



THE GRAND RETURN

COVID-19
AND REVERSE MIGRATION
TO BULGARIA

SOFIA, NOVEMBER, 2020



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FINDINGS

I N B R I E F

■ By using data from the official government system, we were able to establish that over **558 000 Bulgarian citizens** were registered as having entered Bulgaria during the March-May period. This was the period of the most severe lockdown, with 14-days quarantine and checkpoints between cities.

■ There is no method to calculate what percentage share of these people had been staying abroad long-term vs. short-term. Yet we used a unique database of **over 70 000 quarantined people and traced them back to municipalities.** The number of quarantined people was **larger in May in every single municipality**, suggesting the flow of people entering was stronger.

■ Data from comparing the number of people quarantined at different locations to the working age populations there points to some **cities with a significant percentage share of returnees. In Petrich and Sandanski for example, this share is between 7**

and 8%, in Vidin it is 4.5%, in Montana, Ruse and Blagoevgrad - around 4%. Given that the quarantined for the studied period account for just under half the total number of entrants into the country, it is logical to assume that the total amount of repatriates to these locations represents a larger percentage share than the stated data.

■ We carried out an online survey with people who returned after a prolonged period abroad. The results show that the **two leading reasons for repatriation are “the desire to be with relatives” (46%), or “job loss” (32%). 10% of respondents stated that they would not be returning abroad after the COVID crisis is over, whereas 25% had not decided yet.** Within the group that has spent over one year abroad, these shares are respectively 19% and 47%. The factors their decision hinges upon are finding well-paid work here in Bulgaria, corruption, the COVID-19 crisis, finding work abroad, and the social and urban environment.

I. AN UNFORESEEN WAVE OF RETURNEES

A quiet tsunami is sweeping over the borders of the European continent's eastern reaches. It's perhaps unsurprising if you haven't noticed it since everyone in the past few months has been preoccupied with returning home.

This is exactly what has happened in Central and Eastern Europe: many people have departed from the destinations they had migrated to and have returned home to their countries of origin.

This trend emerged clearly at the end of March when gen. Ventsislav Mutafchiysky, head of the Bulgarian national HQ addressing COVID-19, declared¹ that more than 200 000 Bulgarians had returned home. On March 27, Romanian PM Ludovic Orban stated² that a similar number of Romanians, around 200 000, had also come back since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, this process has not been limited to the confines of EU borderlines, but has also spilled over to the EU's neighbours: As the biggest country in the region, Ukraine has so far reported the return of more than 1.3 m people over land and air, whereas significantly smaller Moldova has had around 40 000³ of its citizens return from abroad.

1. dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/200-000-bylgari-se-pri-braha-v-bylgariia-prez-poslednite-sedmici-video-2218275

2. rmx.news/article/article/coronavirus-has-flipped-mass-migration-around-for-eastern-europe-as-millions-return-home

3. rovienna.iom.int/story/moldova-braces-large-numbers-returning-migrants

This is obviously not an isolated trend. Reverse migration or repatriation is currently a global and very widespread phenomenon. More than 2.1 m Indians⁴ as well as 600 000 Afghans (according to IOM data) have returned home. Similar trends can be observed in many Latin American countries.

The combination of a sharp contraction in consumption, widespread business decline, shutdowns of large swathes of the economy and last but not least, a health crisis, which mandates quick access to health services, has led many migrants to conclude that the safest and most sensible decision would be to return home to their birthplaces. This decision is also underlined by emotional reasons, which cannot be overstated—the need to be with one's relatives, in a place where one has built up a social network that can be a source of mutual support during a crisis.

The current repatriation trend is probably going to be a temporary phenomenon in many places. The fundamental reasons