanding of the skills-migration nexus across its partner regions and beyond.

To foster knowledge creation, MIGCOM launched an international call for papers in the second part of 2025. Out of 116 submitted abstracts, 40 authors were invited to submit articles and, of the 30 received, 19 articles were selected for publication. These were included in a thematic report and working paper and both publications are available on the ETF Skills and Migration webpage. The scope of the two publications is complementary, one is written from the skills systems perspective (the thematic report) and the other from the perspective of labour market analysis (the working paper).

The articles in this working paper showcase the variety of current research on the skills-migration nexus. While they do not offer definitive answers, they seek to advance debate, test hypotheses, and encourage further research. By presenting a range of empirical evidence and conceptual insights, this paper supports a more nuanced understanding of when migration fosters human capital development and when it may contribute to the development of countries of origin or skills loss.

This working paper also reflects the valuable cooperation and contributions of many experts. The ETF would like to thank the authors of the eight articles, and Mihaela Matei for her dual role as author and peer reviewer. A big thank you also to ETF staff Mariavittoria Garlappi (editor, author and peer reviewer), Alessandra Massaro and Elma Aga for their professional support.

Finally, and most importantly, this working paper is dedicated to all migrant workers, whose professional journeys embody the complex interaction between mobility and skills. It is the ETF's hope that the evidence and reflections presented here will support more informed, balanced, and humane policies that recognise migration as an integral part of sustainable skills development and shared prosperity.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: KEY FINDINGS AND WAY FORWARD

Mariavittoria Garlappi and Mihaela Matei

1.1 Context and structural transformations

This Working Paper examines how ongoing transformations in labour markets, migration regimes and systems of skill formation are reshaping the relationship between mobility and human capital development. The analytical dimensions capture the interconnected processes through which structural change reshapes skills demand and mobility patterns and are derived from the eight contributions included in this volume. These lenses should not be seen as exhaustive. Structural transformation encompasses additional dimensions that are only partially addressed here and require further attention; both to deepen understanding and to refine policy-relevant insights into the evolving relationship between skills, mobility and labour markets[1].

At the core of this transformation lie technological developments and geoeconomic shifts, which are increasingly driving changes in job and skill demand across economies. Digitalisation, automation and platform-mediated work are reconfiguring production processes, occupational hierarchies and contractual arrangements. Rather than raising skill demand uniformly, technological transformation differentiates it: high-end digital competences expand alongside precarious, low-entry-barrier forms of platform work. Employment relations become more fragmented, and the geographical organisation of labour increasingly extends beyond nationally bounded systems through remote and digitally mediated work.

Demographic dynamics interact with these economic changes. Ageing populations across the European Union and parts of the Western Balkans face labour force and skills shortages, while regions such as Central Asia and West Africa experience rapid labour force growth. These labour-market transformations and evolving skills demand shape mobility patterns, while demographic asymmetries amplify these dynamics.

Migration, therefore, also emerges as an adjustment mechanism within changing labour markets. Many countries present complex migration profiles in which different forms of mobility coexist. Several ETF partner countries experience outward migration of their own citizens while also receiving foreign workers, hosting transit migrants, and witnessing growing patterns of diversified and transnational circular migration. Circular mobility, return migration and telemigration[2] are no longer peripheral phenomena but integral components of labour-market adjustment.

[1] To foster mutual learning and knowledge co-creation on the relations between skills, employment and migration, ETF has set up a community of international experts (MIGCOM).
Any interested expert can join MIGCOM by filling a form at EUSurvey - Survey

[2] Telemigration refers to the phenomenon of people living in one country while working remotely for a company or client based in another country, essentially "moving their skills without moving their bodies". Coined by economist Richard Baldwin in 2019, it represents a new wave of globalization where digital technologies enable the offshoring of skilled, white-collar service jobs.

Across these diverse contexts, the eight papers in this publication advance the skills-migration debate by analysing mobility within a broader configuration of structural transformation. The authors integrate digitalisation, conflict dynamics, return migration and informal skill formation within analytical frameworks that foreground institutional mediation. Methodologically, the paper combines econometric modelling, cross-country labour-market analysis, institutional case studies and ethnographic research, thereby bridging macro-level structural trends with micro-level skill trajectories. Substantively, it brings new evidence on underexplored dimensions of the skills-migration nexus: the limits of the brain gain hypothesis under conflict-induced displacement; the role of skills intelligence and career guidance in mitigating emigration pressures; the conditional nature of return and intangible remittances; the developmental constraints posed by fragmented reintegration systems; and the emergence of telemigration and platform-based skill production operating beyond traditional regulatory categories. By situating skills as institutionally embedded rather than merely as individual attributes, the volume reframes migration as an adjustment mechanism whose developmental impact hinges on the alignment between labour-market transformation, recognition frameworks and institutional capacity. Beyond their analytical contributions, the articles in this volume also offer practical insights for policy development, inspiring policymakers seeking to design programmes that maximise the developmental benefits of mobility.

The sections of this chapter rely on the eight contributions included in this volume. Section 1.1 situates the skills–migration nexus within broader processes of structural transformation, highlighting recurring patterns across diverse country contexts. Section 1.2 develops the analytical lens, identifying the key dimensions through which the interaction between skills, mobility and labour markets can be understood. Section 1.3 summarises the contributions from the eight authors into three interconnected focus areas, while Section 1.4 integrates key findings from all eight articles into cross-cutting findings and policy implications.

1.2 Analytical lens – skills as a mediating mechanism

Labour-market transformations challenge how countries anticipate and build the skills needed in the 21st-century. The outcomes of these processes depend on institutions' capacity to recognise, regulate, and utilise skills in changing labour-market environments. Systems of vocational education and training, qualification frameworks, labour-market institutions and migration governance structures play a critical role in shaping whether mobility leads to human capital upgrading, knowledge circulation or persistent mismatch. These pressures also influence mobility patterns, including emigration, return migration and emerging forms of cross-border digital work. Migration, in turn, redistributes competences across regions and sectors, creating both opportunities and challenges for labour markets and institutions.

The contributions in this volume demonstrate that similar structural pressures can generate different outcomes depending on institutional contexts. Geographically, the

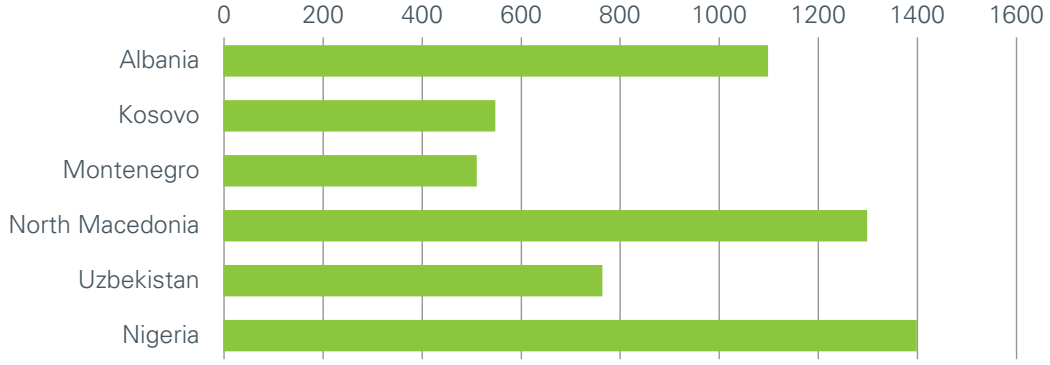
volume draws on cases from the European Union (Romania), the Western Balkans (Albania, Kosovo[3], Montenegro and North Macedonia), Central Asia (Uzbekistan) and West Africa (Nigeria). These regions differ in demographic structure, skills formation systems, labour-market composition and migration regimes. Rather than treating these differences descriptively, the analytical lens interprets them as variations in how structural asymmetry, technological transformation and policy coordination interact.

1.2.1 Digitalisation and skill demand

Technological transformation constitutes an important structural dimension shaping contemporary labour markets. Digitalisation and the expansion of platform-mediated work reconfigure occupational hierarchies and create new, stratified skill requirements. Digital platforms, remote contracting, and algorithmic management have introduced new forms of work that blur the boundaries between wage employment, self-employment, and informal activity.

Evidence from online labour platforms indicates that digital labour markets are expanding rapidly across several ETF partner regions. Data from global online labour observatories show increasing participation of workers from Central Asia, Eastern Europe and parts of Africa in remote digital service provision. However, exports of digitally deliverable services illustrate the uneven capacity of countries to participate in digital labour markets (Figure 1). Nigeria's digital ecosystem (in Q2 2024 is expanding, and the ICT's contribution to Nigeria's real GDP reached 19.78 per cent). This has generated growing demand for advanced ICT skills and entrepreneurial competencies. In this case, digitalisation functions as both a channel for labour-market absorption and a source of new inequalities.

Figure 1. International exports in digitally-deliverable services, $ million, 2023



Sources: World Bank, UNCTAD_DE_DIG_SERVTRADE_ANN_EXP

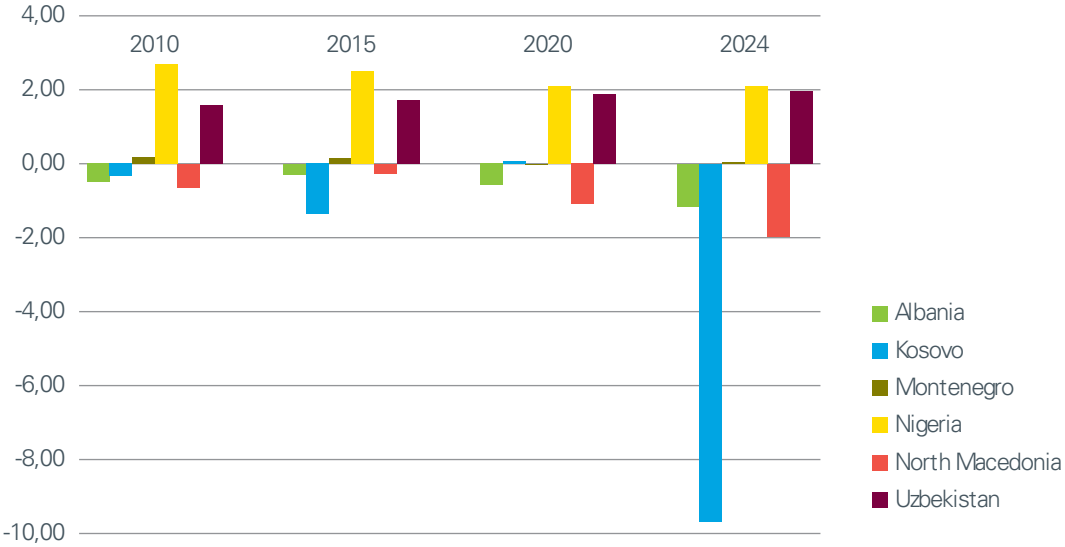
[3] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

The papers in this report illustrate how these dynamics unfold differently across regions. Skills acquired in digital environments become globally tradable, yet institutional recognition and social protection frequently remain nationally bound.

1.2.2 Labour-market transformations

Labour-market transformation unfolds unevenly across regions because demographic structures differ fundamentally. Ageing and population decline, as found in parts of the Western Balkans, generate regional 'demand poles' by intensifying labour and skill shortages. An ageing population is shrinking the workforce, creating shortages in sectors such as healthcare, construction, and technical services, and leading to increased recruitment of foreign workers. In contrast, expanding youth populations in Central Asia and West Africa create 'supply poles.' In these areas, large cohorts seek employment opportunities, and these demographic imbalances drive mobility patterns. As several contributions in this volume illustrate, these demographic asymmetries strongly shape mobility patterns and labour-market outcomes.

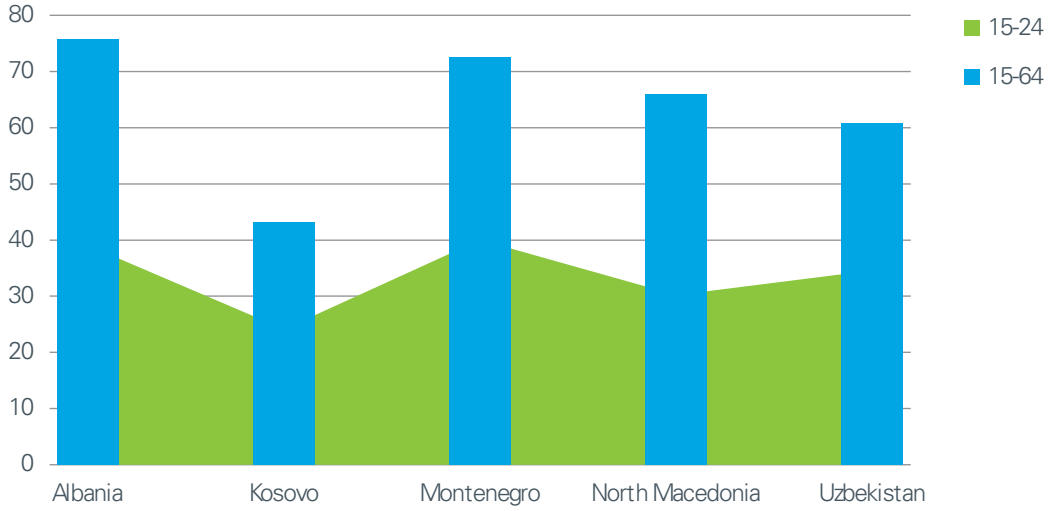
Figure 2. Population growth (annual %)



Sources: ETF KIESE. Note: Data for Nigeria are sourced from data.worldbank.org

The data indicate substantial disparities in labour force participation, particularly among youth, with Kosovo showing the lowest participation rates, while Albania and Montenegro display comparatively higher levels of labour market engagement (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Labour force participation rate (%), by age group



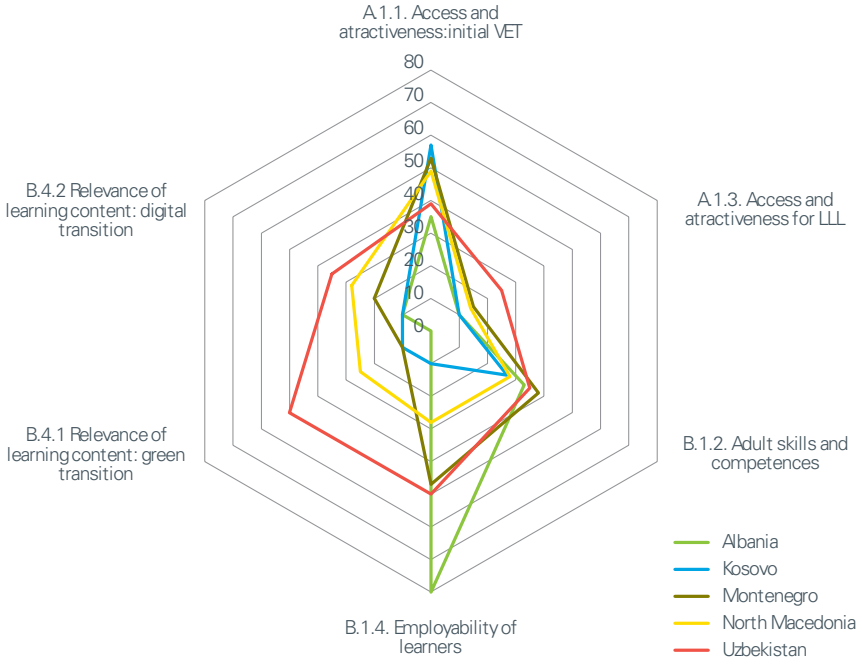
Sources: ETF KIESE

Structural change does not produce uniform labour-market effects. Therefore, skills mismatches manifest differently, such as the underutilisation of educated workers in the Western Balkans, and as underemployment and limited formal-sector opportunities in Uzbekistan and Nigeria.

1.2.3 Skill formation systems and institutional capacity

The **ability of skill formation systems to meet labour demand varies** significantly across countries (Fig. 4). Differences in regulatory frameworks, education governance, and labour-market coordination shape how effectively countries transform education and training into productive employment outcomes. Western Balkan countries have expanded university education and introduced digital skills into their curricula, thereby raising participation in higher education and in digital learning. Uzbekistan focuses on expanding vocational training and skills partnerships to prepare people for local and overseas jobs. Nigeria's growing higher education sector is held back by unequal access, especially for women and rural areas, and by infrastructure constraints, which limit inclusive skills development.

Figure 4. System Performance Indices



Sources: ETF KIESE and Torino Process databases

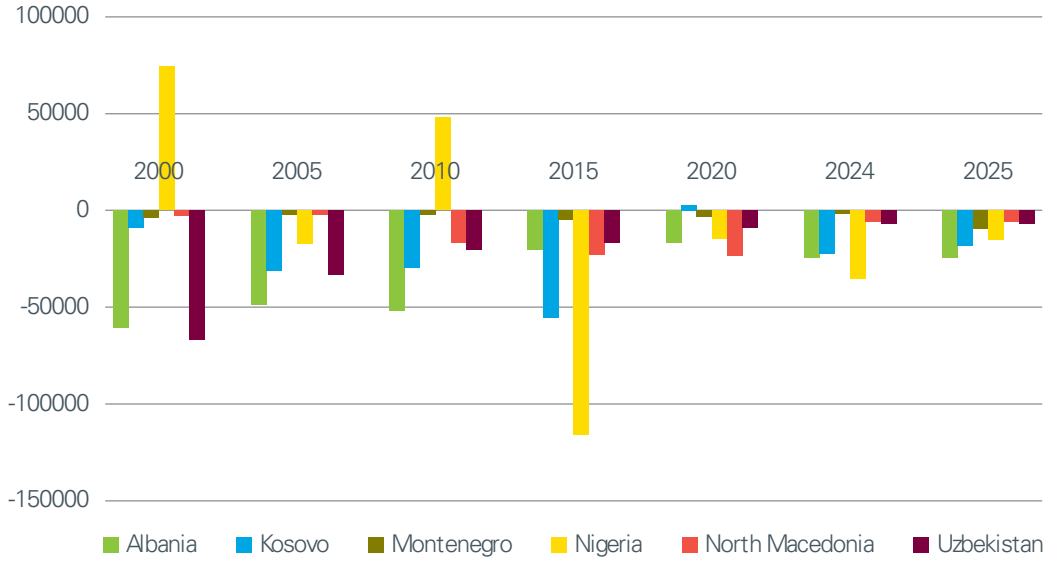
The recognition of skills emerges as a central institutional bottleneck, and qualification frameworks, employer validation mechanisms, and cross-border recognition systems frequently lag behind evolving forms of learning. Where recognition fails, mobility risks creating underutilisation of skills rather than effective use.

1.2.4 Migration, remittances and development

Migration regimes and patterns of emigration, return and circularity differ across regions and influence how competences circulate. The Western Balkans have long-standing emigration traditions and well-established diasporas in the European Union, with growing attention to circularity and return. Albania displays the highest level of outward mobility, while immigration remains very low. North Macedonia also shows a substantial rise in emigrant stock, in parallel with a gradual increase in immigrant stock. Kosovo presents a slightly different pattern: a declining emigrant stock and persistently negative net migration, indicating continued outward mobility despite some inflows. Montenegro reflects similar regional dynamics. Outside the Western Balkans, migration regimes display different characteristics. Uzbekistan's migration is predominantly temporary and labour-oriented, often concentrated in specific corridors and accompanied by significant remittance flows. Nigeria presents more heterogeneous mobility patterns, including

intra-African migration, migration to Europe and North America, and an emerging policy emphasis on diaspora engagement and return entrepreneurship.

Figure 5. Net migration

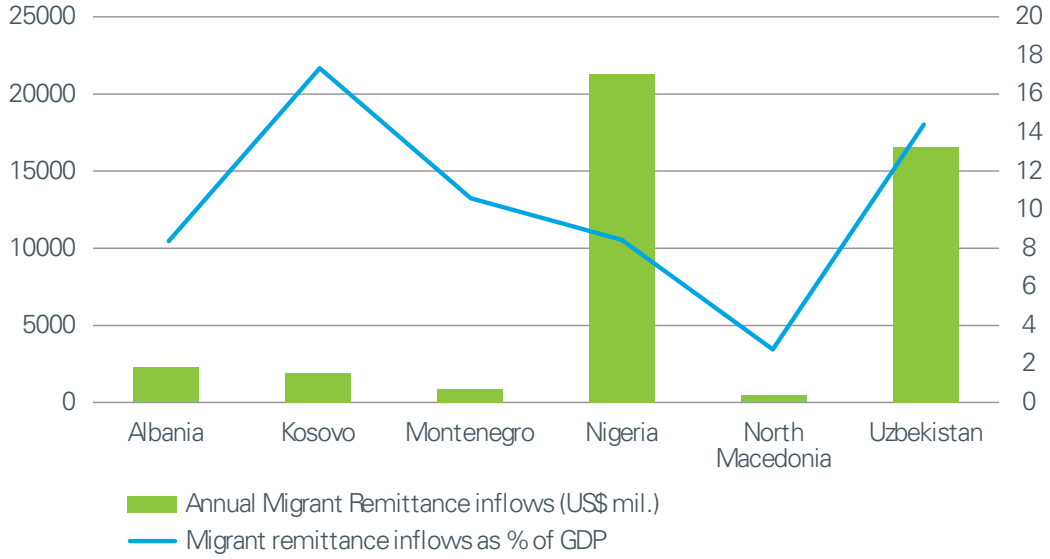


Sources: data.worldbank.org

Beyond mobility, the contributions in this volume highlight the multiple ways in which migration reshapes development processes. Several papers emphasise the role of non-financial resource transfers. Other contributions draw attention to more complex mobility trajectories or conflict-induced displacement. It is worth noting that within the skills-migration nexus, limited attention is often paid to the growing role of forced migration. Refugees and asylum seekers are often analysed primarily through humanitarian frameworks, yet they also participate in transnational labour markets and contribute to knowledge and resource circulation. Social remittances, including professional practices, skills, norms, and entrepreneurial ideas, can influence economic and institutional development in origin countries.

Finally, the **role of remittances and return migration** differs across these countries. In several Western Balkan economies, remittances account for a substantial share of the GDP and serve as a stabilising source of income for households (Fig.6). In Uzbekistan, remittances are central to household livelihoods and poverty reduction, yet their translation into productive investment depends on savings accumulation and financial intermediation. Nigeria receives large volumes of remittances in absolute terms, and policy discourse frequently emphasises their potential to stimulate entrepreneurship and innovation. However, the conversion of mobility or return into sustainable development outcomes depends on institutional capacity, labour-market absorption, access to credit, and effective recognition of skills acquired abroad.

Figure 6. Migrant remittances, 2024



Sources: ETF KIESE and World Bank. Note: Data for Nigeria are sourced from data.worldbank.org.

Across these diverse contexts, skills emerge as a key mediating dimension within broader institutional configurations. Institutional coordination ultimately conditions whether mobility contributes to sustainable human capital development or reinforces structural imbalance.

1.3 The Skills–migration narrative: key focus areas

The central argument advanced in this Working Paper volume is that change in labour markets generates new forms of mobility and reconfigures patterns of skill demand, while migration feeds back into the organisation of work and the distribution of competences across regions. Skills, as formed, recognised and deployed within institutional systems, mediate how these transformations translate into upgrading, segmentation or persistent mismatch. Beyond documenting diverse migration patterns, the eight papers move beyond traditional migration narratives and provide complementary perspectives on how migration interacts with skills systems, human capital formation and institutional governance. Instead of presenting a single narrative, the volume is organised around three analytically distinct yet interconnected dimensions of the skills–mobility nexus.

1.3.1 Human Capital Under Pressure: Skilled Migration and Institutional Responses

The first dimension examines situations in which structural asymmetries in labour markets and skill formation systems generate sustained outward mobility. Papers in this section analyse how skilled outmigration, demographic change, and forced displacement reshape human-capital dynamics in origin countries.

Marija Rashkovska's analysis of North Macedonia in chapter 2.1 Brain Drain and Skills Mismatch in North Macedonia: Can career guidance interventions help break the vicious circle? identifies persistent mismatch between education outputs and labour-market demand as a driver of emigration and provides evidence from the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre. Outward migration occurs within a context of limited high-value job creation, weak coordination across education and employment institutions, and insufficient alignment between VET, higher education, and employer demand. This misalignment generates a self-reinforcing cycle: emigration intensifies shortages in strategic sectors, which in turn constrain productivity and innovation, further weakening domestic absorption of skilled graduates. The analysis highlights the potential role of career guidance, VET–employer partnerships and institutional coordination in mitigating these dynamics.

A similar paradox, unemployment, mismatch and labour shortages, is reflected in Iva Vukčević's study, in chapter 2.2 From emigration to immigration? New mobility patterns in Montenegro. The country increasingly relies on foreign workers to fill shortages, particularly in seasonal and low- to medium-skilled occupations, even as it continues to lose its young and educated workforce. Education and training systems remain weakly aligned to evolving sectoral needs, while migration is insufficiently integrated into workforce planning. The absence of coordinated reintegration frameworks limits the capacity to convert remittances and return into sustained development gains. Most importantly, fragmented institutional responsibilities and limited skills intelligence hinder effective matching between migrant competencies and domestic economic priorities, weakening the strategic value of circularity. The study highlights the importance of migration governance, improved data systems and institutional coordination for effective skills matching and labour-market planning.

Oruc's econometric analysis in chapter 2.3 Migration prospects, conflict-induced displacement and human capital accumulations, extends the discussion to conflict-affected contexts. Testing the 'brain gain' incentive hypothesis in conflict contexts, the paper finds that the positive education incentives predicted by standard brain-drain theory weaken or disappear under forced displacement. Conflict disrupts education systems, displacement is not positively selected by education, and perceived returns to education decline. In such contexts, emigration does not generate virtuous human-capital formation effects but instead risks long-term erosion. The findings point to the importance of the education system's resilience in shaping human capital outcomes in conflict-affected contexts.

The three articles highlight that mobility can stimulate new forms of knowledge circulation, skills upgrading and entrepreneurial activity when institutions are able to channel migration experiences into productive outcomes. The authors demonstrate that the pressures exerted by migration on human capital systems depend on institutional capacity.

1.3.2 Human Capital in Circulation: Return Migration and Development

The second dimension focuses on the circulation of skills through return migration. Papers explore the conditions under which return migrants contribute to economic activity, institutional development and knowledge transfer.

Bresena Kopliku and Erka Caro's study of Albanian returnees, in chapter 3.1 From brain drain to brain return? Reintegration pathways and skills utilisation among qualified Albanian return migrants demonstrates that highly skilled graduates and professionals return with expertise, networks and international exposure. Yet rigid organisational cultures, weak recognition of foreign-acquired qualifications and limited research and innovation ecosystems constrain their utilisation. Reintegration pathways vary significantly, ranging from successful professional reinsertion and entrepreneurship to underemployment or re-emigration when domestic labour markets fail to recognise or effectively deploy returnees' skills. The study highlights the constraints posed by rigid qualification frameworks and limited institutional capacity to recognise returnees' skills.

The intangible remittances are further explored in Janine Pinkow-Läpple and Judith Möllers' research on highly skilled female returnees to Kosovo and Romania, in chapter 3.2 Overcoming resistance, enabling change: Support structures for intangible remittance transmission by female returnees. The authors show that migration generates forms of knowledge and social innovation that go beyond economic capital and emphasise the importance of intangible remittances, professional norms, civic practices and gender-equality values as channels of knowledge transfer. However, diffusion depends on receptive institutional and social environments. Hierarchies, resistance and reverse culture shock limit impact, illustrating that circulation alone does not guarantee transformation. The findings, therefore, underline the importance of supportive professional settings, peer networks, and institutional openness in enabling return migrants to convert the knowledge they have acquired into broader social and institutional change.

In chapter 3.3 Unlocking the development potential of skilled returned migrants in Nigeria's labour market Nkiru Ndowe complements this analysis in a context marked by high informality and limited formal job creation. The paper shows that returnees often possess skills and entrepreneurial ambitions, yet reintegration support is fragmented, donor-dependent, and poorly aligned with labour-market demand. Barriers include stigma, bureaucratic constraints in credential recognition and limited access to finance, with gender-specific vulnerabilities intensifying constraints for women. The paper calls for improved, coordinated, and long-term reintegration frameworks that link migration governance with labour-market policies, strengthen access to finance and to skills

recognition mechanisms, and support the productive economic inclusion of return migrants.

The second section addresses the conditional nature of return and skills circulation. Skills do not automatically translate into domestic upgrading upon return. Instead, outcomes depend on institutional receptiveness, regulatory coherence and labour-market absorption capacity. The articles also highlight the need for gender-sensitive, inclusive policy approaches.

1.3.3 Human Capital Beyond Borders: Emerging and Informal Mobility Forms

The third dimension examines mobility beyond traditional migration frameworks. These papers analyse how digital labour markets, transnational work arrangements, and the transfer of intangible competences reshape the relationships among mobility, work, and development.

The shift from physical migration to telemigration is introduced into the analysis through chapter 4.1 From migration to telemigration: Mapping the skills and policy challenges of Uzbekistan's platform workforce (Isakova Zebo Murodovna), which examines Uzbekistan's transition toward remote cross-border service provision via digital platforms. The study shows that freelancers develop digital competencies and platform literacy that are globally tradable and, for some workers, substitute for physical migration. Yet telemigration operates in an institutional vacuum: legal status is unclear, social protection is limited, and platform-acquired skills remain largely uncertified and disconnected from qualification frameworks. As a result, telemigrants are excluded from conventional mobility schemes and labour protections, and the developmental benefits of digital work remain fragile. The paper gaps in regulation, skills recognition and social protection within emerging forms of digital labour.

Complementing this perspective, Rano Turaeva-Hoehne's ethnographic research on Central Asian female migrants, in chapter 4.2 Invisible skill transfers: Female migration, informal economies and gender-sensitive skills recognition in the Central Asian migration, reveals how substantial competencies are acquired through informal labour-market participation. Women engaged in domestic work, care services and small-scale retail develop linguistic, organisational, digital and customer-relations skills through practice-based learning. Yet these competences remain largely uncertified and unrecognised, resulting in deskilling and downward mobility. The study highlights the absence of gender-sensitive recognition frameworks and the resulting underutilisation of informally acquired skills.

Although they examine different empirical settings within the Central Asian migration system, the two studies converge around a shared theme: the emergence of new transnational spaces of skill formation that extend beyond traditional migration pathways and test existing policy frameworks. Digital platforms, informal labour markets, and hybrid employment blur the distinctions between migration, remote work, and domestic employment.

1.4 Main Findings and Policy Recommendations

1.4.1 Findings

The contributions included in this Working Paper advance the understanding of the skills–migration nexus in several important ways. Firstly, the articles conceptualise mobility **as part of a dynamic system linking structural economic change, skill formation, labour-market institutions and transnational mobility patterns**. This perspective moves beyond static notions such as 'brain drain' or 'skills shortage' and instead highlights the processes through which mobility reshapes the distribution, utilisation and recognition of skills.

Secondly, several papers show that **competences are increasingly developed outside formal education systems**, including through informal work, migration experiences, platform-based activities and everyday labour practices. This finding broadens the analytical scope of skills research and highlights the limits of qualification-centred approaches in capturing the full range of skills relevant to labour markets.

Thirdly, the contributions document the **circulation of ideas, practices and professional norms across borders**. These 'intangible remittances' illustrate how migration can generate social innovation, institutional learning, and behavioural change, while also revealing the structural constraints that may limit their effective utilisation in countries of origin.

Across the diverse contexts examined, the findings consistently show that **mobility outcomes are shaped less by migration flows themselves and more by the capacity of domestic systems to recognise, utilise, and circulate skills**. Where skills systems and labour-market institutions are fragmented or weakly coordinated, mobility tends to reinforce existing mismatches and patterns of underutilisation. Conversely, where institutional frameworks are more coherent, mobility can contribute to knowledge circulation and human capital development.

The evidence also highlights **significant variation across regions**. In the Western Balkans, mobility is closely associated with skills mismatch and limited domestic absorption capacity. In Central Asia and West Africa, rapid labour-force growth, informality and constrained employment opportunities shape both physical and digital mobility patterns. Across all contexts, institutional capacity—particularly in skills recognition, labour-market coordination and governance—emerges as a critical mediating factor in determining outcomes.

1.4.2 Policy recommendations

Building on these findings, the following policy recommendations identify priority areas for action for EU institutions, partner countries and national policymakers.

1. Strengthen career guidance and labour-market systems in high-emigration contexts. The analysis shows how skills mismatch and limited information about labour-market opportunities can contribute to a cycle of outward migration and underutilised human capital. Labour-market forecasting, education planning and training provision increasingly need to account for patterns of emigration, return migration, circular mobility and remote cross-border work. Aligning skills systems with these mobility realities can help reduce mismatches between skills supply and labour-market demand. EU cooperation programmes and national policies should support the expansion of career guidance systems and labour-market forecasting. These instruments can help improve the alignment between education outcomes and labour-market demand in countries such as North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo.

2. Develop comprehensive reintegration frameworks for return migrants. Evidence from Albania and Nigeria demonstrates that return migration does not automatically translate into development gains when labour markets lack mechanisms to absorb returning professionals. Reintegration systems that connect migration institutions, employment services, training providers and the private sector can help transform return migration into a resource for economic development. Governments should establish integrated reintegration systems that combine employment services, skills recognition, entrepreneurship support, and innovation programmes. EU external cooperation instruments could support such frameworks through targeted funding for returnee programmes and local innovation systems. In this context, programmes such as Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) and the Reintegration and Recovery Facility (RRF) should place greater emphasis on skills assessment, recognition, and utilisation, ensuring that return processes are not limited to short-term assistance but also contribute to sustainable labour-market integration and local development.

3. Facilitate the transmission of knowledge and 'intangible remittances'. Women migrants and returnees often operate in sectors where skills remain undervalued or invisible, particularly in care work, services and informal entrepreneurship. Recognising and supporting these competences is essential for improving labour-market inclusion and for unlocking wider development benefits. EU and national policies should support diaspora knowledge networks and temporary return schemes that allow skilled migrants to contribute to institutional reform, entrepreneurship and innovation in their countries of origin.

4. Expand recognition of skills acquired in migration, informal economies and digital labour markets. Competences acquired through migration, informal work, platform labour or transnational professional experience often remain poorly captured by existing qualification frameworks. Expanding flexible mechanisms, such as recognition of prior learning (RPL), and developing assessment tools to validate non-formal and informally acquired skills would help ensure that these competences are effectively utilised within domestic labour markets. National governments should strengthen recognition of prior learning mechanisms and develop certification pathways for skills gained through informal work and digital platforms, allowing workers to translate these competencies into formal employment opportunities.

5. Promote skills partnerships linking training, mobility and labour-market needs. The Nigerian case illustrates how labour mobility initiatives can support skills development when training systems are linked to international labour demand. EU institutions and partner governments should expand skills partnerships and mobility schemes that combine vocational training with legal mobility pathways.

Structural transformation will continue to generate uneven labour-market pressures. The question is not whether mobility will occur, but whether institutions can shape its effects. Aligning recognition frameworks, adaptive training systems and coherent migration regimes is essential if the skills-migration nexus is to move from reactive adjustment toward sustainable structural coordination.

References

European Commission (2024), Pact on Migration and Asylum. Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Commission (2021), Talent Partnerships. Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-resettlement/talent-partnerships_en (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Commission (2021), European Skills Agenda. Available at: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Commission (2026), Union of skills. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills_en (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Commission (2024), *Attracting skills and talent to the EU*. Available at: EUR-Lex - 52022DC0657 - EN - EUR-Lex (Accessed: 27 March 2026)

European Commission (2023), *Communication on skills and talent mobility*. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/communication-skills-and-talent-mobility_en (Accessed: 27 March 2026)

European Commission (2023), *Recommendation EU 2023/7700 of 15 November 2023 on the recognition of qualifications of third-country nationals*. Available at: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/publications/commission-recommendation-recognition-qualifications-third-country-nationals_en (Accessed: 27 March 2026)

European Commission (2026), *Skills portability initiative*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/15892-Skills-portability-action-1-facilitating-worker-mobility-across-the-EU-through-skills-transparency-and-digitalisation_en (Accessed: 27 March 2026)

European Commission (2025), *The European Learning Model*. Available at: https://europass.europa.eu/en/european-learning-model-stakeholders (Accessed: 27 March 2026)

European Training Foundation (2025), Skills and migration. Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/skills_and_migration (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Training Foundation (2024), New forms of work and platform work in Central Asia. Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/new-forms-work-and-platform-work-central-asia (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Training Foundation (2021), The future of work – New forms of employment in the Eastern Partnership countries: Platform work. Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/future-work-new-forms-employment-eastern-partnership (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Training Foundation (2022), The future of work in the Western Balkans: New forms of employment and platform work. Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/embracing-digital-age (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Training Foundation, Data Portal. Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-portal (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Training Foundation (2025), KIESE indicators. Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/transforming-vocational-education-and-training-etf-monitoring-initiatives-and (Accessed: 13 May 2026)

European Training Foundation (2025), Torino Process reports. Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/trp-assessment-reports (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

European Training Foundation (2025), Migration Dashboard. Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-portal/migration-dashboard (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

National Bureau of Statistics (2024), Nigeria Gross Domestic Product Q2 2024. Available at: https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/elibrary/read/1241549 (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), International trade in digitally deliverable services, value, shares and growth, annual (analytical). Available at: https://unctadstat.unctad.org/datacentre/reportInfo/US.DigitallyDeliverableServices (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

World Bank, Population growth (annual %). Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

World Bank, Net migration. Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

World Bank, Personal remittances, received (current US$). Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

World Bank (n.d.), Personal remittances, received (% of GDP). Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS (Accessed: 22 April 2026)

CHAPTER 2: HUMAN CAPITAL UNDER PRESSURE – SKILLED MIGRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

2.1 Brain Drain and Skills Mismatch in North Macedonia: Can career guidance interventions help break the vicious circle?

Marija Rashkovska and Slavica Taseva

2.1.1 Preface

This paper has been prepared for the ETF Call for Papers 2025 under the MIGCOM Network. It examines the interlinked challenges of brain drain and skills mismatch in North Macedonia and explores whether vocational education and training (VET) and career guidance interventions can help shift the country from a vicious to a virtuous skills–migration cycle.

The motivation for this study stems from the authors' professional roles as coordinator at the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre in Strumica and as members of the Association of Career Counsellors of North Macedonia. In both contexts, students and adults face difficult career decisions in an environment of limited opportunities and strong emigration pressures. At the same time, evidence from practice indicates that targeted guidance and employer-linked training can influence perceptions, raise confidence and open new pathways.

The paper combines quantitative evidence from national and international data sources with qualitative insights from the Nikola Karev Regional Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE). This dual perspective bridges macro-level trends and micro-level practices, aligning with the ETF's conceptual frameworks on skills demand and migration cycles.

Appreciation is extended colleagues, students and partners who contributed indirectly to this work through their participation in guidance activities and professional exchanges. The European Training Foundation provided inspiration and methodological support through its extensive research and policy tools on skills and migration.

AI-assisted tools were used in a limited capacity to improve readability. All analyses, interpretations and conclusions are the author's independent work. AI tools were not used for data analysis or substantive argument development.

This paper is intended as both an academic contribution and a policy-relevant analysis. It seeks to inform debates on how North Macedonia and the wider Western Balkans can retain talent, align skills with labour market needs, and ensure that young people can envisage a career in their own country as viable and rewarding.

2.1.2 Abstract

North Macedonia is characterised by sustained emigration trends and a persistent skills mismatch. Census data and international reports confirm that more than 12% of the population lives abroad, with young and highly educated citizens disproportionately represented (IMF, 2023; SSO, 2021). At the same time, labour market surveys reveal acute shortages in ICT, engineering and vocational trades, alongside oversupply in law, economics and social sciences (ESA, 2024; CEDEFOP, 2025). These dynamics form a self-reinforcing vicious cycle: underutilised skills drive individuals to emigrate, while emigration depletes the domestic talent pool, widening the skills mismatch and discouraging investment (ETF, 2022).

While migration and the skills mismatch are frequently analysed separately, few studies examine their interaction through an integrated institutional lens. This paper addresses this gap by applying a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of migration and labour market data (2015–2024) with qualitative case study evidence from the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre in Strumica, one of the first Centres of Vocational Excellence in the country. The findings confirm that the skills mismatch and emigration are mutually reinforcing, but also highlight the potential of career guidance and VET interventions to generate virtuous cycles. At the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre, structured guidance and employer partnerships have increased awareness of green and digital skills pathways, improved employability and, in some cases, altered emigration intentions.

Policy analysis revealed ambition, but also fragmentation. While the National Employment Strategy 2021–2027, Youth Guarantee and ETF-supported CoVEs acknowledge the problem, gaps remain in scaling, coordination and integration of migration data into skills planning.

The study concludes that career guidance and CoVEs represent promising policy levers for reducing skills mismatch and mitigating brain drain. Three priorities emerge: institutionalising guidance across all schools, embedding CoVEs into the national VET system and integrating migration data into skills forecasting. By acting decisively, North Macedonia may strengthen conditions for a transition from vicious to virtuous cycles, offering young people viable futures in their home country while providing lessons to the wider Western Balkans through the ETF MIGCOM network.

2.1.3 Introduction

North Macedonia, like many Western Balkan countries, is experiencing a dual challenge: persistent emigration of skilled individuals and a mismatch between education outputs and labour market demand. These trends have significant consequences for economic growth, innovation and social cohesion. While migration has long been a feature of the region, recent data confirm that the outflow of young and educated citizens has reached levels that risk undermining national development (IMF, 2023; ETF, 2024a).

At the same time, the skills mismatch remains entrenched. Annual employer surveys by the Employment Service Agency (ESA, 2024) reveal critical shortages in ICT, mechanical engineering and vocational trades, while oversupply persists in law, economics and social sciences. This divergence between demand and supply reduces the employability of graduates and contributes directly to outward migration. The ETF (2022) model of vicious and virtuous skills–migration cycles captures this dynamic: underutilised skills encourage emigration, which reduces the domestic talent pool, worsening the skills mismatch and further discouraging investment.

This paper explores whether VET and career guidance interventions can break this cycle. It argues that while structural drivers of migration – such as wage differentials and EU demand – remain important, education and guidance systems play a critical role in shaping individual decisions. By aligning skills supply with demand and equipping students with accurate information, VET institutions may help mitigate mismatch and reduce emigration incentives.

Recent studies (ETF, 2022; OECD, 2022; Petreski, 2021) underscore how persistent skills mismatch and human-capital underutilisation continue to shape outward migration patterns across the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia.

The contribution of this paper is threefold:

- to provide an empirical analysis of migration and mismatch in North Macedonia, using quantitative data from 2015–2024;
- to examine a case study by the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre, selected due to its early transformation into a Regional Centre of Vocational Excellence — while analytically relevant, the case is illustrative rather than statistically representative;
- to propose policy-relevant recommendations, building on ETF frameworks and regional lessons, for integrating career guidance and skills planning into national strategies.

The paper is structured as follows: the Literature Review outlines what is already known about brain drain, mismatch and VET interventions, with a focus on North Macedonia and the Western Balkans. The Methodology describes the mixed-methods approach, data sources and analytical framework. The Findings present evidence on migration trends, mismatch, vicious cycles and case study insights. The Discussion interprets these findings in light of the literature and ETF frameworks. Finally, the Policy Implications and Conclusion identify actionable strategies for national and regional stakeholders.

2.1.4 Literature review

Migration and brain drain in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans

Migration represents one of the most significant structural forces shaping labour market and human capital dynamics in North Macedonia. Census data and international estimates indicate that a substantial share of the population resides abroad, with younger and tertiary-educated cohorts disproportionately represented (IMF, 2023; SSO, 2021). Such selective emigration patterns are frequently interpreted within the brain drain framework, which links skilled mobility to labour market opportunities, skills utilisation and institutional conditions (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Regional comparisons suggest that these dynamics are not unique to North Macedonia. Studies across the Western Balkans document sustained outward mobility among both highly educated and middle-skilled workers (OECD, 2022; Leitner, 2022). While institutional reports provide valuable descriptive evidence, the academic literature highlights important areas of debate, particularly regarding measurement challenges, underreporting of migration flows and the difficulty of distinguishing temporary mobility from permanent emigration (de Haas, 2010).

Petreski (2021), using cohort-based labour-force analysis, finds that emigration patterns in North Macedonia are strongly associated with age, education level and employment absorption constraints. These findings align with broader theoretical perspectives suggesting that migration decisions are shaped not only by wage differentials, but also by skills utilisation, career prospects and social networks (Massey et al., 1993).

ETF's regional study Use It or Lose It! (ETF, 2022) reinforces this interpretation by emphasising the relationship between skill underutilisation and outward mobility. However, empirical uncertainties remain, particularly concerning causal directionality and the interaction between structural and behavioural drivers.

Skills mismatch and the skills–migration cycle

Skills mismatch is commonly defined as the divergence between workers' competences and labour market requirements. The literature distinguishes vertical mismatch, horizontal mismatch and skills gaps (Allen & van der Velden, 2001; CEDEFOP, 2018). Across the Western Balkans, persistent mismatches are frequently linked to structural changes in sectoral demand, educational expansion and delayed institutional adaptation (ETF, 2023; OECD, 2022).

In North Macedonia, employer surveys consistently report shortages in selected technical occupations alongside oversupply in several academic disciplines (ESA, 2024). CEDEFOP (2025) projections similarly indicate sustained demand for green and digital skills. While widely accepted, the relationship between mismatch and migration remains analytically complex.

Academic studies suggest that mismatch interacts with multiple factors, including wages, employment quality, institutional trust and mobility networks (McGuinness et al., 2018). Rather than functioning as an isolated driver, mismatch may operate as a mediating condition shaping opportunity perceptions and career expectations.

The ETF's (2022) skills–migration cycle framework conceptualises this interaction as a dynamic process. Nevertheless, scholars caution against deterministic interpretations, noting methodological challenges in establishing causal relationships between mismatch, underemployment and mobility decisions (de Grip et al., 2008).

Interventions: VET, career guidance and policy responses

Career guidance

Career guidance is widely recognised as a mechanism for reducing informational asymmetries and supporting career decision-making (Hooley et al., 2018). OECD (2021) emphasises its role in improving school-to-work transitions. Empirical studies indicate that guidance may influence expectations, awareness and perceived employability pathways, though evidence on long-term labour market or migration outcomes remains mixed (Musset & Kurekova, 2018).

Tracer studies in North Macedonia highlight challenges related to field-of-study alignment and early career transitions (ETF, 2016), suggesting potential relevance for expanded guidance provision.

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

VET reforms increasingly emphasise employer engagement, work-based learning and Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). Comparative studies suggest that CoVEs may strengthen skills utilisation and regional innovation ecosystems (CEDEFOP, 2020). However, the academic literature also notes variability in outcomes depending on governance structures, funding models and labour market contexts.

Centres of Vocational Excellence are conceptualised as institutional platforms integrating vocational education, innovation, employer engagement and regional development functions (ETF, 2024; CEDEFOP, 2020). Unlike traditional VET providers, CoVEs are designed to operate as skills ecosystems linking education delivery with labour market intelligence, applied innovation activities and stakeholder partnerships.

Their relevance is particularly pronounced in small and transition economies, where systemic coordination between education and labour markets remains constrained. By strengthening employer collaboration, promoting emerging skills domains (notably green and digital competences) and embedding lifelong-learning pathways, CoVEs are intended to mitigate skills mismatch and enhance local employability structures.

Policy context

Policy frameworks across the region acknowledge the interaction between mismatch and migration (ETF, 2022; OECD, 2022). Nevertheless, scholars highlight persistent coordination challenges, particularly concerning data integration, institutional fragmentation and scaling constraints (World Bank, 2023).

Synthesis and gaps identified

The reviewed literature identifies two closely interconnected structural dynamics:

1. sustained outward mobility affecting both highly educated and middle-skilled workers;
2. persistent skills mismatch, contributing to underutilisation risks.

While conceptual frameworks suggest cyclical interactions between these processes, empirical debates remain concerning measurement limitations, causal directionality and policy effectiveness.

Three research gaps emerge:

1. limited integration of migration and skills-planning perspectives;
2. uneven institutionalisation of career guidance mechanisms;
3. insufficient micro-level evidence linking institutional practices with mobility perception.

Addressing these gaps requires bridging policy, practice and data, which is precisely the contribution of this paper, by combining macro-level analysis with micro-level institutional evidence from career-guidance implementation in the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre.

2.1.7 Methodology

Research design

This study applies a mixed-methods design to analyse how skills mismatch and emigration interact in North Macedonia and to assess the potential of VET and career guidance interventions to mitigate brain drain. It combines quantitative analysis of migration and labour market data with qualitative case study evidence from the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre in Strumica.

The design addresses three research questions (RQ).

- RQ1: What is the scale and profile of emigration, and how does it relate to education and labour market characteristics?
- RQ2: Which forms of skills mismatch are most pronounced, and how do they contribute to emigration?
- RQ3: How can VET and career guidance interventions help break the vicious circle of mismatch and brain drain?

This approach aligns with the ETF skills–migration framework (ETF, 2022) and the ETF methodologies for skills demand analysis (ETF, 2025).

The quantitative findings are descriptive and exploratory. The analysis does not seek to establish causal relationships, but to identify structural patterns and plausible mechanisms.

Data sources

Secondary quantitative data

The quantitative strand covers 2015–2024 and draws on the data found below.

- State Statistical Office (SSO): Labour Force Survey, census, migration data.
- Employment Service Agency (ESA): employer surveys and skills forecasts.
- IMF (2023): municipal-level emigration and business impacts.
- European Commission (2024): evaluations of ALMPs and Youth Guarantee.
- CEDEFOP (2025): skills demand projections to 2035.
- Eurostat/World Bank: comparative indicators for the Western Balkans.

Data from multiple sources have been interpreted comparatively, taking into account differences in definitions, reporting periods and coverage. Where datasets varied, analysis focused on consistent trends rather than exact numerical comparability. Known limitations of migration statistics, including underreporting and survey-based estimation, were considered throughout the interpretation.

The analysis integrates secondary datasets from ETF (2022; 2025), OECD (2022), IMF (2023) and national sources (SSO, ESA), complemented by qualitative evidence from institutional practice at the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre.

Primary qualitative data

The case study at Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre provides insights from:

- ISATCOVE self-assessment and activity evaluations (2019–2024) – the institutional practices examined in the case study are aligned with the ISATCOVE framework (ETF, 2024);
- student and adult reflections from guidance workshops;
- records of employer-linked training and workshops.

The qualitative component draws on institutional evidence collected between 2023 and 2024. Data sources included:

- reflective semi-structured interviews with students (n≈22) and adult learners (n≈12) participating in career guidance activities;
- aggregated feedback forms from guidance workshops (n≈65);
- internal ISATCOVE evaluations and activity documentation.

Participants in the qualitative component included upper secondary vocational learners and adult participants engaged in career-guidance activities implemented between 2019 and 2024. The student cohort predominantly comprised individuals aged 16–18

years, reflecting typical upper secondary enrolment patterns. Adult participants ranged between approximately 25 and 45 years of age and were primarily involved in reskilling or competence-development pathways.

The qualitative sample reflected a gender distribution broadly consistent with institutional enrolment structures. Given the exploratory and illustrative nature of the case study, the analysis focuses on aggregated perception patterns rather than demographic differentiation.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on learners engaged in career guidance and employer-linked activities. Feedback instruments consisted of short, structured reflection templates combining Likert-scale items and open-response prompts. These forms captured participant perceptions related to career awareness, perceived employability, skills relevance, labour market understanding and migration considerations. The structure enabled consistent aggregation of recurring perception patterns while preserving qualitative nuance. Qualitative evidence was analysed using thematic coding. Responses were grouped into recurring themes including career awareness, employability perceptions, migration intentions and skills relevance. Coding focused on identifying consistent patterns across participant groups rather than individual narratives.

Nikola Karev was chosen as an illustrative case because it is among the first VET institutions transformed into a Regional Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE), making its practices strategically relevant even if not representative.

Analytical framework

The analytical approach combined quantitative and qualitative techniques in a structured four-step process designed to ensure coherence between macro-level patterns and micro-level institutional evidence.

First, descriptive statistical analysis was applied to secondary datasets to identify trends in emigration, unemployment and sectoral demand pressures. These indicators provided the structural context within which skills mismatch and migration dynamics were interpreted (SSO; ESA; Eurostat).

Second, labour market alignment challenges were examined through established skills-mismatch typologies, distinguishing between vertical mismatch, horizontal mismatch and skills gaps (ETF, 2025; CEDEFOP, 2025). This step enabled the identification of systemic imbalances between qualifications, occupational demand and competence utilisation.

Third, qualitative evidence was analysed using a thematic coding strategy. Initial open coding of participant reflections and institutional records was followed by aggregation into higher-level analytical themes. The coding process focused on identifying recurring patterns related to learner perceptions of employability, career expectations, awareness of labour market opportunities and migration-related attitudes. To enhance analytical consistency, emphasis was placed on themes emerging across multiple participant groups and activity cycles rather than isolated responses.

Finally, empirical findings were interpreted through policy mapping against national strategic frameworks, particularly the National Employment Strategy 2021–2027 and ETF's conceptual model of vicious and virtuous skills–migration cycles. The interpretation of qualitative findings was further informed by the ISATCOVE conceptual framework, as elaborated in the case-study analysis.

Principles, limitations and ethics

The study was guided by the following principles:

- triangulation: combining multiple datasets for robustness;
- comparability: situating national results in a regional context;
- policy relevance: ensuring findings feed into actionable recommendations.

Given the author's professional involvement in the case-study institution, potential confirmation bias was mitigated through the use of aggregated data, anonymised reporting and the prioritisation of patterns consistent with external datasets and literature.

Limitations include underreported migration, employer survey biases and the illustrative scope of the case study. These constraints are treated as analytical boundaries rather than weaknesses.

All qualitative evidence was collected with consent, anonymised and reported in aggregate. Secondary data is cited following ETF standards.

By combining national data and institutional practice, this methodology captures both structural trends and individual experiences. It provides a research-based foundation for recommendations aligned with ETF's Skills Lab and MIGCOM objectives.

2.1.8 Findings

Migration trends in North Macedonia (2015–2024)

According to the IMF (2023) and the 2021 Census (SSO 2021), approximately 12.4% of North Macedonia's population resides abroad. Complementary international datasets (World Bank, 2024) indicate persistently negative net migration balances over the last decade, suggesting that outward mobility represents a stable demographic pattern rather than a short-term fluctuation.

Existing research further contextualises these dynamics. Petreski (2021) documented sustained outflows of educated youth even during periods of modest GDP growth, indicating that migration decisions are influenced by structural rather than purely cyclical economic factors. More recent evidence suggests the continuation of these patterns, particularly among younger and tertiary-educated cohorts.

Regional comparison

North Macedonia's migration profile reflects broader regional tendencies. Similar selective emigration dynamics have been observed across the Western Balkans, where younger and more highly educated individuals demonstrate higher mobility propensities (OECD, 2021; ETF, 2022; OECD, 2022). This regional consistency indicates that migration pressures are embedded within shared structural characteristics of small and transition economies.

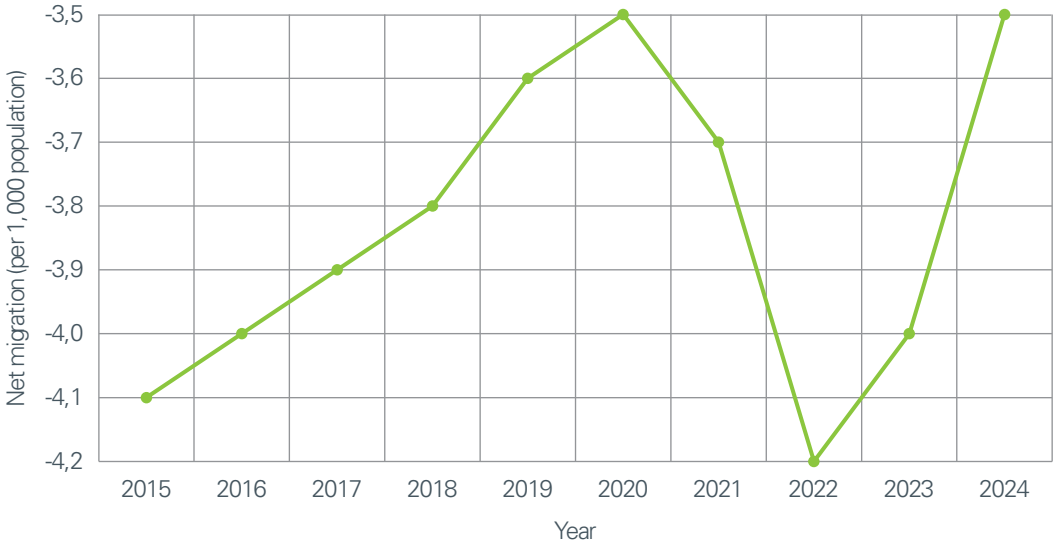
World Bank (2024) data show sustained negative net migration over the last decade, confirming the persistence of outward mobility.

Implication

The observed migration patterns exhibit characteristics of structural stability and demographic selectivity, implying potential long-term effects on the composition and utilisation of domestic human capital.

The persistence of outward migration patterns is illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Net Migration Trend, 2015-2024



Source: World Bank (2024), World Development Indicators (database).

Figure 7 presents the net migration rate for North Macedonia over the 2015–2024 period, expressed per 1 000 population. The data indicate persistently negative net migration throughout the observed timeframe, reflecting sustained outward mobility. While moderate fluctuations are visible, including a temporary improvement around 2019–2020 and a sharper decline in 2022, the overall pattern suggests structural rather than cyclical migration dynamics.

These trends should be interpreted with caution, as migration statistics are subject to underreporting and definitional differences across datasets. Nevertheless, the consistency of negative values across sources supports the conclusion that outward migration remains a stable feature of the national demographic profile.

While the findings are broadly consistent with established ETF and OECD analytical frameworks, this study contributes micro-level institutional evidence illustrating how career-guidance mechanisms operate within skills–migration dynamics. By linking structural labour market patterns with learner-level perception shifts, the paper extends predominantly macro-level analyses through an institutional practice lens.

This perspective is particularly relevant in small and transition economies, where informational asymmetries, career expectations and perceived employability constraints may significantly influence migration-related decision-making processes. The analysis therefore complements existing frameworks by highlighting the behavioural and institutional dimensions of skills mismatch and mobility.

Labour market mismatch and underutilisation

Unemployment and NEETs: youth unemployment remains elevated, with recent Labour Force Survey estimates indicating levels around 24% (SSO, 2024). NEET rates similarly remain high in comparison to the rest of the region.

Employer shortages: employer surveys (ESA, 2024) consistently report shortages in ICT, mechanical engineering and selected technical occupations. CEDEFOP (2025) projections indicate continued demand pressures in the green and digital sectors.

Oversupply: oversupply patterns remain visible in several academic fields, particularly law, economics and social sciences, where underemployment risks persist.

Regional perspective: comparative ETF (2022) and OECD (2022) analyses show that such shortages and oversupplies are widespread in the Western Balkans, where education and training systems have not yet adapted to changing industrial and technological needs. Leitner (2022) notes that migration patterns increasingly mirror these sectoral imbalances, with skilled-trade and mid-skill professionals among the most mobile groups.

Implication: observed patterns are consistent with vertical, horizontal and skills-gap mismatches documented in national and regional datasets.

Table 1. Key mismatch indicators in North Macedonia (ESA 2024; CEDEFOP, 2025)

Indicator	Latest Value/Trend (estimates/ survey-based approximations)	Short Description	Analytical Interpretation
Youth Unemployment Rate (15–24 years)	≈ 24% (2024)	Among highest in Western Balkans; slowly declining since 2018	Reflects persistent transition challenges between education and employment, potentially associated with skills alignment and labour market absorption constraints
NEET Rate (15–24 years)	≈ 22% (2024)	Slightly improving but still above WB6 average (~20%).	Indicates continued disengagement of a significant youth cohort from both education and employment pathways
Graduate Underemployment	≈ 30% within 2 years of graduation	Many employed below qualification level (vertical mismatch)	Suggests imbalances between qualification structures and demand for higher-level competences
Occupational Shortages	ICT specialists; mechanical and construction technicians; green-tech skills	Reported by > 60% of employers (ESA 2024)	Highlights sector-specific demand pressures and possible gaps in skills supply and specialisation profiles
Occupational Oversupply	Law; Economics; Social Sciences graduates	Continued high enrolment, limited job openings	Suggests potential misalignment between educational choices and labour market demand structures
Forecast Demand to 2030	Strong growth in green and digital occupations (CEDEFOP 2025)	Skills transition underway across EU and WB region	Indicates evolving competence requirements likely to reshape sectoral employment patterns

Source: ESA (2024), Labour Market Needs Forecasting Report 2024, Skopje; CEDEFOP (2025), Skills Forecast 2025–2035, Thessaloniki.

Skills–migration cycles: vicious dynamics

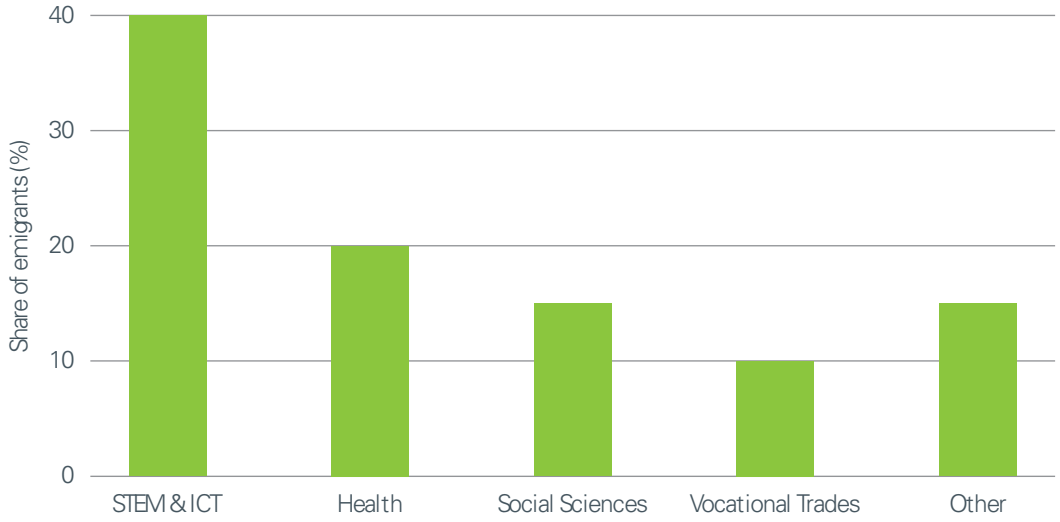
The observed patterns are consistent with ETF's (2022) skills–migration cycle framework:

mismatch → underemployment → emigration → reduced domestic capacity → further mismatch.

Available regional studies (ETF, 2022; OECD, 2022) suggest that graduates with STEM qualifications represent a highly mobile group, particularly where domestic employment opportunities are perceived as limited. Destination patterns frequently include Germany and Austria, reflecting sustained demand for technical competences. These regional studies also describe similar dynamics across the Western Balkans.

Implication: without stronger alignment between education, labour market and migration policies, such dynamics may persist.

Figure 8. Share of tertiary-educated emigrants by field (IMF 2023; ETF 2022)



Source: IMF (2023), Emigration, Business Dynamics and Firm Heterogeneity – Evidence from the Western Balkans; ETF (2022), Use It or Lose It! How Do Migration, Human Capital and the Labour Market Interact in the Western Balkans.

Case study: Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre

Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre, located in Strumica, is among the first institutions in North Macedonia formally designated as a Regional Centre of Vocational Excellence. The Centre provides upper secondary vocational education and post-secondary specialist programmes across multiple occupational sectors, including forestry and wood processing, electronics, energy and electrotechnics, mechanical engineering, textile and leather design, traffic and logistics, and construction and architecture.

In addition to formal upper secondary provision, the institution delivers adult education and training pathways, including reskilling and upskilling programmes aligned with regional labour market demand. At the time of analysis, the Centre enrolled approximately 960 upper secondary learners and 95 adult participants engaged in various qualification and competence-development programmes.

Strumica represents a region characterised by a mixed economic structure combining traditional industries – particularly wood processing, furniture production, light manufacturing and construction – with emerging demand for digital and green-skills competences. Within this regional context, the CoVE designation positions Nikola Karev

Regional VET Centre as a skills-development hub intended to strengthen employer engagement, innovation capacity and responsiveness to labour market dynamics.

The analysed career-guidance interventions are situated within the ISATCOVE framework, which conceptualises Centres of Vocational Excellence as integrated skills ecosystems rather than solely education providers (ETF, 2024). Within this structure, career guidance functions as a cross-cutting institutional mechanism aligned with several criteria of the Teaching and Learning dimension.

Most notably, the guidance activities correspond to Criterion TL7, which emphasises the provision of careers education and guidance tailored to individual and group needs. The interventions examined operationalised TL7 principles by explicitly addressing career expectations, labour market awareness and perceptions of occupational pathways.

In addition, the activities indirectly supported Criterion TL1 (skills relevance) by strengthening learners' understanding of labour market demand and Criterion TL2 (transition and progression) by reinforcing perceived employability trajectories. Employer-linked guidance sessions further reflected elements of Dimension 2 (Partnership and Coordination), particularly Criterion PC1 concerning collaboration with enterprises.

Within the ISATCOVE analytical logic, career guidance is therefore understood not as an auxiliary support activity, but as a structural component of institutional responsiveness linking learner decision-making with skills intelligence, employer engagement and transition mechanisms.

Career-guidance interventions implemented through ISATCOVE introduced structured counselling sessions, employer presentations and skills-awareness workshops for both youth and adult learners.

Qualitative reflections and interviews revealed several recurring themes. Participants frequently reported improved awareness of labour market demand, particularly in emerging green and digital sectors. Many learners emphasised increased confidence in employability pathways and a clearer understanding of skills relevance. Several respondents described shifts in migration-related considerations, typically framed as reassessment or postponement rather than definitive behavioural change.

Employer engagement activities further reinforced these perceptions. Partnerships with local firms enabled internships, site visits and collaborative workshops, contributing to stronger links between training and workplace expectations.

While the case-study findings are illustrative rather than statistically representative, they highlight institutional mechanisms through which career guidance and employer-linked VET practices may influence opportunity perception and career planning environments.

A detailed overview can be found in Annex 2 of this paper.

The qualitative patterns observed at the institutional level can be summarised as follows.

Table 2. Selected case-study outcomes: career-guidance interventions at Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre (ISATCOVE 2024–2025)

Qualitative theme	Observed change or example	Indicative quote/ evidence	Analytical interpretation
Awareness of Local Labour Market Demand	Students linked training choices to regional employer needs after guidance sessions.	'I realised that the companies here also need skilled people in green technology.'	Suggests improved alignment between learner perceptions and labour market awareness.
Confidence and Career Self-Efficacy	Participants expressed greater confidence in applying for internships and jobs.	'Before, I wasn't sure what I could do with my qualification – now I know where to start.'	Indicates perceived strengthening of employability orientation and career clarity.
Reconsideration of Migration Plans	Several students postponed or cancelled short-term migration intentions.	'I decided to first try to find a job here in Strumica before going abroad.'	Reflects potential shifts in migration-related attitudes associated with career-guidance exposure.
Employer Involvement and Partnerships	Collaboration with three local firms resulted in internships and project-based tasks.	Employers co-designed mini workshops on digital and circular skills.	Highlights the role of employer engagement in reinforcing skills relevance perceptions.
Integration into School Practice	Teachers trained to deliver short guidance sessions in regular classes.	New 15-minute 'career moments' introduced once per week.	Suggests early-stage institutionalisation of career-guidance practices.

Source: compiled by the author based on ISATCOVE project records, student feedback forms and staff interviews at Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre (2023–2024).

Policy landscape and gaps

Policy documents, including the National Employment Strategy 2021–2027, recognise challenges related to mismatch and emigration. Evaluations (European Commission, 2024) indicate that initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee and ALMPs (Active Labour Market Programmes) provide mechanisms for training and internships.

ETF (2022) and CEDEFOP (2025) evidence suggests that successful national approaches require systemic integration of forecasting, career guidance and employer engagement into VET governance.

Implication: existing strategies acknowledge key challenges, while implementation patterns suggest coordination and scaling constraints.

Table 3. Selected case-study outcomes: career-guidance interventions at Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre (ISATCOVE 2024–2025)

Finding/issue Identified	Relevant policy framework or initiative	Current implementation status	Analytical considerations
Persistent skills mismatch across key sectors (ICT, engineering, trades)	National Employment Strategy 2021–2027	Skills forecasting introduced, but coordination between ministries remains limited	Reflects cross-sectoral alignment challenges within policy implementation structures
Limited access to quality career guidance in schools and VET centres	Youth Guarantee; Education Strategy 2030 (draft)	Guidance pilots in progress through EU/ETF projects (ISATCOVE, CoVEs)	Indicates variability in institutional access and delivery models
Emigration of young and tertiary-educated workers	Economic Reform Programme 2024–2026; EU Mobility Partnerships	Monitoring mechanisms established but reintegration or retention measures appear limited	Suggests emphasis on mobility tracking rather than skills retention dynamics
Underutilisation of VET graduates and weak employer engagement	ETF CoVE initiative; Dual Education Model (MoES)	Employer partnerships implemented primarily within pilot frameworks	Highlights concentration of engagement mechanisms within experimental rather than systemic contexts
Fragmented coordination among education, labour and migration authorities	National Coordination Body for Human Capital Development	Coordination body established; unified data integration mechanisms remain limited	Reflects structural fragmentation across skills, employment and migration domains

Source: compiled by the author based on European Commission (2024), ETF (2022), CEDEFOP (2025) and Government of North Macedonia (2021).

Synthesis of findings

The analysis identifies persistent associations between emigration patterns and skills mismatch dynamics. Policy frameworks recognise these challenges, though coordination constraints remain visible. Case-study evidence provides illustrative insights into institutional practices associated with guidance and employer engagement.

2.1.9 Discussion

Interpreting skills–migration dynamics

The findings indicate that North Macedonia exhibits persistent outward migration patterns combined with structurally embedded skills mismatch dynamics. Census data and international estimates confirm both the scale and the selective profile of emigration, particularly among younger and highly educated cohorts. These patterns are consistent with analytical frameworks that conceptualise migration and mismatch as mutually reinforcing processes rather than isolated phenomena (ETF, 2022). Similar dynamics documented across the Western Balkans further suggest that the North Macedonian case reflects broader characteristics of small and open labour market systems.

The interaction between migration and skills mismatch emerges as a central analytical theme. Quantitative indicators reveal the coexistence of labour shortages in selected technical sectors alongside oversupply and underutilisation risks in several academic fields. Such divergence contributes to imbalances between skills supply and demand, shaping opportunity structures and influencing individual career considerations. While wage differentials remain a recognised driver of mobility, the evidence indicates that perceived employability constraints and skills relevance represent important complementary factors within migration decision-making environments.

Institutional mechanisms and career guidance

Within this structural context, qualitative insights from the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre provide illustrative evidence of institutional mechanisms that may influence these dynamics. Career guidance interventions and employer-linked pathways were associated with increased awareness of labour market demand, improved confidence in employability trajectories and shifts in migration-related considerations. Importantly, these observed shifts primarily concern perceptions, expectations and decision-making frameworks rather than definitive behavioural outcomes. The case study findings therefore highlight how guidance and employer engagement may operate as moderating influences within broader structural conditions.

Career guidance emerges as a particularly significant factor within the analytical interpretation of the findings. Prior research emphasises the role of labour market information, counselling and skills awareness mechanisms in reducing informational asymmetries and supporting more realistic career planning (OECD, 2021; ETF, 2016). The present findings support this interpretation, suggesting that guidance may indirectly contribute to skills alignment by shaping awareness, expectations and perceived opportunity pathways. However, the potential effectiveness of such interventions remains contingent upon systemic integration, professional capacity and institutional continuity.

Policy and system-level considerations

Policy analysis indicates that strategic frameworks recognise the challenges associated with migration and mismatch, yet implementation patterns remain characterised by fragmentation. Skills forecasting mechanisms, migration monitoring systems and guidance provision frequently operate within parallel rather than integrated policy domains. These coordination constraints limit the capacity of institutions to address the systemic drivers underpinning skills–migration interactions.

The limitations identified in this study also carry broader interpretive significance. Data gaps, measurement uncertainties and the illustrative scope of the case study underscore the inherent complexity of analysing migration and mismatch relationships. Rather than weakening the analytical conclusions, these constraints reinforce the need for cautious interpretation and highlight the importance of integrated data and institutional approaches.

The discussion highlights that the interaction between skills mismatch and migration represents a structural rather than episodic phenomenon. Quantitative indicators capture persistent labour market imbalances, while qualitative evidence illustrates how institutional practices may shape perceptions, expectations and opportunity awareness. Importantly, the findings do not imply deterministic relationships, but suggest that education, guidance and policy coordination mechanisms operate as moderating factors within complex mobility dynamics.

2.1.10 Policy implications

National-level actions

The findings suggest that strengthening career guidance represents a critical systemic priority. Expanding access to structured guidance services across all VET and secondary schools may contribute to reducing informational asymmetries, improving career decision-making and supporting more realistic skills alignment. Establishing national quality standards and developing digital guidance infrastructure could enhance consistency and scalability. However, successful implementation depends on professional capacity, institutional coordination and sustained funding mechanisms.

The analysis also highlights the strategic role of Centres of Vocational Excellence. Expanding CoVE practices geographically and embedding them within national VET strategies may support closer alignment between training provision and labour market demand. Strengthened employer partnerships and work-based learning pathways appear particularly relevant for improving skills utilisation. Nevertheless, scaling CoVE models requires careful consideration of resource allocation, governance arrangements and regional economic disparities.

Improving migration–skills data integration emerges as an additional policy consideration. The establishment of mechanisms linking migration monitoring with skills forecasting

may enhance anticipatory governance capacities. While proposals such as integrated observatories represent logical extensions rather than directly tested interventions, the findings indicate clear challenges related to fragmented data systems.

Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) similarly represent a complementary policy instrument. Expanding programme coverage and embedding green and digital skills modules may support labour market transitions, particularly for younger cohorts facing underemployment risks.

Regional and EU-level actions

At the regional level, cross-border policy learning mechanisms such as MIGCOM provide opportunities for the exchange of institutional practices and analytical approaches. Shared challenges related to skills mismatch and mobility dynamics suggest potential benefits from coordinated intelligence frameworks. Alignment with EU Green Deal and digital-transition priorities may further enhance policy coherence, particularly in relation to curriculum modernisation and skills forecasting systems.

Mobility governance frameworks may also benefit from greater emphasis on brain circulation, skills utilisation and reintegration pathways. However, the feasibility of such mechanisms varies significantly across national institutional contexts.

Implementation and system constraints

Effective implementation of these priorities requires strengthening institutional coordination mechanisms. Feedback loops linking skills intelligence, education provision and labour market outcomes may enhance policy responsiveness. Capacity building initiatives targeting counsellors, teachers and VET staff appear essential for sustaining guidance and alignment interventions.

Digital tools may support scalability, though their effectiveness depends on integration with institutional processes rather than technological deployment alone. Monitoring systems incorporating indicators related to guidance coverage, institutional performance and graduate outcomes may improve policy evaluation frameworks.

Synthesis

The analysis suggests that mitigating vicious skills–migration dynamics requires institutional practices to be embedded within coherent system-level frameworks. Career guidance, CoVE practices and integrated data mechanisms represent complementary policy domains rather than isolated interventions. Importantly, the findings indicate that guidance interventions primarily influence perceptions, expectations and opportunity awareness rather than directly determining migration outcomes.

Policymakers may draw on CEDEFOP's (2025) skills forecasting tools and ETF's (2025) demand-analysis methodologies to strengthen alignment between national VET planning, sectoral transitions and regional mobility dynamics.

2.1.11 Conclusion

North Macedonia faces a dual structural challenge characterised by persistent outward migration and entrenched skills mismatch dynamics. The analysis indicates that these processes are closely interconnected, contributing to labour-market imbalances and human-capital utilisation constraints.

Quantitative evidence highlights sustained emigration patterns alongside sectoral divergences between skills supply and demand. Shortages in selected technical occupations coexist with oversupply and underemployment risks in several academic fields. Qualitative insights from the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre provide illustrative evidence of how institutional practices, particularly career guidance and employer-linked pathways, may influence perceptions, expectations and opportunity awareness.

Importantly, the findings do not imply deterministic or causal relationships, but suggest that guidance and VET interventions operate as moderating mechanisms within broader structural conditions. Observed effects primarily concern shifts in awareness and decision-making frameworks rather than definitive behavioural outcomes.

Policy analysis indicates that existing strategic frameworks recognise these challenges, while implementation patterns reveal coordination and scaling constraints. The study therefore underscores the potential relevance of integrated approaches linking skills planning, career guidance and labour-market intelligence systems.

For ETF and MIGCOM, this paper contributes empirical observations and practice-based insights into the interaction between skills mismatch and mobility dynamics in small labour-market contexts. The findings highlight the importance of proportional interpretation, systemic coordination and institutional continuity when considering policy responses.

The analysis suggests that mitigating vicious skills–migration dynamics depends less on isolated interventions and more on the coherence of institutional and policy frameworks shaping opportunity structures.

ANNEXES

Annex 1. Evidence matrix of sources

Evidence matrix of sources used for the empirical and policy analysis in this study

Source	Period	Key indicators	Findings	Use in paper
State Statistical Office (SSO) – Labour Force Survey & Census	2015–2024	Employment, unemployment, NEET, migration by age/education	Youth unemployment ~24%; NEETs among highest regionally; selective emigration of 20–34-year-olds	Findings (Migration Trends, Unemployment/ NEETs)
Employment Service Agency (ESA) – Labour Market Needs Forecasting	2015–2024	Employer-reported shortages, recruitment difficulties	Shortages in ICT, engineering, skilled trades; oversupply in law/economics	Findings (Mismatch); Discussion (Policy Gaps)
IMF Working Paper 23/268	2015–2022	Municipal-level emigration; firm creation/capital	12.4% population abroad; emigration reduces firm investment	Findings (Migration Scale); Discussion (Vicious Cycle)
European Commission (2024) Country Report	2020–2023	Evaluation of ALMPs, Youth Guarantee	Limited coverage; below EU benchmarks	Policy Implications (ALMPs, Youth Guarantee)
CEDEFOP Skills Forecasts (2025)	2025–2035	Projected demand by occupation/ sector	Growth in green/ digital skills; stagnation in social sciences	Findings (Oversupply & Demand); Policy Implications
ETF (2022) Skills–Migration Framework	–	Conceptual vicious/ virtuous cycle	Underutilised skills → emigration → deeper mismatch	Literature Review, Discussion (Cycle Evidence)
ETF (2024) Trends and developments	2015–2023	Migration and skills interaction	Continued challenges in youth employment and skills utilisation, particularly among young people	Findings (Vicious Cycle); Discussion
ETF (2025) Skills Demand Toolkit	2025	Methodology for mismatch and demand analysis	Provides framework for vertical/ horizontal mismatch measures	Methodology section

Source	Period	Key indicators	Findings	Use in paper
Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre – ISATCOVE & activity reports	2019–2024	Student/adult feedback; workshop evaluations	Guidance improved awareness, employability, reduced migration intent	Findings (Case Study); Discussion (Virtuous Cycle)

Source: compiled by the author based on data and publications from ETF (2016, 2022, 2024, 2025); OECD (2021, 2022); CEDEFOP (2025); IMF (2023); ESA (2024); SSO (2021, 2024); World Bank (2024); European Commission (2024); Government of North Macedonia (2021); Petreski (2021); Leitner (2022).

Annex 2.1 Qualitative data overview

The qualitative component of the study draws on institutional evidence collected at the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre between 2023 and 2024.

Elements	Description
Case-study institution	Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre, Strumica
Data collection period	2023–2024
Participants – students	n ≈ 22
Participants – adult learners	n ≈ 12
Sampling strategy	Purposive sampling of participants engaged in career guidance and employer-linked activities
Data collection tools	Reflective semi-structured interviews; aggregated feedback forms
Institutional evidence	ISATCOVE evaluations; activity documentation; employer-linked training records
Analytical method	Thematic coding and pattern-based interpretation
Core analytical themes	Career awareness; employability perceptions; migration intentions; skills relevance
Case-study institution	Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre, Strumica

Qualitative analysis focused on identifying recurring themes and consistent patterns across participant reflections rather than individual narratives.

Annex 2.2 Reflective interview framework

Reflective semi-structured interviews were conducted using guiding prompts designed to explore learner perceptions of skills relevance, employability and migration-related decision-making.

Indicative guiding prompts included the questions below.

- How do you perceive employment opportunities in your field in North Macedonia?
- Which skills do you consider most important for your future career?
- How do you evaluate your preparedness for labour market participation?
- Has participation in career guidance activities influenced your career planning?
- How do you view migration as a potential career pathway?
- Did guidance or employer-linked activities affect your perception of local opportunities?
- How do you assess the relevance of your training to real workplace demands?

Interviews were reflective rather than evaluative and aimed at capturing perceptions, expectations and decision-making considerations.

Annex 3. Case-study evidence summary (Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre)

Summary of qualitative outcomes from career guidance interventions conducted at the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre, illustrating practice–policy linkages in the skills–migration cycle.

Thematic area	Observed outcome / participant feedback	Illustrative evidence or example	Analytical interpretation
Career Awareness and Labour Market Information	Students demonstrated a clearer understanding of sectoral demand and required skills after exposure to employer presentations and local labour-market information.	'Before this workshop, I didn't know green jobs existed in our town.'	Suggests enhanced learner awareness of occupational opportunities and skills requirements.
Motivation and Confidence in Employability	Participants reported increased confidence in applying for internships and skills-based competitions.	82% of surveyed students indicated higher self-efficacy in career planning.	Indicates perceived strengthening of employability orientation and career self-assessment.
Migration Intentions and Perceptions of Opportunity	Several students reported reconsideration of short-term migration intentions after identifying domestic career pathways.	'I realised I can build my career here if I develop new skills.'	Reflects potential shifts in migration-related attitudes associated with expanded career awareness.
Employer Engagement and Work-Based Learning	Local companies offered site visits and internships following partnership activities.	Three firms established ongoing collaboration with the VET Centre.	Highlights the role of employer interaction in reinforcing perceived skills relevance.

Thematic area	Observed outcome / participant feedback	Illustrative evidence or example	Analytical interpretation
Staff Capacity and Guidance Integration	School counsellors and teachers underwent training in updated guidance tools and digital career resources and how to incorporate them.	Adoption of hybrid guidance sessions (in-person + digital).	Suggests early-stage integration of guidance practices into institutional routines.

Source: compiled by the author from qualitative feedback and ISATCOVE activity documentation, Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre (2023–2024), with reference to ETF (2022) and OECD (2021) analytical frameworks.

Annex 4. Supplementary tables and charts

Migration indicators by age and education (SSO, 2021 Census)

Age group	Estimated % of population residing abroad	Education level most affected	Main destination regions
15–24	~10%	Secondary VET	EU (Germany, Austria, Slovenia)
25–34	~18%	Tertiary (STEM, ICT)	EU, North America
35–44	~12%	Mixed (technical + administrative)	EU neighbouring states
45+	~6%	Lower secondary	Regional (Serbia, Greece)

Source: SSO (2021), Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2021, Skopje.

Youth labour market indicators (SSO, ESA, 2024)

Indicator	North Macedonia (2024)	Western Balkans Average (WB6)	Trend 2015–2024	Interpretation
Youth Unemployment Rate (%)	24.1	20.3	↓ improving	Still among the highest in the region.
NEET Rate (15–24, %)	22.5	20.0	↓ slight decline	Progress noted but gap persists.
Graduate Underemployment (within 2 years, %)	~30	~25	→ stable	Indicates enduring vertical mismatch.
Employer-Reported Skill Shortages	ICT, mechanical, green tech	Common to all WB6	–	Aligns with CEDEFOP (2025) forecast.

Source: ESA (2024), Labour Market Needs Forecasting Report 2024, Skopje.

References

Allen, J. and van der Velden, R. (2001), "Educational mismatches versus skill mismatches: Effects on wages, job satisfaction and on-the-job search", *Oxford Economic Papers*, 53(3), pp. 434–452. https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/53.3.434 (accessed: 9 September 2025).

Centre for Economic and Social Studies (2006), *Emigration of lecturers and researchers from Albania 1991–2005*, CESS, Tirana.

CEDEFOP (2018), *Insights into skill shortages and skill mismatch: Learning from CEDEFOP's European skills and jobs survey*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/3075 (accessed: [10 September 2025).

CEDEFOP (2020), *Vocational education and training in Europe: 1995–2035 – Scenarios for European vocational education and training in the 21st century*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/3083 (accessed: 10 September 2025).

CEDEFOP (2025), *Skills forecast 2025–2035*, CEDEFOP, Thessaloniki, https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/skills-forecast (accessed: 10 September 2025).

de Grip, A., Bosma, H., Willems, D. and van Boxtel, M. (2008), "Job–worker mismatch and cognitive decline", *Oxford Economic Papers*, 60(2), pp. 237–253. https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpm023 (accessed: 9 September 2025).

de Haas, H. (2010), "Migration and development: A theoretical perspective", International Migration Review, 44(1), pp. 227–264. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2009.00804.x (accessed: 9 September 2025).

Docquier, F. and Rapoport, H. (2012), "Globalization, brain drain, and development", Journal of Economic Literature, 50(3), pp. 681–730. https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.3.681 (accessed: 9 September 2025).

Employment Service Agency (2024), *Labour Market Needs Forecasting Report*, ESA, Skopje, https://av.gov.mk/analiza-na-potrebi-od-veshtini-na-pazar-na-trudot.nspx (accessed: 10 September 2025).

ETF (2017), *Tracing secondary vocational and tertiary education graduates in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Results of the 2016 tracer study*, European Training Foundation, Turin https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/m/370594378AEE2242C12581C90068FE63_2016%20Tracer%20study%20results%20MK.pdf (accessed: 10 September 2025).

ETF (2021), *How migration, human capital and the labour market interact in North Macedonia,* European Training Foundation, Turin, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-05/migration_north_macedonia.pdf (accessed: 10 September 2025).

ETF (2022), A review of national career development support systems in the Western Balkans, European Training Foundation, Turin, https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/review-national-career-development-support-systems-western (accessed: 10 September 2025).

ETF (2022), *Use it or lose it! How do migration, human capital and the labour market interact in the Western Balkans?* European Training Foundation, Turin, https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/use-it-or-lose-it-how-do-migration-human-capital-and-labour (accessed: 10 September 2025).

ETF (2023), *Skills and migration: The triangular relationship between migration, human capital formation, and labour markets*, European Training Foundation, Turin, https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/skills_and_migration (accessed: 10 September 2025).

ETF (2024), *Education, skills and employment: Trends and developments*. European Training Foundation, Turin. https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/education-skills-and-employment-trends-and-developments (accessed: 10 September 2025).

ETF (2024), *International Self-Assessment Tool for Centres of Vocational Excellence (ISATCOVE)*, European Training Foundation, Turin.

ETF (2025), *ETF methodologies, tools and publications in the field of skills demand analysis (Updated May 2025)*, European Training Foundation, Turin, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-05/ETF%20work%20on%20skills%20demand%20analysis_Updated%20May%202025.pdf (accessed: 10 September 2025).

European Commission (2023), *Employment and social developments in Europe 2023*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8640 (accessed: 10 September 2025).

European Commission (2024), *North Macedonia 2024 Report*, European Commission, Brussels, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2024_en (accessed: 10 September 2025).

Ferreira, M., Künn-Nelen, A. and de Grip, A. (2017), "Work-related learning and skill development in Europe: Does initial skill mismatch matter?", in *Skill Mismatch in Labor Markets*, Research in Labor Economics, Vol. 45. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, pp. 249–291. https://doi.org/10.1108/S0147-912120170000045010 (accessed: 9 September 2025).

Hooley, T., Sultana, R.G. and Thomsen, R. (2018), *Career Guidance for Social Justice: Contesting Neoliberalism*. New York: Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781315110516/career-guidance-social-justice-tristram-hooley-ronald-sultana-rie-thomsen (accessed: 9 September 2025).

Government of North Macedonia (2021), *National employment strategy 2021–2027*, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Skopje, https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/ (accessed: 10 September 2025).

IMF (2023), *Emigration, business dynamics, and firm heterogeneity: Evidence from the Western Balkans*, IMF Working Paper 23/268, International Monetary Fund, Washington D.C., https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/WP/2023/English/wpiea2023268-print-pdf.ashx (accessed: 10 September 2025).

Leitner, S. (2022), *Net migration and its skill composition in the Western Balkan countries between 2010 and 2019: Results from a cohort approach*, The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw), Vienna, https://wiiw.ac.at/net-migration-and-its-skill-composition-in-the-western-balkan-countries-between-2010-and-2019-results-from-a-cohort-approach-dlp-5682.pdf (accessed: 10 September 2025).

Massey, D.S. et al. (1993), "Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal", *Population and Development Review*, 19(3), pp. 431–466. https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462 (accessed: 9 September 2025).

McGuinness, S., Pouliakas, K. and Redmond, P. (2018), "Skills mismatch: Concepts, measurement and policy approaches", *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 32(4), pp. 985–1015. https://doi.org/10.1111/joes.12254 (accessed: 9 September 2025).

Musset, P. and L. Mytna Kurekova (2018), "Working it out: Career Guidance and Employer Engagement", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 175, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/51c9d18d-en (accessed: 9 September 2025).

Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre (2023), *ISATCOVE activity evaluation: Career guidance workshop reflections*, Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre, Strumica, (internal document).

OECD (2021), *Career guidance for the 21st century*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://www.oecd.org/education/career-guidance-for-the-21st-century.htm (accessed: 10 September 2025).

OECD (2022), *Labour migration in the Western Balkans*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/labour-migration-in-the-western-balkans.htm (accessed: 10 September 2025).

Petreski, M. (2021), *How migration, human capital and the labour market interact in North Macedonia*, European Training Foundation, Turin, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-05/migration_north_macedonia.pdf (accessed: 10 September 2025).

SSO – State Statistical Office of North Macedonia (2021), *Census of population, households and dwellings 2021*, SSO, Skopje https://www.stat.gov.mk/ (accessed: 10 September 2025).

World Bank (2024), *World Development Indicators* (database), World Bank, Washington D.C., https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators (accessed: 10 September 2025).

2.2 From emigration to immigration? New mobility patterns in Montenegro

Iva Vukčević

2.2.1 Introduction

Over the past decade, migration has become one of the most defining social and economic forces shaping Europe's labour markets. Demographic decline, shifting skill demands, and geopolitical disruptions have combined to make mobility a key mechanism for balancing human capital across countries. In response, European policy initiatives increasingly aim at promoting managed mobility frameworks designed to generate mutual benefits for origin and destination countries alike. However, the effectiveness of such European skills and mobility frameworks ultimately depends on the capacity of partner and candidate countries to generate reliable knowledge on migration–skills dynamics and to design evidence-based governance mechanisms at the national level.

This paper addresses this gap by exploring emerging mobility patterns in Montenegro and how they relate to labour-market adjustment and human capital formation. Montenegro represents a particularly illustrative case. Traditionally characterised by sustained emigration and remittance dependence, the country is now undergoing a gradual but notable transformation, marked by increasing immigration. These changes have emerged in parallel with economic recovery, regional instability, and growing labour shortages in several sectors, making migration an increasingly relevant component of labour market functioning and economic activity.

While these transformations mirror wider trends in the Western Balkans, they have unfolded in Montenegro with limited documentation and institutional response. The country lacks a comprehensive migration monitoring system and an integrated policy framework linking migration to labour market and human capital strategies. Official statistics capture only internal migrations, while cross-border movements – both of Montenegrins abroad and of foreign nationals settling in Montenegro – remain undocumented. As a result, the full scope and implications of recent migration flows remain poorly understood. This knowledge gap hinders both evidence-based policymaking and public understanding of the economic and labour market relevance of migration.

The need to better understand these dynamics has become particularly important in recent years, as Montenegro has experienced a visible rise in foreign residents and workers. For example, government decisions determining the annual quota for temporary stay and work permits for foreigners indicate a clear upward trend. The quota increased from 20 454 permits in 2019 (pre-pandemic) to 21 454 in 2023, 23 988 in 2025, and is set at 28 988 for 2026 – approximately 42% higher than in 2019 (Official Gazette of Montenegro, 2025). A similar upward pattern is visible in business registrations: the number of registered business entities under foreign ownership rose from 12 429 in 2019 to 24 278 in 2023 (an increase of approximately 95%) and to 29 960 in 2024 (around

141% higher than in 2019), indicating a growing economic presence of foreign residents alongside labour immigration (MONSTAT, 2025b). Qualitative interviews conducted for this study suggest that some of these inflows are temporary, linked to the relocation of digital professionals, entrepreneurs, and remote workers; while others reflect longer-term migration decisions motivated by employment, security, or family reasons.

Despite these observable developments, migration in Montenegro continues to be predominantly framed as emigration and brain drain, while other forms of mobility remain analytically under-recognised. This paper examines whether recent developments indicate a shift in Montenegro's migration profile from a predominantly emigration-based pattern toward more complex mobility characterised by growing immigration and diversified migrant inflows. The study focuses particularly on new forms of immigration and their interaction with the labour market. Clarifying these developments helps situate the role migrants play in the workforce and how migration relates to labour supply and human capital in Montenegro. Rather than measuring causal effects, the paper provides an exploratory assessment that combines contextual evidence on migration trends with qualitative insights from migrant interviews in order to better understand who is coming to Montenegro, why they come, and how their presence relates to labour supply and human capital.

To address these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: Do recent migration developments indicate an emerging shift in Montenegro's migration profile from predominantly emigration to more complex mobility patterns?
- RQ2: How do new immigration flows relate to labour market dynamics?
- RQ3: What indications exist that recent migration trends may contribute to skills circulation and human-capital formation?

Given the limited availability of systematic migration statistics in Montenegro, the study relies on a mixed-method approach. Quantitative analysis draws on data from national statistical offices, labour force surveys, administrative registers, and the ISSP's database. These are complemented by qualitative insights gathered through interviews with migrants. This mixed-method approach allows the study to go beyond descriptive statistics and uncover patterns of migration flows, barriers to labour market integration, and perceptions of opportunity and constraint among both migrants. The temporal scope of the study spans 2022–2025, capturing a period of post-pandemic adjustment and intensified cross-border mobility triggered by the war in Ukraine and other regional developments. or selected indicators, however, 2019 is used as a baseline reference year representing the last pre-pandemic period of relatively stable labour-market and migration conditions. The pandemic and immediate recovery years (2020–2023) involved temporary labour-market disruptions, border restrictions, and incomplete reporting, making year-to-year comparison less reliable. The 2019 benchmark therefore serves only to contextualise the scale of subsequent changes rather than as part of the analytical observation period.

Analytically, the paper is grounded in a conceptual framework that views migration as both a response to and a component of economic and demographic change. It draws on different possible migration–development outcomes: while unmanaged migration can

exacerbate skill shortages and institutional strain, well-governed mobility can stimulate investment, innovation, and the transfer of knowledge and human capital. This framework provides a lens through which Montenegro's emerging migration patterns can be interpreted not only as demographic trends, but as indicators of the country's economic adaptability and policy responsiveness.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the conceptual background, situating Montenegro within broader debates on the migration-development nexus. Section 3 explains the methodological design and data sources used in the study. Section 4 provides an overview of recent migration trends and the structural context of Montenegro's labour market, while Sections 5 and 6 examine in greater depth the new immigration patterns and the dynamics of diaspora engagement. Finally, Section 7 summarises the main findings and discusses their policy relevance, outlining potential directions for improving migration data and policy coordination in Montenegro.

2.2.2 Existing knowledge and conceptual context

This section establishes the analytical framework used in the paper. Rather than providing a comprehensive literature review, it identifies the main mechanisms through which migration may affect labour supply and human capital, and situates Montenegro within these debates. The aim is to clarify how migration – labour market interactions can be interpreted and to define the conceptual gap that the empirical analysis addresses.

The literature offers different interpretations of how migration interacts with labour markets. Some studies view migration as a labour-supply adjustment mechanism addressing shortages linked to demographic change and sectoral demand. Others emphasise labour market segmentation, in which migrant workers concentrate in lower-paid or less secure occupations. A further strand highlights brain circulation and skills transfer rather than permanent loss. These perspectives imply different economic roles for migrants, but distinguishing between them requires information on migrant profiles, skills and labour-market positions.

Yet rapid changes in migration patterns frequently precede the development of reliable statistical monitoring, particularly in smaller economies (Mara & Landesmann, 2022). As a result, countries may experience significant demographic and economic effects of migration while lacking sufficient evidence to identify the characteristics and labour-market roles of incoming populations. Consequently, policy debates often rely on assumptions about labour shortages, brain drain or wage competition without adequate empirical identification of migrant profiles and labour-market positions.

Taken together, these perspectives highlight that migration can play different roles depending on the structure of the labour market and the composition of migrant inflows. For Montenegro, this distinction is particularly important. Public and policy discussions have long treated migration primarily as a question of emigration and population loss, while recent developments suggest the simultaneous presence of outward migration and new forms of immigration. Without examining immigrant profiles, motivations and

labour-market positions, it remains unclear whether migration functions mainly as labour replacement, labour-market segmentation, or skills circulation. The following sections therefore move from conceptual discussion to empirical observation in order to assess which mechanisms are most consistent with the emerging evidence in Montenegro.

A comparable dynamic has been observed in other small service-oriented European economies. Malta provides an analytically relevant reference, as it historically experienced sustained emigration but has, over a relatively short period, developed a more complex mobility profile combining continued outflows with growing inflows of foreign workers and residents. In such settings, migration change is often first observed through labour-market pressures and rising foreign presence before statistical systems and policy frameworks fully adapt (Pace, 2021). The Maltese case thus provides a conceptual reference for examining whether similar transition dynamics – from emigration dominance toward more complex mobility involving different types of immigration – may be emerging in Montenegro. The comparison is not used to predict identical outcomes, but to frame Montenegro's recent developments within a broader pattern observed in small European economies.

Previous research has largely interpreted migration in Montenegro through the lens of emigration and seasonal labour mobility. Available evidence indicates that labour shortages in sectors such as tourism, construction and services have traditionally been compensated by foreign workers, while domestic workers seek higher wages abroad (ETF, 2021). However, more recent developments suggest that this explanation is no longer sufficient. Administrative data show a substantial increase not only in work permits, but also in the number of foreign residents and business entities under foreign ownership. The number of registered business entities in foreign ownership increased from 12 429 in 2019 to 29 960 in 2024, representing an increase of approximately 141% (MONSTAT, 2025b). At the same time, Ministry of Interior data indicate that 100 867 foreign nationals were residing in Montenegro in September 2025, which corresponds to roughly 16% of the total population recorded in the 2023 census (623 633 inhabitants). While work permits mainly capture employment-related migration, they do not account for a significant share of foreigners residing in the country. The available statistics therefore reveal the scale of change but provide little information on the characteristics, skills or labour market positions of these new arrivals.

As a result, an important analytical gap emerges. Existing studies explain low-skilled labour inflows and emigration dynamics, but little is known about newer forms of mobility potentially linked to entrepreneurship, remote work, investment or relocation motivated by geopolitical developments. Without information on who these migrants are and how they participate in the economy, it is difficult to assess how migration relates to labour supply, workforce composition and human capital development in Montenegro. To address this limitation, the study complements limited statistical evidence with qualitative interviews conducted with different groups of immigrants. Given the absence of systematic migration data, the purpose of the qualitative analysis is not to provide representative measurement, but to offer an initial, indicative picture of the profiles, skills and motivations of recent arrivals. Through this approach, the study seeks to

approximate how these migrants may be positioned in the labour market and what their presence could imply for labour supply and human capital patterns in Montenegro. The findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative, intended to inform further research and policy discussion rather than to provide definitive measurement.

2.2.3 Methodology

This study applies a mixed-methods approach that combines desk research, secondary data analysis, and qualitative fieldwork through semi-structured interviews. The methodological design aimed to map and describe emerging migration patterns in Montenegro, to highlight knowledge gaps, and to provide indicative insights into how recent migrants might relate to observed labour market trends and sectoral developments. The research does not attempt to measure causal impacts, but rather to build a contextual understanding of immigration as an evolving socio-economic phenomenon in Montenegro.

The research integrates two complementary components. The first involved a desk review of available national and international data sources, policy documents, and analytical studies. This part of the work provided the contextual basis for analysing migration trends, labour market developments, and demographic pressures. It relied primarily on datasets from the Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT), Eurostat, and other publicly available administrative data. The analysis focused in particular on indicators related to residence and work permits, foreign population stocks, foreign-owned business entities, and employment structure. In addition, relevant strategic, legal, and institutional frameworks were reviewed to map existing approaches to migration governance, labour mobility, and human capital development in Montenegro. The desk research also included prior analytical work by international organisations and think tanks. Qualitative interviews were used to interpret migrant profiles and labour-market positioning, allowing indirect analytical inference rather than statistical measurement.

The qualitative fieldwork was conducted between 2023 and 2025 and included 21 in-depth interviews with foreign nationals residing in Montenegro. Interviewees were selected to reflect the main origin groups of foreign residents identified in the 2023 population census (MONSTAT, 2025a). The aim was to include migrants from the Western Balkans, Türkiye, Russia and Ukraine, EU countries and North America in order to compare migration motivations and labour-market roles across origin groups. Participants were primarily recruited through expatriate social media groups (e.g. "Expats in Montenegro") and through snowball sampling, whereby interviewees recommended additional participants. Participation depended on migrants' willingness to respond, which limited control over socio-economic composition of the sample. A total of 21 interviews were conducted. The sample included migrants from Russia (7), European Union countries (7), Ukraine (3), Türkiye (2), and the Western Balkan region (2). The distribution reflects response availability and accessibility through recruitment channels rather than intentional prioritisation of particular groups. Respondents remained anonymous and

only basic demographic characteristics (gender, age and occupation) were recorded. No personally identifiable information is disclosed in the study.

Interviews were carried out both in person and online, depending on participants' availability and location. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured format, allowing for comparability across cases while enabling participants to elaborate on their individual experiences. The interview guide covered several thematic blocks: reasons for migration, prior migration experience and migration pathways, employment or business activity, integration experiences, perceived opportunities and obstacles, and future plans in Montenegro. Interviews were conducted in English and Montenegrin/Serbian, depending on participant preference. Interviews were recorded when participants agreed; otherwise detailed written notes were produced.

The interview material was analysed using a comparative thematic approach. Interviews were first grouped by migrants' place of origin. Responses were then reviewed across the main themes covered in the interview guide (migration motivations, labour-market position, integration experience and future intentions). Within each theme, recurring patterns and differences between origin groups were identified. The analysis focused on comparing dominant motivations and experiences across groups. After repeated interviews within several groups, similar responses began to recur, indicating analytical (though not statistical) thematic saturation.

The findings were triangulated with secondary data from the desk research to contextualise individual narratives within broader migration trends. This integrated approach helped identify both complementarities and discrepancies between public discourse, statistical evidence, and migrants' lived experiences.

The study's main limitations stem from the lack of official migration data and the volume of the interview sample, as well as the under-representation of certain groups that are difficult to access (e.g. seasonal workers, construction workers, informal workers etc.). The qualitative findings are based on a small, non-representative sample and should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than relating in general to the entire migrant population in Montenegro. While they cannot provide statistically representative conclusions, they offer a valuable analytical insight into emerging migration profiles and motivations. Rather than offering definitive policy conclusions, the results serve as an exploratory starting point for identifying potential areas for further research and for informing discussions on labour market integration and the economic role of recent immigrants.

2.2.4 Migration trends and structural context in Montenegro

This section situates recent migration developments within the broader structural characteristics of Montenegro's economy and labour market. The purpose is to identify the structural conditions that shape migration behaviour, such as labour demand, wage levels, sectoral composition, regional disparities and demographic trends.

Montenegro has been a candidate for European Union membership since 2012 and has made significant progress in aligning national legislation with the EU acquis. However, rule-of-law and governance challenges continue to slow the accession process and represent one of the key barriers to faster development. Survey evidence suggests that these institutional conditions are also reflected in migration behaviour: a study of highly educated young adults (aged 24 – 40) identified the socio-political environment, functioning of public administration and rule of law – as some of the most frequently cited reasons for considering emigration (OMSA, 2022). At the same time, the economy remains heavily reliant on tourism, which accounted for around one-quarter of GDP and employment before the pandemic, underscoring its exposure to global market shocks and seasonal labour demand. (World Bank, 2025)

Table 4. Main macroeconomics indicators in Montenegro

	2015	2022	2023	2024
Real GDP growth rate (%)	3.4	6.4	6.3	3.0
Consumer price index (inflation rate) (%)	1.5	13.0	8.6	3.3
Population (thousand)	624.7	623.6	623.5	623.5
Working-age population (15-64) (thousand)	:	:	405.9	403.7
Activity rate (population 15+) (%)	53.7	58.9	63.9	63.7
Unemployment rate (%)	17.6 (10.2)	16.2 (6.2)	13.1 (6.1)	11.4 (5.9)
Youth unemployment rate (%)	37.6 (17.6)	29.4 (11.4)	23.2 (11.20)	26.0 (11.4)
Not in employment, education nor training (NEET) rate (%)	23.4 (15.4)	20.1* (11.7)	17.6* (9.9*)	:
Average monthly gross wages total (EUR)	737	900	1,018	1,205

Source: World Bank and MONSTAT; *ILOSTAT; Note: data in brackets present EU27 values

In this context, the indicators presented above illustrate structural conditions shaping migration behaviour. Modest productivity growth and persistent inflation limit real wage growth, while high youth unemployment and NEET rates indicate difficulties in labour-market entry. At the same time, demographic stagnation and sectoral labour shortages create demand for workers. Together, these factors generate a dual dynamic: surplus labour in certain skill categories encourages emigration, while unmet labour demand in low-paid sectors stimulates immigration.

Montenegro's labour market reflects a structural mismatch between labour supply and labour demand. Although youth unemployment remains relatively high and the transition from education to work is often slow, employers in sectors such as construction, hospitality and agriculture repeatedly report labour shortages. As noted by the ETF (Mara & Landesmann, 2021), educational outcomes and labour-market needs are weakly

aligned, with many tertiary graduates employed below their qualification level. Survey evidence supports this pattern: more than half of young Montenegrins express a desire to leave the country due to limited job prospects and low wages (FES, 2019), while qualitative findings show that 39% of young respondents prefer stable employment in national or local public institutions (UNDP, 2022). As a result, many educated job seekers avoid low-paid, seasonal and insecure service-sector occupations. Employers in those sectors, thus struggle to recruit domestically and increasingly rely on foreign workers to maintain economic activity.

At the regional level, disparities in economic opportunity further reinforce migration pressures. Northern municipalities record some of the country's highest unemployment rates – 25.7% in 2024 compared with 8.4% in the central and 2.0% in the southern regions (MONSTAT, LFS). According to the official classification of local self-government units for the 2022–2024 period (Ministry of Regional-Investment Development, 2025), municipalities in northern Montenegro record an average development index of approximately 57 out of 100, significantly below the national average (≈84). This results in a long-standing pattern of outward migration from northern municipalities which have produced extensive diaspora communities abroad. In addition, qualitative findings indicate that many young people from these areas have at least once considered leaving, or are actively considering emigration, noting that the presence of relatives abroad would make relocation easier (UNDP, 2022). This suggests a sizeable "migration-ready" youth population in the north.

Given these labour-market conditions, Montenegro's migration patterns remain primarily economically driven, directed toward Western Europe, with smaller flows to the United States and other destinations. Available data from Eurostat show five EU member states issuing the largest numbers of long-term permits to Montenegrin citizens – Germany (2,224 permits), Luxembourg (421), Austria (419), Sweden (144), and Slovenia (115) – together, these five countries accounted for more than 85% of all new long-term residence permits granted to Montenegrin nationals in the EU between 2022 and 2024. EU labour shortages create external pull factors that interact with domestic push factors in Montenegro. In response to demographic ageing and labour shortages, EU countries have actively facilitated access to its labour market, e.g. Germany with its Skilled Labour Strategy (BMAS, 2023), which expanded opportunities for workers with vocational qualifications to obtain employment. Similar shortages in sectors such as healthcare, hospitality and construction increasingly recruit workers from candidate and neighbouring countries.

At the same time, Montenegro's EU accession process shapes migration governance not only through emigration pressures but also through institutional convergence. Alignment with EU labour mobility standards, recognition of qualifications frameworks, and data harmonisation requirements may gradually strengthen Montenegro's capacity to manage both inward and outward mobility. In this sense, EU integration represents both an external pull factor and an internal institutional anchor influencing migration dynamics.

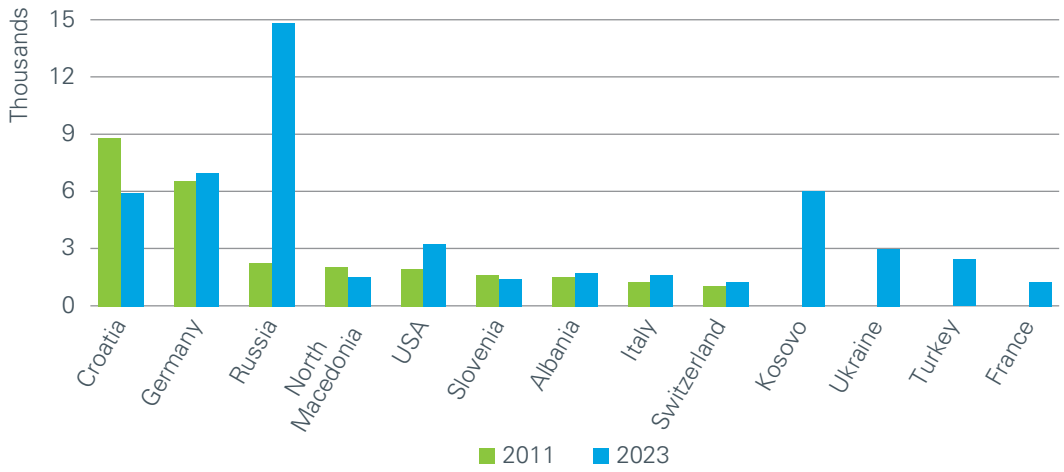
Because of the labour-market dynamics described above employers in tourism, construction and related service sectors have long relied on foreign labour to sustain

economic activity. This reliance is reflected in the steady expansion of annual quotas for temporary residence and work permits for foreign nationals. However, recent evidence suggests that current inflows extend beyond temporary labour migration. Administrative records, business-registration data and census comparisons indicate both a sharp increase in the number of foreign residents and a diversification of migrant profiles.

In recent years, Montenegro has experienced a visible increase in immigration, particularly after March 2022, when the inflow of citizens from Ukraine and Russia intensified. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Montenegrin diplomatic missions abroad received 6 561 visa applications in the first eight months of 2025, a 17% increase compared to the same period in 2024, with the majority coming from the United Arab Emirates and India. The growing number of applicants from the Middle East and South Asia reflects Montenegro's increasing visibility as a destination for tourism, business, and residence.

Administrative records further confirm the scale of this shift. Ministry of Interior data indicate that as of September 2025, 100 867 foreign nationals resided in Montenegro (71 250 temporary and 29 617 permanent residents), equivalent to approximately 16% of the country's population recorded in the 2023 census. In parallel, MONSTAT reports a sharp expansion of economic presence by foreigners: the number of business entities under foreign ownership increased from 12 429 in 2019 to 29 960 in 2024, a rise of approximately 141%. Together, these indicators suggest that recent inflows extend beyond seasonal labour migration and increasingly include entrepreneurs, remote workers and longer-term residents whose labour-market roles are not systematically monitored.

Figure 9. Diversification of immigration to Montenegro by country of origin, 2011–2023



Note: Serbia is excluded from the figure due to scale differences; Only countries with more than 1 000 residents are shown; Source: MONSTAT (2012) and MONSTAT (2025a)

Census comparisons provide additional insight into the changing composition of immigration. Citizens of neighbouring countries continue to constitute the largest foreign-born population, with Serbia by far the dominant country of origin (around 55 000 residents in 2011 and over 44 000 in 2023), indicating a stable and long-standing regional mobility pattern. Other neighbouring states – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia – also remain consistently represented. However, the most pronounced changes are observed among more recent inflows. The number of residents originating from the Russian Federation increased sharply from 2 266 in 2011 to 14 853 in 2023 – an increase of more than 550%. Ukraine and Türkiye, which did not feature prominently in earlier statistics, now account for 2 986 and 2 457 residents respectively. At the same time, the number of residents from EU countries and North America has gradually grown.

Taken together, the evidence presented in this section suggests that migration in Montenegro operates primarily through a labour-market adjustment mechanism, helping to compensate for sectoral shortages. At the same time, the scale and diversification of recent inflows, particularly the growth in foreign residents and foreign-owned business activity, indicate that mobility may not be limited to labour replacement alone. While the available statistics capture migrants' presence, they provide limited information on their skills, occupations, and labour-market positioning. This leaves open the possibility that recent migration also affects labour supply, workforce composition, and human-capital formation through additional channels (including emerging forms of skills circulation) that remain insufficiently documented.

2.2.5 Immigration: new patterns and profiles

This section aims at identifying forms of mobility that are not captured by existing statistics and are typically overlooked. Administrative data on temporary residence and work permits primarily record employment-related migration and account for approximately 30 000 foreign workers (2025). However, Ministry of Interior records indicate that more than 100 000 foreign nationals currently reside in Montenegro (2025). The difference between these figures suggests that a substantial share of the foreign population is not represented. To address this gap, the analysis draws on qualitative interviews to document the profiles of recent immigrants, including their skills, occupation, push and pull factors, and sectors of economic activity. The purpose is to provide an initial empirical picture of who these migrants are and to explore how their characteristics may relate to labour supply, workforce composition and human capital dynamics in Montenegro.

The analysis draws on a set of semi-structured interviews conducted with immigrants from several key regions – a total of 21 interviews were conducted. The sample included migrants from Russia (7), European Union countries (7), Ukraine (3), Türkiye (2), and the Western Balkan region (2). The distribution reflects response availability and accessibility through recruitment channels rather than intentional prioritisation of particular groups. The interview sample was predominantly composed of highly educated respondents, with

most participants falling into the high-skilled professional category and smaller shares represented by medium-skilled vocational and technical occupations. The age distribution was concentrated within the core working-age population, particularly between 25 and 49 years. The sample was gender-imbalanced, with women (15) more strongly represented than men (6).

These interviews offer qualitative insights into migrants' motivations, settlement experiences, and perceptions of institutional, economic, and social conditions in Montenegro. The interview guide covered several thematic blocks: reasons for migration, prior migration experience and migration pathways, employment or business activity, integration experiences, perceived opportunities and obstacles, and future plans in Montenegro.

Figure 10. Skill composition of the interview sample

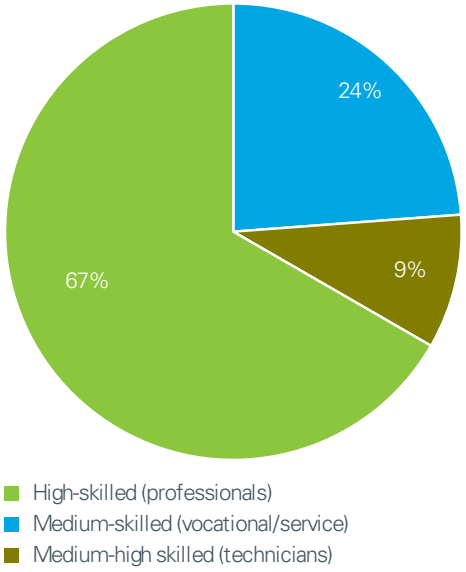
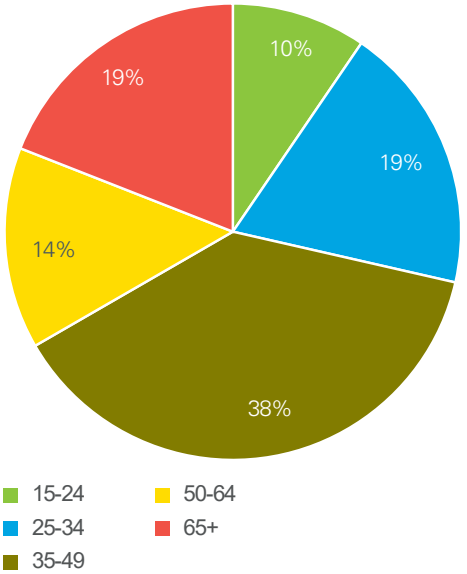


Figure 11. Age structure of the interview sample



Among the most visible and numerous groups are immigrants from the Russian Federation. Movements of Russian citizens to Montenegro are not a new phenomenon – they have been present for more than a decade, initially connected primarily with the real estate sector. Many early arrivals were individuals and investors engaged in buying, renovating, and renting properties, particularly along the coastal region, where demand for tourism was growing.

However, these movements have intensified significantly since 2022, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The recent wave of Russian immigrants differs from earlier patterns, encompassing a much more diverse social and professional structure.

"We didn't think much. We already had friends who live here. They told us… they shared their experience, and we decided to come here. I'm very happy to raise my kids far from unstable conditions back home.", Diana, 32, Russia

"We used to come here for vacation and we just loved the place. As we were coming here, we noticed a large community of our people here and heard about schools available in the Russian language. So it was an easy decision.", Viktoria, 48, Russia

A central pull factor for this group is the already established Russian community in Montenegro. The existence of Russian-language schools, kindergartens, and social networks has made it easier for newcomers to adapt and integrate. For families, these social and cultural connections were among the key reasons for choosing Montenegro as a destination – the country offered both a sense of safety and a familiar cultural environment without the administrative barriers characteristic of many EU states.

"Registering a company here is not as complicated as it would be in an EU country. There is administration and paperwork, but it still allows me to settle in a country where I feel safe. It is easier than in most EU countries, so that was my choice.", Max, 38, Russia

"My workplace relocated us. I work under the same conditions. I've been able to keep my job, but live in a much safer environment.", Marysia, 29, Russia

Interviews with Russian immigrants indicate the recent arrivals are highly educated professionals with backgrounds in the ICT sector (1), research (1), education (2), and creative industries (1). For some, such as IT entrepreneurs and freelancers, Montenegro offered an opportunity to continue business remotely or relocate company operations, taking advantage of flexible work arrangements and the country's relatively simple registration procedures. For others, particularly those without initial capital or self-employment opportunities, integration into the Montenegrin labour market has been more challenging.

Respondents operating in the ICT sector, however, reported difficulties in accessing banking and financial services. In particular, they were often subject to additional verification procedures and documentation requests. While these requirements are related to regulatory compliance and anti-money-laundering safeguards, migrants perceived them as a significant administrative barrier that delayed or complicated business operations.

"It's still quite difficult to operate an ICT business here. Compared to neighbouring countries, the procedures are slower and more complicated. Because IT companies are considered higher-risk for money laundering, banks ask for extra documentation and checks. That takes a lot of time and makes running a business harder.", Max, 38, Russia

Some respondents noted that their longer-term stay in Montenegro is uncertain, and the reason is the absence of a clearly defined legal framework for remote workers and

digital nomads. Because of this they are considering relocation to countries offering more predictable regulatory conditions.

In addition to economic and professional motivations, respondents highlighted cultural proximity as an important element shaping their decision to move. Shared Slavic linguistic and cultural roots, as well as a generally positive perception of Montenegro among Russian citizens, contributed to the choice of destination.

Immigrants from Ukraine were driven by similar factors as their Russian counterparts – most notably, the search for safety and stability amid the ongoing war. The presence of established Ukrainian communities made settlement in Montenegro easier. The presence of Russian-language schools and kindergartens further contributed to smoother integration of families with children, while the availability of intermediaries and informal "helpers" – often other migrants with prior experience – played a crucial role in facilitating access to local institutions and services.

> *"There are many Ukrainian families here. When we arrived they helped us a lot… some procedures like applying for residence, opening bank account were really complicated.", Vyacheslav, 31, Ukraine*

> *"It was easier to move here than to some EU country. I came with my children while my husband stayed in Ukraine. Because many families are already here, my children feel at home.", Masha, 33, Ukraine*

Another distinct group of newcomers to Montenegro are migrants from North America (the United States and Canada), whose decisions to relocate have been shaped by a combination of quality-of-life considerations and the changing social dynamics in home countries. Many of them pointed to the growing sense of insecurity and social inequality in their home cities – including rising crime rates and homelessness – as key reasons. Montenegro appeared as an affordable, peaceful, and community-oriented alternative within Europe.

The pull factors identified by this group are consistent: they valued Montenegro's small and quiet communities, its mild climate, and attractive nature. Many were drawn by the possibility of living more simply and meaningfully – the so-called "polako" lifestyle that emphasises time, relationships, and balance. Respondents often noted that the warmth and directness of local people surprised them positively; unlike in their home countries, where politeness sometimes replaces genuine connection, they felt that Montenegrins' openness allowed them to build authentic relationships and integrate more naturally into community life.

Among those interviewed, two broad profiles emerged. The first includes entrepreneurial migrants, often arriving with savings or investment capital, who established small businesses. The second group consists of retirees or semi-retired professionals seeking a more relaxed lifestyle at lower cost. Both groups emphasised that Montenegro remains financially accessible, especially compared with Western Europe or North America, allowing for a comfortable standard of living.

> *"I discovered Montenegro while browsing online and came for a short visit to see it in person. After returning to the United States, I sold my property, bought one in Montenegro and relocated permanently. I now spend my retirement gardening, enjoying the climate and living away from democratic backslide back home.", Jane, 68, USA*

> *"I would rather work the lowest-paid job in Montenegro than have a comfortable life running my business back in Canada." Tyler, 34, Canada*

> *"I recently visited back home for family reasons, and the moment I stepped outside the airport I experienced an incident. It is no longer safe to live in Canada.", Tyler, 34, Canada*

For those establishing businesses, however, administrative and institutional barriers were a recurring theme. They encountered many of the same obstacles mentioned by other migrant groups – difficulties with e-banking, company registration, and limited online procedures.

> *"I struggled with the legislation. Information was fragmented and often outdated, and I had to spend a lot of money on a legal advisor. It would help if updated procedures were clearly available online and easier to access.", Iris, 31, USA*

Another recurring observation was the lack of centralised, reliable information for newcomers. Key details about residence permits, business registration, taxation, or local services are scattered across various websites and institutions, with information frequently inconsistent or outdated. As a result, new arrivals rely heavily on word-of-mouth advice and informal networks, which can be confusing and unreliable, especially for those without prior local connections. Several respondents suggested that a dedicated mobile application or digital platform could significantly improve the experience of foreign residents – providing verified information, connecting local service providers and businesses, and creating a space for newcomers to ask questions and exchange experiences.

Immigrants from Türkiye represent another notable group in Montenegro's evolving migration landscape. Their movement is driven by a mix of economic opportunities, investment potential, and the possibility of more comfortable living. Some arrive with capital to invest or start businesses, while others fill gaps in labour markets, particularly in sectors requiring less specialised skills.

Cultural proximity and religious affinity also figure among the pull factors for some Turkish migrants. Montenegro's Muslim communities and shared elements of Ottoman heritage make cultural adaptation easier. The presence of Turkish-linked business organisations, such as TurkCham Montenegro strengthens cross-border networks and provides institutional support for business ventures. In fact, Turkish investments in Montenegro have grown rapidly, and newcomers benefit from an established business community that actively shares experience and know-how.

> *"I perceived the social environment in Montenegro as relatively welcoming toward Muslims, and I did not experience discrimination." Yigit, 33, Türkiye*

"Relocating to Montenegro was financially accessible for me and allowed me to expand my business by opening an office here. There are also agencies run by people from my country that guide newcomers through the administrative procedures.", Kartal, 41, Türkiye

Migrants from Western European countries illustrate the pattern of lifestyle migration. They describe how they value the slower pace of life and the sense of safety Montenegro provides. For them personal well-being and quality of life outweigh purely economic motivations. However, for those seeking greater financial freedom and aiming to establish their own businesses, Montenegro offers a more affordable ground for doing so.

"My wife and I used to work in hospitality. After relocating, we switched careers and began working as online content creators. Establishing a freelance activity in Montenegro was significantly less expensive than in Germany.", Justine, 42, Germany

"In most EU countries purchasing property does not guarantee residence rights. Montenegro does, which made the decision straightforward. We enjoy our life here – the lifestyle suits us. We talk with our neighbours and the lady in the local shop; everyone is very friendly. People back home are much colder.", Daniela, 31, Latvia

Migrants from the Western Balkan region represent one of the most traditional and enduring forms of mobility toward Montenegro. Such movements are shaped by deep historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, as the countries of the region once shared a common state framework. These have long facilitated seasonal work and/or short-term mobility, which in many cases later evolved into permanent settlement.

"I already had some relatives here. I first came to Montenegro to study, and after graduation I found a job and decided to stay permanently.", Dušan, 29, Serbia

"My employer was opening a local office in Podgorica and I was assigned to relocate. For me it wasn't a big change – I already had friends living here." Jelena, 40, Serbia

"I used to come here every summer with my family. I met my husband here, and once we decided to start a family, I moved to Montenegro." Ana, 36, Serbia

"Finding a job was a bit challenging. I didn't have problems with recognising my diploma, but the labour market doesn't offer many opportunities. Still, I didn't feel I was in a worse position than anyone else.", Ana, 36, Serbia

The push and pull factors driving these migrations are often complementary. On one hand, economic disparities and limited labour market opportunities in some neighbouring countries continue to push individuals to seek better employment and living conditions elsewhere. On the other, Montenegro's geographical proximity, similar language, and familiar social environment make it an accessible and appealing destination. Many respondents described their migration as a natural and unforced decision – the continuity of shared culture and values made adaptation easier and faster than in more distant destinations.

While a share of these migrants fills labour shortages in hospitality, construction, and personal services (Golubović, 2021), the interviews also indicate the presence of qualified professionals – including consultants, economists, lawyers, teachers and university staff. Although the qualitative evidence does not allow firm conclusions about the causes of this movement, recent regional policy developments may provide a facilitating context. The Common Regional Market initiative has introduced frameworks for mutual recognition of professional qualifications and easier labour mobility within the region. These arrangements potentially reduce administrative barriers and may contribute to enabling professionals from neighbouring countries to pursue employment or business activities in Montenegro.

Table 5. Main migration profiles and motivations identified through interviews

Migrant group	Dominant motivation	Typical economic activity	Key pull factors	Main barriers	Migration type
Russia	Safety + relocation of employment	ICT, remote work, entrepreneurship	Security, existing community, Russian schools	Bureaucracy, banking, legal procedures	Relocation migration / remote workers
Ukraine	War-related displacement + family safety	Services, remote work, informal employment	Safety, community networks	Administrative procedures, residence documentation	Protection-driven mobility
North America	Lifestyle & security	Retirement, small business, online work	Affordability, safety, community life	Legal information, administrative complexity	Lifestyle migration
Western Europe	Cost & flexibility	Freelancing, digital/creative work	Lower costs, residence rules, property access	Bureaucracy	Remote workers / lifestyle migration
Türkiye	Business expansion & trade	Small business, commerce, services	Investment opportunity, networks, cultural familiarity	Legal procedures	Entrepreneurial migration
Western Balkans	Labour mobility & social ties	Employment in services, administration, professions	Language, proximity, familiarity	Labour-market opportunities	Regional labour mobility & professional mobility

The comparison reveals that immigration to Montenegro is not a single phenomenon but a combination of distinct mobility types. The new inflows consist of lifestyle migrants, remote professionals and entrepreneurial migrants. Safety-motivated relocation (Russia, Ukraine) and cost- or lifestyle-driven relocation (EU and North America) represent

particularly visible patterns. Across groups, common themes recur – administrative complexity, reliance on informal information networks, and the importance of existing migrant communities. However, their economic roles differ substantially: some migrants compensate labour shortages, while others create businesses, work remotely or bring independent income. These patterns should not be interpreted as statistically representative of the entire migrant population, but as exploratory qualitative evidence indicating the diversity of mobility forms and the need for more systematic data collection.

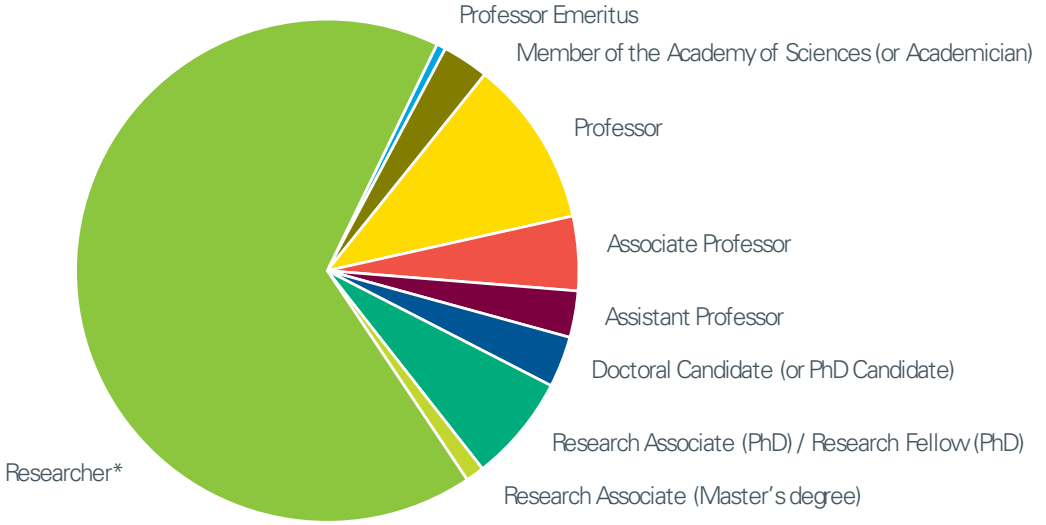
This section underscores the limitations of official statistics in capturing the composition and diversification of recent immigration inflows. While available administrative indicators record the presence and scale of foreign residents and permit holders, they provide limited information on migrants' skills, occupations, labour-market positioning and duration of stay. In this regard, further alignment with EU statistical standards and data-harmonisation requirements may contribute to improving migration monitoring systems, with more systematic data collection representing a necessary first step toward more informed governance.

2.2.6 Return migration: diaspora linkages

This section approaches return migration indirectly, by analysing diaspora engagement as a mechanism that may enable knowledge transfer, temporary mobility and possible future return. It explores these processes as under-researched and weakly monitored components of mobility. The analysis treats the diaspora not as an already mobilised development actor, but as a statistically insufficiently mapped and institutionally under-targeted form of human capital circulation whose potential role in labour supply and knowledge transfer remains largely unexplored. Existing engagement is largely confined to cultural and symbolic activities – such as informal gatherings and summer festivals – that help maintain identity but rarely translate into sustained cooperation or development impact.

The Scientific Network established by the Ministry of Science and Education in 2018 was designed to map Montenegrin scientists working abroad and foster cooperation with domestic institutions. Although the database has not been regularly updated, the available data provides valuable insights into the structure and distribution of Montenegro's scientific diaspora.

Figure 12. Scientific diaspora of Montenegro: composition by research and academic position



*Researcher not holding a formal academic or research title (i.e., not appointed to an academic rank or research associate position).
Source: Author's calculations based on Scientific Network database (2023)

According to the Scientific Network database (2023), Montenegro's scientific diaspora includes at least 336 identified professionals Approximately one quarter of them hold formal academic titles (assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, academician or professor emeritus), while an additional share consists of research fellows and doctoral candidates. Approximately 74% of these professionals are located in Europe and 23% in North America (United States and Canada), while smaller shares reside in Asia (2%) and Australia (1%) (author's calculation; Scientific network, 2023).

The absence of systematic engagement with this group therefore represents 'a missed opportunity'. The mapped profiles indicate that many members of the scientific diaspora are professionals and researchers employed in international research institutes, universities and knowledge-intensive industries. In disciplinary terms, the largest shares are concentrated in natural sciences and mathematics and in technological sciences, together accounting for more than half of the identified scientific diaspora (authors calculations; Scientific network, 2023). The experience of neighbouring countries demonstrates that strategic engagement of highly skilled diaspora members can yield measurable results – such as the creation of academic partnerships, research consortia, and start-up initiatives that foster return migration or attract new talent. EU research and innovation programmes, such as Horizon Europe and mobility schemes under Erasmus+, provide institutional platforms through which diaspora engagement could be structured and strengthened. Participation in such frameworks may facilitate temporary return, joint research initiatives, and cross-border knowledge transfer, transforming diaspora from a symbolic connection into an operational component of national human-capital strategy.

Several policy documents have acknowledged the relevance of diaspora engagement. The Law on Cooperation between Montenegro and Emigrants (2015, amended 2018 and 2019) identifies scientific collaboration as a key area for cooperation, while the Strategies for Cooperation with the Diaspora (2011-2014, 2015-2018, and 2020-2023) introduced actions to include highly educated expatriates in research projects, student exchanges, and advisory bodies. However, the implementation of these measures has been fragmented and underfunded, and the existing database of Montenegrin scientists abroad has not been regularly updated. Discussions with institutional stakeholders, ministry representatives, indicate that these initiatives were affected by frequent institutional restructuring, political turnover and limited administrative capacity, which interrupted continuity of programmes and prevented long-term coordination. Consequently, coordination between institutions remains limited, and reintegration pathways for returning scientists are weak.

The available evidence shows that Montenegro possesses a dispersed but highly qualified scientific diaspora, while institutional mechanisms for cooperation remain fragmented and weakly operationalised. Existing contacts largely take the form of individual academic, professional and business interactions rather than structured reintegration pathways. In this sense, the findings point less to an established pattern of return than to an underutilised channel through which knowledge transfer, temporary mobility and possible future return could occur. From a conceptual perspective, this indicates a weakly institutionalised form of skills circulation, where the potential for knowledge transfer exists but remains insufficiently structured.

2.2.7 Conclusions and policy implications

This paper set out to examine whether recent developments indicate a shift in Montenegro's migration profile from a predominantly emigration-based pattern toward more complex mobility characterised by growing immigration and diversified migrant inflows, and to explore how these movements relate to labour supply and human capital dynamics. The study aimed to provide an exploratory empirical assessment combining available statistical evidence with qualitative insights from migrant interviews.

The findings suggest that such a shift is indeed observable at the descriptive level. Multiple indicators – rising foreign population stocks, increasing business ownership by foreign nationals, and diversification of countries of origin – point to a migration landscape that is no longer defined solely by outward mobility. Instead, several forms of mobility coexist. Some migrants enter as workers filling labour shortages in construction, tourism and services, confirming earlier explanations of migration as labour market balancing mechanism. At the same time, the qualitative interviews identified additional groups: safety-motivated relocation (particularly from Russia and Ukraine), lifestyle migration from higher-income countries, entrepreneurial migration, and remote-worker relocation. These categories differ significantly in their labour-market positioning. In other words, some migrants participate in local employment, others operate businesses, work remotely for foreign employers, or rely on independent income.

Interpreted through the conceptual framework outlined earlier in the paper, the findings are broadly consistent with a labour-market adjustment mechanism: immigration appears to respond to sectoral shortages, particularly in construction, tourism and services, thereby supporting short-term labour-market balancing. Evidence for skills circulation is indicative rather than conclusive and emerges in two partially distinct domains. The interviews point to the presence of highly educated professionals, remote workers and entrepreneurs whose economic roles could potentially extend beyond labour replacement; however, the absence of systematic data on their occupations and labour-market positioning limits any firm assessment of their implications on labour market dynamics and human capital formation. At the same time, the scientific diaspora represents an outward reservoir of human capital whose potential contribution through return or temporary engagement remains underutilised.

Weak coordination between migration governance, labour-market policy and diaspora engagement reduces the extent to which either immigration or diaspora mobility translates into structured and sustained human-capital accumulation.

The study also examined diaspora engagement as a perspective related to return migration. Available evidence indicates the presence of a highly qualified scientific diaspora, yet interactions with domestic institutions remain mostly individual and project-based. The evidence suggests that institutional discontinuity and limited coordination have constrained the emergence of more structured mobility patterns, such as knowledge circulation, temporary professional engagement and possible return migration of highly skilled nationals.

Across all sections, one consistent conclusion emerges – Montenegro currently possesses only a partial empirical understanding of its immigration reality. Existing statistics record the presence of immigrants but provide limited information on their skills, occupations or labour-market roles. In particular, the large difference between the number of temporary residence and work permits and the total number of foreign nationals residing in the country indicates that a substantial share of migrants remains statistically uncharacterised. As a result, immigration in Montenegro is observable demographically, but only weakly documented socio-economically, a gap that future alignment with EU statistical and governance standards may help to gradually address.

Taken together, the research objectives were achieved in an exploratory sense. The study identifies emerging immigration patterns and illustrates different migrant motivations and profiles through qualitative evidence, but these findings remain indicative rather than representative. The available evidence does not allow the study to establish causal relationships between recent immigration and labour-market or human-capital outcomes. Its contribution lies primarily in clarifying the diversity of recent mobility and in identifying key empirical gaps that future research and data collection would need to address.

Policy implications:

- Migration governance in Montenegro remains underdeveloped and primarily oriented toward short-term labour management. Existing policy instruments focus largely on annual quota decisions regulating temporary residence and work permits, while

broader forms of mobility receive limited to no policy attention. Although quota decisions specify the number of permits by sector, publicly available information does not include the actual distribution of permits, the profiles of workers admitted (e.g. occupation, skills, education, or nationality). As a result, policy operates primarily as an administrative control mechanism rather than an evidence-based instrument for labour-market or human-capital planning. Improving transparency and accessibility of administrative migration data would therefore represent a prerequisite for developing a more coherent and analytically informed migration policy framework.

- Administrative data show that the number of foreign residents substantially exceeds the number of temporary work and residence permits issued annually. While permit quotas capture employment-related mobility, a large share of foreign nationals residing in Montenegro is not systematically described in available statistics. Their occupations, skills, economic activities and duration of stay are largely unknown. The absence of such information constitutes a governance issue in itself. Without reliable data on who foreign residents are and how they participate in the economy, migration policy remains necessarily reactive and focused on short-term labour shortages. Systematic collection and public availability of basic disaggregated migration indicators would enable independent research and more informed policy design, allowing migration to be addressed as a structural socio-economic phenomenon rather than only as an administrative labour-market measure.
- Even within the limited qualitative sample, the interviews identified a few institutional and administrative integration barriers. These findings indicate that migration governance is not adapted to the diversity of newcomer profiles, which may influence settlement decisions and points to the need for further systematic research:
    - Respondents pointed at fragmented information, unclear procedures and slow administrative processes when dealing with residence applications, business establishment or everyday bureaucratic requirements. In the absence of updated, accessible and centralised guidance, newcomers frequently relied on informal networks and advice from other migrants to navigate procedures. These experiences suggest that the transparency and accessibility of administrative procedures can influence migrants' capacity to integrate successfully.
    - Business-oriented migrants reported additional obstacles related to the regulatory environment. In particular, respondents operating in ICT sector faced prolonged verification procedures and extensive documentation requirements when accessing banking and financial services. Although these practices are linked to compliance and risk-control regulations, migrants perceived them as operational barriers that delayed business activity.
    - Interviewees also noted the absence of a clearly defined framework for remote workers and "digital nomads", which creates uncertainty regarding residence status, taxation and long-term settlement.

Table 6. Operationalisation of policy implications

Empirical finding (from study)	Policy implication	Responsible institutions	Governance level	Main policy instruments
Large gap between foreign residents and recorded work permits; lack of migrant profiles	Improve migration data transparency and monitoring	Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Labour; MONSTAT	National (inter-institutional)	Linked administrative datasets; publication of anonymised statistics
Migrants rely on informal networks due to unclear procedures	Improve administrative accessibility	Ministry of Interior; e-Government Directorate; Tax Administration	National/local	Centralised information portal; standardised procedures
ICT entrepreneurs face prolonged banking verification	Clarify regulatory procedures for business migrants	Central Bank; commercial banks; Ministry of Economic Development	Regulatory/ financial sector	Standardised compliance guidelines; procedural clarification
Scientific diaspora mapped but weakly coordinated	Strengthen diaspora engagement mechanisms	Ministry of Science; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; universities	National/ international	Updated registry; coordination programmes; research cooperation

Annex: Semi-structured interview guide

Section A: Migration Motivations and Background

1. What were the main reasons that motivated you to consider immigrating to Montenegro?

(Please elaborate on whether these reasons were economic, professional, family-related, safety-related, or other.)

2. Did you have previous experience living abroad? If yes, where and in what capacity (study, work, business, family reunification, other)?

3. What were the three most important expectations you hoped to achieve by moving to Montenegro?

(For example: employment opportunities, business prospects, safety, lifestyle, cost of living, family environment.)

4. Did you have prior contacts or acquaintances in Montenegro before relocating? If so, how did these networks influence your decision and settlement process?

Section B: Living Conditions and Adaptation

5. How would you describe your first impressions of Montenegro after relocating?

(What surprised you positively or negatively?)

6. How would you compare everyday life in Montenegro with life in your previous country of residence?

(Please reflect on differences in cost of living, work-life balance, social norms, public services, or general pace of life.)

7. How do you assess your overall quality of life in Montenegro compared to your previous country of residence?

(Which components most influence your assessment – income, security, social life, professional opportunities, public services?)

8. Have your expectations about living in Montenegro been fulfilled?

(If not, what aspects differed from what you anticipated?)

Section C: Social and Cultural Integration

9. How do you experience social interactions and relationships in Montenegro?

(Have you established new personal or professional networks?)

10. How do you perceive cultural diversity in Montenegro?

(Did you encounter any challenges adapting to local customs, language, or institutional practices?)

11. How would you evaluate public systems such as healthcare, education, and social security in Montenegro compared to your previous country of residence?

Section D: Professional and Economic Position

12. What are the main challenges or obstacles you have faced since relocating to Montenegro?

(For example: administrative procedures, residence permits, recognition of qualifications, banking access, employment opportunities, language barriers.)

How did you address these challenges?

13. How have you integrated into society in Montenegro?

(Have you integrated through employment, business activity, remote work, community engagement, or other forms of participation?)

Section E: Future Plans

14. How would you describe your long-term vision and plans regarding your life in Montenegro?

(Do you see your stay as temporary, long-term, or permanent? What factors would influence your decision to remain or leave?)

References

BMAS, Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2023), Skilled Labour Strategy (Available at: https://www.bmas.de/EN/Services/Publications/skilled-labour-strategy-publication.html)

European Training Foundation (2021), Migration, human capital and labour deployment in Montenegro, Turin: European Training Foundation (Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/migration_montenegro_0.pdf)

FES (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung) (2016), Radulović, M. and Brnović, M., Economic migrations from Montenegro to the EU, European Movement in Montenegro, Podgorica (Available at: www.emim.org/images/publikacija-ENG.pdf)

Golubović, V. (2021), How migration, human capital and the labour market interact in Montenegro, Turin: European Training Foundation (Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/migration_montenegro_0.pdf)

Government of Montenegro, Directorate for Diaspora. Strategy for Cooperation with the Diaspora 2020–2023. Podgorica, 2019

Government of Montenegro, Official Gazette of Montenegro (2025), Decisions on determining the annual number of temporary stay and work permits for foreigners, various years (Available at: https://www.sluzbenilist.me/propisi?type=0&q=Odluka+o+utvrđivanju+godišnjeg+broja+dozvola+za+privremeni+boravak+i+rad+stranaca)

Hooper, Kate, Tesseltje de Lange, and Jasmijn Slootjes (2025), How Can Labour Migration Policies Help Tackle Europe's Looming Skills Crisis? Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe (Available at: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpie-gs4s-europe-skills-2025_final.pdf)

Jovanović, J. (2025, September 25), U Crnoj Gori boravi ukupno 100.867 stranih državljana. Vijesti (Available at: https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/776216/najvise-srba-rusa-i-turaka-preko-100-hiljada-stranaca-u-crnoj-gori)

Mara, I., & Landesmann, M. (2022), "Use it or lose it!" How do migration, human capital and the labour market interact in the Western Balkans? European Training Foundation (Available at: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/use-it-or-lose-it-how-do-migration-human-capital-and-labour)

Ministry of science, Naučna mreža – online platform (Last accessed in May 2023 at https://www.naucnamreza.me)

MONSTAT, Statistical Office of Montenegro (2012), Population Census 2011 – Migration Characteristics of the Population (Available at: https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/Migracije%20stanovni%C5%A1tva%20PDF.pdf)

MONSTAT, Statistical Office of Montenegro (2025a), Population Census 2023: Migration Characteristics of the Population (Available at: https://www.monstat.org/uploads/files/popis%202021/saopstenja/SAOPSTENJE_Popis%20stanovnistva%20migracije.pdf)

MONSTAT, Statistical Office of Montenegro (2025b), Number and structure of business entities under foreign ownership – Statistical release (Available at: https://monstat.org/cg/page.php?id=648&pageid=98)

OECD (2020), "COVID-19 and key workers: What role do migrants play in your region?", OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), OECD Publishing, Paris (Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/42847cb9-en)

OMSA, Organisation of Montenegrin Students Abroad (2022), Reality Check (Out) from Montenegro: Roadmap to Brain Gain (Available at: https://www.omsa.me/roadmap-to-brain-gain-in-montenegro/)

Pace, R. (2021), Malta: A Janus Faced Migration and Integration Policy. In: Joensen, T., Taylor, I. (eds) Small States and the European Migrant Crisis. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. (Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66203-5_7)

Radojevic, G., & Koprivica, D. (2023), Why doesn't Montenegro care about its own population? Podgorica, Society of Statisticians and Demographers of Montenegro (Available at: https://demostats.me/dokumenta/publikacija4.pdf)

Rulebook on Cooperation with the Scientific Diaspora ("Official Gazette of Montenegro", No. 44/18)

The World Bank (2025) Montenegro Overview (Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/montenegro/overview)

UNDP, United Nations Development Programme (2022), Istraživanje i procjena lokalnih politika koje se odnose na mlade i potrebe mladih u 15 lokalnih samouprava, Regionalni program lokalne demokratije (Available at: https://www.undp.org/cnr/montenegro/publications/istrazivanje-potreba-mladih-i-procjena-lokalnih-omladinskih-politika-u-15-crnogorskih-opstina)

2.3 Migration prospects, conflict-induced displacement and human capital accumulations

Nermin Oruc

2.3.1 Abstract

This paper assesses the extent of brain gain in the context of conflict-induced migration through an empirical test of the Beine et al. (2006a) brain gain model, distinguishing contexts affected by conflict. Using a country-level panel of 99 countries covering the period 1985–2005, we construct a destination-driven migration-prospect index and interact it with UNHCR-based displacement measures estimated using two-way fixed-effects methods. The baseline estimates show that migration prospects are negatively signed in within-country estimates, consistent with the within-country variation in the Bartik index being limited after absorbing country fixed effects. Displacement carries a consistently negative coefficient, directionally consistent with the capacity-constraint hypothesis. The interaction between migration prospects and displacement is negative in all specifications and statistically significant in the displaced-country subsample, providing qualified support for the attenuation mechanism. A non-parametric quartile analysis offers stronger evidence: migration prospects are significantly positive in low-displacement environments and negative in the highest-displacement quartile, consistent with the brain gain being attenuated as displacement intensifies. These findings contribute to the understanding of conflicts' long-term human capital costs and the conditions under which migration can generate developmental returns in fragile settings.

2.3.2 Introduction

The literature on migration and brain drain (Stark, 2004a, 2004b; Beine et al., 2001, 2006a) argues that the emigration of highly educated individuals does not necessarily reduce the stock of human capital in a country, as brain drain may have positive feedback effects on human capital formation through different channels. The main channels discussed are: the 'incentive effect', whereby migration prospects raise expected returns to education and stimulate schooling investment; the 'remittances effect', through which receipt of remittances increases household income and investment in education; and the 'return migration effect', whereby migrants return with human capital acquired abroad. The empirical evidence on brain drain and human capital formation in the home country (Beine et al., 2006a; Schiff, 2005; Beine et al., 2006b) remains inconclusive, as findings vary between positive and negative depending on assumptions and country samples. In addition, prior work did not distinguish between different types of migration. Therefore, in order to properly investigate the impact of brain drain on human capital formation in conflict-affected countries, empirical analysis using data from such countries is required.

This paper presents empirical findings that test the brain gain argument by drawing on the Beine et al. (2006a) model of brain gain, controlling for the heterogeneity of migration

with respect to conflict. The model uses country-level data and regresses the change in human capital on migration prospects and displacement intensity, interacted to capture whether the incentive effect is conditional on institutional capacity. The theoretical model of 'brain gain' was originally developed by Beine et al. (2006a). The main argument is that, once migration possibility is introduced, it produces additional schooling incentive for potential emigrants. However, the model rests on assumptions that do not necessarily hold in the case of conflict-induced migration, most importantly that potential migrants perceive that more education increases their migration prospects. Migrants from conflict areas are not selected by host countries on the basis of their education level but are granted asylum as refugees. Empirical evidence accounting for the specific context of conflict-induced migration is therefore required to understand the incentive effect and the net effect of conflict-driven emigration on human capital formation.

Moreover, Batista et al. (2012) and Batista et al. (2025) argue that the net brain gain depends primarily on the home country's institutional capacity to expand its education sector in response to foreign demand, while the risk of 'brain drain' remains in conflict zones where educational infrastructure is destroyed. This paper investigates whether migration prospects have differential effects on human capital accumulation depending on the intensity of conflict-induced displacement, proposing a conceptual framework with two mechanisms: (i) the incentive channel, whereby migration opportunities raise expected returns to education; and (ii) the capacity channel, whereby conflict and displacement reduce the ability of education systems to deliver schooling. Under displacement both channels may weaken or reverse the expected positive impact of migration prospects.

2.3.3 Literature review

A traditional argument of the migration literature (Bhagwati and Hamada, 1974; Bhagwati, 1976) is that migration lowers growth in the home country once highly educated workers emigrate. A subsequent wave of theoretical contributions (Mountford, 1997; Stark et al., 1998; Vidal, 1998; Beine et al., 2001, 2006a; Stark and Wang, 2002; Gibson and McKenzie, 2011; Docquier and Rapoport, 2012) argues that migration of the highly educated can, through expected higher wages abroad, produce more human capital ex ante than the ex post loss. All these models are based on the plausible assumption that migration prospects increase the expected return to education abroad and consequently the incentive for acquiring education. Since more people opt for education but not all migrate, this creates the possibility of net brain gain. The size of this incentive effect is positively related to migration prospects and the expected wage differential between countries, implying that poorer countries with higher skilled-emigration rates should have the strongest incentive for educational investment.

Schiff (2005) and Docquier et al. (2016) showed that the brain gain is much smaller once restrictive assumptions are relaxed. In particular, once unskilled migration is introduced, the education incentive becomes the difference between the skilled and unskilled migration premium. Beine et al. (2008, 2011), using expanded longitudinal datasets from

127 developing countries, found a positive impact of emigration prospects on human capital, especially for countries with low initial GDP. Batista et al. (2012) found that an increased probability of future migration significantly boosts the probability of completing intermediate or higher education, while Faini (2007) notes that 'brain waste' (migrants working in unskilled jobs abroad) can dampen the tertiary enrolment effect.

A related strand of literature documents the direct effects of conflict on education outcomes independently of migration. Justino (2011) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how armed conflict disrupts human capital accumulation through destruction of infrastructure, displacement of teachers and students, and diversion of household resources. Shemyakina (2011) presents micro-level evidence from Tajikistan showing that conflict reduces educational attainment differentially by gender. Chamarbagwala and Morán (2011) document large and persistent reductions in schooling following Guatemala's civil war. This paper builds on these insights by modelling how conflict-induced displacement interacts with migration incentives: the capacity-destruction channel documented in this literature provides the supply-side mechanism through which displacement attenuates the positive incentive effects of migration prospects identified by Beine et al. (2006a) and subsequent work.

In relation to conflict-induced migration, the main drawback of prior empirical models of brain gain is measuring migration prospects by the stock of emigrants. In case of voluntary migration with stable immigration quotas, this may be appropriate. However, in case of conflict, the stock of emigrants rapidly increases in a short period, distorting the probability of emigration and potentially overstating the estimated brain gain. For this reason, a destination-driven index of migration prospects is used in this paper, constructed to be orthogonal to origin-country conditions. In conclusion, the evidence from Beine et al. (2006a) shows that a positive outcome is possible only under restrictive assumptions and for specific combinations of income and emigration rates. The remaining question is whether the brain gain is further attenuated in the case of conflict, due to the dual mechanism of incentive distortion and institutional capacity destruction.

2.3.4 Methodology

This paper investigates whether migration prospects have differential effects on human capital accumulation depending on the intensity of conflict-induced displacement, distinguishing between two mechanisms: the incentive channel and the capacity channel. In order to test this hypothesis, the study uses a global country-level panel covering the period 1980–2015. The list of variables and data sources used are described below and presented in a summary table in the Annex to this paper.

The baseline model

The baseline specification is a country-based, two-way fixed-effects model of the form:

$$\Delta HK_{it} = \alpha_i + \tau_t + \beta_1 MigPros_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 Disp_{it} + \beta_3 (MigPros_{i,t-1} \times Disp_{it}) + \gamma X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where ΔHK_it is the change in human capital in country i over period t; α_i are country fixed effects absorbing time-invariant heterogeneity; τ_t are period fixed effects capturing global trends; MigPros is the lagged migration-prospect index; Disp is displacement intensity; their interaction is the term of central interest; and X is the vector of controls. The coefficient β_3 captures whether the marginal effect of migration prospects on human capital growth varies with displacement. The dependent variable is measured using the Barro-Lee dataset (Barro & Lee, 2013), which provides five-year educational attainment measures for 146 countries, covering (i) average years of schooling among adults aged 25+, (ii) secondary attainment share, and (iii) tertiary attainment share. Growth in each outcome (first-differenced) is the dependent variable.

The key independent variable is a measure of migration prospects constructed as a destination-driven Bartik shift-share index, following Beine et al. (2008) and Docquier and Rapoport (2012). Formally: MigPros_it = Σ_j s_{ij}(1980) × Δln Emp_{jt}, where s_{ij}(1980) is the share of country i's emigrants residing in destination j as of 1980, and Δln Emp_{jt} is the growth rate of total employment in destination j over period t, aggregated across OECD industry sectors. The 1980 diaspora shares are held fixed to ensure the instrument varies only with destination labour market conditions. The index is available for 111 matched countries in 1980, 1990, and 2000, with linear interpolation used for 1985 and 1995. This limits the estimation sample to the period 1985–2005.

Displacement intensity is constructed from UNHCR annual refugee stock statistics, normalised by World Bank WDI population denominators, averaged to five-year intervals, trimmed at the 99th percentile, and log-transformed in the baseline. Conflict intensity is measured using UCDP battle-related death counts (logged). Economic controls, including log GDP per capita (lagged), population growth, urban share, and remittances as a share of GDP, are sourced from the World Bank World Development Indicators, with the 1990 and 2000 observations used directly and intermediate years obtained by linear interpolation. All controls are lagged one five-year period.

Estimation strategy

Estimating the causal effect of migration prospects on human capital accumulation presents several empirical challenges. Migration flows may be endogenous to education outcomes in origin countries, and displacement may correlate with unobserved factors that simultaneously influence migration and educational attainment. The primary defence against reverse causality is the inclusion of country fixed effects (which absorb the time-invariant component of institutional fragility), lagged controls including conflict intensity and initial human capital, and the pre-trend tests reported in the robustness section.

The Bartik shift-share instrument exploits destination-driven variation in migration opportunities. Countries with larger diaspora communities in specific destination countries are more exposed to labour demand shocks there. By interacting baseline (1980) diaspora shares with destination-country employment growth shocks, the index captures variation driven by pull factors in destination economies rather than conditions in origin countries. A potential concern with the exclusion restriction is that OECD labour

demand shocks may affect origin-country human capital through channels other than migration, for instance through trade linkages or foreign investment. The inclusion of period fixed effects absorbs common shocks, and the near-zero pre-trend coefficient ($\beta = 0.006$, SE = 0.014, $p = 0.67$) supports the instrument's validity.

Data

Human capital outcomes are drawn from the Barro-Lee (2013) educational attainment dataset, which provides quinquennial attainment measures for 146 countries and is used for all three dependent variables (tertiary attainment share, secondary attainment share, and average years of schooling) as well as the lagged initial human capital control. Migration prospects are constructed as a Bartik-style destination-driven index combining fixed 1980 bilateral diaspora shares from Docquier and Marfouk (2006), with contemporaneous industry-level employment growth shocks in OECD destination countries drawn from OECD STAN national accounts data. Displacement intensity is built from UNHCR annual refugee stock statistics normalised by World Bank WDI population denominators, averaged to five-year intervals, trimmed at the 99th percentile, and log-transformed in the baseline. Conflict intensity is measured using UCDP battle-related death counts (logged), the war decade binary indicators are derived from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, and the remaining controls – GDP per capita, population growth, urbanisation rate, and remittance inflows as a share of GDP – are all sourced from the World Bank World Development Indicators, each lagged one five-year period to reduce reverse causation.

The paper faces several data limitations that should inform interpretation. First, the Barro-Lee attainment data are interpolated between census years, introducing measurement error that is likely serially correlated; first-differencing in a short panel may amplify rather than eliminate this error. Second, UNHCR displacement statistics capture only internationally registered refugee flows, excluding internally displaced persons and unregistered cross-border movements. Since many conflicts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, generate predominantly internal displacement, the displacement variable understates true displacement intensity in a systematic way, likely biasing the estimated interaction coefficient toward zero and making the results conservative. Third, the IV strategy relies on 1980 bilateral diaspora shares that are held fixed over the entire 1980–2015 period; for countries that underwent large structural shifts in emigration patterns (post-conflict states, transition economies), this assumption may be violated. Fourth, the main IV sample comprises 856 of a theoretical maximum of 1 022 country-period observations; the 166 excluded observations are not randomly distributed, but are concentrated among smaller, poorer and more conflict-affected countries, precisely those most relevant to the paper's central hypothesis. Estimates should therefore be interpreted as applying to countries with sufficient data coverage, which may differ from the most extreme displacement cases.

An important data limitation in the current analysis is that the predicted migration index (mig_pros_hat) is identical to the actual index (L_mig_pros) in the present dataset, since

the Bartik workbook provides only the final predicted values rather than separate first-stage components. The IV therefore collapses to OLS in the current implementation, and all specifications are estimated by OLS. True IV identification, which would correct for attenuation bias from measurement error in the migration-prospect index, remains as a direction for future work. A second notable limitation is that UNHCR displacement statistics capture only internationally registered refugee flows, excluding internally displaced persons (IDPs). Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates indicate that IDPs typically outnumber international refugees by a ratio of two to one or more in most conflict-affected regions. The displacement variable therefore systematically understates true displacement intensity, likely biasing the estimated interaction coefficient toward zero. The results should be interpreted as conservative lower bounds on the attenuation effect.

2.3.5 Results

Main estimates

Table 7 presents the main estimates from the two-way fixed-effects specifications. Columns 1–3 present OLS estimates without economic controls; columns 4–6 add economic controls (lagged log GDP per capita, population growth, urban share, remittances); column 7 restricts to the observed-lag sample where the lagged migration index is directly observed from the Bartik workbook (periods 1985, 1995, 2005; N = 290).

Table 7. Migration prospects, displacement and tertiary attainment growth (OLS, two-way FE)

	OLS(1)	OLS(2)	OLS(3)	OLS(4)	OLS(5)	OLS(6)	OLS(7) Obs-lag
Migration prospects (lagged)	-0.074	-0.082	-0.108	-0.013	-0.021	-0.040	-0.063
	(0.114)	(0.115)	(0.128)	(0.119)	(0.120)	(0.132)	(0.138)
Displacement (log)		-0.000**	-0.000		-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
MigPros × Displacement			-0.012			-0.009	-0.024
			(0.011)			(0.011)	(0.022)
Conflict intensity	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)
Log GDP pc (lagged)				0.005*	0.005*	0.005*	0.005
				(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Population growth				-0.001*	-0.001*	-0.001*	-0.001**

	OLS(1)	OLS(2)	OLS(3)	OLS(4)	OLS(5)	OLS(6)	OLS(7) Obs-lag
				(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Urban share				-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
				(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Remittances (% GDP)				-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
				(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Period FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Economic controls	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	495	495	495	483	483	483	290
Within R^2	0.004	0.006	0.007	0.023	0.027	0.027	0.039

Notes: Dependent variable is the five-year change in tertiary attainment share (Barro-Lee). Standard errors (in parentheses) clustered by country. All specifications include country and period fixed effects estimated via the within transformation. Economic controls: lagged log GDP per capita, population growth, urban share, remittances/GDP (from World Bank WDI: direct values for 1990 and 2000, linear interpolation for 1985 and 1995). Migration prospects index: Bartik shift-share based on 1980 diaspora shares; observed in 1980/1990/2000, interpolated in 1985/1995. Displacement: ln(refugees per capita), set to 0 when no displacement (68% of regression obs). Column 7 restricts to periods where the lagged migration index is directly observed (1985, 1995, 2005). * p<0.10; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01.
Source: Author's calculations based on Barro-Lee (2013), UNHCR Population Statistics, UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset, and World Bank WDI.

Across all specifications, the coefficient on migration prospects (L_mig_pros) is negative and statistically insignificant. Adding economic controls moves the coefficient closer to zero (−0.040 in column 6, SE = 0.132) and leaves it insignificant. This pattern is consistent with the limited within-country time variation available in the Bartik index, after absorbing country fixed effects. The within-country correlation between the migration index and tertiary attainment growth is near zero (mean within-r = 0.001), confirming that country FE absorb most of the identifiable cross-sectional variation.

The displacement main effect is negative in all specifications, consistent with a direct adverse effect of displacement on human capital accumulation. It is marginally significant in columns 5 and 6 (coefficient −0.0002–0.0003, $p < 0.15$), though the small coefficient magnitude reflects the log scale in which displacement is expressed. The interaction term (disp_x_Lmig) is negative in all specifications, with coefficient ranging from −0.009 to −0.024. It is not significant at conventional levels in the full sample ($p = 0.27$–0.40), though directionally consistent with the capacity-constraint hypothesis. The economic controls contribute meaningfully to model fit: within-R^2 rises from 0.007 (column 3) to 0.027 (column 6). Among the controls, lagged log GDP per capita is positive and marginally significant ($\beta = 0.0053$, $p = 0.09$), and population growth is negative and marginally significant ($\beta = -0.0008$, $p = 0.057$), consistent with established findings in the human capital literature.

Heterogeneity by educational level

Table 8 disaggregates the analysis by educational outcome.

Table 8. Heterogeneity by educational level (OLS, full interaction, with controls)

	Δ Tertiary	Δ Secondary	Δ Avg Yrs Schooling
Migration prospects (lagged)	-0.040	0.124	0.679
	(0.132)	(0.307)	(2.992)
Displacement (log)	-0.000	0.001	0.002
	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.008)
MigPros × Displacement	-0.009	-0.002	-0.151
	(0.011)	(0.051)	(0.400)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Period FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Economic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	483	483	483
Within R^2	0.027	0.020	0.013

Notes: All specifications include country and period fixed effects and the full control vector (conflict intensity, lagged log GDP per capita, population growth, urban share, remittances). Standard errors clustered by country. * p<0.10; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01.
Source: Author's calculations.

The interaction term is negative across all three outcomes but is most pronounced for tertiary attainment ($\beta_3 = -0.009$, SE = 0.011) and average years of schooling ($\beta_3 = -0.151$, SE = 0.400). For secondary attainment the interaction is near zero (–0.002, SE = 0.051). The directional concentration at tertiary level is consistent with the theoretical prediction that migration incentives primarily affect higher education investment, since skilled emigration offers larger wage premia at tertiary level. Secondary education may be more resilient because it relies on a larger, more locally embedded network of teachers and facilities. None of the interactions reach conventional significance levels, reflecting the limited within-country variation in the migration index discussed above.

Displacement quartile analysis

To examine the interaction non-parametrically, Table 9 estimates the migration-prospect coefficient separately within each quartile of displacement intensity among the 156 country-period observations with positive displacement.

Table 9. Migration prospects effect by displacement quartile (OLS, with controls)

Quartile	Displacement range (per capita)	N	β (Mig. prospects)	Std. Error	p-value
Q1 Low	0 to 6.0×10^{-6}	38	0.456***	(0.163)	0.005
Q2 Moderate	6.0×10^{-6} to 8.4×10^{-5}	39	0.244*	(0.119)	0.043
Q3 Elevated	8.4×10^{-5} to 1.3×10^{-3}	38	0.465	(0.592)	0.433
Q4 High	$\geq 1.5 \times 10^{-3}$	32	−0.127	(0.100)	0.210

Notes: Each row shows the OLS-TWFE coefficient on lagged migration prospects estimated within the displacement quartile among 156 country-period observations with positive displacement. Full economic controls included. Country and period fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by country. Quartile bounds computed over the 156 non-zero displacement observations. * p<0.10; *** p<0.01.
Source: Author's calculations.

The results reveal a striking gradient. In the lowest displacement quartile (Q1: displacement per capita $\leq 6 \times 10^{-6}$), the coefficient on migration prospects is positive and highly significant ($\beta = 0.456$, SE = 0.163, $p < 0.01$), indicating a strong brain-gain effect in low-displacement environments. In Q2 (moderate displacement), the coefficient remains positive and marginally significant ($\beta = 0.244$, SE = 0.119, $p < 0.10$). In Q3 and Q4, the coefficient falls sharply, turning negative in the highest-displacement quartile ($\beta = -0.127$, SE = 0.100), though imprecise. This monotonic decline across quartiles provides non-parametric confirmation of the capacity-constraint hypothesis: the positive incentive effect of migration prospects on tertiary attainment is concentrated in low-displacement contexts and is attenuated or reversed as displacement rises.

Robustness checks

The table below presents robustness checks for the interaction coefficient.

Table 10. Robustness checks: interaction coefficient MigPros × Displacement

Specification	β (interaction)	Std. Error	p-value	N
Baseline (full controls, N=483)	−0.009	(0.011)	0.404	483
Obs-lag sample (N=290)	−0.024	(0.022)	0.268	290
Conflict dummy instead of intensity	−0.009	(0.011)	0.405	483
High match-quality countries only	0.000	(0.010)	0.993	346
Displaced obs only (disp_percap > 0)	−0.054*	(0.029)	0.066	147
Excluding conflict observations	−0.016	(0.011)	0.151	359
No controls (FE only)	−0.013	(0.011)	0.233	495

Notes: All specifications include country and period fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by country. The interaction term is MigPros_it-1 × disp_log_it. Dependent variable: Δ tertiary attainment. * p<0.10; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01.
Source: Author's calculations.

The negative sign is consistent across all seven specifications. The interaction is most negative in the observed-lag sample (–0.024, p = 0.268) and in the displaced-only subsample (–0.054, p = 0.066), where restricting to countries with positive displacement provides sharper identification of the attenuation mechanism. Replacing conflict intensity with a conflict dummy leaves the baseline result unchanged. Restricting to high match-quality countries yields an interaction of essentially zero (0.000, N = 346), suggesting some of the displacement signal in the full sample may be attributable to noisier country-matching. Excluding conflict observations yields an interaction of –0.016 (p = 0.151). The specification without economic controls (FE only) yields –0.013 (p = 0.233, N = 495), demonstrating that the directional result is not dependent on the availability of WDI control variables.

Marginal effects

Table 11 reports the marginal effect of migration prospects on tertiary attainment at selected displacement levels, calculated from the baseline specification (column 6 of Table 1).

Table 11. Marginal effect of migration prospects at selected displacement levels

Displacement level	disp_log	disp_percap	Marg. Effect	Std. Error	p-value
No displacement (d=0)	0.000	0.000000	–0.040	(0.132)	0.762
p10 displaced	–9.202	0.000000	0.043	(0.165)	0.792
p25 displaced	–9.154	0.000001	0.043	(0.164)	0.794
p50 displaced	–8.528	0.000019	0.037	(0.160)	0.816
p75 displaced	–6.565	0.000253	0.020	(0.149)	0.896
p90 displaced	–4.855	0.000561	0.004	(0.142)	0.977
p99 displaced	–3.212	0.019929	–0.011	(0.136)	0.936

Notes: ME = $\beta_1 + \beta_3 \times$ disp_log from column 6 of Table 1 (β_1 = –0.040, SE = 0.132; β_3 = –0.009, SE = 0.011). Delta-method standard errors. Percentiles computed over 156 observations with positive displacement. Note that disp_log is negative by construction (log of a fraction ≤ 1), so large displacement in log terms corresponds to values such as –9 to –3.
Source: Author's calculations.

At zero displacement (the majority of the sample), the marginal effect equals the main coefficient on migration prospects (–0.040), which is not statistically distinguishable from zero (SE = 0.132). Among displaced countries, the marginal effect becomes positive and increasing in magnitude as displacement rises, which is a pattern that reflects the sign of disp_log: since disp_log is negative by construction (it is the log of a fraction), a negative β_3 interacts with negative displacement values to produce increasingly positive marginal effects at higher displacement levels on the log scale. This is an artifact of the log transformation of the displacement variable; interpreting the marginal effect in per-capita levels (Table 5, column 3) confirms that the raw displacement values are very small, and the economic importance of this gradient is limited.

The quartile analysis in Table 3 provides a more transparent non-parametric summary that is not affected by the log transformation: the migration-prospect effect is positive and significant in low-displacement environments and negative (though imprecise) in the highest-displacement quartile. This pattern, combined with the consistently negative interaction coefficient, supports the conclusion that the capacity-constraint mechanism operates in the expected direction.

Interpretation

The results present a nuanced picture. In within-country estimates, the migration-prospect coefficient is not significant, reflecting the limited time variation in the Bartik index after absorbing country fixed effects. This is an inherent limitation of the current data configuration: the index is computed for only three benchmark years, and interpolated values in 1985 and 1995 may not capture genuine year-to-year shifts in migration opportunities. The quartile analysis, which exploits cross-sectional variation in displacement intensity, provides stronger and more interpretable evidence: migration prospects are significantly positive in low-displacement environments (Q1: 0.456***, Q2: 0.244*) and negative in the highest-displacement quartile (–0.127). This pattern is consistent with the capacity-constraint hypothesis and robust to controlling for country-level economic variables.

The consistently negative sign of the interaction coefficient across all specifications, and its marginal significance in the displaced-country subsample ($p = 0.066$), provides qualified directional support for the central hypothesis: that conflict-induced displacement attenuates the positive incentive effect of migration prospects on human capital accumulation. The displacement main effect is also consistently negative, consistent with a direct adverse effect of forced displacement on educational outcomes. The economic controls perform as expected: higher initial income is associated with faster tertiary attainment growth, and higher population growth is associated with slower growth, both consistent with conditional convergence in the Solow-Barro framework.

2.3.6 Conclusions

This paper examines whether migration prospects have differential effects on human capital accumulation depending on the intensity of conflict-induced displacement, using a country-level panel of 99 countries covering the period 1985–2005. The empirical framework combines a destination-driven Bartik shift-share migration-prospect index with UNHCR-based displacement measures, estimated using two-way fixed-effects methods with economic controls drawn from the World Bank WDI.

Three principal findings emerge. First, within-country estimates of migration prospects on tertiary attainment are negative and insignificant, reflecting the limited time variation in the Bartik index after absorbing country fixed effects. This is a data limitation that would be addressed in future work by extending the Bartik index to more benchmark years or exploiting additional sources of identification. Second, the quartile analysis

provides clear non-parametric evidence: migration prospects are significantly positive in low-displacement environments and turn negative in the highest-displacement quartile, consistent with the brain gain being attenuated as displacement intensity rises. Third, the interaction between migration prospects and displacement is negative in all specifications, reaching marginal significance in the displaced-country subsample, supporting the capacity-constraint mechanism whereby displacement erodes the institutional conditions required to translate migration incentives into educational outcomes.

These results are consistent with the theoretical framework of Beine et al. (2006a) extended to allow for conflict-induced institutional disruption. Migration prospects may be a genuine stimulus to educational investment, but this stimulus can only be realised when education systems retain the capacity to deliver schooling. Conflict and displacement erode that capacity through multiple channels, such as destruction of facilities, displacement of teachers, administrative fragmentation, and reduced public financing, thereby attenuating or reversing the incentive channel.

The findings have several policy-relevant implications. First, migration opportunities alone do not guarantee human capital gains in origin countries, particularly in conflict-affected settings. Second, education system resilience during crises is a critical enabling condition for positive migration-human capital linkages; investments in protecting teacher supply, maintaining school infrastructure, and sustaining education financing may have high long-term development returns. Third, policies linking migration governance with education-system strengthening are likely to be most effective in fragile contexts.

The analysis faces several important limitations. The IV collapses to OLS in the current dataset because the predicted migration index is identical to the actual index. True IV estimates, which would correct for attenuation bias from measurement error, are expected to be larger in magnitude. The displacement variable systematically understates true displacement intensity because it captures only internationally registered refugee flows, excluding IDPs who typically outnumber refugees. The sample covers 99 countries with matched Bartik data over five periods; the 35 unmatched countries are systematically more fragile, implying the results represent a lower bound on the attenuation effect at extreme displacement levels. Extending the analysis to use combined UNHCR and IDMC forced displacement measures, and to include more benchmark years for the Bartik index, constitute the most important directions for future work.

Annex: Description of variables

Variable name	Description and construction	Source	Units	Period
A. Dependent variables — human capital outcomes				
d_ter_att	**Δ Tertiary attainment.** Five-year change in the share of adults aged 25+ with at least tertiary education. First-differenced to remove time-invariant country effects. Primary dependent variable in all main specifications.	Barro & Lee (2013)	pp change	1985–2005
d_sec_att	**Δ Secondary attainment.** Five-year change in the share of adults aged 25+ with at least secondary education. Alternative dependent variable used in Table 2 heterogeneity analysis.	Barro & Lee (2013)	pp change	1985–2005
d_yrs_school	**Δ Avg. years of schooling.** Five-year change in mean years of schooling for adults aged 25+. Third alternative dependent variable; captures broad human capital accumulation rather than attainment thresholds.	Barro & Lee (2013)	Years	1985–2005
B. Key regressors — migration prospects and displacement				
L_mig_pros	**Migration prospects index (lagged).** Bartik shift-share index of migration prospects, lagged one five-year period. Formally: MigProsit = Σj sij(1980) × ΔlnEmpjt, where sij(1980) is the share of country i's emigrants residing in destination j in the fixed base year 1980, and ΔlnEmpjt is OECD destination j's employment growth in period t. The 1980 diaspora shares are held fixed so the index varies only with destination-side labour demand. Directly observed for benchmark years 1980, 1990 and 2000; linearly interpolated for 1985 and 1995. Available for 99 matched countries; limits the regression sample to 1985–2005.	Docquier & Marfouk (2006); OECD STAN (employment shifter)	Index	1985–2005

Variable name	Description and construction	Source	Units	Period
disp_log	**Displacement intensity (log).** Natural log of UNHCR annual refugee outflows from origin country i, normalised by WDI domestic population, averaged over the five-year interval, and trimmed at the 99th percentile to limit sensitivity to genocide-year outliers (e.g. Rwanda 1994). Set to zero for the 68% of observations with no registered displacement. Since disp_log ≤ 0 throughout (log of a fraction), more negative values indicate greater forced displacement.	UNHCR Population Statistics; World Bank WDI (population denominator)	log(ratio)	1985–2005
disp_percap	**Displacement (per capita).** UNHCR annual refugee outflows per capita (level form), trimmed at the 99th percentile. Used in robustness checks as an alternative, untransformed displacement measure. Zero when no displacement is registered.	UNHCR / WDI	Ratio	1985–2005
disp_x_Lmig	**MigPros × Displacement.** Product of the lagged migration prospects index (L_mig_pros) and log displacement (disp_log). The central interaction term in the baseline model. β_3 captures whether the marginal effect of migration incentives on human capital accumulation varies with displacement intensity. A negative β_3 implies attenuation: greater displacement reduces (or reverses) the positive brain-gain effect of migration prospects.	Constructed	Index×log	1985–2005
C. Conflict controls				
conflict_intensity	**Conflict intensity.** Natural log of total UCDP battle-related deaths plus one: ln(battle_deaths + 1), summed over the five-year period. Zero for countries with no recorded combat deaths. Captures the direct, capacity-destruction effect of armed conflict on education systems, independently of the displacement channel. Included in all specifications.	UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v.22.1; Davies et al. (2025)	log(deaths+1)	1985–2005

Variable name	Description and construction	Source	Units	Period
conflict_dummy	**Conflict dummy.** Binary indicator equal to 1 if UCDP battle-related deaths exceed 25 in the five-year period; 0 otherwise. Follows the UCDP definition of minor armed conflict. Used as an alternative conflict control in robustness specification 3 (Table 4), replacing conflict intensity.	UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v.22.1	0 / 1	1985–2005
D. Economic controls (World Bank WDI, all lagged one five-year period)				
L_gdp_pc_log	**Log GDP per capita (lagged).** Natural log of GDP per capita in constant 2015 USD, lagged one five-year period. Controls for initial income level and its positive association with both education expenditure and migration selectivity. Directly observed from WDI for 1990 and 2000; linearly interpolated for 1985 and 1995; forward-extrapolated for 2005 using the 1990–2000 trend. WDI series: NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.	World Bank WDI (2023)	log(USD)	1985–2005
pop_growth	**Population growth (lagged).** Annual rate of population growth (%), averaged over the five-year period and lagged one period. Controls for demographic pressure that dilutes education attainment shares. Directly observed for 1990 and 2000; interpolated for intermediate years. Winsorised at [−10, †20] to remove artefacts from extrapolation. WDI series: SP.POP.GROW.	World Bank WDI (2023)	% p.a.	1985–2005
urban_share	**Urban population share (lagged).** Urban population as a percentage of total population, lagged one period. Controls for the positive correlation between urbanisation and access to tertiary institutions. Derived as 100 minus rural population share. Directly observed for 1990 and 2000; interpolated for intermediate years; bounded to [0, 100] after interpolation. WDI series: SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS (derived).	World Bank WDI (2023)	%	1985–2005

Variable name	Description and construction	Source	Units	Period
remit_gdp	**Remittances, % GDP (lagged).** Personal remittances received as a share of GDP, lagged one period. Controls for the remittance channel through which emigration may directly raise household income and finance education, thereby isolating the pure incentive effect of migration prospects. Directly observed for 1990 and 2000; interpolated for intermediate years. For 9 countries with no WDI coverage (AFG, BDI, CUB, IRQ, KWT, LBR, SAU, TJK, URY), the regional period median is substituted. WDI series: BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS.	World Bank WDI (2023)	% of GDP	1985–2005
E. Sample and identification flags				
sample_ter	**Main sample flag.** Binary flag equal to 1 for the 495 country-period observations in the main tertiary-attainment regression sample: 99 countries × 5 periods (1985–2005). Conditions: matched to the Bartik workbook, non-missing d_ter_att and L_mig_pros, and period ∈ {1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005}. Analogous flags sample_sec and sample_yrs cover secondary attainment and average years of schooling.	Constructed	0 / 1	1985–2005
sample_ter_obslag	**Observed-lag sample.** Binary flag equal to 1 for the 297 observations where the lagged migration index is drawn directly from an observed Bartik benchmark year (1980, 1990, or 2000) rather than an interpolated value. Covers periods 1985, 1995, and 2005. Reduces to approximately 290 observations after controls availability. Used in column 7 of Table 1 and robustness specification 2 of Table 4.	Constructed	0 / 1	1985, 1995, 2005

Variable name	Description and construction	Source	Units	Period
match_ quality	**Bartik match quality.** Categorical variable recording the quality of the country match between the Barro-Lee panel and the Docquier-Marfouk bilateral emigrant stock data used to construct the Bartik index. 'High': relative difference in 1980 migrant count ≤ 1% (355 observations). 'Medium': ≤ 5% (140 observations). 35 Barro-Lee countries are unmatched and excluded from all regression samples. A high-quality subsample is used in robustness specification 4 of Table 4.	Constructed (Docquier & Marfouk, 2006 matching)	Cat.	1985–2005

References

Angrist and Pischke, 2009. *Mostly Harmless Econometrics: An Empiricist's Companion*, Princeton University Press

Baum, CF and Schaffer ME 2007. Enhanced routines for instrumental variables/GMM estimation and testing, *Boston College Economics Working Paper* No 667

Beine, M, Defoort, C and Docquier F 2005. Skilled migration, human capital inequality and convergence, *Manuscript*, Universitè Catholique de Louvain-La-Neuve.

Beine, M, Docquier, F and Rapoport H 2001. Brain drain and economic growth: theory and evidence, *Journal of Development Economics*, 64, pp. 275–289

Beine, M, Docquier, F and Rapoport H 2006a. Brain drain and LDCs' growth: winners and losers, *Manuscript*, Universitè Catholique de Louvain-La-Neuve

Beine, M, Docquier, F and Rapoport H 2006b. Measuring International Skilled Migration: New Estimates Controlling for Age of Entry, *World Bank International Migration and Development Program*, Working paper

Beine, M, Docquier, F and Rapoport H 2009. On the Robustness of Brain Gain Estimates, *IZA Discussion Paper* 4293

Bhagwati, J. and Hamada, K. 1974. The brain drain, international integration of markets for professionals and unemployment: A theoretical analysis, *Journal of Development Economics,* Elsevier, vol. 1(1), pages 19–42.

Bhagwati, J 1976. Taxing the Brain Drain. *Challenge*, 19(3), 34–38

Davidson. R. and McKinnon, J.G. 1993. *Estimation and Inference in Econometrics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993

Carrington, W and Detragiache, E 1998. How Big is the Brain Drain?, *IMF Working Papers* 98/102

Chamarbagwala, R. and Morán, H. E. 2011. The human capital consequences of civil war: Evidence from Guatemala. Journal of Development Economics, 94(1), pp. 41–61.

Davies, S., Pettersson, T., Sollenberg, M. and Öberg, M. 2025. Organized violence 1989–2024 and the challenges of identifying civilian victims. Journal of Peace Research, 62(4).

Docquier, F and Marfouk, A 2006. International migration by educational attainment, 1990–2000, in C. Ozden and M. Schiff (eds.) International migration, brain drain and remittances, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

Faini, R 2003. Is the Brain Drain an Unmitigated Blessing, WIDER Discussion Paper, No 2003/64

Goldsmith-Pinkham, P., Sorkin, I. and Swift, H. 2020. Bartik instruments: What, when, why, and how. American Economic Review, 110(8), pp. 2586–2624.

Groizard, JL and Llull, J 2007. Brain drain and Human Capital Formation in Developing Countries. Are there Really Winners?, *DEA Working Papers*, No 28

Justino, P. 2011. Poverty and violent conflict: A micro-level perspective on the causes and duration of warfare. Journal of Peace Research, 46(3), pp. 315–333.

Mountford, A 1997. Can a brain drain be good for growth in the source economy?, *Journal of Development Economic*, 53 (2), pp. 287–303

Oruc, N 2009. Self-Selection in Conflict-Induced Migration: Micro Evidence from Bosnia, *wiiw Balkan Observatory Working paper*, No 78

Oruc, N., Jackson, I. and Pugh, G. (2018) Are forced migrants more skilled? A theoretical model of self-selection in conflict-induced migration. Southeastern Europe 43: 233-256.

Schiff, M 2005. Brain Gain: Claims about Its Size and Impact on Welfare and Growth Are Greatly Exaggerated, *IZA Discussion Paper*, No 1599

Shemyakina, O. 2011. The effect of armed conflict on accumulation of schooling: Results from Tajikistan. Journal of Development Economics, 95(2), pp. 186–200.

Stark, Oded & Wang, Yong, 2002. Inducing human capital formation: migration as a substitute for subsidies, *Journal of Public Economics*, Elsevier, vol. 86(1), pages 29–46.

Stark, O 2004a. On the Economics of Refugee Flows, Review of Development Economics, 82., 325–329

Stark, O 2004b. Rethinking the Brain Drain, *World Development*. 32 (1), pp. 15–22

Stark, O, Helmenstein, C and Prskawetz, A 1998. Human Capital Depletion, Human Capital Formation, and Migration: A Blessing or a 'Curse'?, *Economic Letters*, 60, pp. 363–367

Stock, JH and Yogo, M 2002. Testing for Weak Instruments in Linear IV Regression, *NBER Technical Working Papers*, No 0284

Vidal, JP 1998. The effect of emigration on human capital formation, *Journal of Population Economics*, 11, pp. 589–600

World Bank. 2023. World Development Indicators. World Bank Group, Washington DC.

CHAPTER 3: HUMAN CAPITAL IN CIRCULATION – RETURN MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

3.1 From brain drain to brain return? Reintegration pathways and skills utilisation among qualified Albanian return migrants

Bresena Kopliku and Erka Çaro

Abstract

This paper explores the reintegration trajectories and skills utilization patterns of highly skilled Albanian return migrants from more developed countries. Drawing on qualitative methodology through 15 in-depth interviews, the study examines how returnees mobilise transnational social capital upon return, and how institutional and sectoral contexts shape differentiated outcomes. Positioned within the migration–development nexus, the study engages the concepts of brain drain, brain gain, brain waste, and brain circulation to move beyond binary assessments of return as either loss or gain. The analysis shows that skills utilisation outcomes vary significantly by sector and qualification level, with digital professionals and entrepreneurs facing fewer institutional constraints than academics, cultural and civic workers. By specifying the concrete institutional mechanisms that shape reintegration outcomes as the presence of effective skills recognition mechanisms, transparent recruitment systems, coordinated return governance, and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems, the study provides a deeper understanding of the conditions under which return migration contributes to development beyond remittances. The paper concludes with targeted policy recommendations, including merit-based recruitment procedures, improved credential recognition, structured diaspora engagement platforms, and coordinated mechanisms to support returnee entrepreneurship and transnational engagement.

Keywords: Return migration, brain drain, brain gain, transnationalism, reintegration, Albania, diaspora

Introduction

Over the past three decades, Albania has experienced profound and evolving migration dynamics. Large-scale emigration following the post-socialist transition was initially driven by economic insecurity, unemployment and political instability. More recently, however, migration patterns have become increasingly selective, involving students, highly educated professionals and skilled workers seeking advanced training and

employment opportunities abroad (Dhembo et al., 2021). These shifts have intensified concerns about skills loss and human capital depletion, while simultaneously raising policy interest in return migration and the potential for skills transfer, reintegration, and knowledge circulation. In this context, Albania is no longer viewed solely as a country of emigration, but also as a country facing emerging challenges and opportunities related to return, reintegration and the utilisation of skills acquired abroad (Gedeshi and King, 2019). A particularly significant dimension of this shift concerns the return of highly skilled migrants who have obtained advanced academic qualifications or professional experience abroad. Their reintegration trajectories and the extent to which they are able to transfer and utilise their acquired skills in their home country raise pressing questions regarding the capacity of the Albanian state and labour market to transform 'brain drain' into 'brain gain'. Albania is among the countries with the highest rates of qualified migrants in the last decade. The share of tertiary-educated people who have migrated stands at 31.3%, while the Albanian scientific diaspora (defined as PhD holders and students working abroad) is estimated to be around 2 500 individuals, representing approximately 40% of all Albanians with PhD (Gedeshi and King, 2019). Currently, more than 11 000 Albanian students are studying abroad[4], while more than 90% of them refuse to return to Albania[5]. This broader Albanian diaspora – particularly its scientific and entrepreneurial segments – holds considerable potential as a reservoir of transnational knowledge, investment and professional networks (Barjaba and Barjaba, 2015). The Albanian government, alongside international development partners, has increasingly emphasised the developmental potential of return migration – particularly the return of highly skilled individuals – as part of broader strategies for national modernisation, innovation and economic renewal. This has included policy efforts to attract back members of the scientific diaspora, incentivise returnee entrepreneurship, and build institutional pathways for knowledge transfer (Republika e Shqipërisë, Këshilli i Ministrave, 2020).

Returnees themselves are increasingly diverse in terms of motivation, skills, sectoral background and type of return (Cassarino, 2004; Kopliku and Çaro, 2022)the growing diversity of migratory categories (ranging from economic migrants to refugees and asylum seekers. While some return permanently with the aim of investing in business or engaging in civic initiatives, others operate transnationally – working remotely for foreign employers while living in Albania – or cycle in and out of the country. These new forms of return challenge conventional understandings of reintegration and raise questions about how best to support and harness returnees' potential. Despite increasing policy attention to return migration and diaspora engagement in Albania, the empirical evidence of how highly skilled returnees reintegrate and utilise their skills remains limited (Tataj and Akbaş, 2025). Existing research has primarily examined aggregate migration trends, remittance flows, or the socio-economic profiles of returnees, with less focus on the micro-level processes through which qualifications, professional experience and transnational networks are mobilised – or constrained – upon return. In particular, there is insufficient qualitative evidence of how institutional environments, skills recognition mechanisms and labour market structures shape differentiated outcomes for highly educated return

[4] https://studycarefairs.net/market-report/albania-study-abroad-market/.
[5] https://albaniandailynews.com/news/94-of-albanian-students-abroad-don-t-want-to-return-1.

migrants. This gap limits our understanding of when and under what conditions return migration contributes to development beyond financial transfers, and when it risks resulting in skills underutilisation or brain waste.

Against this background, this study examines the complex interplay between brain drain, brain gain, brain waste, brain circulation and transnationalism in the context of high-skilled Albanian return migration from developed countries. It does so by exploring the reintegration trajectories, skill utilisation patterns and institutional experiences of returnees through qualitative interviews. By focusing on their motivations, barriers and contributions, the study aims to provide evidence of the enabling and constraining factors shaping return outcomes. The analysis further explores how transnational experiences and networks shape return intentions and post-return trajectories, thereby contributing to the evolving conceptualisation of migration as a cyclical or circulatory phenomenon rather than a unidirectional movement.

Anchored into Albania's shifting economic landscape and ongoing European integration agenda, this inquiry focuses empirically on skilled returnees who have studied abroad, and highly qualified professionals who have migrated after finishing university in Albania. The paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the professional characteristics of skilled Albanian returnees, and what factors motivate their return?
2. What institutional, economic and social barriers do returnees encounter upon reintegration?
3. What policy interventions may enhance the contribution of qualified returnees to national and local development?

Section 2 of this paper presents the theoretical and conceptual framework underpinning the study, drawing from literature on the migration-development nexus and scholarship on brain circulation. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, followed by an analytical discussion in Section 5. Section 6 concludes with policy recommendations and reflections on the implications for migration governance and skills strategies in transition economies such as Albania.

Theoretical framework and literature review

This study is situated within the migration-development nexus and draws on the concepts of brain drain, brain gain, brain waste, brain circulation and transnationalism to analyse the reintegration trajectories of highly skilled Albanian return migrants. Rather than treating these concepts as competing narratives, the analysis uses them as complementary lenses to examine how skills acquired abroad are mobilised, constrained or reconfigured upon return. Particular attention is paid to transnational practices and institutional conditions that shape post-return outcomes (Faist and Fauser, 2011; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998). The Albanian case is situated within the broader regional context of the Western Balkans, a region marked by significant outmigration, high levels of tertiary-educated emigration, and ongoing challenges in reintegrating returnees into

national labour markets and knowledge systems. In doing so, the analysis also engages with transnational and institutional perspectives that highlight the structural conditions affecting return migrants' capacity to contribute to development.

From brain drain to brain circulation: conceptual debates in the migration-development nexus

Brain drain has been central to debates on the developmental consequences of migration. The concept of brain drain traditionally refers to the emigration of highly skilled individuals from lower-income economies to more developed ones (Giannoccolo, 2009). In policy and academic debates, it has been associated with concerns about the loss of publicly invested human capital, reduced innovation capacity, and weakened institutional performance in countries of origin (Docquier and Rapoport, 2012; King and Oruc, 2019; UNDP, 2006). A related concept, brain waste, captures situations in which highly skilled migrants or returnees are unable to fully utilise their qualifications due to labour market mismatch, non-recognition of credentials, or institutional barriers. However, the developmental implications of skilled migration are not uniformly negative. In response to the perceived costs of brain drain, the concept of brain gain has gained traction. The concept of brain gain suggests that migration may generate positive effects when migrants acquire advanced skills, professional experience and international networks that can later be transferred to their countries of origin (Olesen, 2002). Such gains may occur through permanent return, temporary mobility or sustained transnational engagement (Docquier and Rapoport, 2012). More recent scholarship has moved beyond the binary opposition between brain drain and brain gain by introducing the concept of brain circulation. Rather than a binary model of departure or return, brain circulation posits a fluid, iterative movement of skills, ideas and capital across borders, facilitated by modern transport, communication technologies and diasporic networks (Saxenian, 2005). Return is therefore not necessarily permanent or linear; rather, migrants may maintain ongoing economic, social and professional ties across borders. In addition, transnationalism provides an analytical framework for understanding these sustained cross-border engagements (Faist and Fauser, 2011; Levitt and de la Dehesa, 2003). Highly skilled migrants may contribute to their countries of origin through research collaboration, mentoring, investment, remote employment, or temporary assignments without fully relocating. Such practices complicate conventional understandings of reintegration and challenge policy frameworks that equate development contribution exclusively with permanent return. Brain circulation and transnational engagement are, however, shaped by structural constraints. As Cassarino (2004) argues, the developmental effects of return migration – whether physical or virtual – depend largely on the institutional capacity and policy environment of the country of origin. Reintegration outcomes depend not only on returnees' individual agency, but also on enabling environments such as skills recognition systems, inclusive governance, access to finance, and policy coherence (Kerpaci and Kuka, 2019). When these institutional conditions are weak or fragmented, returnees often encounter structural barriers that limit the effective use of the skills, knowledge and networks they have acquired abroad. As a result, many rely on personal initiative, informal

networks and transnational connections to navigate reintegration challenges and create opportunities. These patterns align with 'transnationalism from below' frameworks (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998) and 'making-do' strategies (Fathi and Ní Laoire, 2024b), whereby individuals compensate for weak institutional scaffolding through self-reliance. These dynamics are particularly visible in the Western Balkans.

Brain gain, transnationalism and regional perspectives

The reintegration of highly skilled returnees can be understood as a cross-sectoral governance challenge involving labour market regulation, higher education systems, diaspora engagement policies and economic development strategies. This is particularly evident in Western Balkan states, where fragmented coordination between ministries, weak data systems, and ad hoc migration policies often undermine long-term planning (ETF, 2022). Countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania exhibit some of the highest emigration rates of tertiary-educated individuals in Europe (World Bank Group, 2020). Such high levels of emigration have strained critical sectors – including healthcare, education and public administration – and contributed to long-term demographic imbalances, including ageing populations and declining workforce size (Breznik et al., 2025; ETF, 2022).

In response to the perceived costs of brain drain, several Western Balkan countries have introduced diaspora engagement strategies aimed at facilitating knowledge transfer. These initiatives highlight the relevance of the transnationalism paradigm, which conceptualises migrants as maintaining active ties across borders and contributing to development through a range of non-territorial engagements (Levitt and de la Dehesa, 2003).Evidence from the Western Balkans suggests growing interest in engaging diasporas transnationally through research collaboration, temporary teaching assignments and diaspora investment schemes. North Macedonia's strategic objectives emphasise the transfer of human capital through mechanisms such as 'talent return', 'talent circulation' and 'virtual return'. Montenegro, meanwhile, focuses on strengthening economic partnerships with its emigrant diaspora. These efforts include the Business Forum, which brings together successful businesspeople of Montenegrin origin to explore avenues for cooperation, particularly through 'matchmaking' activities that connect Montenegrin enterprises with diaspora investors (ECONDIAS, 2022). In Albania, similar trends have emerged. The READ[6] and GERMIN[7] programmes, supported respectively by the Albanian-American Development Fund and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and Albanian institutions, have enabled joint research and teaching between diaspora scholars and domestic universities, introducing a form of brain circulation that does not require permanent return.

However, brain circulation and transnational contributions are not without limitations. Empirical evidence from the region presents a mixed picture of the results of these policies. As (Cassarino, 2004) argues, the developmental potential of return migration

[6] https://www.readdiaspora.al/.
[7] https://www.giz.de/en/projects/experts-fund-migration-and-diaspora.

– whether physical or virtual – is highly contingent on the institutional readiness of countries of origin to maximise their returnees' contribution for development. Reintegration outcomes depend not only on returnees' individual agency, but also on enabling environments such as skills recognition systems, inclusive governance, access to finance, and policy coherence (Kerpaci and Kuka, 2019). This is particularly pertinent in Western Balkan states, where fragmented coordination between ministries, weak data systems, and ad hoc migration policies often undermine long-term planning (ETF, 2022). Across the region, returnees frequently encounter underemployment, non-meritocratic recruitment processes, and limited access to innovation ecosystems. Studies from Serbia and Kosovo have documented instances of returnees abandoning reintegration and re-emigrating within a few years due to unmet expectations and professional stagnation (ETF, 2022). For instance, in Serbia, returning medical professionals have often faced difficulties reintegrating due to institutional inertia and non-recognition of foreign credentials (Krstic and Sanfey, 2007). Similarly, in Kosovo, returnee entrepreneurs have reported challenges in accessing credit and navigating bureaucratic environments (King and Gedeshi, 2024). In Albania, as in neighbouring countries, such barriers are exacerbated by entrenched informality, political patronage and fragmented institutional coordination (King and Oruc, 2019; Kopliku, 2016). As Hausmann and Nedelkoska (2018) note in their study of Albanian returnees, while returnees often possess greater human and financial capital than non-migrants, their integration into productive sectors is often blocked by institutional constraints.

Return migration as a 'wicked problem'

The reintegration of highly skilled returnees is increasingly conceptualised as a 'wicked problem' (Logue, 2009) – a multifaceted challenge involving multiple players, overlapping policy domains and competing objectives. For instance, while labour ministries may prioritise labour market absorption, diaspora agencies may focus on engagement abroad, and higher education institutions may operate independently from migration planning altogether. In the Western Balkans, these institutional silos contribute to reactive and fragmented approaches to return migration. Moreover, political economy factors – such as patronage networks, limited administrative capacity, and resistance to meritocratic reform – further constrain reintegration (King and Oruc, 2019). In such contexts, returnees often face disillusionment, particularly when they are unable to translate their foreign-acquired qualifications and experience into meaningful roles at home.

Thus, the developmental potential of return migration remains conditional. While skilled returnees can be powerful agents of change – injecting new norms, technologies and capital into home societies – the extent to which they are able to do so depends on structural receptiveness. Effective reintegration policies must therefore go beyond rhetorical commitments to brain gain and address deeper institutional reforms, including skills recognition, anti-corruption measures, diaspora engagement platforms and inclusive governance.

Albania in the brain drain-circulation continuum

The relationship between brain drain, brain gain and development is particularly complex in the Albanian context because of its high emigration rates and the dynamic characteristics of migration typologies. In Albania, this concern is especially acute (Gedeshi and King, 2019).

Key professional sectors – such as healthcare, academia, IT and public administration – have experienced talent depletion, leading to weakened service quality and institutional erosion (King and Gedeshi, 2023; Ramallari and Velaj, 2023). Moreover, many skilled Albanians employed abroad experience underemployment, contributing to 'brain waste'.

The policy discourse addressing return migration began especially at the beginning of the new millennium in Albania, because return migration, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis, marked a turning point. Between 2008 and 2013, an estimated 134 000 working-age Albanians returned, creating new discussions around the potential for reintegration and capital transfer (Gedeshi and Xhaferaj, 2016; INSTAT, 2013). The majority of the returnees were economic migrants returning from Greece and Italy because of the consequences of the economic crisis (Gedeshi and Xhaferaj, 2016; Hausmann and Nedelkoska, 2018). In addition to this group of returnees, there were migrants who had completed their migration cycle and decided to return and live in Albania after two decades of ongoing out-migration. Policy and academic discourse shifted towards the 'brain gain' and 'brain circulation' models, emphasising the developmental potential of returnees and the broader diaspora (Logue, 2009). Skilled returnees were now seen as potential drivers of development through the infusion of remittances, entrepreneurial activity, and the application of skills and technologies acquired abroad (Hausmann and Nedelkoska, 2018; King and Oruc, 2019; Kopliku and Caro, 2022).

However, the actual outcomes remain uneven. While remittances continue to exceed both foreign direct investment and official development aid, structural barriers – such as an informal labour market, weak institutions and limited support systems – hinder the realisation of widespread brain gain. Most reintegration support policies target involuntary returnees, who are often low-skilled and face labour market exclusion (Kopliku and Caro, 2022). Among the highly qualified diaspora, permanent return remains rare: only 17.1% of surveyed PhD holders express a desire to return, while 33.2% reject the idea entirely (King and Gedeshi, 2023). Key barriers include job insecurity, bureaucratic inefficiency, weak public services and limited professional opportunities.

To move beyond the dichotomy of permanent return (brain gain) versus emigration loss (brain drain), scholars increasingly advocate a transnational lens. Transnationalism frames migration as an ongoing, multidirectional process in which individuals maintain social, economic and professional ties across borders (Christou and Yeoh, 2022; Faist and Fauser, 2011; Saxenian, 2005). This perspective is particularly relevant in Albania, where many highly skilled migrants live between worlds – working remotely, investing in local projects, or mentoring from abroad – without necessarily resettling permanently (Gedeshi and King, 2019; King and Gedeshi, 2023; Tataj and Akbaş, 2025). It also provides a conceptual basis for reframing diaspora engagement policies to better reflect the realities of contemporary global mobility.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the reintegration trajectories and skills utilisation patterns of highly skilled Albanian return migrants. Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the complexity of individual migration experiences and decision-making, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to capture the depth and nuance of returnees' motivations, constraints and transnational engagements (Bryman, 2016; Cassarino, 2004).

Research design and sampling

The empirical component of the study is based on in-depth interviews conducted with a purposive sample of 15 return migrants who had acquired higher education or substantial professional experience either in Albania or abroad prior to returning to Albania. The interviewees were identified based on the following inclusion criteria: possession of at least a tertiary-level qualification; a minimum of three consecutive years spent abroad for study or professional employment; return to Albania within the past 10 years and engagement in the professional, entrepreneurial, academic, civic or digital sectors upon return. The participants were identified through a combination of professional networks, diaspora engagement initiatives and snowball sampling. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, employment sector (e.g., education, digital work, entrepreneurship, civil society) and type of return (permanent, circular or transnational). Six of the interviewees were female, while only two were under 30 years old, which reflects the predominance of mid-career professionals among highly skilled return migrants in the sample. The in-depth interview guide was drawn up following the questions, which were organised into four thematic blocks: migration trajectory and motivations for departure and return; skills acquisition and professional experience abroad; re-integration experiences, including labour market entry and institutional interaction; and transnational engagement, current professional positioning and future mobility intentions. The interviews were conducted between January and April 2024, either in person (in Tirana and Shkodra) or via secure online platforms, depending on the participants' availability and location. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in Albanian, recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. All data was anonymised, and pseudonyms are used throughout the analysis (Silverman, 2019).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was applied following an inductive-deductive coding approach. Initial codes were informed by the conceptual framework (e.g. brain circulation, institutional barriers, skills utilisation), while additional themes emerged from the data through several readings (Levitt and de la Dehesa, 2003). Key themes included motivations for return, forms of capital mobilised (human, social, financial), challenges in labour market reintegration, digital transnationalism, and ambivalent or circular return patterns.

The analysis aimed not only to identify recurring patterns across narratives, but also to highlight outliers and contradictions that reflect the diversity of returnee experiences. Attention was paid to both structural factors (e.g. policy environment, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency) and subjective interpretations (e.g. belonging, frustration, aspirations) in shaping reintegration outcomes (Hausmann and Nedelkoska, 2018; Kopliku and Çaro, 2022). Analytical saturation was reached after approximately 12 interviews, as subsequent interviews did not generate substantively new themes but rather reinforced already identified patterns. The final interviews served to confirm thematic consistency and refine cross-sectoral comparisons.

Limitations

As a qualitative study, the findings are not statistically generalisable to the entire population of Albanian return migrants. The sample is intentionally skewed towards highly educated individuals with at least some degree of professional success, and thus may not reflect the experiences of involuntary or less-skilled returnees. Moreover, as the sample was obtained through personal networks and snowballing, it may be subject to selection bias.

Nevertheless, the study offers rich, contextually grounded insights into the mechanisms of brain gain and brain waste in the Albanian case, and contributes to a growing body of empirical research on skilled return migration in the Western Balkans (ETF, 2022).

Table 12. List of interviewees

Nr.	Interviewee	Gender	Age	Country returned from	Duration abroad (years)	Current occupation
1	Buna	F	55	USA	20	Entrepreneur
2	Ana	F	42	Norway	5	Teacher
3	Ari	M	56	Italy	27	Artist
4	Gysi	M	44	Italy	6	Freelance, IT
5	Andi	M	46	Austria	35	Entrepreneur, IT
6	Amarildo	M	38	Germany	5	Freelance, IT
7	Ardi	M	50	Italy	20	Social entrepreneur
8	Arben	M	54	Belgium	25	Entrepreneur, SME
9	Denisa	F	28	Netherlands	8	Civic engagement
10	Ida	F	46	UK	30	Writer
11	Edi	M	26	Austria	8	IT
12	Iliri	M	48	Italy	28	Entrepreneur
13	Sidita	F	45	UK	15	Researcher
14	Orges	M	42	Switzerland, Denmark	16	Researcher
15	Melisa	F	55	Italy	25	Artist

Source: Author's interviews.

Return pathways, reintegration and skill utilisation

Return motivations among the interviewed highly skilled returnees are multifaceted, reflecting emotional, existential and strategic considerations (Kopliku and Çaro, 2022). The interview evidence suggests that return decisions are structured around identity and belonging, mission-oriented contribution, and the deliberate mobilisation of skills and capital accumulated abroad, aligning with brain circulation frameworks that conceptualise return as part of an ongoing mobility trajectory rather than a definitive endpoint.

Motivations for return: identity, purpose and strategic planning

For many of the interviewed returnees, particularly those in mid-career stages with accumulated professional capital, return formed part of a broader mobility trajectory rather than a rupture from migration. Consistent with brain circulation dynamics, motivations extended beyond economic considerations and are anchored in identity, belonging, and a desire to re-engage with their country of origin. 9 of the 15 interviewees referred explicitly to attachment to place and community as central to their decision to return. Buna (55, F, entrepreneur), stated emphatically in an interview, '*I believe that Shkodra, the city where I was born, is what made me*.' She articulated feeling truly 'at home' in Albania, asking rhetorically: '*Where do you feel at home? Where do you say, "my home"? This place here*.' From the same perspective, Arben (54, M, entrepreneur) explained that return allowed him to live '*in a community where I feel I belong*.'

Echoing prior findings (Gedeshi and King, 2019), the interviewees linked their return to a desire to mobilise foreign-acquired skills in sectors such as entrepreneurship, education, research and healthcare, framing return as a form of purposeful engagement rather than purely economic repositioning. Ardi (50, M, social entrepreneur) spoke of his current work: '*I live between Belgium and Albania. I'm working on establishing a museum and a cultural heritage centre in my village of origin …*'.

Experiences of discrimination or cultural dissonance abroad also informed return decisions. Edi (26, M, IT) described experiences of cultural misalignment and unequal treatment in Austria, considering return both an escape and a strategic step towards social reintegration and improved status in Albania. '*It was often challenging to adapt to the cultural norms there [Austria]. For example, what is considered helpful in Albania could sometimes be seen as intrusive there. We can say whatever, but I saw the differences in the treatment of EU and non-EU employees … Even finding an flat to rent …*'. These experiences of cultural and institutional marginalisation were closely associated with expectations of improved social and professional positioning upon return. Previous professional experiences, social networks and transnational engagements constitute strong capital to succeed in the home country. Strategically, many returnees used this capital to invest or reintegrate, considering return through the lens of the new economics of labour migration (NELM), where return marks the logical culmination of a cycle (Stark and Bloom, 1985). Several interviewees described return as a planned repositioning after accumulating capital abroad. Ilir (48, M, entrepreneur) explained that he returned during Italy's economic downturn to pursue investment opportunities in

Tirana. He noted that his immediate family continues to reside in Rome, resulting in a transnational household arrangement. Pre-return research and support from family and local networks played a role in smoothing re-entry: '*When I returned, my wife and daughter stayed in Rome, as our child was still young. They continue to live there, and we've adapted to a lifestyle between the two countries. I visit them frequently, and they also come here often*.'

Such cases illustrate life-course repositioning within a circulatory migration framework, rather than permanent settlement in a single national context. Return motivation cannot be reduced to a single driver, but it emerges from a dynamic interplay of emotional ties, existential purpose and calculated planning.

Hybrid return and transnational modalities

For a subset of highly skilled returnees, return did not imply full disengagement from host country labour markets, but instead part of a fluid, transnational life strategy. These individuals continue to maintain strong professional and social ties with their countries of emigration while physically residing in Albania. This form of return challenges traditional binaries and reinforces brain circulation theories (Cassarino, 2004; Christou and Yeoh, 2022). This approach is particularly evident among the highly skilled and highly mobile segments of the Albanian diaspora, such as those in the technology, business and consulting sectors, who leverage their financial and human capital. For these individuals, return often involves a relocation of their lifestyle base underpinned by flexible, global economic participation (Fathi and Ní Laoire, 2024a). This pattern of movement reflects strategic use of the migration cycle, often termed 'post-return transnationalism' or 'reverse transnationalism', where returnees maintain valuable networks and ties with their former host country (King and Christou, 2011).

Digital infrastructure and mobility enable this transnational lifestyle, while technology facilitates it. Digital work and frequent travel allow returnees to maintain global professional networks while enjoying familial proximity and lower costs in Albania. As Faist and Fauser (2011) argue, digital connectivity redefines social fields, supporting new configurations of engagement. Many participants point out the advantages of working remotely for international employers while enjoying family support and affordable living in Albania. Sidita (45, F, researcher), who now lives primarily in Albania, shared: "*I lead a life between two countries, Albania and England, but I live mostly in Albania. I never thought I would return, but now that I see my elderly parents and their need for support, I feel I must be near them*.'

The strategic relocation of one's lifestyle base is described as a calculated decision to improve well-being while maintaining access to global income streams. Returnees cited Albania's lower living costs, family networks, and emotional proximity as benefits. At the same time, many emphasised the flexibility and autonomy that remote work provides, both financially and professionally. As Amarildo (38, M, IT freelancer) put it, '*Being in Albania means I can own a home, avoid rent, and be close to my family while still earning like abroad*.' This group also expressed a desire to contribute beyond economic

activity. Their sense of purpose connected individual agency with national development goals. Many mentor local youth, collaborate with universities, or have already launched community initiatives. These forms of engagement underline the developmental potential of transnational returnees and highlight a growing need for inclusive policy frameworks that can recognise and support hybrid models of mobility. However, such models are especially concentrated among digitally mobile and internationally networked professionals, underscoring the demographically specific nature of the sample.

Institutional barriers and reintegration challenges

Despite strong motivations to contribute, most returnees encounter systemic barriers upon reintegration. Participants frequently criticise bureaucratic inefficiencies, a lack of meritocracy in hiring practices, and institutional resistance to innovation. These challenges are particularly pronounced in the public sector and academia, where returnees with international degrees often feel marginalised (Kopliku and Çaro, 2022; Trajani, 2021).

Participants described institutional processes as 'chaotic', 'hampering' and 'unwelcoming', particularly when attempting to establish new initiatives or enter public service. Ari (56, M, artist), who founded a non-profit focused on local development, remarked: 'It's very difficult to work with public institutions because of too much bureaucracy. Officials don't seem to enjoy their work and don't show interest in outside expertise.' In contrast, returnees working in entrepreneurship and the digital economy reported greater autonomy in skills application. Amarildo (38, M, IT freelancer) noted that online work enabled him to maintain international income levels while residing in Albania. Gysi (44, M, IT professional) emphasised the demands of the global market, which requires continuous professional upgrading. At the time the interviews were conducted, the Law on Freelancers had recently been amended and was widely viewed as having significant implications for middle-class professionals (Leka, 2023). We therefore asked one participant what kind of state support he considered necessary as a freelancer. His response was unequivocal: 'I do not feel the need for state intervention … It would be better if they simply left us as we are.'

Interpersonal reintegration also poses challenges. Some returnees struggled to adjust to informal professional cultures or encountered social resentment from colleagues. Buna (55, F, entrepreneur) noted that without strong ties or endorsements, '*it doesn't work.*' The feeling of being undervalued was common even among financially successful returnees, leading some to focus on indirect ways to contribute, such as community organising or diaspora advocacy.

Skill utilisation and development contributions

Skill utilisation outcomes are deeply uneven and differentiated by sector. Returnees involved in the digital economy or entrepreneurship found greater autonomy and impact. Where institutional alignment and market flexibility existed – particularly in the private and digital sectors – foreign-acquired skills ae effectively mobilised. In more rigid public-sector

environments, the risk of underutilisation increased. Amarildo (38, M, IT freelancer) said: '*The profit from online work is many times higher than local wages. It's the only way I can stay in Albania and thrive.*' Others emphasised that digital work incentivised continuous learning. Gysi (44, M, IT) explained: '*You are forced to constantly improve. The global market expects it, unlike local employers.*'

Entrepreneurs like Andi (46, M, IT entrepreneur) launched businesses registered abroad but operated from Albania, describing it as a 'win-win' model that bypassed domestic bureaucracy while providing jobs locally. Still, even among these cases, interviewees expressed concern that their efforts were not adequately recognised by public institutions.

Some respondents described a sense of being underutilised. Andi pointed out that while his employees in Albania were paid better than average, their salaries still lagged far behind peers in Austria. Amarildo (38, M, IT freelancer) noted that one reason why Albanians win freelance contracts is because they accept lower wages: '*Those who hire us are primarily interested in the lower costs.*'

Nevertheless, many returnees channel their energy into civic and cultural projects. Ardi (M, 50, social entrepreneur) led diaspora-funded efforts to build housing for vulnerable families and restore historical monuments. Melissa (55, F, artist) is active in creating cultural events and mentorship programmes between Italy and Albania. She stresses the importance of setting visible, positive examples for younger generations: '*We must set an example and keep them visible, talk about them, promote them.*'

These findings suggest that, within this sample, development contributions are frequently made outside formal state structures. Consistent with the concept of institutional conditionality, limited absorption capacity in public institutions redirected returnees' engagement towards entrepreneurial, civic and transnational channels (Yeoh et al., 2018). Rather than representing a straightforward case of brain gain within state systems, these trajectories reflect brain circulation dynamics, whereby skills, networks and resources are mobilised through hybrid and non-state pathways (Breznik et al., 2025; Faist and Fauser, 2011; Van Hear, 1998). In this sense, institutional constraints do not eliminate contribution, but rather shape the forms through which knowledge and capital are deployed. Overall, the findings suggest that skilled return in Albania operates through transnational and circulatory pathways shaped by institutional conditionality. Rather than being a straightforward case of brain gain, return emerges as a differentiated process in which cross-border engagement coexists with uneven domestic absorption.

Discussion

The findings provide insight into the differentiated trajectories of highly skilled Albanian returnees by aligning with, and highlighting, existing debate on brain circulation, brain waste and transnationalism.

Moving beyond permanent return

The study reveals a spectrum of return trajectories in Albania – ranging from permanent reintegration to hybrid and transnational engagement – where migrants maintain global economic ties while investing emotionally or socially in their homeland. While consistent with brain circulation literature, the findings suggest that such circulatory patterns are concentrated especially among digitally mobile and mid-career professionals, showing that physical return is no longer a prerequisite for contributing to development in a country with still high out-migration levels that negatively affect its future. In this sample, participants who maintained transnational ties described ongoing professional engagement rather than full reintegration. Participants engaged in transnational practices exemplify how digital mobility, remote employment and flexible residency allow migrants to occupy dual spheres and transfer knowledge, capital and norms without necessarily disengaging from host-country systems. Digital connectivity, remote work and international collaborations facilitate these dual engagements. This new form of migrant engagement with their country of origin is still underexplored and not fully addressed by policy or discourse. Sustained and continuous engagement allows for the transfer of social remittances, referring to the flows of new ideas and practices. Several interviewees described mentoring or knowledge-sharing activities consistent with the concept of social remittances. Furthermore, the concepts of home and identity are no longer fixed to one nation state, as transnational migration is seen as fundamentally tied to the 'location(s) and distribution(s) of home' in both a symbolic and a literal sense (Boccagni, 2022).

These cases suggest that return can function as a basis for continued transnational engagement rather than as a definitive endpoint. The contribution is realised through mentoring, diaspora engagement or launching businesses while residing between multiple countries. This reflects a shift in the meaning of 'return' from physical relocation to relational and functional presence. These patterns challenge state-centred models of reintegration that assume permanent settlement as the primary form of return.

Institutional barriers and the risk of brain waste

The potential developmental impact of return migration is strongly conditioned by the institutional environment. Entrepreneurs and digital professionals reported fewer barriers, whereas academics and public-sector applicants described bureaucratic and meritocratic constraints. These institutional constraints limited the translation of foreign-acquired skills into formal positions, confirming frustration with the inertia and opacity of public institutions and echoing regional trends noted in other Western Balkan countries. Despite being motivated and qualified, returnees found limited space for innovation or leadership within formal institutions. As a result, they often redirected their efforts towards informal contributions, such as community organising, mentoring or entrepreneurial ventures. In several cases, returnees redirected their energy into informal spheres of influence – including mentoring, community initiatives, diaspora networks or entrepreneurship – where their contributions were less constrained. Those who had a valid entrepreneurial

idea managed to enter the market and contributed to economic development. This entrepreneurial success is often rooted in transnational ties and leveraging skills gained abroad to start 'unique' or 'authentic' businesses. Moreover, finding a job often depends on leveraging social capital or social ties (e.g. friends helping you find employment). Their success demonstrates the resilience of returnees and their commitment to contributing despite institutional misalignment. This pattern suggests limited institutional absorption capacity within public systems.

Diaspora capital and the power of transnational engagement

Returnees increasingly operate as transnational players who maintain professional, social and cultural linkages across borders. Many participants described positioning themselves as intermediaries between Albanian institutions and international networks, facilitating exchanges that connect local stakeholders with opportunities, knowledge and resources abroad. Their engagement extends beyond formal employment and includes business investments, mentorship activities, cultural initiatives and knowledge exchange. These forms of involvement demonstrate that diaspora engagement is not limited to remittances or labour market participation, but is embedded in broader transnational networks that link professional communities, entrepreneurial initiatives and civic initiatives across countries. Through these connections, returnees contribute to the circulation of ideas, skills and practices that can support innovation and institutional learning in the country of origin. At the same time, participants highlighted that the potential of such transnational engagement is not always fully realised due to fragmented coordination and limited institutional support structures for diaspora collaboration. In this context, diaspora engagement policies require a conceptual reframing that recognises transnationalism not as a transitional phase between migration and return, but as a structural feature of contemporary mobility. Policies that acknowledge and facilitate sustained cross-border engagement, rather than privileging permanent return alone, may better harness the developmental potential embedded in transnational networks.

Reintegration as a cross-cutting governance challenge

Reintegration emerges as a cross-sectoral governance challenge involving employment, educational and institutional reform. Interviews reveal that returnees often act as their own reintegration agents, relying on informal networks, digital platforms and personal initiative to navigate fragmented systems. These patterns reflect broader dynamics in which migrants rely on transnational practices and personal initiative to navigate structural constraints. In contexts where institutional support and reintegration mechanisms remain weak or fragmented, individuals often develop adaptive strategies that allow them to sustain cross-border ties, mobilise resources from multiple locations, and manage their professional and social lives through flexible arrangements. Such practices highlight how migrants compensate for weak institutional support by relying on informal networks, transnational connections and self-reliant approaches to reintegration and opportunity creation. In the absence of institutional alignment, even highly qualified returnees

reported considering re-migration. Without systemic alignment between returnee capabilities and domestic structures, even the most motivated migrants may face marginalisation or re-migration.

As evidenced in the interviews, returnees must act as their own planners, negotiators and support systems, often relying on personal networks, trial-and-error experimentation or self-funded initiatives, aligning with the concept of 'transnationalism from below'. Individuals utilise digital platforms, for example, to seek employment and professional development, noting that online work often requires them to actively seek out new methods and acquire skills that might not otherwise be accessible. These dynamics illustrate how 'making-do' practices become essential strategies within transnational social fields.

To improve return migration outcomes, reintegration policies must address long-term structural factors, including the establishment of meritocratic recruitment practices in academia and the civil service. This requires prioritising professional rather than political criteria, and ensuring that selection processes follow transparent, internationally recognised standards of fairness and competitiveness. Furthermore, improving the institutional environment and strengthening fair business practices are essential for enabling returnees to fully utilise their skills and experience, including ensuring transparency and reliability in payments and working conditions within emerging sectors such as digital work. Highly skilled returnees can also contribute to transferring professional norms and governance practices acquired abroad, including expectations related to accountability, transparency and participation, which may gradually contribute to improving institutional quality in the country of origin. However, without coherent systemic support and the removal of key structural barriers, even highly motivated returnees may struggle to integrate effectively into the local economy, often finding themselves confined to marginal roles or considering renewed migration as a more viable option.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

This study demonstrates that highly skilled return migration in Albania is characterised by differentiated trajectories shaped by sectoral positioning, transnational engagement and institutional conditions. The findings indicate that return often operates as part of an ongoing transnational mobility trajectory rather than as permanent reintegration. From the interviews, we learned that contributions were observed primarily through entrepreneurship, digital employment, civic initiatives and knowledge exchange. These findings nuance binary interpretations of brain drain versus brain gain by illustrating how brain circulation unfolds unevenly across sectors and institutional contexts. Interviewees reported returning with accumulated professional experience, financial capital, entrepreneurial experience, and the experience of being exposed to institutional cultures that can inspire innovation and accountability. However, the extent to which these resources translated into tangible outcomes depended heavily on institutional absorption capacity. Participants seeking employment in academia or public administration reported

bureaucratic opacity, limited merit-based recruitment, and fragmented institutional coordination as primary barriers compromising returnees' ability to reintegrate effectively and contribute meaningfully. Several returnees responded to institutional constraints by redirecting their efforts towards private enterprise, freelance digital work or community-based initiatives.

Policy implications

The findings point to the need for stronger institutional coordination and governance mechanisms capable of aligning returnees' competences with domestic labour market and institutional needs. Rather than treating return migration as a stand-alone diaspora issue, reintegration policies should be embedded within broader skills governance and public sector reform frameworks

Interview evidence highlights the importance of transparent and merit-based recruitment procedures in academia and public administration, structured platforms for diaspora engagement, and support for transnational entrepreneurial activity. To restore institutional trust and meritocracy, the government should enact legislation mandating transparent recruitment practices in public institutions and academia, including external review committees and diaspora representation where relevant. Strengthening such mechanisms requires clearer evaluation criteria, publicly advertised competitions and greater involvement of independent or external experts in the selection processes. Responsibility for such reforms lies primarily with the Ministry of Education, higher education institutions and civil service authorities. Embedding recruitment transparency within existing human resource and quality assurance frameworks would enhance institutional credibility without requiring parallel structures or short-term project funding.

At the same time, the findings reveal a structural mismatch between returnees' hybrid skill sets and rigid occupational categories. Addressing this mismatch requires a more agile skills development system that connects labour market intelligence with education and training provision. Strengthening the role of sectoral skills committees, employer associations, universities and vocational education and training providers in identifying emerging skills demands should be complemented by a more active coordinating role played by the Ministry of Economy and the National Agency for Employment and Skills. While social partners and education providers articulate and respond to sectoral needs, central labour market institutions are essential for generating labour market intelligence, aligning training provision with national employment strategies, and ensuring that upskilling and reskilling pathways are accessible to returnees. Such coordination would support more responsive curriculum development and institutional adaptation. The introduction of flexible modular training pathways, the recognition of prior learning mechanisms, and short-cycle upskilling or re-skilling programmes would allow both returnees and the broader workforce to adapt to technological and sectoral change. Operationalising these measures within the scope of the existing National Employment and Skills Strategy (2023-2030) would strengthen policy coherence and long-term sustainability. By embedding modular training pathways and recognition-of-prior-learning

mechanisms within already established funding streams and institutional mandates, Albania can avoid fragmented, project-based interventions and reinforce systemic continuity.

The interviews also underscore the importance of structured platforms for diaspora and transnational engagement. Given the increasing prevalence of hybrid returnees, the Ministry of Finance and Economy should lead efforts to formalise remote work and transnational employment arrangements, providing legal clarity on taxation and social security portability for digital professionals. Public-private partnerships with tech hubs, telecoms companies and universities could fund and manage co-working spaces in Tirana and secondary cities. Such infrastructure not only retains returnees but also attracts foreign investment, offering a path to financial sustainability through usage fees, start-up incubator models and EU co-financing. Establishing formal liaison units within relevant ministries or strengthening existing diaspora institutions could facilitate coordination between returnees, research institutions, business/start-up incubators and local government stakeholders. Such platforms would primarily require institutional coordination rather than large-scale financial resources, and could be embedded within existing innovation and entrepreneurship programmes.

Overall, translating the developmental potential of return migration into a long-term impact requires a coherent governance approach that integrates returnees into national development, skills and innovation strategies. The objective should not merely be to reverse brain drain, but also to build institutional agreements that enable sustained brain circulation and continuous upskilling and reskilling within the domestic economy.

This study is based on 15 qualitative interviews with predominantly mid-career, highly educated returnees, and is not statistically generalisable. The sample does not include involuntary returnees or lower-skilled migrants, and therefore reflects a specific segment of the return population. Future research could expand the sample to include diverse return categories, employ comparative designs across Western Balkan countries, or combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to assess the broader structural impact of return migration. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in examining whether initial hybrid or transnational engagement evolves into deeper institutional embedding or renewed emigration.

References

Barjaba, K., Barjaba, J., 2015. Embracing emigration: The migration-development nexus in Albania. Migr. Policy Inst.

Beine, M., Sekkat, K., 2013. Skilled migration and the transfer of institutional norms. IZA J. Migr. 2, 9. https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-9039-2-9

Boccagni, P., 2022. Transnational migration and homemaking, in: Handbook on Transnationalism. Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 141-154.

Breznik, M., Oruc, N., Bajt, V., Kurta, A., Kockovska, K., 2025. Educational institutions in the service of transnational migration? Cases of Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Presented at the CELSI Discussion Paper No. 75.

Bryman, A., 2016. Social Research Methods. Oxford University Press.

Cassarino, J.-P., 2004. Theorising Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited.

Christou, A., Yeoh, B., 2022. Transnational Mobilities and Return Migration, in: Handbook on Transnationalism. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 325-339.

Dhembo, E., Caro, E., Hoxha, J., 2021. "Our migrant" and "the other migrant": migration discourse in the Albanian media 2015-2018. Humanit. Sci. Commun. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00981-w

Docquier, F., Rapoport, H., 2012. Globalization, Brain Drain, and Development. J. Econ. Lit. 50, 681–730. https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.3.681

ECONDIAS, 2022. Diaspora Engagement: Western Balkans&Europe. Factsheet Dossier. International Centre for Migration Policy Development.

ETF European Training Foundation, 2022. "Use it or lose it" How do migration, human capital and the labour market interact in the Western Balkans?

Faist, T., Fauser, M., 2011. The Migration–Development Nexus: Toward a Transnational Perspective, in: Faist, T., Fauser, M., Kivisto, P. (Eds.), The Migration-Development Nexus: A Transnational Perspective. Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, pp. 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230305694_1

Fathi, M., Ní Laoire, C., 2024a. Migration and Home: IMISCOE Short Reader, IMISCOE Research Series. Springer International Publishing, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51315-2

Fathi, M., Ní Laoire, C., 2024b. Migration Status, Class, Race and Home, in: Fathi, M., Ní Laoire, C. (Eds.), Migration and Home: IMISCOE Short Reader. Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 85-104. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51315-2_5

Gedeshi, I., King, R., 2019. The Albanian scientific diaspora: can the brain drain be reversed? [WWW Document]. URL https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21632324.2019.1677072 (accessed 10.9.25).

Gedeshi, I., Xhaferaj, E., 2016. Social and Economic profile of the Return migrants in Albania. International Organization for Migration, Albania.

Giannoccolo, P., 2009. The Brain Drain: A Survey of the Literature. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1374329

Hausmann, R., Nedelkoska, L., 2018. Welcome home in a crisis: Effects of return migration on the non-migrants' wages and employment. Eur. Econ. Rev. 101, 101–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2017.10.003

INSTAT, 2013. Migracioni i kthimit dhe ri-integrimi në Shqipëri.

Kerpaci, K., Kuka, M., 2019. The Greek Debt Crisis and Albanian Return Migration. J. Balk. East. Stud. 21, 104–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1532689

King, R., Christou, A., 2011. Of Counter-Diaspora and Reverse Transnationalism: Return Mobilities to and from the Ancestral Homeland. Mobilities 6, 451–466. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2011.603941

King, R., Gedeshi, I., 2024. The Albanian Scientific Diaspora from Kosovo: Prospects for Cooperation and Return.

King, R., Gedeshi, I., 2023. Albanian Students Abroad: A Potential Brain Drain? Cent. East. Eur. Migr. Rev. https://doi.org/10.54667/ceemr.2023.20

King, R., Oruc, N., 2019. Editorial Introduction: Migration in the Western Balkans – Trends and Challenges. J. Balk. East. Stud. 21, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1532682

Kopliku, B., 2016. Return Migration in Shkodra - What's the next step?, in: Diversity of Migration in South East Europe. Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publisher, Bern.

Kopliku, B., Çaro, E., 2022. The Role of Voluntary Return Migration in Supporting Economic Development in Albania, in: Bartlett, W., Uvalić, M. (Eds.), Towards Economic Inclusion in the Western Balkans. Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 303-320. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06112-7_13

Kopliku, B., Caro, E., 2022. The Role of Voluntary Return Migration in Supporting Economic Development in Albania. pp. 303-320. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06112-7_13

Krstic, G., Sanfey, P., 2007. Mobility, Poverty and Well-Being Among the Informally Employed in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Leka, M., 2023. Vit i ri me taksa të reja për profesionistët e lirë, si po goditet shtresa e mesme. Rev. Monit. URL https://monitor.al/vit-i-ri-me-taksa-te-reja-per-profesionistet-e-lire-si-po-goditet-shtresa-e-mesme/ (accessed 2.21.26).

Levitt, P., de la Dehesa, R., 2003. Transnational Migration and the Redefinition of the State: Variations and Explanations. Ethn. Racial Stud. 26, 587–611. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987032000087325

Logue, D., 2009. Moving policy forward: 'brain drain' as a wicked problem. Glob. Soc. Educ. 7, 41–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720802677366

Olesen, H., 2002. Migration, Return, and Development: An Institutional Perspective. Int. Migr. 40, 125–150. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2435.00214

Ramallari, A., Velaj, E., 2023. The Impact of Education in Economy. The Case of Albania. Rev. Econ. Finance. URL https://refpress.org/ref-vol21-a33/ (accessed 10.10.25).

Republika e Shqipërisë Këshilli i Ministrave, 2020. Strategjia Kombëtare për diasporën 2021 - 2025.

Saxenian, A., 2005. From Brain Drain to Brain Circulation: Transnational Communities and Regional Upgrading in India and China. Stud. Comp. Int. Dev. 40, 35–61. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02686293

Silverman, D., 2019. Interpreting Qualitative Data. SAGE Publications.

Smith, M., Guarnizo, L., 1998. Transnationalism From Below 6.

Stark, O., Bloom, D.E., 1985. The New Economics of Labor Migration. Am. Econ. Rev. 75, 173–178.

Tataj, X., Akbaş, E., 2025. The impact of transnational networks and diasporic influence on skilled migration: insights from the Albanian context. Third World Q. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2600558

Trajani, A., 2021. Return migration and Reintegration in Albania : Returnees' perspective on the topic of return migration and reintegration.

UNDP, 2006. From Brain Drain to Brain Gain: Mobilising Albania's Skilled Diaspora. Tirane.

Van Hear, N., 1998. New Diasporas. The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and regrouping of migrant communities. UCL Press.

World Bank Group, 2020. Western Balkans Labour Market Trends 2020.

Yeoh, B.S.A., Huang, S., Lam, T., 2018. Transnational family dynamics in Asia, in: Handbook of Migration and Globalisation. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Cheltenham, UK, pp. 413-430.

3.2 Overcoming resistance, enabling change: Support structures for intangible remittance transmission by female returnees

Janine Pinkow-Läpple and Judith Möllers

3.2.1 Preface

Research on migration has long emphasised the developmental role of tangible remittances, such as money and goods. However, much less attention has been given to intangible remittances: the ideas and practices that migrants transfer. The contributions of women to this process, in particular, remain poorly researched in both academic scholarship and policy debate.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the potential of highly skilled female return migrants to contribute to development by transferring intangible remittances. It draws on 65 qualitative interviews with women who had studied or worked in Western Europe or North America before returning to Kosovo or Romania.

The empirical results demonstrate that migration is a profoundly transformative experience. The participants in the study had acquired a wide range of socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental resources abroad, and almost all of them (48 out of 53) sought to share these upon their return. They encouraged tolerance and gender equality, promoted civic engagement, introduced new working practices and set up innovative businesses and projects. Yet their efforts unfolded in challenging environments. Reverse culture shock, the absence of support structures and resistance from families, colleagues and communities often undermined their ability and motivation to sustain a high level of engagement. The cumulative effect of these obstacles led some to become disillusioned or even emigrate again. At the same time, the analysis identified several factors that enabled women to persevere, including preparation before returning, more open professional environments, supportive peers and allies, and the pragmatic pursuit of smaller, more achievable goals.

Taken together, our empirical findings from Romania and Kosovo suggest that highly skilled female returnees are a valuable yet fragile resource for social transformation. They also emphasise the importance of policy approaches that directly address the barriers encountered by returnees and systematically strengthen enabling conditions. These include psychosocial support before and after return, peer and returnee networks, more supportive professional and institutional frameworks, and public awareness and community engagement initiatives.

By explicitly foregrounding gender and the non-material dimensions of migration, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the migration-development nexus. It demonstrates that supporting the agency of highly skilled female returnees constitutes a strategic investment in fostering a more open, equitable and sustainable future in their countries of origin, beyond merely facilitating their individual reintegration.

3.2.2 Introduction

While the developmental effects of tangible remittances, such as money and goods, have been extensively studied, much less attention has been paid to intangible remittances, that is the ideas and practices that migrants transfer to their communities of origin (Pinkow-Läpple and Möllers, 2025). Such immaterial transfers possess significant transformative potential, encompassing the diffusion of democratic values (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow, 2010) and changes in gender norms (Pinkow-Läpple, 2023). Despite this, they continue to receive limited attention and remain underexplored in academic scholarship and policy discourse. A particularly notable gap concerns the role of women. Gendered experiences of migration and return shape both the content and the impact of remittances (King and Lulle, 2022; Vullnetari and King, 2011; Balderas and Blackburne, 2013). Despite this, women's contributions to the transfer of intangible remittances are rarely examined in depth. Highly skilled female returnees are especially overlooked, despite their study and work experience abroad providing rich opportunities for the acquisition and dissemination of new ideas and practices (Hugo, 2000; Kuschminder, 2014; Parutis et al., 2023; Ivlevs, 2021). In addition, existing studies have largely focused on successful cases of transmission, underestimating the barriers and resistance that often curtail the potential of returnees (Paasche, 2016).

This paper addresses these gaps by posing three interrelated questions:

1. What is the potential of female return migrants to contribute to development in their countries of origin through the transfer of intangible remittances?
2. What barriers and enabling factors shape this process?
3. Which support structures can enhance the effectiveness of transmission?

The study draws on 65 qualitative interviews with highly skilled women who returned from Western Europe or North America to Kosovo or Romania. The two case studies provide fertile ground for analysis. Although not structurally equivalent and differing substantially in terms of institutional capacity and EU integration, both countries share histories of emigration and continue to grapple, albeit to varying degrees, with debates surrounding institutional reform and gender inequality. In these respects, they stand in contrast to the more progressive and egalitarian destination contexts in which participants acquired many of the ideas and practices examined here.

The findings demonstrate that female returnees constitute a promising yet fragile resource for social transformation. Although highly motivated to share the ideas and practices acquired abroad, they frequently encounter unsupportive environments characterised by a lack of institutional support structures and resistance from local communities, often resulting in reverse culture shock and disillusionment. Despite this, enabling factors, such as preparation, receptive professional settings, supportive peers and pragmatic goal setting, can facilitate sustained transmission. By explicitly foregrounding gender and the non-material dimensions of migration, the study advances a more comprehensive understanding of the migration–development nexus and provides empirically grounded insights for policy and practice, with a focus on analytical rather than statistical generalisation.

3.2.3 Literature review

This study adopts the concept of intangible remittances, building on and extending the notion of social remittances (Pinkow-Läpple and Möllers, 2025). Although the concept of social remittances is well established, its use in literature has been inconsistent, with persistent ambiguities regarding its scope and definition (Pinkow-Läpple and Möllers, 2025; Boccagni and Decimo, 2013; Nowicka and Šerbedžija, 2016). The concept of intangible remittances addresses these limitations by foregrounding the immaterial nature of these transfers and offering a clear analytical structure. More specifically, intangible remittances are conceptualised along two dimensions: their form (knowledge, normative structures and practices) and their content (economic, environmental, political and socio-cultural). They are defined as the knowledge, normative structures and practices that migrants acquire in destination contexts and transfer to their communities of origin, shaped by perceived differences between origin and destination settings, or between particular social segments within them. By contrast, tangible remittances refer to the money and goods migrants acquire in destination contexts and transfer to their communities of origin (Pinkow-Läpple and Möllers, 2025).

Although the development effects of tangible remittances, particularly in relation to poverty reduction, improved access to services and inequality reduction, have been extensively studied (Gupta et al., 2009; Zhunio et al., 2012; Arapi-Gjini et al., 2020), the non-material transfers that migrants bring back to their societies of origin have attracted far less attention. These intangible remittances form the core analytical focus of this study. Existing research links such transfers to the diffusion of professional skills and competences, business ideas, work ethics, democratic norms, gender equality and sustainability. All of these factors have the potential to drive development in the societies of origin (Möllers et al., 2025; Grabowska et al., 2017; Diniega and Sakdapolrak, 2025; Lietaer et al., 2025; Spilimbergo, 2009). Despite this, findings remain fragmented and ambivalent. While some scholars emphasise their transformative potential (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow, 2010; Rapoport et al., 2020; Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou, 2017; Lindstrom and Muñoz-Franco, 2005), others question the extent of their broader societal impact (Drbohlav and Dzúrová, 2023; Bivand Erdal et al., 2022). Furthermore, the predominant focus on the risks for successful transmission can obscure resistance, rejection and structural constraints that may limit or curtail their influence (Paasche, 2016).

These contradictory findings highlight the need for research examining the process of transmission of intangible remittances and the enabling and constraining factors that shape it. By paying closer attention to these dynamics, research can provide a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances under which intangible remittances have the potential to influence processes of social change, and how, when and why this potential may be realised.

This study draws on perspectives that conceptualise remittance transfers as a negotiated process shaped by the interplay of agency and structure (see, for example, Grabowska et al., 2017; Meyer, 2023; Carling, 2014). 'Agency' refers to the motivation, strategies and resilience of returnees when attempting to introduce new ideas and practices.

Structure refers to the institutional arrangements, power relations, and socio-cultural norms that can either facilitate or obstruct their efforts. Rather than viewing agency and structure as opposing forces, this framework emphasises their co-constitution. Even the most determined returnee operates within, and in response to, the constraints and opportunities of the return environment. Conversely, structures are not static: they can be challenged and reshaped through collective action, incremental shifts in practice and the accumulation of small-scale changes (Giddens, 1984).

Importantly, both agency and structure are gendered, as women's capacity to act as transmitters of intangible remittances is shaped by gendered expectations, power relations and institutional constraints. Gender therefore influences not only what is transmitted, but also how transmission is enabled, contested or curtailed in return contexts.

The transmission of intangible remittances is therefore inherently relational and context-dependent. It is shaped not only by the resources that returnees possess but also by the receptivity of the communities that they re-enter, the degree to which the newly acquired norms align with prevailing ones, and the broader socio-political setting. In this regard, the structural context is decisive. As Hornstein Tomić (2023, p. 185) emphasises, returnees require 'space for action and participation' to mobilise their acquired resources. Political opportunity structures, ranging from the wider geopolitical environment to concrete rights such as freedom of speech, association, and citizenship, critically determine the scope for action of returnees' (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk, 2020; Soysal, 1994; Chaudhary and Moss, 2019).

Socio-cultural perceptions in the country of origin also play a pivotal role. Public attitudes towards returnees are often negative and rooted in asymmetric power relations and the narratives that emerge from them. Returnees are portrayed as economically privileged outsiders (Hornstein Tomić, 2023), culturally alien (Möllers et al., 2025), or, in post-conflict settings, as disloyal cowards (Kuschminder, 2014; Mueller and Kuschminder, 2022). Other widespread stigmas depict returnees as being out of touch with local realities or being arrogant (Mueller and Kuschminder, 2022). In Kosovo, for example, migrants are frequently labelled 'Schatzis', a term borrowed from German and used pejoratively to signal perceived differences (Jusufi, 2020; Paca, 2015). Such perceptions can foster exclusion and mistrust when exacerbated by competition over land, property and employment opportunities, thus creating a hostile environment for the transmission of intangible remittances.

In addition, intangible remittances often challenge established norms and power structures. Combined with existing stereotypes, this can provoke resistance in the form of defensive reactions, which are rooted in fears of disruption (Grabowska et al., 2017) or perceptions of paternalism (Genova, 2020). Such resistance can range from subtle reluctance to outright hostility and is particularly strong when transmitted ideas or practices conflict with traditional values, sometimes halting change entirely (Dannecker, 2009; Levitt, 1998). Even in the absence of overt hostility or resistance, a lack of active support can undermine transmission. For example, Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow (2010) find that the initial transmission efforts of Mexican returnees faded due to lack of local support.

Existing literature highlights that the institutional and policy context of return actors can play a crucial role in mediating these dynamics. Targeted reintegration programmes that provide financial, logistical or institutional support and promote positive public perceptions of returnees, can create fertile ground for transmission (Kuschminder, 2014). Hornstein Tomić (2023) documents how returnees in Croatia benefited from supportive colleagues and superiors when trying to introduce new ideas and practices. Similarly, Leutloff-Grandits (2025) shows that, although migrant entrepreneurs in Kosovo frequently introduce intangible remittances, these efforts are limited by weak state institutions. Entrepreneurs repeatedly called for stronger public investment in education, training and social security. They noted that, without co-ordinated state support, private initiatives would remain costly, fragmented and ultimately unsustainable. Such forms of support are central to fostering environments in which returnees are able and encouraged to engage in the transmission of intangible remittances. However, research on these kinds of support structures is very limited.

In addition to institutional and policy factors, gender is a largely overlooked determinant of intangible remittance transmission. Women's migration and return experiences are shaped by distinct social expectations, family roles and economic opportunities (Carling, 2005; King and Lulle, 2022), which influence both the content and pathways of remitting behaviour. Studies on tangible remittances show that women typically remit for more altruistic reasons, focusing on family welfare (Balderas and Blackburne, 2013; Orozco et al., 2006; Vanwey, 2004). This suggests that gender may similarly influence the transmission of intangible remittances. Migration can empower women, enabling them to challenge entrenched gender norms and transmit values of equality and civic participation (Hugo, 2000; King and Lulle, 2022; Amazan, 2013; Pinkow-Läpple, 2023). However, women are rarely at the centre of analyses and highly skilled female returnees, who are well positioned to act as influential transmitters of intangible remittances, remain especially under-researched (Wong, 2014).

3.2.4 Data and methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how highly educated female returnees from Kosovo and Romania engage in the transmission of intangible remittances. The analysis is based on 65 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2018 and 2023 with 53 women from Kosovo and Romania who had previously migrated to Western Europe or North America to study or work. 33 interviews were conducted in Kosovo and 32 in Romania, including twelve follow-up interviews (six in each country).

The study adopts a specific regional focus, examining Kosovo and Romania as countries of origin and North America and Western Europe as destinations for migrants. Both countries have long histories of emigration and well-established patterns of return migration, making them ideal locations for the purpose of examining the transmission of intangible remittances.

However, reliable quantitative data on migration from Kosovo and Romania remains limited and fragmented (see, for example, World Bank and the Vienna Institute for

International Economic Studies, 2018). While Romania has published recent statistics on aggregate long-term migration flows, comparable and up-to-date flow data for Kosovo is not consistently available.

Official statistics for Romania in 2024 indicate that women accounted for around 40 % of long-term emigrants (≥12 months) (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2024). Emigration was heavily concentrated among young adults, with almost half of all emigrants being aged 20–39, and a clear male predominance in core working-age cohorts (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2024). However, systematic public data disaggregated by migrants' skills, qualifications or professional specialisations is not currently available.

The most recent comprehensive census data for Kosovo (2011) indicates that women accounted for approximately one third (33 %) of emigrants overall (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2011). The proportion of women was markedly lower among prime working-age groups (25–55), where they consistently accounted for well under one third of emigrants and, in some cohorts, for nearly one quarter. While these figures are not recent, they nonetheless indicate a distinctly gendered pattern of emigration, especially within economically active cohorts (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2011).

At the same time, both countries are undergoing complex transition processes characterised by economic fragility, democratic deficits and persistent gender inequality. Despite these shared characteristics, the two countries differ in important ways. Kosovo is at an earlier stage of economic and political transformation, and is marked by a post-conflict context characterised by fragile institutions and pronounced socio-cultural constraints (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2022; Freedom House, 2024a). By contrast, Romania has progressed further along its transition trajectory since joining the European Union in 2007, with greater institutional consolidation and sustained exposure to Western political, economic, environmental and social norms. EU membership and freedom of movement have reduced cultural distance and expanded professional and civic spaces in which return migrants can utilise acquired ideas and practices, even though structural inequalities and resistance persist.

By contrast, Western Europe and North America are destinations characterised by consolidated democracies, robust market economies, advanced environmental governance and higher levels of gender equality. This creates an environment conducive to the acquisition of intangible remittances. Figure 1 illustrates these structural differences, highlighting key contrasts across the economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental spheres. Sweden is used as the model, a benchmark ideal to be measured against, as it is a highly developed Western destination. It was selected because it consistently ranks among the highest-performing countries across the indicators relevant to this study, including gender equality, environmental governance and democratic stability and strength, thereby providing a clear reference point for the types of ideas and practices migrants may encounter in such destination contexts.

As the focus of this study is migration from contexts of origin characterised by more traditional gender norms to destinations with more liberal gender norms, the outcomes described here should not be generalised to different constellations, where the dynamics of acquisition and transmission may differ.

Figure 13. Structural Differences between Kosovo, Romania, and Sweden

Source: Own illustration based on data retrieved from the World Bank (2025), Freedom House (2024a, 2024b, 2024c), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2022), World Economic Forum (2022) and CCPI (2025).

The study selected a group that was particularly likely to engage in conscious remittance transmission: highly skilled female returnees who had migrated to study or work (Hugo, 2000; Ivlevs, 2021; Kuschminder, 2014; Parutis et al., 2023). Participants were recruited through targeted outreach to organisations working with returnees, including universities, diaspora associations, social media groups and embassies. Snowball sampling was used to complement this approach. To ensure sample adequacy and avoid clustering around tightly connected networks, recruitment was deliberately designed to maximise heterogeneity, with a limit of two participants per contact. Participants were required to have spent at least six months abroad and to have been back in their country of origin for a minimum of six months to ensure meaningful exposure to both the migration country and sufficient time for post-return engagement.

The participants were aged between 22 and 45 years. The majority were unmarried, childless, and had university degrees. Most originated from relatively progressive and

socio-economically stable families in urban areas, to which they largely returned after migration. With one exception, all Kosovar participants lived in Pristina before departure and after their return, while Romanian participants were slightly more geographically dispersed, though still predominantly based in urban areas.

Education was the main driver of migration, most commonly at master's level. In the Kosovar sample, migration was exclusively education related. Among the Romanian participants, motivations were slightly more diverse. While the vast majority also migrated for education one participant left for employment, and four who had initially migrated for education later undertook a second migration for work. Given the predominance of educational mobility, most participants initially perceived their stay abroad as temporary.

Kosovar participants primarily migrated to the United States, tending to stay abroad for shorter periods (median: 24 months). In contrast, Romanian participants mainly chose the United Kingdom and Germany, staying abroad approximately twice as long (median: 48 months). Across the entire sample, the duration of migration ranged from six months to over six years, with a median duration of 30 months.

During the interviews, it became apparent that three of the participants did not fully meet the selection criteria. In two cases, migration had primarily occurred in the context of accompanying a partner, rather than for education or work. In a third case, the participant had migrated jointly with her partner rather than independently. Given the substantial analytical value of these interviews, however, all three cases were retained in the sample. An overview of the participants' demographic and migration characteristics is set out in the Annex.

The findings of the study apply to the specific group of return migrants researched here. Consequently, the results are not intended to be statistically generalisable to all return migrants. Rather, they aim to offer analytically grounded insights into the experiences and transmission practices within this specific group.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format guided by key thematic areas, but allowed for open-ended, participant-led discussion. The core topics covered were life before migration, experiences abroad, intangible remittance acquisition and transmission, and post-return challenges. A short pre-interview questionnaire was used to gather basic demographic and migration data. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Conducted primarily in English and occasionally in German, either online or in person, the interviews lasted around 90 minutes. In 2023, follow-up interviews were conducted with selected participants to examine how their transmission activities, challenges, and coping strategies had evolved over time.

All interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical research protocols. Participants gave informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Transcripts were fully anonymised and interview recordings were only used with explicit permission.

Data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach using MAXQDA. Coding combined deductive and inductive strategies: an initial category framework based on

the interview guide was iteratively refined to capture emergent themes. A second coder participated in the process to ensure consistency and reliability across interpretations. Thematic saturation was assessed iteratively during data collection and coding and was deemed to have been reached when no new themes of substantial importance emerged.

3.2.5 Intangible remittances as drivers of transformation

The following two chapters present the empirical results of the study. The first part examines how highly skilled female returnees acquired new ideas and practices abroad, and how they attempted to share these intangible remittances upon their return. The subsequent part analyses the obstacles and supportive factors that shaped this process. Building on these findings, the paper then proposes policy implications and concludes with a brief summary.

Acquiring (potential) intangible remittances abroad

The participants in the study described migration as a profoundly transformative experience. The sharp contrasts between the countries of origin and destination prompted reflection and re-evaluation, leading all of them to acquire new ideas and practices. As Majlinda, a 29-year-old lecturer from Kosovo who studied in the United States, explained, migration *'shattered all my beliefs and built them up again from the beginning.'*

Although the overall patterns were similar in both Kosovo and Romania, acquisition was generally more pronounced among Kosovar participants. This may reflect the fact that Kosovo is at an earlier stage of EU integration, has a less advanced transformation trajectory, and maintains more limited interaction with destination societies. These factors appear to have intensified the sense of contrast return migrants experienced abroad.

Importantly, the women did not adopt new ideas or practices indiscriminately but rather actively assessed those that resonated with them and those that did not. This clearly demonstrates that the acquisition of intangible remittances was an act of agency and not just a process of passive absorption. Consequently, acquisition patterns varied considerably across the four subtypes of intangible remittances: socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental.

The socio-cultural sphere was particularly prominent, with 51 out of 53 participants acquiring potential intangible remittances in this area. Many participants emphasised the liberating effect of exposure to individualism, contrasting sharply with the collectivist orientation of the return migrants' societies of origin. They valued greater personal freedom, diversity and privacy, which opened up alternative life paths beyond the rigid expectations that were often imposed on them in their origin countries. Educational experiences abroad further reinforced this shift, as students were encouraged to develop their own opinions and think critically. Reflecting on her studies in Kosovo, Sanije, a 30-year-old doctoral researcher from Kosovo, remarked: *'You finish your studies without*

ever having an opinion of your own about anything.' By contrast, during her time in Belgium and the United Kingdom, she was continuously prompted to articulate her own thoughts and perspectives, substantially strengthening her critical thinking skills in the process.

Another central learning experience was exposure to the ethnic and cultural diversity of destination societies. Interacting with diverse social groups fostered tolerance, intercultural competence and reduced nationalist tendencies. This engagement with pluralism was one of the most significant experiences of acquisition, reshaping interpretative frameworks and broadening the participants' worldviews. Seeing different family structures, shared household duties, women in leadership positions and open-mindedness towards LGBTQIA+ communities encouraged many to reconsider traditional expectations. While some participants encountered negative or conservative attitudes abroad, most found that these experiences fostered the acquisition of more progressive gender norms. The shifts were particularly pronounced among the participants from Kosovo, reflecting the more traditional gender regime described in the Kosovar case. Ardita, a 33-year-old civil servant from Kosovo who studied in the Netherlands, explained:

> *'I gained a lot of confidence because we in Kosovo are raised with the idea that you need a man in your life. The Netherlands played a big role in forming this opinion that I can be an independent woman. I don't need a man in my life.'*

The economic and professional domains, in which 35 out of 53 participants acquired new ideas and practices, were also central. Education abroad, as well as exposure to foreign workplaces, enabled participants to acquire a wide range of professional practices and knowledge, including the use of new technologies, scientific methods and job application skills. Several participants also acquired new business ideas and models (such as social enterprises) which they implemented upon their return. In addition, they adopted new work ethics that emphasised dedication and professionalism, while valuing less hierarchical and more supportive employer-employee relations. These competences can be grouped across the individual accounts into technical and professional skills (e.g. research methods, digital tools and sector-specific know-how), organisational and managerial skills (e.g. project management, less hierarchical leadership styles and teamwork) and other 'soft' professional skills (e.g. communication, confidence and meritocratic work expectations).

Living abroad also exposed participants to different political systems, with 33 out of 53 participants reporting that they had acquired new political ideas and practices. They consistently praised democratic institutions, transparent governance, and citizen-oriented public administration abroad. Well-functioning institutions, such as high-quality education and social security systems, together with reliable technical and social infrastructure, further reinforced these positive impressions. These experiences heightened their awareness of institutional weaknesses in their countries of origin and raised their expectations of state performance. The civic culture they encountered, where citizens actively engaged in politics and exercised their rights, was equally influential. Oana, a 28-year-old Romanian teacher who had studied and worked in the United Kingdom and Switzerland, said:

'I learned about responsibilities, about rights and (…) I don't know. It just made me see that we were citizens, and you have to like look after your country, and you have to learn more in order to give back to your community. Things that never crossed my mind when I was back in Romania.'

These political shifts were reported somewhat more frequently among Romanian participants. This may be understood in light of the timing of the first wave of interviews, which were conducted in late 2018 during a period of political crisis in Romania, when concerns about the rule of law were widely debated. This context may have heightened participants' sensitivity to political differences between their countries of origin and destination.

Although environmental intangible remittances were the least commonly acquired (11 out of 53 participants), they were highly influential for those concerned. Participants contrasted the lack of recycling or anti-littering regulations in Kosovo and Romania with the strict enforcement of such regulations elsewhere. This encouraged them to adopt more sustainable behaviours, from recycling and cycling to experimenting with organic food, vegan diets or eco-village lifestyles. In some cases, exposure to green infrastructure and outdoor culture fostered a closer connection to nature and reshaped expectations about urban environments in their countries of origin.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that highly skilled female migrants acquired a diverse set of potential intangible remittances during their time abroad. Socio-cultural remittances were the most common, followed by political and economic remittances, while environmental remittances were less frequent but highly impactful for some.

Transmitting intangible remittances after return

Remarkably, almost all participants in the study (48 out of 53) actively sought to transfer the ideas and practices they had acquired abroad. Driven by a desire to contribute to their countries of origin, they applied these resources across a range of social, economic, political and environmental issues. While engagement was not uniform, most participants (41 out of 48) described making sustained efforts to transmit the ideas and practices they had acquired while living abroad. As Sabina, a 34-year-old consultant from Romania, explained: *'I am trying to sort of apply as much as I can from what I learnt.'*

Interestingly, although the participants from Kosovo had acquired a broader range of potential intangible remittances during their time abroad, transmission levels were comparable between the two groups. This suggests that the greater transformative experiences reported by Kosovar participants did not result in a proportionally higher level of transmission. As will be discussed in the following chapter, stronger resistance and structural constraints in Kosovo may have limited the extent to which return migrants could apply the ideas and practices they had acquired.

The socio-cultural sphere was the most common area for the transmission of intangible remittances. The participants encouraged their family members, friends and colleagues to question established cultural norms and form their own opinions. They promoted respect

for diversity and tolerance through conversations in their personal and professional circles. For instance, Blerta, a 35-year-old accountant from Kosovo, sought to counter prejudices against Black people by openly discussing them with her close social circle. Another recurring theme was the transmission of more egalitarian gender norms. Many women encouraged an equal division of household tasks, supported their female friends' career ambitions, and challenged patriarchal expectations in families and workplaces. Others pursued institutionalised efforts, such as organising workshops on feminism, mentoring young women and advocating gender-sensitive workplace policies. Rozafa, a 26-year-old project manager from Kosovo, described how her time in Sweden had inspired her to campaign for legislative reform in her capacity as government advisor:

> *'After I went there [to Sweden], I got myself a new cause and that's paid parental leave. Being in Sweden, seeing how it works so perfectly, having an extended leave for the whole family […] now I'm pushing for the legislation that favors the family.'*

Notably, gender-related transmission efforts were particularly frequent among Kosovar participants, in line with their more pronounced gender-related acquisition experiences.

Economic intangible remittances were also widely transmitted. Participants introduced new technologies, less hierarchical management styles and participatory practices to their workplaces. The extent to which these skills could be applied varied considerably. Those that could be transferred to everyday workplace routines, such as project management tools or collaborative practices, were generally easier to implement. In contrast, skills that require broader institutional co-operation or procedural reform, such as transparency standards, depended more heavily on supportive organisational and governance environments.

Seven participants also started businesses inspired by ideas and business models that they had encountered abroad. These include a fashion-technology venture in Kosovo and a social enterprise focusing on mental health, which has since become a leading platform in the Albanian-speaking world. These cases demonstrate how migration can expand participants' professional skills, fostering innovation in their workplaces and beyond.

The transmission of political intangible remittances was less common, but still notable. Participants shared experiences of democratic governance and effective institutions, often contrasting them with deficiencies in their countries of origin. Some engaged with civil society organisations, became electoral observers or joined political parties, while others promoted civic awareness through teaching and community initiatives. Luiza, a 39-year-old architect from Romania, described how migration had shaped her and her husband's political engagement:

> *'We got very militant when we came back, politically militant and try to encourage new movements and talk with friends and relatives and support them. I went to observe some elections for instance. Yeah, I think we got really politically involved. As much as we can.'*

Romanian participants transferred political intangible remittances somewhat more frequently, in line with their comparatively stronger acquisition of political ideas and practices during their time abroad.

Environmental intangible remittances were the least frequently transferred, yet they carried considerable weight for those involved. Participants encouraged recycling and reducing reliance on cars, promoting cycling and walking instead. Some promoted dietary changes and alternative lifestyles, while others initiated professional or civic projects that encouraged eco-friendly practices. For example, Iona, a 33-year-old project manager from Romania, developed a school project to raise awareness of environmental protection, creating films and teaching materials to encourage eco-friendly behaviour.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that participants widely disseminated the ideas and practices they had acquired while living abroad through various methods and across different spheres. Most transmission efforts occurred at micro level, relying on informal strategies such as acting as a role model, offering advice and engaging in face-to-face discussions with family members, friends and colleagues. These everyday interactions were the most frequently described mode of influence.

At the same time, a smaller but significant proportion of participants also engaged in more structured forms of transmission that could reach a wider audience. These included project development (21 %), capacity-building activities such as conducting training events, workshops and awareness-raising events (19 %), and venture creation (15 %). While these findings are based on the subjective accounts of the participants and do not permit an assessment of outcomes or long-term impacts, they highlight the considerable potential of intangible remittances to foster change in multiple areas of life.

3.2.6 Between resistance and support: barriers and enablers of the transmission of intangible remittances

Although most participants actively attempted to transfer the ideas and practices they had acquired abroad, their efforts were influenced by both barriers and enablers. This chapter examines how reverse culture shock, lack of support, resistance and disillusionment hindered transmission, while also highlighting positive experiences that helped return migrants to overcome these challenges. By pairing constraints with potential support, the analysis illustrates the complex conditions under which intangible remittances can take root or fail to do so.

Reverse culture shock vs. preparation for return

Although most participants initially returned to their countries of origin with enthusiasm, the majority quickly found themselves disoriented and alienated. During their stay abroad, the countries of destination became their main frame of reference, prompting critical comparisons with everyday life in their countries of origin. This gave rise to frustration with structural shortcomings, such as corruption, weak institutions, limited career

opportunities and poor infrastructure, which often made returning feel like a journey back in time. Social norms and behaviours that they had once accepted – such as rude behaviour, discrimination, or disregard for the environment – became difficult to tolerate. Like several other participants, Rita, a 34-year-old entrepreneur from Kosovo, recalled that after her return *'everything was bothering'* her.

Around two-thirds of participants reported experiencing reverse culture shock upon return, describing feelings of estrangement, frustration and not fitting in upon return (Gaw, 2000). Notably, reverse culture shock was reported more frequently and more intensely by the participants from Kosovo, likely reflecting the greater perceived cultural distance between Kosovo and the main countries of destination, particularly with regard to gender norms.

Reintegration into family and social life was particularly challenging, especially in Kosovo. Expectations that women would move back into their parents' household often clashed with the independence they had enjoyed abroad. Most participants from Kosovo returned to the family home, often after having lived independently for the first time during their migration. Re-entering collectivist family structures therefore proved challenging, particularly in light of their strengthened commitment to egalitarian gender norms. Several participants described themselves as feeling *'alien'* (Emina, 29, Kosovo) or as though they no longer fitted in, which triggered identity crises and emotional strain. For many, this came as a surprise, as they had expected an easy return. Such readjustment struggles weakened their willingness and capacity to share newly acquired ideas, as energy and motivation were redirected towards navigating familial expectations.

At the same time, the results suggest that adequate preparation can mitigate the emotional challenges often experienced upon return. Recognising that reverse culture shock is a common and temporary phenomenon, and knowing how to cope with it, can reduce the intensity of disorientation. Emina (29, Kosovo) explained: "*In that period of readjustment you could use anyone that tells you 'You know whatever it is you are feeling, it's normal, it's OK.' So, that you don't get that feeling of what's wrong with me.*" Participants who had previously migrated coped with the return process much better, as they were already prepared for the challenges ahead. Some also benefited from structured preparation available under their scholarship programmes. This included workshops on the emotional challenges of return or access to individual counselling sessions where they could discuss their concerns and learn coping strategies. Lindita (24, Kosovo) shared her experience: *'I took therapy before coming back because I knew it's going to be a reverse cultural shock. […] I discussed all the issues that I had with me coming back. For example, I was afraid that I'm going to return to a more, you know, outdated mentality here or something like that. [….] Therapy helped me a lot.'* In this sense, structured preparation emerged as an important factor which, when available, reduced the disruptive effects of returning and created better conditions for engaging in transmission.

Support deficits vs. islands of openness

A lack of support, both formal and informal, was identified as another central barrier to transmission. Participants widely reported that their return was met with a lack of encouragement from family, friends and colleagues. Rather than receiving recognition, return migrants often encountered apathy or scepticism. When asked, what her main challenge after returning was, Iona, a 33-year-old project manager from Romania, said: *'The complacency. People are just like, 'Yeah, this is how it is in Romania.'* This absence of informal support was compounded by the near total absence of institutional structures to guide reintegration and facilitate the transmission of intangible remittances. Although many had received pre-departure orientation, very few were offered similar preparation for returning to their countries of origin. Participants struggled with bureaucratic obstacles and sometimes found it difficult to secure meaningful employment. Likewise, they did not receive sufficient support for launching projects or establishing organisations. Even those who did receive institutional support found it inadequate, with programmes failing to account for local social and economic contexts. As Loreta, a 37-year-old development specialist from Kosovo put it: *'There is no system in place to help them [returnees] integrate themselves and give back what they learned.'*

Without both informal and institutional support, many felt isolated in their efforts to make a change and over time this weakened their ability and motivation to engage. Mihaela, a 40-year-old finance professional from Romania, described how a lack of support had undermined her attempt to set up a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Without encouragement or backing, she eventually gave up and emigrated again: *'I felt like I do not have the support from anyone, even the family, even the society and for his reason, so I gave up.'*

At the same time, there were contexts in which support and openness prevailed. Academic environments, NGOs, progressive workplaces and circles of like-minded friends provided spaces where new ideas were welcomed. Here, returnees found colleagues who valued their skills and perspectives. This allowed them to test and implement innovations that would have been dismissed elsewhere. These 'islands of openness' provided valuable access points for transmission and emphasised the impact of receptive environments. Yet these spaces remained limited. Without broader and more systematic support, returnees' efforts to make a change often faltered, and their potential contributions remained only partially realised.

Resistance vs. allyship and networks

Beyond the lack of support, many participants encountered active resistance to their efforts to transmit intangible remittances. Such opposition was more pronounced in Kosovo than in Romania, likely reflecting the greater cultural distance between Kosovo and destination societies. In addition, the post-conflict context in Kosovo may have fostered greater sensitivity to external influences, thereby reinforcing reluctance to change (Pichler, 2009; Rydzewski, 2022).

At the institutional level, return migrants' initiatives were slowed or blocked by administrative inertia and bureaucratic obstruction. However, resistance most commonly occurred at the interpersonal level. Ideas were dismissed as either foreign or irrelevant, and those who had returned were ridiculed as arrogant outsiders. Florica, a 39-year-old researcher from Romania, recalled: *'Me and my four colleagues [with migration experience], no one listens to us, and we are seen as a sort of enemy fighting with the dinosaurs in the system.'*

Efforts to promote gender equality in particular have triggered pushback. Vjosa, a 23-year-old psychologist from Kosovo, described how her colleagues responded to her initiatives with comments such as: *'Oh yeah, you and your feminism.'* For Oana, a 28-year-old teacher from Romania who had discovered her bisexuality while abroad, the hostility came from her own family. When she tested the waters for coming out by joking about marrying a woman, her mother's response – *'I don't think I brought up a damaged child'* – left her feeling deeply hurt. Her experience highlights the stark contrast between the more inclusive perspectives of return migrants and the conservative attitudes that are often prevalent in their communities of origin. They also demonstrate how resistance, which is often rooted in processes of othering, undermines both the legitimacy and motivation of returnees. Remarks such as *'You've been abroad, now [you think] you're smarter, you're more civilised than us'* (Majlinda, 29, Kosovo) challenges the legitimacy of returnees' contributions. In some cases, resistance has even escalated into exclusion and discrimination in professional settings.

At the same time, participants emphasised the importance of having allies. Supportive colleagues, supervisors or peers can provide encouragement, help to counter negative perceptions and offer opportunities to apply new ideas. Returnee networks in particular emerged as a crucial source of support. Women with access to such networks emphasised their potential value as safe spaces to share experiences, offer mutual support and sustain motivation. Where such allies or informal networks existed, they mitigated hostility and enabled participants to persevere despite resistance. However, access to such networks was however limited and largely confined to participants of specific scholarship programmes. These examples suggest that even in otherwise unreceptive environments, the presence of supportive individuals or groups can be decisive in sustaining transmission efforts.

Disillusionment vs. turn towards smaller but doable goals

For many participants, the cumulative effect of reverse culture shock, a lack of support and active resistance was profound disillusionment. Women who had returned with optimism and a strong desire to contribute often found their efforts undermined by repeated setbacks. Over time, their enthusiasm gave way to frustration and a sense of futility, causing them to seriously question the feasibility of transmission. Some reduced their engagement, while others seriously considered or undertook re-emigration. The psychological toll was significant, with several participants reporting emotional exhaustion, or even depression and anxiety disorders. In some cases, this halted

transmission efforts temporarily or permanently. Sanije, a 30-year-old researcher from Kosovo, offered a particularly vivid articulation of this emotional intensity:

> *'There are moments when I think when I am in Kosovo it feels like 'What the hell am I doing here? This country will never change. This is a country of a shithole.'*

Yet not all responses ended in disengagement. Some participants sought to cope with adversity by redefining the scope of their ambition. Rather than attempting to transform entire systems, they focused on smaller, more achievable changes in their immediate environments. This pragmatic recalibration enabled them to maintain a sense of agency and continue contributing despite constraints. By setting realistic and achievable goals, they preserved in their motivation and carved out areas where they could have a positive and meaningful impact. Roxana, a 38-year-old Romanian economist, explained:

> *'You pick your battles and sometimes, I think, I pick too big battles. […] You can help one kid from a poor family, or you can change a law. […] I think the key is […] trying to do small things.'*

Taken together, these findings show that returnees' engagement is shaped by a constant tension between discouraging obstacles and supportive factors that enable persistence. While many women struggled with disorientation, apathy and resistance, they also found entry points, such as preparation, receptive environments, supportive allies or pragmatic goal setting, that enabled them to sustain their efforts. In addition, some participants adapted to constrained contexts by pursuing smaller-scale, more pragmatic goals, demonstrating individual coping strategies rather than structural support. Building on these insights, the next chapter outlines policy implications for creating environments in which such enabling factors become the norm.

3.2.7 Policy implications: how support structures can facilitate the transmission of intangible remittances

The analysis of barriers and enablers has shown that highly skilled female returnees are motivated and capable of fostering change. However, their efforts often falter in the face of unsupportive environments. Where preparation, open professional settings or allies were present, change could take root, but these enabling conditions were limited and inconsistent. This chapter translates these insights into policy implications, outlining measures that strengthen the conditions for transmission systematically and enable returnees to fulfil their potential. The proposed measures operate at different levels, from strengthening individual coping capacities to addressing structural and institutional constraints.

Providing emotional and psychosocial support

At an individual level, reverse culture shock and emotional disorientation can undermine the engagement of returnees, making targeted psychosocial support essential in order to sustain their personal capacity for transmission. Many participants emphasised that they

would have benefited from being prepared for the emotional challenges of return and receiving guidance on how to cope once back in their countries of origin.

Structured counselling both before departure and after return can mitigate these difficulties. Pre-return counselling can prepare returnees by outlining likely emotional challenges and offering strategies for managing expectations. Post-return counselling can provide a safe space in which to process feelings of estrangement and frustration. Providing such guidance normalises reverse culture shock as a common and temporary phenomenon. This reduces feelings of personal failure and enables returnees to interpret resistance as a predictable response to social change, rather than as a rejection of themselves.

In addition, psychosocial support can equip returnees with concrete coping strategies, such as techniques for managing stress, ways of maintaining motivation and methods for setting realistic goals in challenging environments. By strengthening individual emotional resilience and providing continuity throughout the return process, such support helps sustain engagement even in the face of setbacks.

Strengthening peer and returnee networks

Although individual allies can play a crucial role in support, many women lacked access to wider networks of peers. This isolation amplified frustration and limited opportunities for collective action. Returnee networks were therefore the most frequently requested form of support in the sample. Participants who had access to such networks described them as crucial sources of encouragement and practical assistance. In contrast, those without access often emphasised that what they wished for most was such a community. Strengthening peer and returnee networks can therefore play a key role in enabling the transmission of intangible remittances.

Such networks reduce feelings of alienation by connecting returnees who have had similar experiences. They provide reassurance that emotional and practical difficulties are common, thereby normalising the challenges of re-entry. In addition to providing emotional support, these networks also create safe spaces in which to discuss gender-specific barriers, exchange coping strategies and foster solidarity.

Crucially, returnee networks can also serve as platforms for collaboration and innovation. By pooling resources, coordinating initiatives and amplifying each other's voices, returnees are better placed to pursue projects that would be too difficult to implement if they acted alone. It is also important that these networks are inclusive and accessible to all returnees, regardless of their affiliation with specific scholarship programmes. Institutional support for establishing and maintaining such networks, for example through funding, facilitation or integration into existing diaspora associations, would help transform individual efforts into collective endeavours with greater reach and resilience.

Enhancing professional and institutional support

Several participants found it difficult to translate their professional skills and competencies into meaningful employment. Those who had spent extended periods abroad often lost their professional networks, which left them underutilised or sidelined. These experiences suggest that targeted professional and institutional support is essential to ensure that the expertise acquired abroad can be applied effectively upon return.

Tailored job placement programmes could help to align returnees' qualifications with suitable positions more effectively. Participants' accounts suggest that support should address both access to employment and the recognition and effective utilisation of skills acquired abroad. This may involve formal measures, such as transparent recruitment and recognition of credentials where applicable, as well as supportive organisational practices, such as mentorship and organisational cultures that grant returnees legitimacy.

Beyond general job placement and mentorship, targeted funding mechanisms are crucial for those seeking to implement new ideas through start-ups, social enterprises or community-based initiatives. Several participants described difficulties in accessing financial support or navigating bureaucratic procedures, which limited the scalability of their projects. Dedicated grant schemes, seed funding or simplified access to public and private investment could therefore play a decisive role in enabling returnee-led innovation and the utilisation of their productive skills.

Policies should also account for the specific challenges faced by women. Participants' enthusiasm for more gender-equal policies abroad, such as parental leave arrangements, emphasises the importance of such support in sustaining women's opportunities for professional and civic engagement. Accessible childcare, flexible working arrangements and family-friendly workplace practices are therefore crucial for enabling female returnees to remain engaged. Without such measures, many risk withdrawing from change-oriented activities due to the combined pressures of family responsibilities and the broader difficulties of returning.

More broadly, stronger institutional frameworks, including investments in education, training, and social security, create the structural conditions in which returnees' contributions can take root. By embedding support within both workplaces and public institutions, policies can transform isolated opportunities into long-lasting avenues for change. However, the implementation of such reforms depends on institutional capacity and political will, both of which vary considerably across contexts and may limit the scope or pace of change.

Fostering public awareness and community engagement

Resistance and othering frequently undermined returnees' legitimacy, portraying them as outsiders seeking to impose foreign values. In light of these experiences, we argue that measures aimed at fostering public awareness and facilitating direct community engagement are essential.

Awareness campaigns can highlight the positive contributions of returnees and provide visible examples of successful initiatives. Showcasing how new practices have been adapted locally demonstrates that they are viable solutions with tangible benefits, not alien impositions. This recognition can reduce resistance and encourage more receptive attitudes.

Community engagement initiatives complement these campaigns by creating spaces for dialogue. Workshops, forums, and participatory projects enable returnees and community members to negotiate values and collaborate on shared goals. Such encounters can reduce social distance, build trust and foster a sense of joint ownership of the change process.

By combining public recognition with direct interaction, these measures can help shift perceptions from scepticism to acceptance. They thus create a more enabling environment in which returnees can share new ideas and practices without being marginalised as outsiders.

Taken together, these measures emphasise that the successful transmission of intangible remittances requires more than individual motivation. Policies that provide psychosocial support, foster peer networks, create receptive communities and strengthen professional and institutional frameworks can help stabilise and sustain otherwise fragmented or fragile transmission efforts. This enables the potential of highly skilled female returnees to be supported more effectively, allowing them to make context-dependent contributions to ongoing processes of social change and development.

However, these measures differ in terms of immediacy and feasibility. Returnee networks are structures that can be readily established, even in resource-constrained environments while offering strong impact. They could be facilitated through civil society organisations, existing return migration programmes or diaspora engagement initiatives. Psycho-social support generally requires somewhat greater financial resources, but still involves relatively modest investments and constitutes an important complement to returnee networks. While these can help mitigate many of the emotional challenges associated with re-entry through peer support, professional psychosocial services provide an important additional layer of support for returnees experiencing more severe distress. Broader societal measures, such as public awareness and community engagement initiatives, are also typically less resource-intensive but depend more strongly on prevailing public attitudes and social norms. Their impact therefore tends to be more gradual and context-dependent, as shifts in perceptions and social acceptance often take time to unfold. Professional and institutional reforms, finally, require the greatest financial investments and organisational capacity. Although such reforms are typically more demanding to implement and may take longer to materialise, they have the potential to generate more far-reaching and lasting effects by shaping the structural conditions under which returnees' contributions can be recognised and utilised.

3.2.8 Conclusion

This paper examines the experiences of highly skilled female return migrants from Kosovo and Romania, with a focus on their potential to act as agents of change by transmitting intangible remittances. Migration was described as a profoundly transformative experience that equipped these women with a wide range of socio-cultural, political, economic and environmental resources. Motivated to contribute to their countries of origin, most women actively sought to apply and disseminate these intangible remittances upon their return.

While overall patterns were similar across Kosovo and Romania, some differences emerged that highlight the importance of contextual conditions. The participants from Kosovo generally demonstrated stronger acquisition dynamics, particularly with regard to gender norms, whereas Romanian participants showed comparatively stronger engagement in the political domain. At the same time, transmission levels were largely comparable across both groups, suggesting that contextual constraints in Kosovo slowed down the translation of acquisition into practice.

Generally, returnees' engagement unfolded within challenging environments. Reverse culture shock, widespread lack of support and resistance from local communities constrained their ability to share new ideas, and cumulative frustration led some to become disillusioned or even emigrate again. In this sense, re-emigration can be viewed not merely as an individual decision, but also as an indicator of structural conditions that limit the sustainability of return and the transmission of intangible remittances. However, certain conditions, including preparation, open professional environments, supportive allies, and the pursuit of smaller, more realistic goals, enabled women to maintain their efforts and sustain transmission.

The empirical analysis highlights that returnees have significant potential to contribute to social change which, however, is contingent on supportive environments. Realising this potential requires more than individual determination. It depends on structures being in place that enable returnees to sustain their engagement and translate it into practice. From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that structured forms of support are important. Emotional and psychosocial counselling, peer and returnee networks, awareness and engagement initiatives, and stronger professional and institutional frameworks can stabilise and sustain otherwise fragile transmission efforts. In light of the results, creating such environments is not only a matter of facilitating the reintegration of individuals, but also of strengthening the broader conditions in which the contributions of returnees can take root. Supporting these women's skills and experiences is therefore not only a matter of assisting individual returnees, but also of enabling context-dependent contributions to ongoing processes of social and developmental change in their countries of origin.

Beyond its policy implications, this paper contributes to the remittance and return migration literature by refining our understanding of intangible remittance transmission from a gender-sensitive perspective. Through a differentiated analysis of barriers and enabling factors, it advances a relational and context-sensitive understanding of

returnees' contributions, showing how gendered experiences, individual agency and structural conditions interact to shape the possibilities and limits of social change.

AI Disclosure Statement

AI-based language tools were used for language editing and stylistic refinement in the preparation of this manuscript. All conceptual, analytical and interpretative aspects of the study remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

ANNEXES

Annex 1. Interview Guideline

Background

- Please tell me about your life prior to migration.
- Compared to the 'average' Kosovar/Romanian family: How would you describe your family? Would you consider it more traditional, more progressive, or something in between?
- Where/with whom did you live before migrating?
- How would you describe your standard of living before migrating? Would you consider your family middle-class, above average or facing financial difficulties?

Migration Experience

- What were your primary motivations for migrating?
- Did your family support your decision to migrate?

Acquisition of Potential Intangible Remittances

- How did your life in the country of destination differ from life in your country of origin?
- Were there things in the country of destination that surprised you in a positive or negative way? Please give examples.
- Do you feel changed by your migration experience? Please give examples.
- Where and how did you acquire these ideas/practices?

Transmission of Intangible Remittances

- Did you try to transfer any of the acquired ideas/practices to others after return?
- If yes, which ones?
- If yes, to whom?
- If yes, how?
- If yes, what motivated you to do so?
- If no, why not?

Migration Experience (continued)

- Did you ever experience hostility or unfair treatment during your stay abroad?
- Would you say you appreciate your country of destination?
- How would you judge your time abroad retrospectively (success/failure…)?

Return Experience

- What motivated you to return to Kosovo/Romania?
- How did you experience your return?
- Where/with whom did you live after your return?
- Did you encounter any challenges after return? Please give examples.
- Do people treat you differently since your return? In what ways?
- How do you judge your decision to return today?

Else

- What kind of support would you have wished to receive after return?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Annex 2. Participants' Demographic and Migration Characteristics (Kosovo)

Name	Age	Marital Status	Children	Destination Country	Migration Duration (Months)	Migration Motivation
Linda	26	Single	No	United States	18	Education
Arjeta	31	Single	No	United States	24	Education
Rozafa	26	Single	No	Sweden, United States	30	Education
Emina	29	Single	No	United States	30	Education
Vera	25	Married	No	United States	34	Education
Ardita	33	Single	No	Netherlands, United States	15	Education
Rita	34	Married	No	United States	36	Education
Lindita	24	Single	No	United States	12	Education
Jehona	27	Single	No	United States, United Kingdom	79	Education

Name	Age	Marital Status	Children	Destination Country	Migration Duration (Months)	Migration Motivation
Florentina	28	Single	No	Germany, Sweden	18	Education
Agnesa	26	Single	No	United States	24	Education
Anita	27	Married	No	United States	24	Education
Loreta	37	Married	No	United States	36	Education
Sanije	30	Divorced	No	Belgium, United Kingdom	66	Education
Ndrita	26	Single	No	United States, Germany	23	Education
Vlora	30	Single	No	United States	22	Education
Majlinda	29	Single	No	United States	17	Education
Blerta	35	Married	Yes	Germany	48	Education
Nora	25	Single	No	United States	11	Education
Vjosa	23	Single	No	United States	57	Education
Yeta	24	Married	No	Austria	10	Education
Aferdita	31	Married	Yes	Belgium, Italy	20	Education
Lirika	33	Single	No	United Kingdom	22	Education
Arjola	39	Married	No	United States	27	Education
Flutura	45	Married	Yes	United Kingdom	56	Education
Drita	31	Married	No	Austria, United States	25	Education
Dafina	31	Married	No	Austria, Italy	36	Education
Summary	**Median Age: 29 years**	**26% married**	**11% have children**	**-**	**Median Duration: 24 months**	**-**

Source: Own Compilation
Note: Please note that only migration experiences that meet the study's inclusion criteria are considered. Other experiences, primarily war-related displacement during early childhood, are excluded, as they fall outside the analytical focus of this study.

Participants' Demographic and Migration Characteristics (Romania)

Name	Age	Marital Status	Children	Destination Country	Migration Duration (Months)	Migration Motivation
Elena	31	Married	No	Ireland, Spain	76	Work
Roberta	35	Married	Yes	Norway, Germany	24	Education, Work
Daniela	26	Married	No	Germany	21	Education
Simona	27	Single	No	Germany	54	Education

Name	Age	Marital Status	Children	Destination Country	Migration Duration (Months)	Migration Motivation
Andreea	44	Married	Yes	France, Belgium, Germany	75	Education, Work
Georgiana	30	Single	No	Ireland, Germany	45	Work
Roxana	38	Married	Yes	Germany, United Kingdom	72	Education
Luiza	39	Married	Yes	France, Switzerland	34	Education, Work
Natalia	32	Married	No	Netherlands	48	Education
Iona	33	Single	No	United Kingdom, Sweden	24	Education
Sabina	34	Married	No	Germany	60	Education
Catalina	33	Married	No	Germany, Belgium	66	Education
Raluca	27	Single	No	United Kingdom	36	Education
Oana	28	Single	No	United Kingdom, Switzerland	79	Education
Mihaela	40	Single	No	Belgium, Netherlands	24	Education
Adelina	41	Married	Yes	United Kingdom, Italy	50	Education
Adriana	26	Married	No	United Kingdom	53	Education
Ionela	31	Married	No	Germany	47	Education, Work
Ana	31	Married	No	Austria, Netherlands	75	Education
Anca	40	Single	No	United Kingdom	57	Education
Cristina	31	Married	Yes	France	29	Accompany Partner
Aurelia	31	Single	No	Germany	79	Accompany Partner
Luminita	41	Married	Yes	United Kingdom	9	Education
Florica	39	Single	No	Germany	8	Education
Corina	38	Married	No	Netherlands, Germany	17.5	Education
Maria	22	Single	No	France	12	Education
Summary	**Median Age: 32.5 years**	**58% married**	**31% have children**	**-**	**Median Duration: 47.5 months**	**-**

Source: Own Compilation
Note: Please note that only migration experiences that meet the study's inclusion criteria are considered. Other experiences, primarily war-related displacement during early childhood, are excluded, as they fall outside the analytical focus of this study.

References

Amazan, Rose (2013): Giving women voice: the Ethiopian female skilled diaspora's potential contribution to development. In *Sociologia y Tecnociencia* 3 (3), pp. 77–95.

Arapi-Gjini, Arjola; Möllers, Judith; Herzfeld, Thomas (2020): Measuring Dynamic Effects of Remittances on Poverty and Inequality with Evidence from Kosovo. In *Eastern European Economics* 58 (4), pp. 283–308. DOI: 10.1080/00128775.2020.1720517.

Balderas, Ulyses; Blackburne, Edward (2013): The new female migrants: do they send more money home? A case study for Mexican immigrants in the Houston area. In *The Journal of Developing Areas* 47 (2), pp. 417–428.

Bivand Erdal, Marta; Szulecki, Kacper; Bertelli, Davide; Coșciug, Anatolie; Kussy, Angelina; Mikiewicz, Gabriella; Tulbure, Corina (2022): On the formation of content for 'political remittances': an analysis of Polish and Romanian migrants comparative evaluations of 'here' and 'there'. In *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48 (19), pp. 4485–4502. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2022.2077707.

Boccagni, Paolo; Decimo, Francesca (2013): Mapping social remittances. In *Migrat. Lett.* 10 (1), pp. 1–10. DOI: 10.33182/ml.v10i1.106.

Carling, Jørgen (2005): The gender dimension of international migration. In *Global Migration Perspectives* 35 (1), pp. 1–26.

Carling, Jørgen (2014): Scripting Remittances: Making Sense of Money Transfers in Transnational Relationships. In *International Migration Review* 48 (1_suppl), pp. 218–262. DOI: 10.1111/imre.12143.

CCPI (2025): Climate Change Performance Index 2025. Available online at https://ccpi.org/ranking/, checked on 2/6/2026.

Chaudhary, Ali Razzak; Moss, Dana (2019): Suppressing transnationalism: bringing constraints into the study of transnational political action. In *Comparative Migration Studies* 7 (9), pp. 1–22. DOI: 10.1186/s40878-019-0112-z.

Dannecker, Petra (2009): Migrant visions of development: a gendered approach. In *Popul. Space Place* 15 (2), pp. 119–132. DOI: 10.1002/psp.533.

Diniega, Rachael; Sakdapolrak, Patrick (2025): Social remittances and the environment in the context of climate change: What do we know? Where do we go? In *Climate and Development*, pp. 1–21. DOI: 10.1080/17565529.2024.2449121.

Drbohlav, Dušan; Dzúrová, Dagmar (2023): Social remittances and interpersonal communication: Moldovans in Prague and Turin. In *Geografie* 128 (1), pp. 25–48. DOI: 10.37040/geografie.2023.002.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2022): Kosovo country diagnostic: Private investment challenges and opportunities 2022. London. Available online at https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.ebrd.com/content/dam/ebrd_dxp/assets/pdfs/country-strategies/kosovo/Kosovo-Private-Sector-Diagnostic.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwiUhdnziuKOAxWeRPEDHSfvGb4QFnoECBgQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2u7iz_HbbJKGbB--pJy-JT, checked on 7/29/2025.

Freedom House (2024a): Freedom in the World 2024: Kosovo. Available online at https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/freedom-world/2024, checked on 11/12/2024.

Freedom House (2024b): Freedom in the World 2024: Romania. Available online at https://freedomhouse.org/country/romania/freedom-world/2024, checked on 11/12/2024.

Freedom House (2024c): Freedom in the World 2024: Sweden. Available online at https://freedomhouse.org/country/sweden/freedom-world/2024, checked on 11/12/2024.

Genova, Elena (2020): (New) Bulgarian Enlighteners and Ambassadors? The Reinvention of National Identity in Times of Crisis. In *Int Migr* 58 (1), pp. 76–89. DOI: 10.1111/imig.12592.

Giddens, Anthony (1984): The constitution of society. Outline of the theory of structuration. 1. publ. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Grabowska, Izabela; Garapich, Michał P.; Jaźwińska, Ewa; Radziwinowiczówna, Agnieszka (2017): Migrants as Agents of Change. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Gupta, Sanjeev; Pattillo, Catherine A.; Wagh, Smita (2009): Effect of Remittances on Poverty and Financial Development in Sub-Saharan Africa. In *World Development* 37 (1), pp. 104–115. DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2008.05.007.

Haas, Hein de; Castles, Stephen; Miller, Mark J. (2020): The age of migration. International population movements in the modern world. Sixth edition. London: Red Globe Press.

Hornstein Tomić, Caroline (2023): Remigrant Agency and the Receptivity of Social Remittances. In Vytis Čiubrinskas, Ingrida Gečienė-Janulionė, Caroline Hornstein Tomić, Violetta Parutis (Eds.): Returning - Remitting - Receiving: Social Remittances of Transnational (re)migrants to Croatia, Lithuania, and Poland. Münster: Lit Verlag, pp. 171–202.

Hugo, Graeme (2000): Migration and women's empowerment. In Harriet B. Presser, Gita Sen (Eds.): Women's empowerment and demographic processes. Moving beyond Cairo. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press (International studies in demography), pp. 287–317.

Institutul Național de Statistică (2024): Emigrants by sex and age group (long-term migration). TEMPO-Online Database. Available online at https://statistici.insse.ro, checked on 2/16/2026.

Isaakyan, Irina; Triandafyllidou, Anna (2017): "Sending so much more than money": exploring social remittances and transnational mobility. In *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (15), pp. 2787–2805. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2016.1259491.

Ivlevs, Artjoms (2021): Does Emigration Affect Pro-environmental Behaviour Back Home? A Long-Term, Local-Level Perspective. In *Kyklos* 74 (1), pp. 48–76. DOI: 10.1111/kykl.12257.

Jusufi, Lumnije (2020): Die kosovarischen Schatzis Das Verhältnis zwischen den einheimischen und den ausgewanderten Bevölkerungsgruppen in Kosovo. In *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* (4), pp. 51–66.

Kapur, Devesh (2004): Remittances: The New Development Mantra? G-24 Discussion Paper No. 29. United Nations. New York, Geneva.

King, Russell; Lulle, Aija (2022): Gendering return migration. In Russell King, Katie Kuschminder (Eds.): Handbook of return migration. Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing (Elgar handbooks in migration), pp. 53–69.

Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2011): International migration by sex and age group. ASKdata online database. Available online at https://askdata.rks-gov.net, checked on 2/16/2026.

Krawatzek, Félix; Müller-Funk, Lea (2020): Two centuries of flows between 'here' and 'there': political remittances and their transformative potential. In *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46 (6), pp. 1003–1024. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1554282.

Kuschminder, Katie (2014): Female Return Migration and Reintegration Strategies in Ethiopia (Doctoral Thesis). Maastricht University, Maastricht.

Leutloff-Grandits, Carolin (2025): Migrant Entrepreneurs as Drivers of Wage and Labour Standards: Transnational Normative and Structural Embeddedness for Promoting Development in Kosovo. In *Migration and Development*, Article 21632324251365450. DOI: 10.1177/21632324251365450.

Levitt, Peggy (1998): Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion. In *Int Migration Rev* 32 (4), pp. 926–948.

Lietaer, Samuel; van Praag, Lore; Hut, Elodie; Michellier, Caroline (2025): Migrants' perspectives on environmental change and translocal practices in Morocco, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In *Migrat Stud* 13 (2), Article mnae013, pp. 1–17. DOI: 10.1093/migration/mnae013.

Lindstrom, David P.; Muñoz-Franco, Elisa (2005): Migration and the diffusion of modern contraceptive knowledge and use in rural Guatemala. In *Studies in family planning* 36 (4), pp. 277–288. DOI: 10.1111/j.1728-4465.2005.00070.x.

Meyer, Silke (2023): Introduction: Theorizing Remittances — Social Positioning and the Making of Migrant Subjectivity. In Silke Meyer, Claudius Ströhle (Eds.): Remittances as Social Practices and Agents of Change. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 1–26.

Möllers, Judith; Pinkow-Läpple, Janine; Dufhues, Thomas (2025): Conceptualising Rural Migrant Entrepreneurship: Lessons from Kosovo. In *Migration and Development*, Article 21632324251345622. DOI: 10.1177/21632324251345622.

Mueller, Charlotte; Kuschminder, Katie (2022): Beyond 'Just Comes' and 'Know-It-Alls': Exploring Strategies to Deal with Returnee Stigmas During Diaspora Return Visits for Knowledge Transfer. In *Int. Migration & Integration* 24 (2), pp. 427–443. DOI: 10.1007/s12134-022-00975-w.

Nowicka, Magdalena; Šerbedžija, Vojin (Eds.) (2016): Migration and Social Remittances in a Global Europe. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Orozco, Manuel; Lowell, B. Lindsay; Schneider, Johanna (2006): Gender-Specific Determinants of Remittances: Differences in Structure and Motivation. Report to the World Bank Group. Washington, DC.

Paasche, Erlend (2016): The role of corruption in reintegration: experiences of Iraqi Kurds upon return from Europe. In *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42 (7), pp. 1076–1093. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2016.1139445.

Paca, Dafina (2015): 'Schatzi': Making Meaning of Diaspora. In *JOMEC Journal* 7, pp. 1–17. DOI: 10.18573/j.2015.10005.

Parutis, Violetta; Buler, Marta; Čiubrinskas, Vytis; Hornstein Tomić, Caroline; Gečienė-Janulionė, Ingrida; Nevinskaitė, Laima (2023): Methodology. In Vytis Čiubrinskas, Ingrida Gečienė-Janulionė, Caroline Hornstein Tomić, Violetta Parutis (Eds.): Returning - Remitting - Receiving: Social Remittances of Transnational (re)migrants to Croatia, Lithuania, and Poland. Münster: Lit Verlag, pp. 33–45.

Pérez-Armendáriz, Clarisa; Crow, David (2010): Do Migrants Remit Democracy? International Migration, Political Beliefs, and Behavior in Mexico. In *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (1), pp. 119–148. DOI: 10.1177/0010414009331733.

Pichler, Robert (2009): Migration, Ritual and Ethnic Conflict. A Study of Wedding Ceremonies of Albanian Transmigrants from the Republic of Macedonia. In *Ethnologia Balkanica* 13, pp. 211–229.

Pinkow-Läpple, Janine Isabelle (2023): 'That's so Sexist!' How Highly Skilled Female Return Migrants Try to Shape Gender Norms in Kosovo. In *CEEMR* (12), Article 2, pp. 117–133. DOI: 10.54667/ceemr.2023.05.

Pinkow-Läpple, Janine Isabelle; Möllers, Judith (2025): From social to intangible remittances: toward a comprehensive framework of remittances. In *Comparative Migration Studies* 13 (1). DOI: 10.1186/s40878-025-00484-6.

Rapoport, Hillel; Sardoschau, Sulin; Silve, Arthur (2020): Migration and Cultural Change. CESifo Working Paper No. 8547. Munich Society for the Promotion of Economic Research - CESifo. Munich.

Rydzewski, Robert (2022): Understanding the Albanians' Return to North Macedonia. In *Ethnologia Balkanica* 23, pp. 185–204.

Soysal, Yasemin Nuhoglu (1994): Limits of citizenship: Migrants and postnational membership in Europe. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Spilimbergo, Antonio (2009): Democracy and Foreign Education. In *American Economic Review* 99 (1), pp. 528–543. DOI: 10.1257/aer.99.1.528.

Vanwey, Leah K. (2004): Altruistic and contractual remittances between male and female migrants and households in rural Thailand. In *Demography* 41, pp. 739–756.

Vullnetari, Julie; King, Russell (2011): Gendering remittances in Albania: a human and social development perspective. In *Gender & Development* 19 (1), pp. 39–51. DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2011.554020.

Wong, Madeleine (2014): Navigating return: the gendered geographies of skilled return migration to Ghana. In *Global Networks* 14 (4), pp. 438–457. DOI: 10.1111/glob.12041.

World Bank (2025): GDP per capita (current US$). Available online at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD, checked on 2/26/2025.

World Bank; Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (2018): Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018.

World Economic Forum (2022): Global Gender Gap Report 2023. Geneva. Available online at https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf, checked on 7/29/2025.

Zhunio, Maria Cristina; Vishwasrao, Sharmila; Chiang, Eric P. (2012): The influence of remittances on education and health outcomes: a cross country study. In *Applied Economics* 44 (35), pp. 4605–4616. DOI: 10.1080/00036846.2011.593499.

3.3 Unlocking the development potential of skilled returned migrants in Nigeria's labour market

Nkiru Perpetua Duru and Victor Michael Aihawu

3.3.1 Preface

Return migration has become a defining feature of contemporary mobility in West Africa, with Nigeria occupying a central position as both a major country of emigration and of return. Over the past decade, increasing numbers of Nigerians have returned through voluntary, assisted and forced pathways, often bringing with them skills, resilience and aspirations to rebuild their lives and contribute to their communities. Despite this growing significance, the policy and institutional environment governing return and reintegration in Nigeria remains fragmented, unevenly resourced and insufficiently connected to labour market systems.

This research was undertaken within the framework of the European Training Foundation's (ETF) initiative to examine how migration can contribute to inclusive growth, skills development, and labour market outcomes. It responds to a critical gap in existing policy and research: while reintegration programmes in Nigeria have expanded, they are rarely analysed through a labour market and skills governance lens. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to how institutional coordination, skills recognition and employment structures shape longer-term socio-economic outcomes for returnees.

Empirically, the study draws on qualitative evidence from semi-structured interviews with government institutions, including the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI), Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, alongside civil society and community-based organisations working directly with returnees. These perspectives are complemented by insights from practitioners working directly with returnees at the community level. While returnees lived experiences inform the analysis indirectly through these institutional and frontline perspectives, the primary focus of the study is on governance arrangements, policy implementation and labour market dynamics.

The analytical contribution of this report lies in repositioning return migration as a systemic development and labour market issue rather than a predominantly humanitarian or project-based concern. By examining institutional fragmentation, gendered reintegration experiences and skills mismatches, the study identifies both structural constraints and emerging innovations within Nigeria's reintegration landscape. It argues that when embedded within coherent skills and employment frameworks, return migration can support skill transfer, enterprise development and social inclusion

Ultimately, this research examines the extent to which current reintegration approaches in Nigeria enable returnees to act as agents of development, rather than assuming that such outcomes occur automatically. By critically analysing institutional arrangements, labour market linkages and gendered reintegration experiences, the paper assesses the

conditions under which return migration can contribute to inclusive growth. It is intended that the findings and recommendations will inform policy discussions and support Nigeria's efforts to strengthen nationally owned, labour-market-oriented reintegration frameworks capable of translating return into sustainable development outcomes.

Use of artificial intelligence in the study

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited and supportive capacity during the preparation of this report. Specifically, AI-assisted tools helped to organise qualitative data and to refine the academic language and structural coherence of the manuscript. All empirical data, including interview transcripts, quotations, thematic coding and analytical interpretations were generated, reviewed and validated by the researcher. AI was not used to generate primary data, simulate interviews or produce analytical findings. The researcher retained full responsibility for the study design, methodological choices, interpretation of results and policy conclusions, ensuring that the research adheres to the principles of academic integrity, transparency and ethical research practice.

3.3.2 Literature review and analytical framework

Introduction

Return migration has become an increasingly prominent feature of Nigeria's migration landscape over the past decade. Large numbers of Nigerian nationals have returned through voluntary, assisted and forced channels, driven by changing migration regimes, economic shocks and geopolitical instability in destination countries. While return migration is often framed in policy discourse as a humanitarian or social protection issue, this report positions it primarily as a labour market and skills governance challenge. Existing research suggests that, under certain conditions, return migrants may act as agents of innovation, entrepreneurship and skills transfer (Cassarino, 2004; King & Skeldon, 2010). However, the literature also demonstrates that such outcomes are neither automatic nor uniform. The realisation of development potential is contingent upon enabling labour market institutions, coherent reintegration frameworks and favourable socio-economic conditions in countries of origin.

This study focuses on Nigeria as a strategic case due to the scale of its return migration, the diversity of the return pathways and existing policy architecture on migration and labour. Despite the presence of national migration policies and donor-supported reintegration programmes, evidence suggests a persistent fragmentation between migration governance and labour market institutions. In particular, Nigeria-specific empirical evidence on how reintegration intersects with employment systems, skills recognition and demand-side labour market constraints remains under-examined.

Building on this review, the study aims to examine how return migration is governed and operationalised within Nigeria's labour market and skills ecosystem. The analysis focuses on institutional coordination, gendered reintegration experiences, and the extent to which existing frameworks enable or constrain sustainable employment outcomes

for returnees. By grounding the analysis in qualitative evidence from Nigeria, the study seeks to contribute context-specific insights to ongoing policy debates on aligning return migration governance with labour market development.

This chapter serves two distinct but complementary purposes. First, it synthesises the existing literature and policy evidence on return migration, labour market reintegration, gendered experiences and governance challenges. Second, it presents the analytical framework that guides the study's interpretation of the empirical findings. While the literature review establishes what is currently known, the analytical framework defines how the study conceptualises reintegration processes and examines institutional and labour market dynamics in Nigeria.

Literature review

Return migration and development debates

Return migration has long been framed within migration development studies as a potential driver of innovation, skills transfer and entrepreneurship. Foundational studies argue that returnees may act as agents of change by mobilising financial capital, transnational networks and knowledge acquired abroad. However, empirical evidence shows that development outcomes are contingent rather than automatic.

Research emphasises that the extent to which return migration contributes to economic transformation depends on labour market conditions, institutional support and broader macroeconomic environments. In contexts characterised by high unemployment and weak industrial bases, returnees often struggle to translate the skills acquired into productive employment. Consequently, contemporary literature cautions increasingly against deterministic assumptions that return migration inherently generates development gains.

In the Nigerian context, existing studies highlight the scale and diversity of return flows but show limited systematic analysis of how reintegration intersects with labour market systems. Much of the policy discourse remains focused on short-term assistance rather than long-term employment trajectories.

Labour market reintegration and skills mismatch

A substantial body of research identifies labour market integration as a central determinant of reintegration success. Two dominant explanations emerge from the literature.

First, institutional analyses emphasise weak skills recognition systems. Foreign-acquired competencies often remain unvalidated within domestic qualification frameworks, limiting access to formal employment. Studies highlight the absence of structured recognition of prior learning mechanisms as a major barrier to productive reintegration.

Second, structural perspectives focus on labour market demand constraints. High youth unemployment, limited industrial growth and the dominance of informal employment

reduce opportunities for both returnees and non-migrants. In such contexts, reintegration challenges reflect broader economic conditions rather than returnee-specific deficits.

The evidence from Nigeria suggests that these explanations are mutually reinforcing. Returnees frequently possess practical skills acquired in informal sectors abroad but lack certification that is recognised by employers, while labour markets simultaneously struggle to absorb new entrants. As a result, entrepreneurship becomes the dominant reintegration pathway, albeit often within saturated low-productivity sectors.

Gendered dimensions of reintegration

Gender has emerged as a critical lens in reintegration research. Studies consistently show that female returnees face compounded vulnerabilities, including stigma, economic marginalisation and psychosocial challenges. In many contexts, reintegration policies prioritise protection for trafficking survivors, yet broader structural barriers affecting women's labour market participation remain insufficiently addressed.

In Nigeria, the literature highlights the role of anti-trafficking frameworks in providing shelter and psychosocial services, but also notes persistent gaps in long-term economic inclusion. Limited access to childcare, constrained property rights and occupational segregation restrict women's economic opportunities, reinforcing cycles of dependency and informality.

Scholars increasingly argue that gender-responsive reintegration must move beyond targeted protection toward integrated approaches that address social norms, labour market access and community acceptance.

Governance, policy implementation and institutional coordination

Despite the proliferation of migration policies across many countries, implementation challenges remain pervasive. Research identifies fragmentation, overlapping mandates and donor dependence as recurring obstacles to sustainable reintegration.

Nigeria possesses a comparatively dense migration governance architecture, including national policies and institutional mandates across multiple agencies. However, studies indicate persistent gaps between policy design and operational practice. Data fragmentation, weak interagency coordination and limited subnational institutionalisation hinder long-term planning and monitoring.

Comparative evidence from other regions underscores the importance of decentralised governance structures and community-level engagement in sustaining reintegration outcomes. These findings suggest that reintegration effectiveness depends not only on policy presence but on institutional coherence and vertical coordination.

Identified knowledge gaps

The literature reveals several gaps that this study seeks to address:

- limited empirical analysis linking reintegration directly to labour market systems in Nigeria;

- insufficient examination of institutional coordination across migration and employment actors;
- underexplored distinctions between return pathways and their implications for labour market outcomes;
- a need for integrated analysis of gendered reintegration within broader governance frameworks.

Addressing these gaps requires an analytical lens that treats reintegration as a systemic process embedded within labour markets and governance structures rather than as a stand-alone assistance intervention.

3.3.3 Analytical framework

Conceptualising reintegration as a system

Building on the literature, this study conceptualises reintegration as a multidimensional and systemic process encompassing economic, social and institutional dimensions. Economic reintegration, particularly labour market participation and skills utilisation, is treated as the primary outcome of interest, while social and psychosocial factors are considered enabling conditions that influence labour market access.

This systems perspective moves beyond individual-level explanations to examine how institutional arrangements, labour market structures and governance dynamics jointly shape reintegration trajectories.

Differentiating return pathways

The framework distinguishes between assisted voluntary returnees, forced returnees and self-initiated returnees. These categories are analytically important because return pathways influence access to support, vulnerability profiles and labour market opportunities. By incorporating pathway differentiation, the study avoids treating returnees as a homogeneous population and allows a comparative interpretation of reintegration experiences.

Skills recognition and skills utilisation

A central analytical distinction underpinning the study is between skills recognition and skills utilisation.

- Skills recognition refers to formal or informal processes through which competencies acquired abroad are validated.
- Skills utilisation refers to the extent to which those competencies are productively deployed within the domestic economy.

This distinction enables an analysis of whether reintegration challenges stem primarily from institutional barriers to certification, labour market demand constraints, or a misalignment between the two.

Governance and the institutional coordination lens

The framework situates reintegration within a multi-level governance environment involving migration agencies, labour market institutions, social protection actors and non-state organisations. Reintegration outcomes are interpreted through the degree of coordination, clarity of mandate and alignment of resources across these actors.

Fragmentation is therefore analysed not merely as a funding issue but as a structural characteristic of governance arrangements. This lens guides the interpretation of the policy implementation gaps and institutional behaviour identified in the empirical findings.

Analytical propositions guiding the study

Based on the conceptual model, the study is guided by the following propositions:

1. Reintegration outcomes are shaped more by labour market structures and governance coherence than by individual skills alone.
2. Weak alignment between skills supply and labour demand constrains sustainable employment outcomes for returnees.
3. Gendered social norms and institutional design produce differentiated reintegration trajectories.
4. Policy density does not necessarily translate into effective implementation without coordination mechanisms.

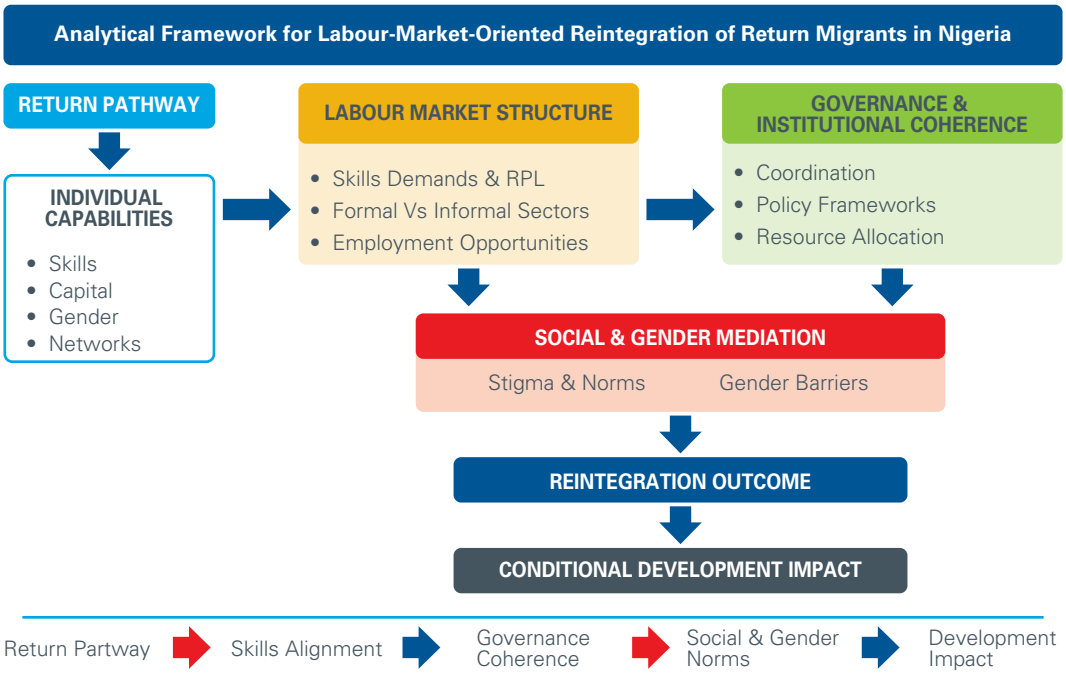
These propositions provide a structured basis for interpreting qualitative evidence and linking empirical findings to broader theoretical debates.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter has distinguished between the state of existing knowledge on return migration and the analytical lens through which the study examines Nigeria's reintegration landscape. The literature review highlights persistent debates around development potential, labour market constraints, gendered experiences and governance challenges. The analytical framework translates these insights into a structured approach for examining how institutional arrangements and labour market dynamics shape reintegration outcomes.

The analytical framework is further demonstrated below.

Figure 14. Analytical framework for labour-market-oriented reintegration of return migrants in Nigeria



Source: AI

From assistance to systems reform: reintegration as a labour market issue

Return migration in Nigeria is primarily managed through short-term assistance programmes, yet sustainable reintegration depends on systemic alignment with national skills and employment frameworks. Evidence from stakeholder interviews and policy analysis indicates that the absence of formal skills recognition pathways, weak labour market absorption capacity and fragmented institutional coordination constrain long-term outcomes. Repositioning reintegration within labour market governance, rather than treating it as a stand-alone humanitarian intervention, is essential to unlocking its development potential.

Source: Author's field research (2025); OECD (2020); ILO (2019); ETF analytical framework.

3.3.4 Methodology

Introduction

This chapter details the methodological approach employed to examine the reintegration of Nigerian returnees within the national labour market and skills ecosystem. Given the study's focus on institutional coordination, labour market absorption and gendered reintegration experiences, a qualitative research design was adopted to enable in-depth exploration of the governance processes, policy implementation dynamics and stakeholder perspectives that are not readily captured through quantitative indicators.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how return migration is governed and operationalised within Nigeria's labour market system. The choice of a qualitative approach was driven by the study's central research questions, which seek to understand:

1. How institutional arrangements shape reintegration outcomes.
2. How labour market dynamics affect skills utilisation among returnees.
3. How gendered experiences influence reintegration trajectories.
4. Where implementation gaps exist between policy frameworks and practice.

These questions require analysis of institutional processes, stakeholder perceptions and governance dynamics rather than numerical measurement alone. Reintegration in Nigeria is mediated by multiple stakeholders operating across migration governance, labour regulation, anti-trafficking systems and community structures. A qualitative design allows examination of how these stakeholders interpret mandates, coordinate (or fail to coordinate) and influence return outcomes in practice.

In the Nigerian context, where data systems remain fragmented and official statistics on labour absorption of returnees are limited, key informant interviews (KIIs) with system-level stakeholders provide the most feasible and analytically appropriate method for understanding governance and labour market processes.

Justification for design in the Nigerian context

The Nigerian reintegration landscape is institutionally complex, involving federal ministries, specialised agencies, state actors, donor-supported programmes and community organisations. In order to perform a systems-level analysis, it is therefore important to engage with those who shape policy implementation and labour market access.

Key informant interviews were selected as the primary method because:

- reintegration governance is highly institutionalised and policy-driven;

- labour market absorption depends on employer perceptions and sectoral demand;
- coordination challenges cannot be observed without direct institutional testimony.

While returnees were interviewed directly (see Section 3.4), the study's primary analytical focus was governance and labour market systems rather than individual life histories. For this reason, the selected design, combining institutional KIIs with a smaller number of returnee interviews, provides an optimal balance between systems analysis and experiential validation.

Study area and scope

The study was conducted in Nigeria between August and November 2025. Interviews were carried out with participants located in Abuja (federal institutions), Lagos State, Edo State and Enugu State. These locations were selected due to:

- their relevance to migration governance and return processing (Abuja),
- the high incidence of return migration (Lagos and Edo),
- the existence of community-based reintegration structures (Enugu).

Although the analysis reflects national frameworks, the empirical base is concentrated in these strategic locations. The scope is therefore national in institutional focus but geographically selective.

Study population and participant distribution

A total of 25 participants were interviewed. The distribution across stakeholder categories was as follows:

- government institutions (8 participants),
- civil society organisations and NGOs (6 participants),
- private-sector representatives and skills development institutions (4 participants),
- community leaders and local stakeholders (3 participants),
- returnees (4 participants).

Returnees were directly interviewed through semi-structured interviews conducted over the telephone and in person in Lagos State. Participants included three individuals who returned through assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes, and one self-returnee. Their accounts were used to contextualise institutional narratives rather than to generate representative experiential claims.

This distribution reflects the study's systems-level orientation but introduces a recognised imbalance toward institutional stakeholders. This potential bias is addressed through triangulation and explicit limitations (Section 3.9).

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were selected using judgemental, snowball and criterion-based sampling. Selection criteria included:

- direct involvement in migration governance, reintegration programming or labour market intermediation;
- minimum of one year of employment in the relevant institution;
- for returnees: return within the past five years through voluntary, assisted or self-initiated pathways.

Institutional participants were recruited via formal invitation letters and professional networks. Civil society and private-sector representatives were identified through programme documentation and stakeholder referrals. Returnees were recruited through civil society organisation (CSO) intermediaries and the snowball method to ensure ethical access and safeguard participants' well-being.

Data saturation was assessed iteratively. After approximately 20 interviews, a thematic recurrence became evident, with no substantially new categories emerging. Five additional interviews were conducted to confirm thematic stability.

Data collection procedures

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Twelve interviews were conducted in person, and twelve were conducted virtually via secure online platforms. All interviews were conducted in English. With the interviewees' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Where recording was not permitted (two cases), detailed contemporaneous notes were taken.

The interview guide was tailored to the category of stakeholder but structured around five thematic domains that were aligned with the research questions:

- reintegration trajectories and return pathways
- labour market absorption and skills recognition
- gender-specific reintegration barriers
- governance and implementation dynamics
- stakeholder-generated reform proposals

Documentary analysis complemented the interviews. Policy documents, standard operating procedures (SOPs), national frameworks and programme reports were reviewed to triangulate stakeholder claims and identify inconsistencies between formal policy design and operational practice.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis proceeded through six iterative stages: familiarisation, coding, category development, theme construction, theme refinement, and analytical synthesis.

In practice, transcripts were uploaded into NVivo and coded using a hybrid approach, involving the following:

- deductive codes derived from the literature and research questions (e.g. labour absorption, stigma, coordination failure, gender vulnerability);
- inductive codes emerging directly from participant narratives (e.g. 'data silos', 'donor dependence', 'skills without certificates').

Themes were refined by comparing across stakeholder groups to identify convergences and divergences. Institutional claims were cross-checked against returnee accounts and documentary evidence. Analytical memos were maintained throughout to document interpretive decisions, enhancing transparency.

Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any stage. Anonymity was ensured by removing personal identifiers and generalising institutional references where disclosure could compromise confidentiality.

The researcher maintained a reflexive awareness of professional experience within migration systems and took deliberate steps to mitigate bias, including neutral questioning and cross-validation of interpretations.

Limitations and interpretive boundaries

The study's findings should be interpreted in the light of several limitations. First, the sample is weighted toward institutional stakeholders, which may privilege governance perspectives over lived experience. Although the returnees were interviewed directly, the number of returnees (four) does not permit a broad experiential generalisation.

Second, the geographic focus on selected high-return states limits insight into regional variation. Third, reliance on qualitative methods restricts statistical generalisability but enhances explanatory depth.

These limitations shape interpretation: conclusions should be understood as system-level analytical insights rather than population-level claims about all Nigerian returnees.

Conclusion

The methodological design, anchored in purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis and systematic thematic coding, was appropriate for examining how reintegration operates within Nigeria's labour market and governance architecture. By explicitly linking research design to research questions and ensuring transparency in data collection and analysis procedures, the study balances policy relevance with academic rigour.

3.3.5 Data analysis and results

Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the thematic analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with federal and state government officials (n=8), civil society stakeholders (n=6), private sector representatives (n=4), community leaders (n=3) and returnees (n=4), alongside documentary analysis of national migration policies and operational frameworks. The analysis is structured around five themes aligned with the study's research questions: (i) reintegration trajectories and return pathways; (ii) labour market absorption and skills recognition; (iii) gender-specific reintegration barriers; (iv) governance and implementation dynamics; and (v) stakeholder-generated reform proposals.

Across themes, respondents described a reintegration ecosystem that is institutionally dense but operationally fragmented. Unless otherwise indicated, findings reflect recurring views across multiple stakeholder categories rather than isolated opinions.

While the themes are presented separately for analytical clarity, the data consistently revealed that reintegration outcomes emerge from the interaction of institutional coordination, labour market opportunity structures and gendered social norms. In practice, governance fragmentation shapes the availability and continuity of support services, which in turn influences labour market entry, while gendered expectations mediate both access to programmes and employer perceptions. This interdependence underscores that reintegration trajectories cannot be understood through single-factor explanations.

Reintegration trajectories and return pathways

Findings show that return pathways – voluntary, assisted and forced – significantly shape reintegration starting points. Assisted returnees often accessed short-term support packages, whereas spontaneous returnees relied heavily on family networks. However, stakeholders noted that programme timelines rarely aligned with the duration required for sustainable socio-economic reintegration.

Data from the interviews suggests that pathway differences are amplified by governance discontinuities: where institutional handovers between agencies were weak, returnees

experienced service gaps that delayed their re-entry into the labour market. For women returnees, these discontinuities were compounded by social stigma, which constrained both livelihood opportunities and psychosocial recovery.

Labour market absorption and skills recognition

Respondents widely agreed that labour market absorption remains the most decisive determinant of long-term reintegration success. Barriers to this include limited job creation, little recognition of skills acquired abroad, and employers' perceptions of risk regarding returnees' reliability.

The findings indicate that labour market challenges are not solely economic but are also institutionally mediated. Fragmented programme ownership reduced the alignment between training initiatives and actual market demand, while gender norms further shaped occupational segmentation, particularly restricting women to low-income sectors. Thus, labour market integration operates at the intersection of economic structure and governance coordination.

Gender-specific reintegration barriers

Gendered stigma, particularly affecting women perceived to have migrated irregularly or experienced exploitation, emerged as a pervasive theme. Women reported social surveillance, limited mobility and difficulties accessing capital or employment.

Gender constraints were closely linked to institutional design. Programmes often treated women primarily as vulnerable beneficiaries rather than as economic participants, limiting their access to skills pathways that matched labour market demand. This demonstrates how governance frameworks can inadvertently reinforce gendered labour exclusion.

Governance and implementation dynamics

Stakeholders described overlapping institutional mandates, donor-driven programme cycles, and weak vertical coordination between federal and state levels. While policies exist, implementation continuity remains uneven.

Governance fragmentation emerged as a cross-cutting driver influencing all other themes. Institutional silos reduced programme coherence, constrained labour market linkages and limited gender-responsive programming. Reintegration outcomes therefore reflected systemic coordination challenges rather than isolated policy gaps.

Stakeholder-generated reform proposals

Participants emphasised the need for nationally owned frameworks, private sector engagement, longer-term funding horizons and improved data systems.

Notably, many of the proposed reforms implicitly recognised system interdependencies, calling simultaneously for governance coordination, labour market alignment and gender-responsive design, thereby reinforcing the study's finding that reintegration effectiveness depends on policy coherence across sectors.

Summary of findings

The evidence indicates that Nigeria's reintegration ecosystem is institutionally layered but structurally fragmented. Labour market barriers reflect both credential recognition gaps and broader absorptive constraints. Gender significantly shapes reintegration trajectories, particularly through stigma and labour market segmentation. While policy frameworks are extensive, implementation deficits stem from mandate segmentation, funding instability and weak vertical coordination.

3.3.6 Discussion of findings

Introduction

This chapter interprets the empirical findings in relation to the dominant studies on return migration, reintegration governance, labour market systems and gendered migration. While many findings align with established migration-development frameworks, the Nigerian case introduces important nuances concerning institutional mandate fragmentation, vertical governance gaps, labour absorptive constraints and the socio-moral regulation of female returnees. Rather than treating reintegration failure as a purely financial or donor-driven issue, the findings suggest deeper structural and institutional dynamics that shape reintegration outcomes.

The discussion adopts a systems perspective, arguing that reintegration outcomes are shaped by the interaction between governance arrangements, labour market structures and gender norms. This approach moves beyond linear explanations and situates reintegration within a broader development context.

Reintegration as institutional fragmentation rather than a temporary deficit

The study confirms global evidence that reintegration programmes are often short-term and donor-dependent. However, findings show that the core constraint lies less in resource scarcity than it does in institutional segmentation, which disrupts service continuity and accountability.

Fragmentation has cascading effects: it weakens labour market linkages by limiting coordination with employers and training institutions, and it reduces the effectiveness of gender-responsive programming. Thus, institutional architecture directly conditions both economic and social reintegration outcomes.

The labour market is structural rather than individual

The findings align with broader African research demonstrating weak labour absorptive capacity (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). However, the Nigerian case complicates narratives that frame the underemployment of returnees primarily as a skills mismatch problem.

The evidence suggests that labour market exclusion reflects the macroeconomic structure as much as individual credential deficits. High youth unemployment, informal sector dominance and limited industrial growth constrain absorptive capacity for both returnees and non-migrants. This indicates that reintegration cannot be analytically isolated from national employment regimes.

The absence of a recognition of prior learning (RPL) framework reinforces underemployment, which is consistent with OECD (2020) findings on skills recognition gaps. However, the Nigerian case adds nuance: employers' reliance on formal certification functions both as a means of mitigating risk and as regulatory compliance in a weakly standardised labour market. Thus, the limited recognition of returnees' foreign-acquired skills should not be interpreted solely as an administrative failure. Instead, it is embedded within employers' risk calculus 'within a volatile economy

Entrepreneurship-focused reintegration strategies reflect this structural constraint. While Kuschminder (2017) critiques entrepreneurship models for reproducing precarious livelihoods, the evidence in Nigeria suggests that entrepreneurship becomes the default not because it is preferred, but because formal labour integration pathways are limited – in other words, reintegration programming adapts to the economic structure rather than shaping it.

In short, this study confirms global evidence that reintegration programmes are often short-term and donor-dependent. However, the findings show that the core constraint lies less in the scarcity of resources than in institutional segmentation, which disrupts service continuity and accountability.

Fragmentation has cascading effects: it weakens labour market linkages by limiting coordination with employers and training institutions, and it reduces the effectiveness of gender-responsive programming. Thus, institutional architecture directly conditions both economic and social reintegration outcomes.

Gendered reintegration as socio-institutional regulation

The study highlights how women returnees encounter layered constraints arising from stigma, caregiving expectations and programme design biases. This supports feminist migration literature which emphasise the social regulation of mobility.

Gendered outcomes cannot be separated from governance and labour market dynamics. Where institutional coordination is weak, gender-sensitive services become fragmented, limiting women's access to economic opportunities and reinforcing occupational segmentation.

Global studies consistently document the gendered dimensions of reintegration (Piper, 2008). The Nigerian findings confirm the existence of heightened stigma, trauma exposure and labour exclusion among female returnees. However, the study contributes three context-specific insights.

Firstly, stigma in Nigeria appears to be strongly tied to moralised interpretations of irregular migration routes, particularly in states with entrenched trafficking narratives. Female returnees are not merely perceived as economically unsuccessful but as morally transgressive. This socio-moral framing intensifies the exclusion of such women in a way that goes beyond economic marginalisation.

Secondly, institutional gender responsiveness remains focused on trafficking. While anti-trafficking frameworks provide targeted support, non-trafficked female returnees fall outside specialised assistance regimes. This creates a bifurcated gender response structure, where women's vulnerability must be legally categorised in order for them to receive support.

Thirdly, labour market exclusion intersects with land tenure systems and informal employment patterns in ways that amplify gender disadvantage. Women's limited property rights and sectoral concentration in low-income informal work reinforce the fragility of their reintegration.

These findings add to the existing literature by showing how gendered reintegration in Nigeria is shaped not only by patriarchal norms but by institutional design and property regimes.

Reintegration governance as a multi-level coordination challenge

The findings illustrate that the effectiveness of reintegration policies depends on vertical coordination across national and sub-national stakeholders, and on horizontal collaboration with labour market institutions and civil society.

A holistic perspective reveals that governance, labour markets and gender norms function as mutually reinforcing domains. Improvements in one area, such as stronger institutional coordination, are likely to yield positive spillovers in employment outcomes and gender equity.

Implications for migration development theory

The study contributes to migration development debates by demonstrating that the developmental potential of return migration is contingent on institutional coherence and labour market inclusivity rather than on returns themselves.

This reinforces a relational understanding of reintegration, where developmental outcomes emerge from policy alignment across sectors rather than from isolated interventions.

Chapter summary

Overall, the discussion shows that reintegration outcomes are shaped by systemic interactions between governance capacity, labour market opportunity structures and gendered social norms. Sustainable reintegration therefore requires coordinated reforms that address these dimensions simultaneously rather than sequentially.

Conclusion

The discussion demonstrates that Nigeria's reintegration ecosystem is characterised less by policy absence than by institutional segmentation, labour absorptive limitations, gendered socio-moral stigma and weak vertical coordination. While the findings align with the literature on global reintegration, they contribute context-specific evidence on mandate fragmentation, trafficking-centric gender responses, employer risk rationality and the politicisation of reintegration data.

Most importantly, the study challenges the automatic association between return migration and development. In the Nigerian case, developmental potential is conditional, dependent on governance coherence, labour market alignment and social inclusion. Without these structural foundations, reintegration remains uneven and development gains remain aspirational rather than realised.

3.3.7 Conclusion and recommendations

Introduction

This chapter synthesises the study's central findings and clarifies their analytical implications for academic studies and policy in this area. Rather than proposing an implementation roadmap, it differentiates between conclusions that are strongly grounded in the evidence and those that remain conditional or context-dependent, while acknowledging how the study's methodological scope shapes the strength of its claims.

The research examined how reintegration structures, labour market dynamics, gendered constraints and governance arrangements influence the developmental potential of return migration in Nigeria. The findings suggests that the developmental outcomes are contingent upon institutional coherence, the absorptive capacity of the labour market and social inclusion dynamics.

Evidence-based conclusions

Reintegration in Nigeria is structurally fragmented

One of the most robust findings, supported consistently across all groups of stakeholders, is that reintegration in Nigeria is discontinuous beyond the reception phase. Institutional mandates are segmented, long-term socioeconomic follow-up remains weak,

and coordination across agencies is inconsistent. This conclusion is strongly grounded in recurring evidence from interviews and a documentary review which, together, indicate a systemic rather than incidental discontinuity.

Importantly, the data suggests that fragmentation is not solely the result of donor dependence. Although the volatility of international funding plays a contributory role, structural mandate segmentation and the absence of vertical integration at state and community levels emerged as equally significant explanatory factors. This interpretation is well supported by institutional interviews; however, it reflects a systems-level perspective rather than ethnographic evidence from large numbers of returnees.

Gender significantly shapes reintegration trajectories

The study presents consistent evidence that female returnees experience compounded challenges, particularly stigma, economic exclusion and limited access to gender-responsive services when outside of trafficking frameworks. This conclusion is substantiated by civil society organisations (CSOs), interviews with community leaders and limited testimonies from returnees.

The findings contribute to the existing literature by highlighting how trafficking-centred institutional design may inadvertently marginalise non-trafficked female returnees and prevent them from accessing structured support. Although this insight is grounded in qualitative evidence, its broader applicability across all states remains inferential, given the study's geographical focus.

Policy density does not guarantee implementation coherence

Nigeria possesses extensive migration governance instruments, and yet the data indicates that the presence of policy does not translate into operational integration. Fragmented data systems, weak interagency coordination and limited subnational institutionalisation undermine implementation.

This conclusion is strongly supported by institutional interviews. However, because the sample is weighted toward federal stakeholders, the analysis reflects governance perspectives more than community-level operational realities.

Labour market absorption is structurally constrained

The study presents credible evidence that returnees encounter barriers in accessing formal employment, in particular barriers such as limited industrial absorptive capacity, employers' reliance on formal certification and the absence of operational recognition of prior learning (RPL) mechanisms. These factors collectively illustrate structural constraints within the employment system rather than isolated individual disadvantages. However, the findings also indicate that these constraints are not unique to returnees; they are symptomatic of labour market weaknesses affecting the general population. These situate the employment challenges of returnees within Nigeria's wider microeconomic structure, indicating that integration outcomes are embedded in systemic economic conditions. While the data substantiates the existence of barriers to skills recognition,

the extent to which these translate into large-scale 'brain waste' cannot be conclusively determined within the scope of this study. This limitation arises from the relatively small number of employer interviews, which restricts the evidentiary basis for assessing labour market demand and utilisation of returnees' skills.

Interpreting developmental potential with caution

A central aim of the study was to examine whether return migration contributes to development. The findings indicate that developmental potential exists in principle, and that returnees possess skills, transnational exposure and entrepreneurial experience. However, the transition of these attributes into tangible outcomes appears to be conditional rather than automatic.

The evidence does not demonstrate that return migration currently generates measurable development gains at scale. Rather, it points to structural constraints, including labour market configuration, governance fragmentation and social stigma, which mediate or limit the impact of such gains. Developmental contribution, therefore, is more appropriately conceptualised as contingent on systemic alignment rather than as an inherent characteristic of return migration itself.

This conclusion is partly inferential: the study did not incorporate the longitudinal measurement of economic outcomes or quantitative income tracking. Accordingly, any assertions concerning national development effects should be interpreted as analytically-derived propositions rather than empirically-substantiated findings

Context-specific policy implications

The findings generate several policy implications, but these should be framed as context-sensitive inferences rather than universally applicable prescriptions.

This is the case because, firstly, fragmentation appears to be structurally embedded within the institutional architecture, suggesting that incremental funding increases alone are unlikely to resolve reintegration discontinuities. The evidence instead points to mandate ambiguity and weak vertical coordination as underlying constraints. This implication follows directly from the institutional patterns observed in the study.

Secondly, labour market alignment emerges as being more critical than the expansion of entrepreneurship programmes in already saturated sectors. However, given Nigeria's broader employment challenges, reintegration reforms cannot substitute macroeconomic restructuring. The implication is therefore conditional: while strengthening skills recognition mechanisms may enhance individual level outcomes, systemic absorptive limits are likely to persist in the absence of wider labour market reforms.

Thirdly, gender-responsive programming appears to be constrained by a predominantly trafficking-centred orientation. If reintegration equity is to improve, a broader conceptualisation may be necessary. Although this inference is well supported within the study's qualitative scope, its robustness would benefit from testing a wide range of state-level contexts

Fourthly, decentralised engagement with communities is associated with enhanced social acceptance and longer-term sustainability. This conclusion is grounded in community leader testimony, although a comparative subnational analysis would be required to establish its broader validity.

Overall, these implications are specific to Nigeria's institutional architecture and labour market context. While similar conclusions appear in global reintegration literature, their relevance here derives from the empirically observed mandate segmentation, certification barriers and stigma patterns documented in this study.

Methodological limits and their implications

Several limitations structure the interpretation of this study's conclusions. The sample size (25 interviews), while appropriate for exploratory qualitative research, constrains statistical generalisability. Institutional stakeholders are overrepresented relative to returnees, potentially privileging governance narratives over lived-experience accounts. The limited number of interviews with direct returnees further restricts the capacity to extrapolate psychosocial findings across heterogeneous return pathways.

In addition, the absence of longitudinal outcome tracking and a quantitative labour market analysis narrows the evidentiary basis of the findings. Consequently, claims regarding development impact remain analytically grounded yet lack econometric substantiation. Taken together, these constraints position the findings as system-level interpretations and provisional hypotheses for further empirical testing, rather than as definitive national-level measurements.

Final reflection

This study does not conclude that return migration currently drives development in Nigeria. Rather, it demonstrates that the developmental promise of return migration is mediated by governance coherence, labour market structure and social inclusion dynamics. The findings suggest that reintegration in Nigeria operates within a reception-oriented, project-dependent and unevenly institutionalised framework. The labour market barriers observed are indicative of structural economic constraints rather than of individual returnee deficits, while gendered stigma and institutional design shape differentiated reintegration trajectories.

Accordingly, the developmental potential of return migration emerges less as a function of programme expansion and more as an outcome of institutional alignment and structural configuration. The extent to which such alignment is politically and economically feasible lies beyond the analytical scope of this study and warrants further investigation. Return migration is thus conceptualised not as an automatic development asset, but as a conditional opportunity, contingent upon systemic coherence rather than aspirational policy intent.

Tables

Known historical return data for Nigerian nationals

Year	Nigerians ordered to leave the EU	Nigerians returned from the EU	Returned to third countries
2008	15,765	5,820	5,265
2009	16,195	5,850	4,910
2010	16,590	6,140	5,205
2011	13,765	6,045	5,095
2012	12,450	5,700	4,665
2013	12,490	6,055	4,850
2014	13,830	4,590	3,860
2015	12,915	4,605	3,770
2016	11,450	3,820	3,015

Source: ICMPD policy brief

These numbers come from International Organization for Migration and European Union External Action Service programmes that facilitate assisted voluntary returns.

Period	Assisted returns to Nigeria (IOM/EU-IOM programme)
2017-2021	22,500 returnees under the EU-IOM initiative

These are people who returned voluntarily with support from the IOM/EU.

Asylum application trend – Nigeria to the EU

Whilst not constituting data on actual returns, asylum claims offer insight into migration flows from Nigeria to the EU.

Year	Nigerian asylum applications (Ireland only)
2014	140
2015	185
2016	175
2017	185
2018	250
2019	385
2020	210
2021	450
2022	1,105
2023	2,080
2024	4,015

These figures are for Ireland only (OECD asylum data) and show increasing Nigerian migration pressure in parts of the EU.

Year	Ordered to leave EU	Returned from EU	Returned to third countries	Context notes
2015	12,915	4,605	3,770	Eurostat historical table
2016	11,450	3,820	3,015	Eurostat historical table
2017–2021	Not published in table	Assisted voluntary returns rise via IOM	~22,500 total assisted t0 2021	
2022–2024	Exact table not available to the public	IOM ASSISTED returns in 2024 ~4,760 (all destinations)		

Source: EEAS

Year	Irregular arrivals to EU (all nationalities)	Nigerian asylum applicants (EU)	Returns to Nigeria / Total returns	Notes
2015	~1,000,000+	Not separately published	—	EU migration crisis peak; Nigerians significant among West African migrants
2016	—	~48,885	—	Nigeria among top asylum applicant countries in EU
2017	—	High / continued	—	Asylum applications remained elevated after 2016 peak
2018	↓ from crisis	—	—	Overall EU irregular flows declined
2019	↓	—	—	Continued low/moderate arrivals
2020	Low (COVID19 impact)	~9,610	~7,845	Return orders include some Nigerian migrants
2021	—	—	—	Irregular flows began increasing slightly post-COVID restrictions
2022	Rising	—	—	Irregular flows and migration activity increase overall
2023	~239,000	—	~91,000	EU irregular arrivals; total returns (non-EU)

Year	Irregular arrivals to EU (all nationalities)	Nigerian asylum applicants (EU)	Returns to Nigeria / Total returns	Notes
2024	~239,000	—	~110,000	Return numbers increasing; EU AVRR programmes active
2025	~154,502	Mid-year ~33% repeat applications	~70,000 (IOM cumulative)	Irregular arrivals lower; Nigerian returns cumulative via IOM

Source: IOM, OECD EUAA

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Interview guide for government agencies

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Do you consent to proceed and to have this discussion recorded?

1. What data does your agency hold on returnees (voluntary vs deported), and how is it managed and shared?
2. What processes exist for reception, registration, and inter-state coordination of returnees?
3. How are returnees' skills assessed and linked to employment or training?
4. What reintegration programmes exist, and how are they funded and evaluated?
5. What are the main coordination or capacity challenges?
6. How are gender-specific needs addressed?
7. What policy reforms are needed to improve reintegration outcomes?

Annex 2: Interview guide for the private sector

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Do you consent to proceed and to have this discussion recorded?

1. How do return migration trends affect labour supply in your sector?
2. Do returnees' skills align with industry needs?
3. How does your organisation assess candidates with foreign experience?
4. What role does your company play in supporting returnees?
5. What challenges do returnees face in accessing jobs?
6. Are there gender-specific barriers in employment?
7. What incentives would increase private sector engagement?

Annex 3: Interview guide for returnees

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Do you consent to proceed and to have this discussion recorded?

1. Can you describe your return experience and reception?
2. What skills did you gain abroad, and are you using them?

3. What economic activities are you engaged in?
4. What support did you receive, and was it adequate?
5. What are your main reintegration challenges?
6. Has your experience differed due to gender?
7. What changes would improve reintegration?

Annex 4: Interview guide for community stakeholders

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Do you consent to proceed and to have this discussion recorded?

1. What patterns of return migration do you observe?
2. How are returnees integrating economically?
3. What local support systems exist?
4. How are returnees perceived socially?
5. What barriers hinder reintegration?
6. Are there gender differences in treatment?
7. What can communities do to improve reintegration?

Annex 5: Interview guide for CSOs

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Do you consent to proceed and to have this discussion recorded?

1. What categories of returnees do you serve?
2. What reintegration services do you provide?
3. How do you support employment or livelihoods?
4. How do you collaborate with other actors?
5. What systemic challenges limit reintegration?
6. How do you address gender-specific needs?
7. What improvements are needed?

Annex 6: Interview guide for development partners

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Do you consent to proceed and to have this discussion recorded?

1. What trends and vulnerabilities do you observe?
2. What programmes do you support for reintegration?
3. How do you coordinate with government and CSOs?
4. What works well and what are limitations?
5. What structural challenges exist?
6. How is gender integrated?
7. What strategic changes are needed?

Annex 7: Interview guide for female-focused CSOs

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Do you consent to proceed and to have this discussion recorded?

1. What types of female returnees do you support?
2. How do you support women's livelihoods?
3. What specialised services do you provide?
4. What are the main gender-specific challenges?
5. How do social norms affect reintegration?
6. How do you engage in policy processes?
7. What targeted interventions are needed?

Annex 8: List of institutions and organisations interviewed

Government institutions

- National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI)
- National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)
- Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment (FMLE)
- Nigeria in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM)
- Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Reduction (FMHAPR)
- National Directorate of Employment (NDE)
- Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corp (NSCDC)
- Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN)

Civil Society and Community-Based Organisations

- Girls' Power Initiative (GPI)
- Ihuoma Girls' Care and Support Initiative

- Patriotic Citizen Initiative (PCI)
- Web of Heart
- Society for the Empowerment of Young Persons (SEYP)
- Family Life and Community Health Society (FLACHS)

References

African Development Bank Group (2022), African economic outlook 2022: Supporting climate resilience and a just energy transition in Africa, AfDB.

African Union (n.d.), ECOWAS Draft Labour Migration Strategy. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44767-doc-ECOWAS_Draft_Labour_Migration_Strategy.pdf

Black, R., Gent, S. & Choudhury, M. R. (2006), Migration, return and development in West Africa, Sussex Centre for Migration Research.

Business Insider Africa (2024), 10 foreign countries with the largest Nigerian population. Available at: https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/lifestyle/foreign-countries-with-the-largest-nigerian-population/wkl0z2g

Carling, J., & Talleraas, C. (2016), Root causes and drivers of migration, Peace Research Institute Oslo.

Cassarino, J.-P. (2004), Theorising return migration: The conceptual approach to return migrants revisited, International Journal on Multicultural Societies, 6(2), 253–279.

Cassarino, J.-P. (2014), A reappraisal of return migration: Bringing social capital, resource mobilisation and preparedness back into the debate, International Migration, 52(2), 1–16. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12164

Duru, N. P. (2024), ETF Interview Responses for Government Agencies, Primary dataset.

European Training Foundation (2020), Skills, migration and development: A review of policies and practices, ETF.

European Training Foundation (2023), Labour mobility and skills governance in Africa, ETF.

GAPs Migration Project (n.d.), Reassessing Return Migration Governance: Insights on Nigeria's Return Migration Infrastructures. Available at: https://www.returnmigration.eu/wp-series/insights-on-nigerias-return-migration-infrastructures

GAPs Migration Project (2024). The 2024 National Migration Dialogue in Nigeria: Beyond Borders – Celebrating Migrants' Legacy, Protecting Their Rights. Available at: https://www.returnmigration.eu/gaps-news/gaps-team-member-unn-shaping-the-future-of-return-migration

Ijahaas (2024), Return Migration and Diasporic Reintegration in Nigeria. Available at: https://ijahss.net/assets/files/1744830004.pdf

International Labour Organization (2018), Global estimates on international migrant workers, ILO.

International Labour Organization (2021), World employment and social outlook: Trends 2021, ILO.

International Organization for Migration (2017), Towards an integrated approach to reintegration in the context of return, IOM.

International Organization for Migration (2020), Nigeria: Return and reintegration factsheet, IOM Nigeria Mission.

International Organization for Migration (2022), World migration report 2022, IOM.

International Organization for Migration / Maastricht University (2023), Returning Female Migrants Face More Reintegration Challenges than Men. Available at: https://cris.maastrichtuniversity.nl/en/clippings/returning-female-migrants-face-more-reintegration-challenges-than

ITCILO (2023), New Research Reports on Reintegration Policies and Mechanisms in Morocco and Tunisia. Available at: https://www.itcilo.org/news/new-research-reports-reintegration-policies-and-mechanisms-morocco-and-tunisia

Journal of International Migration and Integration (2022), Performing a 'Returnee' in Benin City, Nigeria. Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12134-022-00976-9

King, R. (2000), Generalizations from the history of return migration, B. Ghosh (Ed.), Return migration: Journey of hope or despair? United Nations, pp. 7–55

MIGNEX (2023), Migration-Related Policies in Nigeria (Version 2.0). Available at: https://www.mignex.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/d053f-mbp-migration-related-policies-in-nigeria-v2_0.pdf

National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (2023), Annual report, Government of Nigeria

National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Labour force statistics: Unemployment and underemployment report, Government of Nigeria

National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI) (n.d.), NCFRMI website: https://ncfrmidps.com.ng/wp/

Nigeria in Diaspora Commission (2021), Diaspora data mapping initiative report, Government of Nigeria

OECD (2017), Talent abroad: A review of Moroccan emigrants, OECD Publishing

OECD (2018), Perspectives on global development 2019: Rethinking development strategies, OECD Publishing

OECD (2022), International migration outlook 2022, OECD Publishing

OECD (2024), Return, Reintegration and Re-Migration. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2017/02/talent-abroad-a-review-of-moroccan-emigrants_g1g6ecdb/9789264264281-en.pdf

OECD (2017), Talent Abroad: A Review of Moroccan Emigrants. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2017/02/talent-abroad-a-review-of-moroccan-emigrants_g1g6ecdb/9789264264281-en.pdf

OpenEdition Journals (2022), Education Mismatch and Return Migration in Egypt and Tunisia. Available at: https://journals.openedition.org/eps/7110

Punch Newspapers (2025), IOM: 4,760 stranded Nigerians returned home in 2024. Available at: https://punchng.com/4760-nigerians-stranded-abroad-returned-in-2024-iom/

ResearchGate (2022), Return Migration and the Challenges of Diasporic Reintegration in Nigeria. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358255303_Return_migration_and_the_challenges_of_diasporic_reintegration_in_Nigeria

ResearchGate (2024), From Policy to Reality: Examining the Rippling Effects of Return Migration Governance in Nigeria. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386456448_From_Policy_to_Reality_Examining_the_Rippling_Effects_of_Return_Migration_Governance_in_Nigeria

Skeldon, R. (2008), International migration as a tool in development policy: A passing phase? Population and Development Review, 34(1), 1–18.

Springer Nature (2023), Rethinking Women's Return Migration: Evidence from Tunisia and Morocco. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/15/7/180

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2023), International migration 2023 highlights, United Nations.

World Bank (2020), COVID-19 crisis through a migration lens, World Bank.

World Bank (2021), Managed Labor Migration Can Help Unlock Nigeria's Unrealized Economic Potential. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/07/19/managed-labor-migration-can-help-unlock-nigeria-s-unrealized-economic-potential

World Bank (2022), World Bank Project Document: Nigeria Return Migration Study. Available at: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099820406212269200/pdf/P1709640ecd77006f0905300f4dcf5fa78a.pdf

World Bank (2023), Migration and development brief 39, World Bank.

World Bank (2024), Nigeria data. Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/country/nigeria

Zenodo (2024), Return Migration Infrastructures in Tunisia – WP3 Country Dossier. Available at: https://zenodo.org/records/15852188

CHAPTER 4: HUMAN CAPITAL BEYOND BORDERS: EMERGING AND INFORMAL MOBILITY FORMS

4.1 From migration to telemigration: Mapping the skills and policy challenges of Uzbekistan's platform workforce

Zebo Isakova Murodovna

4.1.1 Preface

This paper was prepared within the framework of ongoing research on digital labour mobility and skills governance in Uzbekistan. It aims to contribute to policy dialogue on the intersection between digital platform work, migration systems, and qualifications recognition mechanisms in emerging economies.

Digitalisation has expanded opportunities for cross-border service provision without physical mobility. In Uzbekistan, where labour migration has historically played a central role in household income strategies, the growth of digitally mediated work represents an emerging, though still uneven, development within the labour market. In particular, online freelancing and remote service provision through global digital platforms have created new income channels for workers with marketable digital skills.

This paper focuses specifically on cross-border platform-based service provision ('telemigration') among Uzbekistan's digital freelancers. Telemigration is defined here as the delivery of services to foreign clients via online platforms without physical relocation. The study does not examine the broader digital economy or domestic platform work; rather, it concentrates on internationally oriented freelance work in selected occupational categories.

Titled 'From Migration to Telemigration: Mapping the Skills and Policy Challenges of Uzbekistan's Platform Workforce', the paper analyses this phenomenon through the lenses of skills formation, labour market regulation, and governance. It contributes to discussions within the European Training Foundation's MIGCOM framework by examining how new forms of cross-border digital labour intersect with skills development systems and migration governance structures.

The analysis draws on mixed-method research, combining Labour Force Survey data (specify year if applicable) with qualitative interviews conducted with digital freelancers in both urban and rural regions. The empirical component explores:

1. pathways into platform work,
2. modes of skills acquisition (formal, non-formal, and informal), and

3. patterns of cross-border service engagement.

Rather than assuming telemigration as a large-scale structural shift, the paper assesses its current scale, characteristics, and institutional implications. Particular attention is paid to regulatory gaps in taxation, social protection coverage, credential recognition, and digital access.

The findings aim to inform policymakers and development partners about practical governance challenges associated with cross-border digital labour. The paper identifies policy options related to skills certification, labour protections, and alignment with international reference frameworks such as the European Qualifications Framework and EU Talent Partnership initiatives, while recognising the institutional and implementation constraints specific to Uzbekistan.

The analysis is based on exploratory qualitative research and contextual policy review. The interpretations and conclusions presented are solely those of the author.

This paper benefited from AI-assisted language refinement and structural editing support. All analytical content, interpretation of findings, and policy conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

4.1.2 Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of cross-border digital platform work ('telemigration') in Uzbekistan and explores its implications for skills formation and migration governance. Labour migration has historically played a central role in Uzbekistan's economy, with large numbers of workers employed abroad, particularly in neighbouring countries and the Russian Federation. According to ILO (2021) and recent World Bank Migration and Development Briefs, remittances constitute a significant share of national income, underscoring the structural importance of outward labour mobility.

In parallel with traditional migration flows, digitalisation has enabled new forms of cross-border service provision. Baldwin (2019) conceptualises this shift as 'telemigration,' whereby workers participate in global labour markets remotely through digital platforms. Global evidence indicates that online labour platforms are expanding rapidly, although participation remains uneven across regions (ILO, 2021; Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018). In Uzbekistan, the scale of platform-based work remains modest relative to overall employment, but Labour Force Survey data (2017–2024) and qualitative interviews with 20 digital freelancers suggest growing interest in remote income generation, particularly among youth and women.

Uzbekistan's 'Digital Uzbekistan – 2030' strategy and related ICT reforms have improved connectivity and supported IT sector development (World Bank, 2023). However, as observed globally, digital platform workers often operate in legally ambiguous conditions, with limited access to social protection and unclear employment classification (ILO, 2021; De Stefano, 2016). Interviews conducted for this study indicate that many

Uzbek freelancers rely on informal arrangements and lack mechanisms for formal skills recognition.

Drawing on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the paper explores the relationship between digital skills acquisition, informal learning pathways, and migration aspirations. While some respondents perceive platform work as a potential alternative to physical migration, the findings do not suggest a structural replacement of traditional mobility. Rather, telemigration appears to function as a complementary income strategy within a broader migration ecosystem.

The analysis also situates Uzbekistan within emerging international policy discussions on skills portability and qualifications recognition. ETF and Cedefop (2022) highlight the growing importance of cross-border recognition frameworks, while the EU Recommendation on Micro-credentials (Council of the European Union, 2022) signals evolving approaches to validating non-formal and digital learning. However, Uzbekistan's current National Qualifications Framework does not yet fully accommodate micro-credentials or Recognition of Prior Learning mechanisms.

The study contributes empirical evidence to ETF MIGCOM Theme 9 by examining how platform work intersects with migration governance and skills systems in a lower-middle-income context. Rather than advocating specific policy models, the paper identifies institutional gaps and outlines areas for further policy experimentation, including social protection design, credential validation, and structured digital mobility partnerships.

4.1.3 Introduction

Background

International labour migration has long played a central role in Uzbekistan's economic and social development. According to ILO (2021) and recent World Bank Migration and Development Briefs, a significant share of Uzbekistan's working-age population has engaged in temporary or circular migration, primarily to the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, South Korea, and, increasingly, selected European countries. Migrant workers are concentrated in low- and semi-skilled sectors such as construction, agriculture, manufacturing, and care services. Remittance inflows constitute a substantial proportion of household income and national GDP, reinforcing the structural importance of outward mobility.

Beyond its economic contribution, migration has shaped labour market expectations, skill formation trajectories, and regional employment strategies. In many rural areas, migration functions as both an income-generating mechanism and a coping strategy in the context of limited domestic employment opportunities.

In parallel with these established migration patterns, digitalisation has expanded opportunities for cross-border service provision without physical relocation. Baldwin (2019) conceptualises this phenomenon as 'telemigration', referring to the remote delivery of services across borders through digital platforms. Global evidence suggests

that online labour platforms have enabled new forms of participation in international labour markets, particularly in ICT-related and digitally mediated occupations (ILO, 2021; Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018).

In Uzbekistan, improvements in internet connectivity and ICT sector development under the "Digital Uzbekistan – 2030' strategy have supported growth in the domestic digital economy (World Bank, 2023). However, participation in global platform markets remains uneven and relatively modest compared to leading countries in the region. Structural constraints—including digital skill gaps, infrastructure disparities, and limited English proficiency—continue to shape access to online work opportunities.

At the same time, international research highlights that platform-based work often operates within regulatory grey zones, with ambiguous employment status and limited access to social protection (ILO, 2021; De Stefano, 2016; Graham & Anwar, 2019). Skills acquired through non-formal and informal digital pathways frequently lack formal recognition within national qualifications systems, creating challenges for career progression and cross-border mobility (ETF & Cedefop, 2022).

While Uzbekistan's national strategies acknowledge the importance of digital transformation, existing migration and labour governance frameworks have primarily focused on physical mobility and domestic employment regulation. The intersection between digital platform work, skills recognition, and migration governance therefore remains underexplored in policy and research.

It is within this evolving context that the present study examines telemigration as an emerging, but not yet structurally dominant, component of Uzbekistan's labour market landscape.

Relevance to ETF MIGCOM Theme 9

This study engages with ongoing debates on the relationship between digital labour platforms and migration governance. While platform-based work has been widely analysed in high-income contexts, less attention has been paid to how digitally mediated cross-border labour operates in lower-middle-income countries where traditional labour migration remains structurally significant. Existing research has focused primarily on precarity, algorithmic control, and employment classification in advanced economies (ILO, 2021; De Stefano, 2016; Graham & Anwar, 2019). Far fewer studies examine how platform work intersects with outward migration systems and national qualifications frameworks in migrant-sending countries.

By examining Uzbekistan—a country with historically high levels of labour emigration and growing digital infrastructure—this paper addresses a gap in the literature concerning the coexistence of physical migration and telemigration within the same labour market system. Rather than treating platform work as a substitute for migration, the study conceptualises it as a complementary and stratified mobility pathway embedded in existing institutional constraints.

The analysis contributes to discussions under ETF MIGCOM Theme 9 by empirically examining three unresolved issues:

- How platform-based remote work interacts with established migration economies.
- Whether digital labour generates new forms of skills acquisition that remain institutionally unrecognised.
- How national governance systems can respond to cross-border service provision that does not fit conventional migration categories.
- The relevance of the case extends beyond geography. Uzbekistan provides an analytically useful setting for exploring how digital labour expansion unfolds in contexts characterised by high remittance dependence, evolving qualifications systems, and limited formalisation of self-employment. The findings therefore contribute to broader debates on migration diversification, skills portability, and governance adaptation in emerging economies.

Research Questions

The analysis is guided by three exploratory research questions:

1. How do digital freelancers perceive the relationship between platform-based remote work (telemigration) and traditional labour migration pathways in Uzbekistan?
2. What types of digital skills, barriers, and support mechanisms shape freelancers' experiences within the platform economy?
3. What governance gaps and perceived mobility pathways emerge from freelancers' experiences, particularly in relation to skills recognition and cross-border engagement?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to generate exploratory insights into how platform work is experienced and governed in a migration-dependent context, rather than to measure structural labour market change.

4.1.4 Context and literature

Research increasingly examines the relationship between digital transformation and migration, particularly the emergence of platform-mediated cross-border service provision (ILO, 2021a; Baldwin, 2019). In lower- and middle-income contexts, this intersection raises questions about how digitally enabled work interacts with established labour migration systems rather than replacing them.

In Uzbekistan, digital transformation has been formally articulated through Presidential Decree No UP-6079 approving the 'Digital Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy (Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020). The strategy prioritises ICT infrastructure expansion, digital public services, and IT sector development as central pillars of national modernisation. Complementary administrative reporting indicates growth in the IT sector and export-oriented digital services in recent years (IT Park Uzbekistan, 2024). However, while digital infrastructure and connectivity indicators have improved (World Bank, 2023),

available comparative measures suggest uneven participation in regional online labour markets.

As shown in Table 1 (Annex #1), Uzbekistan's estimated share of online platform workers and related connectivity indicators remain below those of Kazakhstan. These figures should be interpreted cautiously, as they are derived from administrative and platform-based data sources that may not fully capture informal, part-time, or multi-platform engagement. National labour statistics do not currently distinguish platform-based remote work as a separate employment category, limiting systematic measurement (Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023).

Digital Migration Trends: From Global Concepts to Local Realities

The relationship between digital transformation and migration has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Existing research has primarily examined platform labour in high-income contexts, focusing on employment classification, precarity, and algorithmic management (De Stefano, 2016; ILO, 2021a; Graham & Anwar, 2019). Less attention has been paid to how digitally mediated cross-border work interacts with established labour migration systems in migrant-sending countries.

Baldwin (2019) conceptualises 'telemigration' as the remote provision of services across borders through digital technologies. This concept highlights the possibility of participating in international labour markets without physical mobility. Empirical measurement of this phenomenon, however, remains methodologically challenging. The Online Labour Index (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018) provides one of the few systematic attempts to track online labour demand and supply, yet its coverage is limited to selected platforms and may not fully capture informal or region-specific activity.

In Central Asia, available data suggests uneven participation in global online labour markets. As indicated in Table 1 (Annex #1), Uzbekistan's estimated participation appears lower than that of Kazakhstan. However, these estimates rely on platform-derived and administrative data and may underrepresent informal or unregistered digital work. Moreover, cross-country comparisons are complicated by methodological differences in data collection and reporting (ETF, 2023).

Secondary evidence suggests that infrastructure disparities, language proficiency, and uneven distribution of digital skills shape participation in online labour markets (World Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2023). At the same time, international evidence shows that platform-based work often operates within regulatory grey zones, characterised by ambiguous employment status and limited access to social protection (ILO, 2021a; De Stefano, 2016).

In Uzbekistan, broader labour market analyses highlight persistent informality and structural employment challenges, particularly among youth and rural populations (ILO, 2021b; Statistics Agency, 2023). Although national strategies emphasise digitalisation and skills development (Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020), systematic

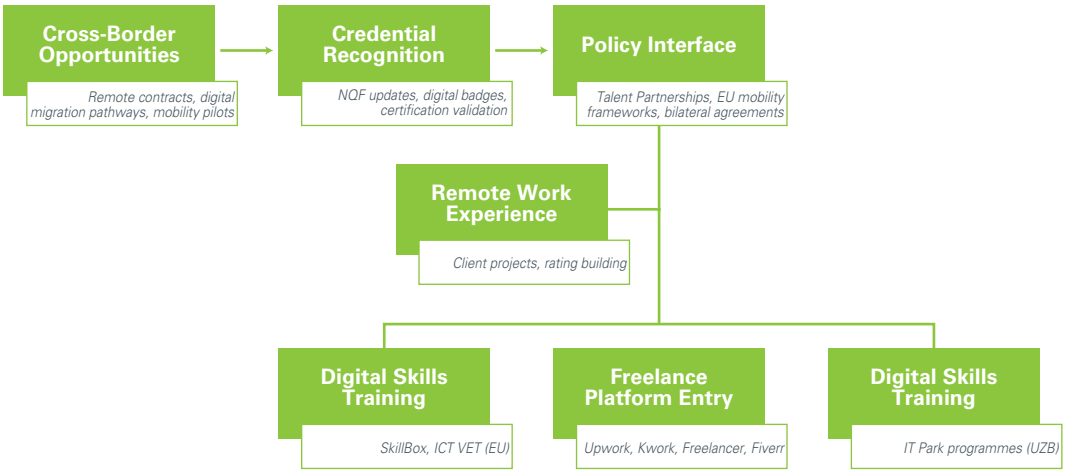
research examining how digital platform work relates to established outward labour migration systems and qualifications governance remains limited.

This gap provides the analytical foundation for the present study.

The Platform Economy in Uzbekistan and Central Asia: Opportunities and Exclusions

In the Uzbek context, participation in digital labour platform appears to be expanding, although current evidence suggests that this growth remains concentrated in specific sectors and demographic groups rather than representing a structural transformation of the labour market. Available data indicate that platform-based work functions primarily as a supplementary or alternative income source, particularly in urban centres such as Tashkent and Samarkand. Government initiatives under the "Digital Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy have supported improvements in ICT infrastructure and IT sector development (World Bank, 2023). Figure 15 is the author's conceptual framework which illustrates a typical digital migration pathway from local skills training to EU-aligned remote employment opportunities.

Figure 15. Pathway from Digital Skills to Cross-Border Telemigration (Uzbekistan)



Source: Author conceptual framework

Administrative data from IT Park Uzbekistan report an increase in registered freelancers and IT specialists from approximately 1 000 in 2017 to over 11 000 in 2022. Reported digital service exports have also increased significantly during this period. However, these figures should be interpreted cautiously. They reflect registered and export-oriented activity and may not capture informal, part-time, or multi-platform engagement. Moreover, the absolute scale remains modest relative to total employment.

Existing international research highlights that platform-based work often operates in regulatory grey zones, characterised by ambiguous employment status and limited

access to social protection (ILO, 2021; De Stefano, 2016; Graham & Anwar, 2019). In Uzbekistan, available secondary evidence suggests that many digital workers remain outside formal labour protection mechanisms, although systematic national measurement is limited.

Regionally, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan also show growing participation in online labour markets. Comparative indicators suggest variation in digital infrastructure and institutional adaptation across Central Asia (ETF, 2023). However, cross-country comparisons should be treated cautiously due to differences in data sources and measurement methodologies.

Overall, current evidence points to early-stage expansion of platform-mediated work in Uzbekistan, with participation concentrated among digitally skilled groups and urban populations. The governance implications of this development remain insufficiently examined in existing research.

EU Mobility Policies: Aligning Aspirations and Structures

Recent European Union labour and migration initiatives increasingly emphasise skills-based and circular mobility frameworks. Instruments such as the Talent Partnerships and related policy developments place greater focus on skills matching, ethical recruitment, and cooperation with partner countries (European Commission, 2023). These frameworks are primarily designed around regulated mobility channels linked to qualifications' and labour market's needs.

For partner countries, participation in such initiatives typically requires institutional capacity in areas such as qualifications transparency, skills validation, and regulatory alignment. ETF and Cedefop (2022) highlight the importance of cross-border recognition mechanisms and the portability of qualifications in facilitating structured mobility pathways.

In the context of Uzbekistan, national strategies have prioritised digitalisation and human capital development; however, mechanisms for recognising non-formal and digitally acquired skills remain limited. Existing qualifications frameworks are largely oriented toward formal education pathways, and systematic approaches to micro-credentials or Recognition of Prior Learning are still evolving. These structural features may influence the extent to which digitally mediated work aligns with existing EU mobility instruments.

Gender disparities also shape participation in digital labour markets. International evidence indicates that digital access, care responsibilities, and socio-cultural constraints can affect women's engagement in platform-based work (World Bank, 2021; GSMA, latest edition). In Uzbekistan, available secondary data suggest similar patterns, though comprehensive measurement remains limited.

Overall, the interaction between EU mobility frameworks and digitally mediated work in migrant-sending countries raises broader governance questions regarding skills recognition, regulatory adaptation, and inclusion. These issues form part of the analytical focus of the present study.

4.1.5 Data and methods

This study is designed as an exploratory qualitative inquiry supported by contextual quantitative evidence. The primary analytical focus is on the lived experiences and perceptions of digital platform workers in Uzbekistan. Quantitative data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) are used for macro-level contextualisation rather than statistical modelling or causal analysis.

Description of Sources

The research draws on three sources:

1. Labour Force Survey (LFS) data (2017–2024) – Nationally representative LFS data from the State Committee on Statistics are used to contextualise labour market structures, youth unemployment trends, regional disparities, and informal employment patterns. The LFS does not directly measure telemigration or platform-based work; therefore, its role in this study is limited to background labour market analysis.
2. In-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 20) – Twenty digital freelancers were interviewed between January and June 2025. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in:
    - Type of digital work (e.g. IT, design, translation, tutoring)
    - Platform usage
    - Gender
    - Urban and rural residence

    Respondents were recruited through online forums, professional networks, and referral chains. This sampling strategy allows insight into diverse experiences but does not produce statistically representative findings.
3. Policy and institutional analysis – National strategies, regulatory documents, and selected EU and international frameworks were reviewed to map institutional alignment and governance gaps.

Sampling and Interview Methods

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture variation across gender, region and type of platform engagement. The study included 20 digital freelancers actively engaged in platform-based remote work at the time of interview. Participants were selected to reflect diversity in:

- Type of digital work (e.g. IT, design, translation, tutoring).
- Platform use (e.g. Upwork, Freelancer, Kwork, Instagram).
- Demographics (age, gender, urban/rural residence).

The participants were recruited through online freelancing forums, social media groups, and referral chains. As recruitment relied on digital networks, individuals without stable platform engagement or internet access are likely underrepresented.

The sample size (n = 20) was determined based on exploratory qualitative research standards, where the objective is depth of insight rather than statistical representativeness. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no substantially new analytical themes emerged across consecutive interviews. Saturation was assessed during iterative coding.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and June 2025, in Uzbek or Russian, either online or in person. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were anonymised and transcribed with participant consent.

The study focuses specifically on the experiences of engaged digital platform workers. Findings should therefore not be interpreted as representative of the broader Uzbek workforce or of individuals not participating in online labour markets.

The sampling strategy introduces potential self-selection and success bias. Participants who are digitally active and willing to participate in interviews may differ from less successful or more marginalised platform workers. As such, findings are indicative and exploratory, rather than generalisable.

Framework of Analysis

The analytical framework combines thematic qualitative analysis with structured policy mapping. Interview transcripts were coded using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. Coding proceeded iteratively, beginning with open coding and progressing to higher-order thematic grouping. Both dominant and minority perspectives were retained in the coding framework to avoid overgeneralisation.

Particular attention was given to identifying divergent or negative cases. Instances where participants reported stable income trajectories, limited precarity, or no interest in migration were analysed alongside more common narratives of instability and regulatory ambiguity. These contrasting cases were used to refine theme boundaries and assess the robustness of emerging patterns.

The final thematic structure included recurrent patterns related to informality, credential recognition, gendered access constraints, platform dependency, and perceptions of cross-border mobility. However, not all participants experienced these factors uniformly.

The policy mapping component involved systematic comparison between identified experiential themes and relevant national and EU-level frameworks. Rather than assuming alignment gaps, the mapping exercise examined areas of convergence, partial correspondence, and institutional disconnect between Uzbekistan's qualifications system and selected EU mobility instruments. This exercise was interpretative rather than evaluative.

The triangulation of qualitative evidence and document review supports contextual understanding, but it does not produce generalisable or causal conclusions. Findings are exploratory and indicative.

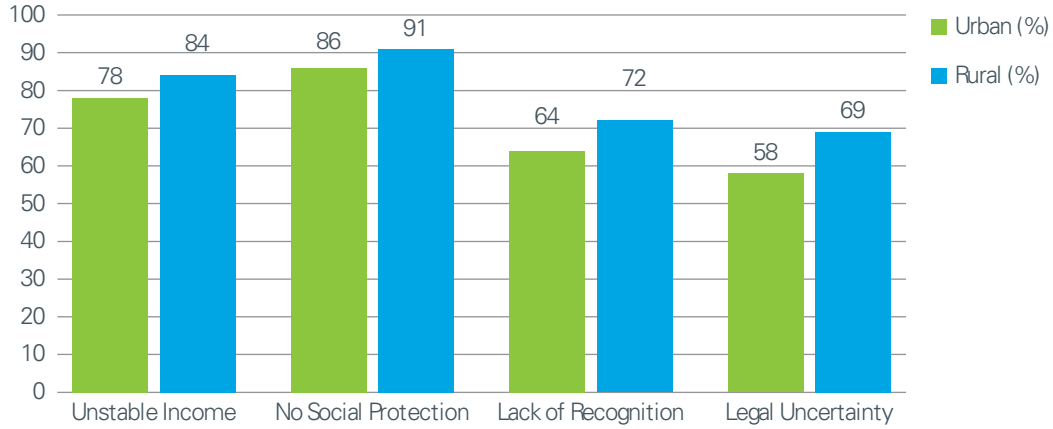
4.1.6 Results and findings

This section presents findings from 20 semi-structured interviews with actively engaged digital platform workers. The results are organised thematically (motivations → barriers → skills recognition → mobility constraints) and reflect recurring patterns across respondents. Given the qualitative and non-representative nature of the sample, the findings are indicative rather than generalisable.

Observed Barriers and Regional Variation

Across the interviews, the respondents most frequently reported income instability, lack of formal recognition of skills, limited access to social protection, and regulatory ambiguity. These themes emerged consistently during coding. Table 2 (Annex #1) summarises the relative frequency with which each issue was mentioned. Any numerical references are illustrative of patterns within the interview sample (n = 20) and do not indicate population-level prevalence.

Figure 16. Key Barriers Faced by Digital Platform Workers in Uzbekistan



Source: Author's elaboration based on DARYA Monthly Reports (2023–2025)

Rural respondents more frequently described constraints related to internet reliability, payment systems, and legal uncertainty. Urban respondents more commonly referred to competition on platforms, price undercutting, and saturation in certain digital service categories.

Figure 16 (author synthesis based on interview data) visualises these contrasts. The diagram summarises recurring themes reported by participants and illustrates differences in emphasis between urban and rural respondents. It does not represent statistically measured disparities and should be interpreted as a qualitative mapping of reported experiences.

Descriptively, these findings indicate uneven access conditions within the interview sample. They reflect variation in infrastructure, market exposure, and perceived regulatory clarity rather than documented structural labour market transformation.

Telemigration and Physical Migration: Reported Perceptions

Interview data reveal diverse perceptions regarding the relationship between platform work and physical migration. Some respondents described digital freelancing as reducing short-term pressure to migrate by providing income locally. Others framed platform work as a preparatory stage, enabling skills accumulation, savings, or international contacts prior to potential migration. A smaller group indicated no migration intentions irrespective of digital engagement.

These contrasting narratives suggest differentiated pathways rather than a uniform effect. The data do not allow conclusions about substitution, complementarity, or reduction of aggregate migration flows. Instead, platform engagement appears to operate as one livelihood strategy among several, shaped by prior skills, language ability, and access to digital infrastructure.

National and Regional Context

National labour statistics provide important contextual background. According to the Statistics Agency of Uzbekistan (2023), youth unemployment remains above the national average, and informal employment accounts for a significant share of total employment. Regional disparities persist, with employment opportunities concentrated in major urban centres. Official labour force surveys do not separately measure platform-based remote work, limiting quantitative validation of digital labour participation.

Comparative indicators from ETF (2023) and World Bank (2023) suggest that Uzbekistan's digital participation indicators remain below those of Kazakhstan, particularly in ICT sector scale and online labour visibility. However, cross-country comparisons must be interpreted cautiously due to methodological differences and the difficulty of capturing informal or multi-platform engagement.

Administrative data from IT Park Uzbekistan indicate growth in registered IT specialists and digital service exports. Relative to total national employment, however, this segment remains modest in scale.

Gender and Inclusion Patterns

Gender disparities are visible in national labour statistics, with female labour force participation lower than male participation rates (Statistics Agency, 2023). International evidence further highlights persistent digital gender gaps in access and digital skills acquisition (GSMA, 2023). Within the interview sample, some women described constraints related to care responsibilities and device access. However, the study does not provide representative measurement of gender distribution in platform work.

These patterns suggest that participation in telemigration opportunities is shaped by broader structural inequalities rather than operating independently of them.

Taken together, the interview data point to early-stage expansion of platform-mediated work among digitally skilled groups, with participation shaped by regional infrastructure, prior skills, and regulatory ambiguity. The findings highlight governance and recognition gaps affecting workers' security and mobility options. They do not provide evidence of economy-wide transformation or measurable changes in national migration flows.

1. Motivations for Entering Digital Work

Respondents described entering platform work after job loss, low wages, or limited advancement opportunities. Some began through online tutorials or referrals, while others were motivated by the flexibility of remote work. Women participants often highlighted compatibility with caregiving responsibilities. These accounts reflect varied pathways into digital freelancing rather than a single common driver. Interviews indicate that motivations are rooted in both push and pull factors:

- Economic necessity: Respondents frequently cited underemployment, low wages, and job scarcity as the primary drivers for entering the digital economy. According to the Labour Force Survey (2024), youth unemployment in Uzbekistan remains high at 15.2%, with notable disparities in rural regions (State Committee of Statistics, 2024).
- Autonomy and flexibility: Many freelancers value the ability to work remotely, especially women managing domestic responsibilities. Several participants identified platform work as their only viable means of earning an income without relocating.

  > *'I left my factory job after the pandemic. With my phone and Telegram, I started designing logos for small businesses. It's not stable, but it gives me dignity and control over my time,' (Female, 33, Namangan).*

- Aspirations for international exposure: Digital platforms offer workers the chance to engage with global markets. Participants noted that clients from abroad pay higher rates, treat them with more respect, and offer more creative projects. This international engagement contributes to a shift in identity – from local jobseekers to global service providers.

2. Barriers to Sustained Engagement in the Platform Economy

While platform work provides access to income-generating opportunities, many respondents described difficulties in sustaining stable long-term engagement. Interview

accounts and supporting document review indicate recurring challenges related to legal clarity, income volatility, and limited access to formal protections:

- Legal and regulatory uncertainty: Freelancers often operate in a grey zone. Taxation policies are unclear, and many fear penalties for undeclared income. Although the government has taken steps to support IT professionals (e.g. IT Park Uzbekistan tax incentives), these programmes rarely reach informal freelancers.
- Social protection gaps: None of the interviewees had health insurance, maternity coverage, or pension contributions through their digital work. This creates long-term vulnerability, particularly for women and people with disabilities.
- Infrastructure inequalities: Rural freelancers face low internet speeds, limited access to affordable digital tools, and fewer peer networks. According to the Digital Economy Study (2024), broadband penetration in rural Uzbekistan remains below 42%, compared to over 80% in urban areas.
- Platform dependency and power asymmetries: Many freelancers are heavily reliant on one or two platforms. Account suspensions, poor ratings, or client disputes can have immediate financial consequences. Workers reported feeling powerless in disputes, as platforms offer limited recourse.

> *'After one bad review, I was blocked for three months. There's no support. You just disappear,' (Male, 26, Jizzakh).*

3. Skills Development and Recognition Issues

Freelancers typically acquire skills through self-directed learning, informal networks, and online communities. Yet, their competencies often go unrecognised by formal education and employment systems.

- Non-formal learning: Many participants had invested time in online courses on YouTube, Coursera, or domestic platforms such as IT Park's SkillBox. However, these skills are not reflected in diplomas or certificates accepted by employers or state authorities.
- Credentialing vacuum: Uzbekistan lacks a national system for recognising micro-credentials or validating informal learning in the digital sector. This limits access to formal jobs, career progression, and participation in international mobility programmes.
- Gendered challenges: Several female freelancers reported restrictions from family members, especially in rural areas, where patriarchal norms limit internet access or independent work.

> *'I hide my online work from my father. He doesn't believe freelancing is a real job,' (Female, 22, Research Project).*

This mismatch between demonstrated skill and credential recognition also hampers Uzbekistan's potential engagement in EU Talent Partnerships and Union of Skills initiatives (European Commission, 2023).

4. Telemigration Potential and EU Mobility Constraints

The interviews indicate notable interest in legal, skills-based international mobility among participants.

- Aspiration for international work: A majority of respondents expressed interest in working abroad through formal migration channels, particularly if their digital skills and platform experience could be recognised. However, awareness of existing mobility schemes was limited, and most participants lacked access to formal credential validation mechanisms.
- Informational barriers: There is no centralised platform or agency disseminating information on international skills mobility or credential validation. Participants rely on Telegram groups, online forums, or informal peer advice.
- Regulatory misalignment: The current national qualifications framework (NQF) does not support micro-credentialing or recognise digital work experience. According to the ETF's (2023) Education and Training Monitor, Uzbekistan's skills recognition policies remain largely inward-focused and disconnected from regional or EU mobility standards.
- Policy window: Recent EU mobility initiatives, including the Blueprint for Talent Partnerships (European Commission, 2023), emphasise structured cooperation with partner countries in areas such as skills recognition and labour mobility. While Uzbekistan is not currently integrated into such schemes, these frameworks illustrate the types of institutional mechanisms that shape access to regulated mobility channels. Comparative experiences from countries such as Georgia and Moldova suggest variation in how partner states engage with EU mobility instruments.

Available administrative and interview evidence suggests signs of gradual expansion among digitally skilled groups, a trend largely propelled by persistent economic pressures and facilitated by improving digital connectivity. Yet this growth remains constrained by pervasive informality, regulatory ambiguity, and weak mechanisms for skills recognition, all of which undermine worker protection and limit both horizontal and upward mobility within and across markets. At the same time, there is considerable untapped potential to connect Uzbek digital freelancers with European Union labour markets through structured telemigration pathways. Current findings highlight governance areas that intersect with legal status, taxation frameworks, social protection coverage, and skills recognition mechanisms. The extent to which digitally mediated work can align with cross-border mobility systems depends on institutional coordination among national authorities, platform intermediaries, and international partners.

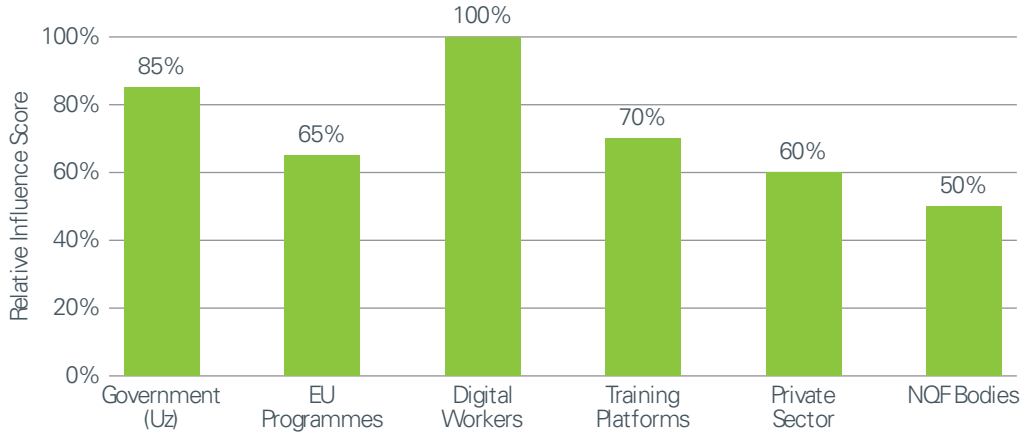
4.1.7 Policy discussion

The interview findings presented in the previous section highlight recurring challenges related to income instability, informal status, and limited skills recognition. These observed patterns provide the basis for examining potential governance responses at both national and EU levels. The rise of digital platform work is reshaping labour migration pathways and creating new forms of economic participation that are not adequately

addressed by current policies. This section discusses policy gaps and offers targeted recommendations aligned with existing EU frameworks such as Talent Partnerships and the Union of Skills.

Figure 17 presents an author-constructed analytical mapping of stakeholder influence based on themes identified in the interviews and document review. It is not derived from quantitative measurement but reflects the relative salience of actors as described by respondents and referenced in policy documents. The figure illustrates perceived engagement levels among digital workers, government bodies, and qualifications authorities within the current governance landscape.

Figure 17. Stakeholder Influence in Advancing Digital Labour Mobility



Source: Author's analysis based on ETF (2023); European Commission (2023); DARYA Reports (2023–2025)

Uzbekistan's expanding digital labour participation raises policy questions regarding the governance of platform-based work. Current institutional arrangements allow platform activity to develop largely within existing regulatory structures, while alternative approaches could involve more formalised integration into labour, taxation, and skills recognition systems. The direction of policy development will shape how digital workers are incorporated into national and international mobility frameworks.

1. Formalisation and Protection

Interview findings indicate that many freelancers operate without formal legal status, written contracts, or access to contributory social protection schemes. At the same time, views regarding formalisation were mixed: while some respondents expressed interest in clearer registration pathways, others were concerned about administrative complexity and potential tax burdens.

In light of these reported experiences, several governance considerations emerge:

- Exploration of a simplified freelancer registration framework under the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations (MELR) could address reported legal ambiguity, provided that procedures remain accessible and proportionate to income levels.
- Voluntary social protection mechanisms for platform workers may respond to concerns about long-term security, particularly among respondents highlighting vulnerability linked to gender, rural location, or unstable earnings.
- Greater clarity and simplification of taxation arrangements for self-employed digital workers could influence willingness to formalise, although administrative feasibility and perceived financial costs would remain important factors shaping uptake.

2. Skills Recognition and Credentialing

Uzbekistan's current National Qualifications Framework (NQF) does not reflect the realities of the platform economy. In order to increase skills mobility:

- Expand the NQF to include micro-credentials, digital badges, and informal learning outcomes relevant to the digital economy (ETF & Cedefop, 2022).
- Pilot Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms for freelancers with demonstrable portfolios.
- Collaborate with local platforms (e.g. IT Park) and international providers (e.g. Coursera, Google Career Certificates) to embed certification pathways into formal frameworks.

3. Infrastructure and Inclusion

Digital divides persist across gender and geography. The government should:

- Prioritise rural broadband access, especially in regions with high youth unemployment.
- Launch digital upskilling programmes targeting marginalised populations, including single mothers and internal migrants.
- Partner with civil society and tech companies to support inclusive digital literacy campaigns.

Implications for EU Policymakers

The European Union has committed to building partnerships that attract global talent while promoting fair and ethical migration. Uzbekistan's emerging digital workforce offers a clear opportunity to pilot such initiatives.

1. Talent Partnerships

Uzbekistan could explore participation, subject to mutual interest and institutional feasibility, in EU Talent Partnerships established under the framework of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, ensuring alignment with existing cooperation mechanisms rather than creating parallel structures.

Uzbek digital professionals could potentially register on the EU Talent Pool platform, recognising that it is an EU-level mechanism open to individual applicants and subject to Member State labour demand.

There is scope to develop portable credentialing mechanisms, including recognition of prior learning (RPL) and portfolio-based validation, to formalise experience-based skills in areas such as graphic design, translation, and software development.

Within the framework of EU Talent Partnerships, Uzbek authorities and EU Member States could explore whether digitally skilled professionals may be reflected in structured skills cooperation dialogues, subject to labour market needs and regulatory compatibility.

2. Union of Skills and Regional Cooperation

The Union of Skills serves as an overarching strategic framework guiding skills development, lifelong learning, and recognition initiatives across the EU. Mobility-related programmes may operate within this broader agenda.

In the regional context, Uzbekistan could explore opportunities for enhanced mutual recognition of digital competencies with neighbouring countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Such cooperation may facilitate regional labour mobility and skills transparency, subject to institutional alignment and regulatory feasibility (ETF, 2023).

Further alignment of Uzbekistan's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) with European standards could be supported through technical cooperation, peer learning, and policy dialogue involving EU institutions and ETF expertise, where mutually agreed.

3. Addressing Informality at the Border of Work and Migration

Given the hybrid nature of digital labour, the EU should:

- Discussions within EU policy processes could explore how digitally mediated cross-border service provision is reflected within existing labour mobility and skills recognition instruments, in line with the scope of the Platform Work Directive and relevant mobility frameworks.
- Update the EU Skills Agenda to reflect telemigration as a strategic dimension of future mobility.
- Promote safeguards and fair platform standards under the EU Platform Work Directive, ensuring that digital workers outside the EU are not left vulnerable to platform abuse.

The findings indicate potential areas for governance adaptation. Whether digitally mediated labour contributes to inclusive alternatives to physical migration will depend on regulatory design, institutional coordination, and implementation capacity. Uzbekistan must modernise its qualifications, protections, and access systems; the EU must evolve its mobility tools to include digitally active third-country nationals. By jointly addressing gaps in recognition, inclusion, and mobility, both sides can forge a future where migration is no longer only physical – but also virtual, fair, and skills-based.

4.1.8 Recommendations

Drawing directly on the empirical findings presented in the Results section, this chapter outlines a limited set of priority actions derived from reported barriers and governance

gaps. The recommendations focus on areas where interview participants highlighted recurring constraints – particularly legal ambiguity, income instability, and limited recognition of digitally acquired skills. These proposals are exploratory in nature and reflect areas where findings suggest scope for institutional adjustment rather than prescriptive reform agendas.

For the Government of Uzbekistan

1. Launch Digital Mobility Pilot Programmes

- Explore, subject to institutional feasibility and mutual interest, the possibility of piloting structured cooperation mechanisms that facilitate legally compliant remote cross-border service provision. Any such initiative would require bilateral dialogue, legal clarification, and administrative capacity assessment before implementation.
- Collaborate with the EU's Talent Pool and private sector intermediaries (e.g., Upwork, Freelancer, Malt) to create legal remote work pipelines with labour protections and clear tax regimes.

2. Introduce Tax and Legal Reforms for Freelancers

Consideration could be given to exploring a simplified registration framework for freelance digital workers, potentially integrating e-tax mechanisms and voluntary social protection schemes. Such measures may address reported legal ambiguity and informality among platform workers, although their design would require careful assessment of administrative capacity, compliance incentives, and fiscal sustainability.

Clarification of taxation rules concerning cross-border digital income could also be examined, drawing on comparative regulatory experiences in countries such as Georgia and Estonia. Any adaptation, however, would depend on institutional readiness, alignment with existing tax legislation, and broader public finance priorities.

Targeted entry-level incentives — such as temporary tax adjustments or structured onboarding support — could be evaluated to encourage participation by women and young entrants in the platform economy, subject to equity considerations and budgetary feasibility.

3. Expand Recognition of Skills and Micro-Credentials

- Update the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to recognise informal and non-formal digital learning pathways, aligned with the ETF's regional guidelines.
- The findings indicate gaps in formal recognition of digitally acquired skills. In response, policymakers could consider piloting Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms that assess freelancers' portfolios and documented client work. Any expansion into dedicated RPL centres would depend on institutional capacity, assessor training, and alignment with existing qualifications frameworks.
- Partner with global education platforms (e.g. Google, Coursera, Microsoft) to issue government-recognised digital certificates.

4. Build Inclusive Upskilling Platforms

- Scale up initiatives such as IT Park's SkillBox and integrate digital skills modules into secondary and TVET education curricula.
- Prioritise access for women, people with disabilities, and rural populations through mobile learning labs and community centres.
- Incentivise private-sector co-investment in upskilling-for-export models, where firms co-fund skills development in exchange for freelance services.

For the European Union

1. Consider the Position of Digital Freelancers within Existing Mobility Instruments

- Within the framework of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum and related Talent Partnerships, the EU and participating Member States could examine how digitally engaged professionals may be reflected in skills-based mobility discussions, where aligned with labour market needs and mutual interest.
- EU institutions and Member States may consider whether documented digital work experience — including verified portfolios and platform records — could be assessed within existing recognition procedures, in accordance with national regulations and qualification frameworks, rather than treated as informal or non-recognised experience.

2. Support Capacity Building and Systems Development

- Provide technical assistance to Uzbek ministries and training providers in aligning digital credentials with European Qualifications Frameworks (EQFs).
- Fund research and piloting of portable digital skill passports, especially for underserved regions and sectors (e.g. translation, design, software testing).

3. Promote Responsible Platform Standards

- Encourage EU-based digital labour platforms to adopt ethical work standards in line with the forthcoming EU Platform Work Directive.
- Incentivise platforms to provide access to insurance schemes, dispute resolution, and onboarding support for freelancers in third countries.

Cross-Cutting Recommendations

- Create a joint Uzbek–EU Telework Task Force to monitor, assess, and coordinate pilot programmes.
- Launch an awareness campaign using digital and community media to inform youth, women, and migrant returnees about new legal digital opportunities.
- Build a regional platform for credential recognition and freelancer mobility with neighbouring countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan).

Taken together, these recommendations aim to respond to governance gaps identified in the findings, particularly in relation to legal status, skills recognition, and regulatory clarity. Rather than proposing a fixed model, they outline potential directions for institutional

experimentation and structured dialogue between national authorities and international partners.

If pursued incrementally and with due consideration of administrative capacity, such measures could contribute to more coherent governance of digital labour mobility. Their broader regional relevance would depend on context-specific adaptation and sustained institutional engagement.

4.1.9 Conclusion

This paper set out to explore central questions: how is the rise of digital platform work reshaping migration patterns and skills development in Uzbekistan, and what are the implications for national and EU policy frameworks?

The study has shown that for a growing segment of Uzbekistan's workforce – especially youth, women, and rural jobseekers – digital freelancing is no longer a fringe activity. For the interviewed participants, platform work was described as an increasingly important income strategy and a legitimate pathway to global labour markets. Through qualitative interviews, Labour Force Survey data, and policy analysis, the research uncovered three key findings:

1. Interview findings suggest that platform-based digital work is perceived by some participants as providing income opportunities that may influence short-term migration considerations. However, these opportunities are often described as unstable and lacking formal social protection mechanisms.
2. Respondents reported differential access to digital work shaped by factors such as gender roles, geographic location, and limited formal recognition of digitally acquired skills. These patterns indicate uneven participation within the interview sample rather than definitive structural exclusion.
3. The analysis highlights areas where existing national policy frameworks and international mobility instruments may not fully address digitally mediated cross-border work. However, the study does not assess institutional capacity or readiness systematically and therefore cannot draw conclusions about overall policy preparedness.

Digital migration (or telemigration) requires new thinking. It blurs borders and redefines what mobility means in the 21st Century. It challenges traditional models of employment regulation, taxation, and credential recognition.

Moving forward, the Uzbek government has an opportunity to lead in shaping inclusive, rights-based digital work policies that align with European frameworks such as the Talent Partnerships and the Union of Skills. The EU, in turn, must broaden its vision of skilled mobility to include not only doctors and engineers – but digital freelancers, creative professionals, and service providers delivering value across borders without crossing them.

In this context, telemigration can be understood as an emerging area of policy attention rather than an established mobility pathway. Its future trajectory will depend on how governance frameworks evolve in relation to digital labour regulation, skills recognition, and cross-border cooperation. The extent to which it contributes to inclusive or sustainable labour outcomes remains contingent on institutional design and implementation capacity.

4.1.10 Summary of findings

The findings of this exploratory study indicate growing engagement with digital platform work among the interviewed participants, shaped by economic considerations, demographic pressures, and improved digital connectivity. However, the scale and broader labour market impact of this activity cannot be determined from the qualitative sample.

Within the interview group, platform-based work was frequently described as operating in conditions of informality, with limited legal clarity and restricted access to contributory social protection mechanisms. Respondents reported income instability and uncertainty regarding taxation and registration requirements.

Participants also highlighted challenges related to the formal recognition of digitally acquired skills. The absence of systematic credential validation mechanisms was perceived as limiting opportunities for career progression and structured cross-border mobility.

The findings further suggest that digitally mediated work intersects with international mobility aspirations in complex ways. While some respondents expressed interest in engaging with foreign clients or formal migration pathways, the study does not assess employer demand or institutional readiness on the EU side.

Taken together, the findings point to areas where governance frameworks may not fully address emerging forms of digitally mediated labour. These include legal classification, taxation clarity, and skills recognition mechanisms. Any policy responses would need to consider administrative capacity, regulatory coherence, and the diverse motivations and constraints reported by participants.

Rather than demonstrating a ready-made pathway toward structured telemigration, the study highlights an emerging policy area whose development will depend on institutional choices, coordination mechanisms, and broader labour market conditions.

ANNEX

Digital Platform Workforce and Internet Access in Central Asia

Country	Share of Online Platform Workers (%)	Internet Penetration Rate (%)
Uzbekistan	8.2	77.0
Kyrgyzstan	10.5	74.3
Kazakhstan	14.6	85.7
Regional Avg.	11.1	79.0

Table source: World Bank (2023), Uzbekistan Digital Economy Study; ETF (2023), Central Asia Education and Training Monitor; UZSTAT (2024), Labour Force Reports.

Challenges Reported by Uzbek Platform Workers (FGD/KII Interviews, 2023–2025)

Key Challenge	Urban Respondents (%)	Rural Respondents (%)
Unstable or Irregular Income	78	84
Lack of Formal Credentials	64	72
No Access to Social Protection	86	91
Legal Uncertainty/Tax Barriers	58	69

Table source: Author's elaboration based on qualitative interviews

Alignment of Uzbekistan's Digital Labour Landscape with EU Talent Mobility Priorities

Policy Dimension	Uzbekistan Status (2024–2025)	EU Talent Priorities Alignment
National Digital Strategy	*Digital Uzbekistan – 2030* underway; strong ICT growth focus	✓ High
Digital Skills Development	SkillBox launched; limited rural outreach	⚠ Partial
NQF and Skills Recognition	NQF revised in 2023; lacks cross-border portability mechanisms	⚠ Partial
Freelancer Legal Framework	No formal registration or tax schemes for digital nomads	✗ Low
Participation in EU Schemes	Not yet engaged in EU Talent Partnerships	✗ Low

Table source: Author's analysis based on European Commission (2023), Blueprint for Talent Partnerships; MELR (2025); ETF (2023); Uzbekistan Digital Strategy documents; RESEARCH PROJECT Reports (2023–2025)

References

Anwar, M.A. and Graham, M. (2023), 'Hidden costs of digital labour in the Global South', *World Development*, 161, 106123.

Baldwin, R. (2019) *The Globotics Upheaval: Globalization, Robotics, and the Future of Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berg, J. (2023) 'Algorithmic management and labour standards', *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal*, 44(1), pp. 45–70.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77–101.

CEDEFOP (2023) *Micro-credentials for labour market education and training: Micro-credentials and evolving qualifications systems*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Council of the European Union (2022) *Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability*. Official Journal of the European Union, C 243, 27 June.

De Groen, W.P., et al. (2022) 'Digital labour platforms and migration: Emerging cross-border service markets', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(15), pp. 3685–3704.

De Stefano, V. (2016) 'The rise of the just-in-time workforce: On-demand work, crowdwork and labour protection in the gig economy', *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal*, 37(3), pp. 471–504.

ETF (2023) *Education and Training Monitor: Central Asia*. Turin: European Training Foundation.

ETF and Cedefop (2022) *Handbook on Qualifications Frameworks and Cross-Border Recognition*. Turin: European Training Foundation.

European Commission (2023) *Blueprint for Talent Partnerships: Guiding Principles and Country Engagement*. Brussels: European Commission.

Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2020) *Presidential Decree No. UP-6079 "On Approval of the Digital Uzbekistan – 2030 Strategy"*. Tashkent: Lex.uz.

Graham, M. and Anwar, M.A. (2019) 'The global gig economy: towards a planetary labour market?', *First Monday*, 24(4).

GSMA (2023) *Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023*. London: GSMA.

Howson, K., et al. (2023) 'Platform work and the future of labour regulation', *International Labour Review*, 162(2), pp. 203–222.

ILO (2021a) *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

ILO (2021b) *Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: Results and Methodology*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

IT Park Uzbekistan (2024) *Results of 2023 Transformation and Plans for 2024*. Tashkent: IT Park Uzbekistan.

IOM (2023) *Migration Profile: Uzbekistan*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.

Kässi, O. and Lehdonvirta, V. (2018) 'Online Labour Index: measuring the online gig economy for policy and research', *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 137, pp. 241–248.

OECD (2022) *21st-Century Skills and Competences for New Work Models*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Pesole, A., et al. (2023) 'Platform workers in Europe: Evidence from cross-country surveys', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 54(4), pp. 345–362.

Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2023) *Labour Market Indicators*. Tashkent: Statistics Agency of Uzbekistan.

UNDP (2024) *Analysis of the State System in Uzbekistan to Promote an Integrated Approach in Employment and Welfare Services Delivery*. Tashkent: United Nations Development Programme.

Wood, A.J., Lehdonvirta, V. and Graham, M. (2022) 'Workers of the Internet unite? Online freelancer organisation and collective action', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 37(3), pp. 267–285.

World Bank (2021) *Digital Jobs for Youth: A Guide for Policymakers*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank (2023) *Uzbekistan Digital Economy Study*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank (2024) *Migration and Development Brief*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

4.2 Invisible skill transfers: Female migration, informal economies and gender-sensitive skills recognition in the Central Asian migration

Rano Turaeva-Hoehne

4.2.1 Abstract

This paper examines women labour migrants from Central Asia who develop skill portfolios within informal economies along changing migration corridors. Drawing on the author's long-term multi-sited ethnographic engagement across Central Asia and key destination contexts, complemented by a review of recent policy and empirical research on the skills–migration nexus, the paper analyses how women learn and mobilise competences in care and domestic work, cleaning, beauty and small retail services, as well as in emerging forms of platform-mediated work (Turaeva 2025, 2023)).

The paper first outlines the feminisation of labour in general with a further focus on Central Asia in the context of post-Soviet labour markets and global care chains. It then sketches a conceptual framework that links informal economies, social reproduction and skills formation to analyse the empirical findings. Empirically, the paper draws on vignettes from ethnographic work with Central Asian migrant women in Russian cities and sending communities in Uzbekistan, as well as recent survey and qualitative evidence on women migrant workers from international organisations and regional studies (Turaeva 2025, 2023, 2019; IOM, 2021; ETF, 2024).

The analysis shows that these competences—often relational, organisational, linguistic and digital—are systematically unrecognised: they remain poorly legible to employers' recruitment practices, skills classification systems, and recognition of prior learning and reintegration programmes in origin countries (IOM, 2021; ETF, 2024). This misrecognition contributes to skill downgrading and persistent precarity despite intensive informal learning. The paper concludes with operational options for gender-sensitive assessment and recognition, including portfolio-based RPL pilots in care and service sectors and more realistic reintegration pathways.

4.2.2 Introduction

Over decades, labour migration from Central Asia to the Russian Federation and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan defined features of regional political economy changing post 2020 and more so after 2022 after Russia attacked Ukraine. Central Asian migration routes changed from Russia to Turkey and the West. While men working in construction and other manual sectors remain the public face of this migration system, women now constitute a growing share of migrants from Central Asia and are increasingly present in the care, domestic and service sectors (Turaeva, 2025; IOM, 2021; UN ESCAP, 2025). Their remittances are crucial for household survival, yet their specific skill needs and

trajectories remain under-analysed in both research and policy debates. Skills policies in origin and destination countries tend to focus on formal qualifications and high-skilled migration, while most Central Asian women migrate into informal and semi-legal segments of labour markets where learning happens through practice, social networks and digital platforms rather than accredited training centres.

The ETF call for papers on the skills–migration nexus invites closer attention to these neglected areas. This paper responds by focusing on female migrants from Central Asia working in informal care, domestic and service economies in destination countries. It highlights the 'invisible' skills that women acquire before, during and after migration, and asks how these skills are (or are not) recognised in sending and receiving-countries. Building on feminist scholarship on global care chains and social reproduction (Hochschild, 2000) and on anthropological work on informal economies and migration in Central Asia (Turaeva, 2016, 2025), the paper argues that female migration cannot be understood solely through macro-indicators of labour shortages or remittances. Instead, attention to everyday work practices, gender norms and institutional silences around informality reveals how migration both reproduces and reconfigures inequalities.

The empirical focus is therefore on Central Asian female migration in a set of changing migration corridors that link Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to destination countries such as Turkey, Kazakhstan, Gulf states and selected EU member states. The paper draws on long-term ethnographic engagement with Central Asian migrants in Uzbekistan and in different destination settings, including observations of care and domestic work, informal entrepreneurship and digital labour, complemented by recent regional reports on women migrant workers, platform work and labour-market transformations (Turaeva, 2019; IOM, 2021; Karachurina et al., 2019; ETF, 2024; UN ESCAP, 2025). The analysis seeks to speak simultaneously to academic debates on migration and to policy discussions within the ETF Skills Lab Network by identifying concrete entry points for more gender-sensitive and realistic skills policies.

In line with the ETF call, the paper pursues the following objectives and guiding questions:

Objectives

- Document the skill bundles that are produced through women's informal work and mobility across the migration cycle.
- Analyse how and why these competences remain unrecognised in employment practices and skills governance in both origin and destination countries.
- Identify operational entry points for gender-sensitive skills recognition and reintegration, grounded in realistic institutional constraints.

Guiding questions

- How are skills acquired, refined and transferred through women's participation in informal care/domestic work, service work and hybrid livelihoods (including platform-mediated work) along Central Asian migration corridors?

- Through which institutional mechanisms—employers, skills classification, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and reintegration programmes—are these competences rendered unrecognised or downgraded?
- What low-cost, feasible recognition instruments could improve gender-sensitive skills assessment and reintegration in selected origin and destination contexts?

4.2.3 Conceptual framework: skills, informal economies and gendered migration

The starting point of this paper is a broad understanding of 'skills' that moves beyond formal qualifications or narrow occupational categories. Feminist economists and sociologists have long pointed out that care, cleaning and other forms of reproductive labour require complex bundles of competences – including emotional management, time coordination, conflict mediation and embodied practical know-how – that tend to be naturalised as 'women's work' and therefore devalued or rendered invisible in labour statistics and wage structures (Hochschild, 2000; Addati et al., 2018). Informal and semi-legal employment arrangements, such as live-in domestic work or unregistered care work for older people, intensify this invisibility: workers are often hired through kinship and migrant networks, paid in cash and excluded from standard forms of skills certification and social protection.

The working definitions used in this paper are as follows. First, skills are understood as situated competences that combine embodied practice, relational work, organisation and judgement, often developed through repetition, mentoring and problem-solving rather than formal instruction. Second, unrecognised skills refer to competences that are produced through such informal learning but remain poorly legible to employers' recruitment practices and to formal skills systems (including qualification frameworks and recognition of prior learning). Third, misrecognition denotes the institutional processes through which a skilled practice is classified as 'low-skilled' because it is gendered, informal, racialised or associated with domestic and care work.

Central Asian women migrants typically navigate intersecting hierarchies of class, ethnicity, gender and legal status. In destination contexts, they are racialised as 'Central Asian' workers and inserted into ethnicised niches in low-paid segments of the service and care economy (Turaeva 2025, 2019; Turaeva and Urinboyev 2021). In origin societies, their migration decisions are mediated by norms of female respectability, expectations of care obligations to children and elders and obligations to remit earnings to extended families (Turaeva, 2016). These hierarchies shape not only who can migrate and under what conditions, but also which forms of knowledge and skill are deemed legitimate. Language skills, navigation of bureaucracies, negotiation with employers and the ability to coordinate transnational care arrangements are all central to women's lived experience but are rarely captured as 'skills' in policy frameworks.

The concept of informal economies is likewise understood here not as a residual or marginal sphere, but as a dense web of practices that are deeply entangled with formal institutions and state regulations. Domestic workers and cleaners may be hired informally

by households yet rely on formal money-transfer systems and digital platforms; market traders may rent official stalls while operating largely in cash; babysitters and elder-care workers may oscillate between short-term contracts and undocumented work. Informality in this sense is a mode of governance and social ordering, not simply a legal status. For migrant women, informality can create spaces for agency – flexibility, room for negotiation, opportunities to combine paid work with family obligations – but also generate profound precarity, exposure to harassment and abuse and limited avenues to claim rights.

This conceptual framing draws attention to unrecognised skill transfers that occur as women move between different segments of informal and formal economies and across national borders. Rather than treating skills as a stable individual attribute, it foregrounds how competences are produced in practice and how they become misrecognised or downgraded when they are not captured by dominant occupational classifications, credential regimes and employer expectations.

4.2.4 Migration and labour-market context: central asian women

Labour migration from Central Asia expanded rapidly in the 2000s, driven by economic restructuring in the post-Soviet space, high unemployment and underemployment in rural areas and persistent wage differentials between origin and destination countries. For a long time, the dominant pattern was circular migration to neighbouring and regional centres. Over the past decade, however, mobility strategies have diversified in ways that are particularly visible in women's migration trajectories: alongside continued movement to Russia and Kazakhstan, some women have sought temporary work opportunities in Turkey and other destinations. Changes in visa regimes, recruitment practices and political relations have repeatedly reshaped who can travel where, under which legal statuses and on what kinds of contracts (OECD, 2025).

Within this broader system, women's participation in migration has steadily increased. Although precise sex-disaggregated data remain scarce, survey-based evidence and qualitative research indicate a rising share of Central Asian women in domestic work, cleaning, retail, hospitality and small-scale trade in Russian and Kazakhstani cities (Turaeva, 2018; Zayonchkovskaya et al., 2014; UN ESCAP, 2025). Many women migrate as part of family strategies to diversify income sources or to accompany husbands, but others migrate independently, especially from Kyrgyzstan where the legalisation of dual citizenship and relatively liberal exit policies have facilitated female mobility (Abdukadyrova and Studenko, 2023). Once in destination countries, women's employment is heavily segmented: they are over-represented in low-paid, informal jobs with long working hours, limited social protection and high exposure to exploitation.

Sex-disaggregated migration statistics for Central Asia remain uneven across countries and years, and many administrative datasets underestimate short-term and irregular mobility. The sources reviewed in this paper (e.g. IOM, 2021; ETF, 2024; UN ESCAP, 2025) nonetheless converge on three policy-relevant patterns: (1) women's participation in migration is increasing and is strongly sectoral; (2) women are overrepresented in

domestic work, care, cleaning and low-wage services, frequently in informal or semi-legal arrangements; and (3) dominant skills policies map 'skills' to formal qualifications, leaving informally acquired competences outside recognised categories.

Corridors and institutional constraints also differ. Legal status, documentation pathways and access to formal labour markets vary between EAEU and non-EAEU regimes, shaping women's bargaining power and vulnerability to exploitation. Destination contexts likewise differ: Russia combines large-scale demand in care and services with complex documentation requirements and entrenched ethnicised labour hierarchies, while Kazakhstan and Turkey offer alternative routes but reproduce similar patterns of informalisation and segmentation in domestic and service work. These differences matter for skills recognition, because recognition instruments (such as RPL) are filtered through labour-market regulation, employer practices and gendered expectations about 'women's work'.

Among origin countries, Kyrgyzstan is distinct because membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) gives its citizens a comparatively simplified pathway to legal employment in Russia and Kazakhstan, which can reduce some bureaucratic costs and enable women to enter service and care-related jobs more quickly, although it does not remove exposure to informalisation and gendered segmentation (OECD, 2025; Abdukadyrova and Studenko, 2023). By contrast, women from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan typically navigate work-patent or permit regimes, intermediary brokers and recurrent documentation hurdles; these constraints can push employment into semi-legal arrangements and increase dependence on employers or recruiters (IOM, 2021; UN ESCAP, 2025). In the policy evidence reviewed, Uzbekistan has also expanded more state-led and contract-based channels—alongside pre-departure training and information provision—while Tajikistan's governance of labour migration often relies more heavily on household networks and brokered routes; these differences shape where and how women accumulate skills and whether those competences can later be documented and translated into recognised credentials (IOM, 2021; OECD, 2025).

At the same time, labour markets in Central Asia are undergoing transformations linked to digitalisation, platform work and changes in the structure of domestic economies. Young women in particular engage in hybrid livelihood strategies, combining seasonal migration with online freelancing, home-based production, tutoring or beauty services marketed through social media (ETF, 2024). These trends blur the boundaries between migration and non-migration, formal and informal work and 'home' and 'abroad'. They also generate new forms of skills acquisition and use, including digital, entrepreneurial and language skills that cut across different locations and legal statuses. However, policy frameworks in both origin and destination countries rarely integrate these realities into skills assessment tools, vocational curricula or recognition mechanisms.

4.2.5 Methods and empirical basis

Empirical material

The paper is based on a combination of long-term ethnographic work and secondary analysis of recent empirical studies on Central Asian migration. Over more than a decade, I have conducted multi-sited fieldwork in Uzbekistan and Russia with Central Asian migrants, including participant observation in workplaces, markets, mosques and households, informal conversations and in-depth interviews with migrants, brokers, employers and family members (Turaeva, 2016). This work has focused in particular on urban economies, informal practices and the entanglements of migration, religion and gender. It provides contextual depth and a grounded understanding of how migrants navigate bureaucracies, labour markets and social hierarchies.

Secondary sources and selection criteria

To connect ethnographic insights to policy-relevant evidence, the analysis is complemented by a review of recent regional reports and empirical studies that address labour migration dynamics, women migrant workers, platform work and skills governance in Central Asia and key destination contexts (IOM, 2021; Addati et al., 2018; Zayonchkovskaya et al., 2014; Karachurina et al., 2019; Abdukadyrova and Studenko, 2023; ETF, 2024; UN ESCAP, 2025). Sources were prioritised where they (i) include sex-disaggregated evidence or explicit discussion of women's work; (ii) address informal employment and/or care and service sectors; and (iii) contain implications for skills assessment, training or recognition (including RPL).

Analytical strategy and evidence presentation

Rather than presenting a single statistically representative dataset, the paper adopts an interpretive, ethnographically informed approach. Earlier fieldwork insights are re-read through the lens of skills and gender, and triangulated with the reviewed secondary evidence. The paper uses short vignettes and composite cases to illustrate recurring patterns of women's work and learning in informal economies, while indexing these patterns to the broader trends documented in the cited literature. This strategy supports a grounded discussion of policy questions—how skills are defined, measured and recognised—without reducing migrants' trajectories to narrow occupational categories.

Limitations

Because the ethnographic corpus was accumulated across multiple projects and was not collected as a single skills survey, the paper does not report a unified sample size or claim statistical representativeness. Data gaps in sex-disaggregated migration statistics further limit precise quantification for several corridors. The aim is therefore analytic rather than enumerative: to clarify mechanisms of skill formation and misrecognition and to derive feasible policy entry points that can be tested through future pilots and stakeholder consultation.

Annex: indicative interview topics

The annex provides an indicative topic guide that can support future fieldwork and stakeholder workshops focused on women's skills, recognition and reintegration along the migration cycle.

4.2.6 Informal care and domestic work as sites of skill formation

A large share of Central Asian women migrants in Russia and Kazakhstan work in private households as live-in or live-out domestic workers, nannies, cleaners and carers for older people or persons with disabilities (Zayonchkovskaya et al., 2014; Karachurina et al., 2019). These jobs are often accessed through kinship networks, compatriot communities, mosque-based contacts or online community groups rather than formal agencies. Contracts, if they exist at all, tend to be verbal. Wages are typically paid in cash, and working hours can be extremely long, particularly for live-in workers who are 'on call' around the clock. In public discourse, such work is viewed as low-skilled, feminised and easily replaceable.

Ethnographic accounts, however, reveal that these jobs demand a high degree of dexterity, emotional labour and situational judgement. Caring for older people, for example, involves administering medication, monitoring symptoms, coordinating with doctors, managing conflicts within families and handling emergencies. Live-in nannies must balance the expectations of parents, children and other household members while managing their own family obligations transnationally via digital communication. Cleaners and housekeepers are expected to adapt to different households' norms of cleanliness, food preparation and privacy. Even when women migrate with previous experience in nursing, teaching or other professions, they often need to relearn basic routines in line with the expectations of Russian or Kazakhstani households.

These practices generate a dense repertoire of skills: language skills (including the mastery of Russian or Kazakh and specific registers used in service encounters), organisational skills (scheduling, multitasking, budgeting), conflict management and the ability to negotiate working conditions and pay. Women also accumulate tacit knowledge about local infrastructure – transport, markets, clinics, bureaucratic offices – that is crucial for both their own survival and the support of co-nationals. Yet these competences are rarely formalised. When women return to their countries of origin, their migration biographies are often summarised as 'she worked as a nanny' or 'she cleaned houses', with little recognition of the complex skill sets this implies. Skills audits and reintegration programmes seldom ask detailed questions about care and domestic work, and national qualifications frameworks rarely contain pathways to recognise such experience (Addati et al., 2018; UN ESCAP, 2025).

Mechanism summary: In domestic and care work, skills are produced through intensive practice and responsibility (care routines, coordination, communication and problem-solving), yet recognition tends to fail at three points: employers often treat these competences as 'natural' feminine dispositions; skills systems rarely recognise domestic and care work performed informally; and reintegration programmes in origin

countries typically channel returnees into generic entrepreneurship schemes rather than recognising care and service expertise.

4.2.7 Hybrid livelihoods, digital platforms and informal entrepreneurship

Not all women migrants are confined to domestic service. Many develop hybrid livelihood strategies that combine care or cleaning work with small-scale entrepreneurship and, increasingly, platform-mediated activities. In Russian cities, Central Asian women commonly sell food, clothes or cosmetics to compatriots; run informal beauty salons in rented rooms or dormitories; or provide services such as translation, accompaniment to hospitals and help with documentation. In origin countries, women who have returned from migration often invest remittances in small shops, sewing workshops or home-based catering. These activities are coordinated through dense social networks and, more recently, through digital tools such as WhatsApp and Telegram groups, Instagram pages and Russian-language classified platforms (Turaeva, 2016; ETF, 2024).

The ETF regional study on new forms of work and platform work in Central Asia documents the expansion of online freelancing, ride-hailing and delivery platforms across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, noting that women are particularly present on platforms offering domestic and care services, even if reliable data are scarce (ETF, 2024). In the migration context, women use these platforms in multiple ways: to search for jobs in destination countries before departure; to find clients for cleaning and babysitting services; to advertise products; or to connect with diaspora-based mutual aid groups. Digital platforms thus function simultaneously as labour-market intermediaries, informal training spaces and social support infrastructures. Women learn how to present their skills online, negotiate prices, manage client feedback and adapt to algorithmically mediated forms of visibility.

However, platform-mediated opportunities are unevenly distributed. Access to digital devices, stable internet connections and relevant language skills remains stratified by class, age and location. Algorithms often privilege workers with strong ratings and continuous availability, which can be difficult for women with care responsibilities. There are also risks of fraud, harassment and non-payment, especially when transactions remain in a grey zone between formal and informal arrangements. Despite these challenges, the digitalisation of informal work has opened up new spaces for skill development and diversification for some migrant women, suggesting that skills policies need to consider online as well as offline learning environments.

Mechanism summary: Hybrid livelihoods expand women's skill portfolios by adding digital competences (platform navigation, online marketing, customer communication and cross-border coordination) to care and service skills. Yet these competences remain unrecognised because they are embedded in informal work and micro-enterprises, rarely translated into formal credentials, and often excluded from employer-facing classifications and public employment services.

4.2.8 Return, reintegration and skills recognition

Return migration from Russia and Kazakhstan to Central Asia takes diverse forms, ranging from short-term seasonal returns to more definitive resettlement driven by family obligations, health concerns, changes in legal regimes or geopolitical shocks. Evidence suggests that many Central Asian migrants cycle between origin and destination countries multiple times over the life course, combining work abroad with periods of unemployment, care work or small business activities at home (Agadjanian, 2014; IOM, 2021). For women, returns are strongly shaped by gendered expectations regarding marriage, motherhood and care for older relatives. Their migration experience may be valued for the remittances it generated, yet their skills are often discounted or misrecognised in local labour markets.

Policy debates on return migration often focus on entrepreneurship and the mobilisation of savings and networks for local development. Programmes supported by international organisations and donors encourage returnees to invest in small businesses, sometimes offering training or credit schemes. While these initiatives can create important opportunities, they frequently rely on assumptions about 'entrepreneurial' skills that do not match women's lived experiences. Women returning from care or domestic work may possess sophisticated organisational and interpersonal skills but lack formal credentials or collateral, making it difficult to access credit or register businesses. Moreover, patriarchal norms and local labour-market structures may channel them back into low-paid service work or unpaid household labour, regardless of the skills they acquired abroad (UN ESCAP, 2025).

Existing skills recognition mechanisms in Central Asia are only beginning to address migration-related competences. National qualifications frameworks have been introduced or revised in several countries, but they remain heavily oriented towards formal vocational education and training pathways. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is still at an early stage and is often piloted in sectors such as construction or ICT rather than care and domestic work. Where RPL schemes do exist, they may be inaccessible to women due to costs, bureaucratic requirements or lack of information. As a result, many female returnees experience 'brain waste': their skills are underutilised, and their trajectories are characterised by downward mobility despite years of work abroad (Abdukadyrova and Studenko, 2023). Addressing these gaps requires both technical reforms and shifts in cultural attitudes towards what counts as 'real' skills.

Mechanism summary: Recognition failures are reproduced on return because reintegration programmes tend to prioritise formal employment and entrepreneurship, while women's informally acquired care, service and digital skills remain outside standard qualification pathways. Without targeted recognition instruments (such as portfolio-based RPL aligned to care and service occupations), women's migration learning is translated into neither improved labour-market position nor social protection, sustaining cycles of precarity and re-migration.

4.2.9 Policy implications and ways forward

This section translates the analysis into implementable options. It first summarises the main clusters of unrecognised skills and typical recognition barriers, and then proposes a prioritised set of low-cost interventions that can be piloted and validated with migrant women, employers and skills institutions.

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that policies aiming to harness the developmental potential of migration must pay closer attention to the gendered dynamics of informal economies and the ways in which women migrants actually learn and use skills. Several implications follow. First, skills assessment tools and labour-migration schemes need to broaden their understanding of relevant competences. This means explicitly recognising care, domestic and service skills – including communication, conflict resolution, time management and digital literacy – as valuable, transferable skills rather than treating them as natural attributes of women. Qualitative methods, narrative-based assessments and portfolio approaches could complement standard occupational classifications to capture these dimensions (Addati et al., 2018; ILO, 2018).

Second, pre-departure and post-arrival training should be designed with women's realities in mind. For many potential migrants, especially from rural areas, access to formal training centres is limited by care responsibilities, mobility constraints and financial barriers. Flexible, modular and community-based training provision – including hybrid online/offline formats – can help women acquire language, rights awareness and practical skills before departure and during migration. Cooperation between origin-country training providers, diaspora organisations and destination-country NGOs could ensure that content reflects actual labour-market conditions and includes information on how to mitigate risks of exploitation and violence (UN ESCAP, 2025).

Third, reintegration and skills recognition policies in origin countries must move beyond generic entrepreneurship support and actively identify and valorise skills acquired in care, domestic and other informal work abroad. This could involve developing RPL procedures tailored to care-related occupations; linking returnees with vocational schools and employers in social services, education and health; and creating safe spaces where women can collectively reflect on and document their competences. Attention should also be paid to mental health and social support, given evidence of stress, discrimination and family conflicts experienced by women migrant workers (Abdukadyrova and Studenko, 2023).

Finally, collaboration between research institutions, international organisations such as ETF, ILO and IOM, and policy-makers in Central Asia could help build a more robust evidence base on female migration and skills. Mixed-methods studies that combine quantitative surveys, administrative data and ethnographic insights would allow for more precise mapping of women's skill trajectories and for the testing of innovative policy instruments. Crucially, women migrants themselves should be involved as co-researchers and advisors, ensuring that their knowledge and priorities shape the design of skills-related interventions rather than being treated merely as data providers.

Synthesis: where skills are formed and where recognition fails

Table 13. Recurrent skill bundles and the points at which they become unrecognised

Skill bundle (illustrative)	Common sites of learning	Typical evidence in practice	Where recognition fails	Policy entry point
Care routines and health-related tasks (non-clinical)	Private households; care chains	Medication reminders; monitoring; coordination with clinics	Classed as 'natural' women's work; no credential pathway	Portfolio-based RPL aligned to care/support roles
Relational and emotional labour	Households; service encounters	De-escalation; conflict management; trust-building	Not captured in standard occupational classifications	Assessment using structured narratives + supervisor references
Organisation and logistics	Households; micro-business	Scheduling; budgeting; coordinating multiple jobs	Undervalued; not translated into CV language	Skills passport + templates translating tasks into competences
Language and intercultural communication	Workplace + diaspora networks	Service registers; negotiation with officials/employers	Treated as informal, not certified	Modular micro-credentials (language for care/service)
Digital/platform competences	Messaging apps; platforms; online marketing	Client acquisition; online payments; platform navigation	Excluded from formal VET; uneven access	Digital literacy modules + recognition within RPL portfolio

Recognition entry points by setting (indicative)

Table 14. Feasible entry points by origin/destination setting (indicative and should be validated through stakeholder consultation)

Setting	Existing entry points	Feasible pilot actor(s)	Low-cost instrument	Key constraint
Uzbekistan (origin)	NQF development; public employment services	VET agency + women's organisations	Portfolio-based RPL pilot for care/service skills	Low legitimacy of domestic/care work as 'skill'
Kyrgyzstan (origin)	Return support programmes; diaspora links	Employment services + NGOs	Skills passport + referral to bridging courses	Resource constraints; uneven local provision
Tajikistan (origin)	Migration management programmes	Local training providers + community organisations	Modular pre-departure + reintegration training	Care responsibilities limiting participation

Setting	Existing entry points	Feasible pilot actor(s)	Low-cost instrument	Key constraint
Russia (destination)	Employer-based onboarding; NGO support	Care/service employers + NGOs	Workplace-based assessment + references for RPL portfolio	Informality and documentation insecurity
Kazakhstan/Turkey (destination)	Sectoral demand in services/ domestic work	Employers + diaspora organisations	Short micro-modules (language/digital) + portfolio templates	Fragmented regulation; enforcement gaps

Priority recommendations (pilot-ready)

The following recommendations are prioritised because they can be piloted with limited resources, while still addressing the key mechanism identified in this paper: the misrecognition of informally acquired skills.

Recommendation 1: Portfolio-based recognition of prior learning (RPL) pilot in care and service sectors

- Actors: VET/skills agencies, care/service employers, women's organisations and diaspora networks.
- Tool: a portfolio template that translates tasks into competences (care routines, organisation, communication, basic digital skills), combined with a short practical assessment.
- Output: a recognised pathway into bridging courses or formalised care/service roles, where available.

Recommendation 2: Skills passport that makes informal learning legible across borders

- Actors: origin-country employment services and training providers, supported by NGOs.
- Tool: a portable 'skills passport' (paper + digital) recording tasks, references, and self-assessed competences, designed to feed into RPL or employer onboarding.
- Output: reduced skill downgrading and improved matching for returnees and newly arriving migrants.

Recommendation 3: Modular, women-centred training before departure and during migration

- Actors: local training providers, community organisations, and destination-country NGOs.
- Tool: short modules (rights awareness, language for care/service, digital safety, basic financial literacy) delivered in hybrid formats to account for care responsibilities and mobility constraints.
- Output: safer mobility and improved bargaining power in segmented labour markets.

Recommendation 4: Recognition pathways beyond 'generic entrepreneurship' on return

- Actors: public employment services, VET colleges, municipal social services and donor programmes.
- Tool: targeted re-entry tracks into care and service sectors, including short bridging courses and referral mechanisms to employers, rather than defaulting to entrepreneurship schemes.
- Output: reintegration options that align with the actual skill portfolios women acquire in migration.

Recommendation 5: Participatory validation and evidence-building with migrant women

- Actors: research institutions, international organisations (e.g. ETF/ILO/IOM), and national partners.
- Tool: stakeholder workshops where migrant women co-produce skill taxonomies and test portfolio templates and assessment criteria.
- Output: improved legitimacy and usability of recognition instruments, and a stronger evidence base for scaling pilots.

Feasibility constraints and validation

Pilot design must account for constraints that repeatedly shape women's participation: limited time due to care work, documentation insecurity in destination settings, and low institutional legitimacy of domestic and care work as 'skill'. For these reasons, low-threshold instruments (portfolio templates, modular training, employer references) are more feasible than complex certification reforms in the short term. The recommendations above are derived from the analysis and reviewed evidence and should be validated through consultation with migrant women, employers and skills institutions before scale-up.

4.2.10 Conclusion

Female migration from Central Asia to Russia and Kazakhstan unfolds at the intersection of informal economies, transnational care chains and evolving skills regimes. Women migrants are central actors in sustaining households and communities across borders, yet their work and learning remain undervalued and poorly understood in policy frameworks that privilege formal qualifications and high-skilled profiles. By foregrounding women's everyday practices in domestic and care work, hybrid livelihoods and digital platforms, this paper has highlighted the complex, often invisible skills that underpin their economic and social contributions.

The discussion has shown that informal work is not synonymous with an absence of skills; rather, it is a dense field of embodied, relational and organisational competences that are produced and refined under conditions of precarity. These skills are crucial for

navigating gendered labour markets, discriminatory bureaucracies and volatile geopolitical contexts, but they are rarely recognised by employers, skills systems or reintegration programmes. As a consequence, many women experience downward occupational mobility and 'brain waste' upon migration and return, even as their labour remains indispensable at multiple scales.

Responding to these challenges requires both conceptual and practical shifts. Conceptually, skills policies need to embrace a broader, more relational understanding of competence that acknowledges the value of care and social reproduction. In practice, reforms should focus on extending the recognition of prior learning, tailoring training provision to women's constraints and opportunities, and designing reintegration measures that start from women's own accounts of their skills rather than from narrow occupational categories. For actors engaged in the skills–migration nexus, including the ETF Skills Lab Network, engaging seriously with informal economies and gendered power relations is essential if labour-migration schemes are to generate genuinely 'triple-win' outcomes for origin countries, destination countries and migrants themselves.

ANNEX

Indicative interview topic guide

The following prompts are indicative and can be adapted for interviews or focus groups of migrant women and returnees when documenting skills acquisition, use and recognition.

- Migration trajectory: where have you lived and worked, and what motivated the moves between places/sectors?
- Work tasks: describe a typical working day/week in care/domestic/service work; what decisions do you routinely make?
- Learning pathways: how did you learn key tasks (observation, mentoring, trial and error, online tutorials, employers)?
- Care and responsibility: what kinds of responsibility did you have (medication routines, coordinating with clinics/family, budgeting)?
- Relational skills: how do you manage conflicts, build trust, and negotiate boundaries with employers/clients?
- Language and communication: what language registers or communication strategies are required in your work?
- Digital practices: do you use messaging apps, platforms or social media for work (finding clients, payments, scheduling)?
- Recognition experiences: have employers, institutions or family members acknowledged your skills? What was ignored or devalued?
- Documentation and barriers: how do legal status and bureaucracy affect work and access to training/recognition?
- On return: what skills would you like to use in your home country, and what support would make that possible?

References

Abdukadyrova, N. and Studenko, A. (2023), 'The Pandemic Played a Cruel Joke on Us': The vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz women migrant workers in Russia during COVID-19', Anti-Trafficking Review, 20, pp. 96–114.

Addati, L., Cattaneo, U., Esquivel, V. and Valarino, I. (2018), 'Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work.' Geneva: International Labour Office.

Agadjanian, V. (2014), 'Plans to return and women's employment in sending communities in the context of return migration: Evidence from Central Asia', International Migration, 52(5), pp. 25–37.

European Training Foundation (ETF) (2024), 'New forms of work and platform work in Central Asia.' Turin: ETF.

Hochschild, A. R. (2000), 'Global care chains and emotional surplus value', in Hutton, W. and Giddens, A. (eds) On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism. London: Jonathan Cape, pp. 130–146.

International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2021), 'Study of labour migration dynamics in the Central Asia–Russian Federation migration corridor: Consolidated report.' Moscow: IOM.

Karachurina, L., Florinskaya, Y. and Prokhorova, A. (2019), 'Higher wages versus social and legal insecurity: Migrant domestic workers in Russia and Kazakhstan', *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 20(3), pp. 639–658.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2025), 'Facilitating safe and skilled labour migration along the Central Asia–Russian Federation–Kazakhstan corridor.' Paris: OECD.

Turaeva, R. (2025). Dokymenty!" Overdocumentation and the Anti-Refugee Machine in Russia *Migration and Society: Advances in Research* 8 (2025): 138–152.

Turaeva, R. (2023) Capitalising Precarity: Wellbeing of Migrants in Russia. *Journal of Labor and Society*, 1(aop), pp.1-18.

Turaeva, R. (2019). Imagined mosque communities in Russia: Central Asian migrants in Moscow, *Asian Ethnicity,* 20:2, 131-147, DOI: 10.1080/14631369.2018.1525529

Turaeva, R. (2018). Informal economies in post-Soviet space: Post-Soviet Islam and its role in ordering entrepreneurship in Central Asia*, Central Asian Affairs,* (5):55-75.

Turaeva, R. (2016), '*Migration and Identity: The Uzbek Experience*.' London: Routledge.

Turaeva, R. and Urinboyev, R. (2021). *Labour, Mobilities and Informal Practices: Power, institutions and Mobile Actors in Transnational Space*, London: Routledge.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) (2025), '*Women migrant workers from Central Asia to the Russian Federation: Trends, challenges and prospects.'* Available at: https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12870/8202 (Accessed: 15 November 2025).

Zayonchkovskaya, Z., Chudinovskikh, O., Apakidze, E. and Florinskaya, Y. (2014), '*Domestic workers in Russia and Kazakhstan*.' Almaty: UN Women and Ex Libris.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Victor Michael Aihawu is a social entrepreneur, migration practitioner, cultural strategist, and mental wellness advocate, and founder of the Centre for Youths Integrated Development (CYID), registered in Nigeria and the UK. For over two decades, he has supported youth, returnees, and vulnerable communities through skills development, enterprise support, and psychosocial care. He is Director of the Platform for Cooperation on Mixed Migration (PCMM), advancing migrant protection and community-driven solutions. Through Africa Multicultural & Heritage Promotion Ltd (AMHP), he leads the Cultural Hangout Festival (CHF), Coastal Fashion & Art Show, and Coastal du Monde, using culture to connect migration, identity, and opportunity across London and Nigeria.

Erka Çaro is a researcher and lecturer at the University of Tirana. She holds a PhD in Population Studies from the University of Groningen. Her work focuses on migration, labour mobility, gender, and diaspora dynamics in the Western Balkans. She has coordinated major international research projects on labour migration and diasporas and is a member of the executive board of the Western Balkans Migration Network. Her publications appear in leading journals and academic presses, contributing to policy debates on migration governance, labour rights, and development.

Nkiru Perpetua Duru is a development practitioner and research professional with over a decade of experience in migration governance, skills development, and inclusive reintegration programming in Nigeria. She holds a Masters in Development Studies and a B.Sc. in Sociology. She has professional training in migration law and refugee law from the Institute of International Humanitarian Law Sanremo, Italy, which underpins her evidence-based approach to policy and programming. Nkiru serves as Senior Program and Research Officer at CYID Sariaglo and as the Co-chair Asylum and Refugees Thematic Head for the Platform for Cooperation on Mixed Migration. Her work focuses on generating evidence to inform policies linking migration, skills mobility, and labour market integration, contributing to national and regional policy dialogue and systems strengthening.

Zebo Isakova Murodovna is associate professor of Economics at Kimyo International University in Tashkent. She is Doctor of Science (DSc) in Economics. Her research focuses on labour migration, digital labour platforms, skills governance and labour market transformation in emerging economies. She has contributed to international research and policy initiatives with organisations including the European Training Foundation (ETF), UNDP, UNESCO-UNEVOC and the Islamic Development Bank. Her work examines how digitalisation is reshaping labour mobility, skills development and employment structures in Central Asia. Her recent research explores the emergence of telemigration and the governance challenges associated with cross-border digital work and skills recognition.

Mariavittoria Garlappi is a senior Education and Training Expert at ETF with a post-graduate diploma in International Relations from Johns Hopkins University. For 35 years, she has worked on system reforms across Northern Africa, the Middle East, Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, covering research, policy advice, and project management. As ETF's Migration Focal Point, she specializes on the links between

skills provision, labour market needs, and migration. She leads MIGCOM, ETF's expert community on migration, and supports EU services in developing skills and migration-related initiatives.

Bresena Kopliku is an Associate Professor of Geography at University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi" in Albania. She holds a PhD in migration and population studies and has extensive experience in teaching, research, and academic leadership. Her work focuses on migration, diaspora engagement, transnationalism, and digital transformation in tourism. She has contributed to numerous international projects and collaborations, including Erasmus+ and regional research initiatives. She also serves as an external expert and editorial board member. Her research informs policy debates on migration, skills, and development in transitional and global contexts.

Mihaela Matei is a migration policy expert and researcher specialising in labour migration governance, labour mobility and migration policy frameworks. She holds a PhD from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, focusing on the return migration of highly skilled workers. Since 2012, she has led multiple framework contracts for EU and UN institutions, coordinating research on migration, labour mobility, migration governance, return, and reintegration. Her work integrates academic research with practical interventions to support evidence-based migration governance and the protection of migrant workers, with particular focus on aligning national migration policies with European Union standards and international labour regulations.

Judith Möllers is Deputy Head of the Department of Agricultural Policy at the Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO) in Halle (Saale), Germany. Her research focuses on rural development, agricultural policy, and livelihood transformation in transition economies, with a particular emphasis on South-Eastern Europe. She examines labour markets, migration and remittances, and the wellbeing of farm households, as well as agricultural policies and their impacts on farms and rural livelihoods. Dr Möllers has contributed to numerous international research projects on agricultural transformation and socio-economic change in rural regions. Her work informs academic and policy discussions on sustainable rural development, structural transformation, and the resilience of rural communities in transition contexts.

Nermin Oruc is founder and director of Research at the Centre for Development Evaluation and Social Science Research. He is also coordinator of the Western Balkans Migration Network (WB-MIGNET). He holds PhD from Staffordshire University and has 10 years of teaching experience and more than 20 years of research experience. His research interests include migration, labour market analysis, education and social policy analysis. He was visiting teaching fellow at the CERGE-EI, Prague and visiting research fellow at ISER/University of Essex, and International Inequalities Institute, LSE, London. Nermin developed first labour market forecasting model for BiH, first tax-benefit microsimulation model for BiH, and is providing regular support to institutions in developing their monitoring and evaluation systems.

Janine Pinkow-Läpple is a postdoctoral researcher at the Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO) in Halle (Saale), Germany. Her research focuses on migration, social change, and the development impacts of return migration in transition and post-conflict contexts. In particular, she examines intangible

remittances, gender dynamics, and the role of return migrants in social and institutional transformation in their countries of origin. Her work uses qualitative and interdisciplinary approaches to study the migration–development nexus and has been conducted within several international research projects. Alongside her academic work, she has served as a consultant for the German Development Cooperation (GIZ), contributing to rural development initiatives in Southeast Europe.

Marija Rashkovska is a project associate at the Nikola Karev Regional VET Centre and an internationally certified career counsellor (holding the Global Career Development Facilitator certificate) and board member of the Macedonian Association of Career Counsellors. With over 15 years of experience in vocational education and training, she specialises in career guidance, skills development, and the integration of green and digital competences into VET systems. She is actively involved in institutional development processes, including self-assessment and quality improvement, within a Centre of Vocational Excellence context, strengthening education–labour market linkages. Her work combines practice and research, focusing on skills mismatch, employability, and policy-relevant approaches to improving career pathways and lifelong learning opportunities.

Slavica Taseva is an internationally certified career counsellor, HR expert and trainer with over 10 years of experience in human resources, training and project management. She holds multiple international certifications, including Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF), GENOS Emotional Intelligence Practitioner, DISC Flow Trainer and KPI Professional. Her work focuses on supporting individuals and organisations in developing personal and professional capacities, with particular emphasis on lifelong learning and employability skills. She works with youth, adults and institutions, delivering training and coaching programmes. She is a member of the Macedonian Association of Career Counsellors and a recipient of the 2020–2021 Global Career Development Scholarship awarded by the NBCC Foundation.

Rano Turaeva-Hoehne is a social anthropologist, Senior lecturer (Privatdozentin) at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich), consultant and a founder of a think tank based in Germany. Her research focuses on labour migration, gender, religion and informal economies across Central Asia, Russia and the Caucasus, grounded in more than a decade of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in those countries. She authored the monograph Migration and Identity: The Uzbek Experience (Routledge, 2016) and is forthcoming book Migration and Islam in Russia (Brill 2026). Alongside academic work, she serves as a country and migration expert for courts and international organisations, producing applied analyses on mobility, labour markets and protection risks. She has also led capacity-building and training programmes on gender mainstreaming and monitoring.

Iva Vukčević is a researcher at the Institute for Strategic Studies and Prognoses (ISSP), socio-economic scientific research center, in Montenegro. Her research focuses on labour markets, migration and youth policies in the Western Balkans. Her research experience includes survey design, field research, and quantitative and qualitative analysis. She is a member of the Western Balkans Migration Network (WB-MIGNET), the ETF Skills Lab Network of Experts – MIGCOM (Migration Community), and the WEBecon – Western Balkans Economic Think Tank Network. Iva is currently completing an MSc in International Economy at the University of Donja Gorica.

ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALMPs	Active Labour Market Programmes
AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
CA	Central Asia
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CoVE	Centre of Vocational Excellence
CRGG	Climate Resilience and Green Growth
CSO	Civil Society Organization
E.T.F.	European Training Foundation.
EC	European Commission
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EE	Eastern Europe
EEA	European Economic Area
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESA	Employment Service Agency of North Macedonia
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
FLACHS	Family Life and Community Health Society
FMHAPR	Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Reduction
FMLE	Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPI	Girls Power Initiative
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration

ISATCOVE	International Self-Assessment Tool for Centres of Vocational Excellence
ISSP	Institute for Strategic Studies and Prognoses
IT	Information Technology
KII	Key Informant Interview
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and others
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MELR	Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations (Republic of Uzbekistan)
MLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (North Macedonia)
MONSTAT	Statistical Office of Montenegro
NAPTIP	National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons
NCFRMI	National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIDCOM	Nigerians in Diaspora Commission
NIS	Nigeria Immigration Service
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCI	Patriotic Citizen initiative
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SSO	State Statistical Office of North Macedonia
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WDI	World Development Indicators (World Bank)

ETF
Working together
Learning for life

European Training Foundation

www.etf.europa.eu

https://bsky.app/profile/etf.europa.eu

youtube.com/user/etfeuropa

www.facebook.com/etfeuropa

www.instagram.com/etfeuropa

openspace.etf.europa.eu

https://www.linkedin.com/company/etfeuropa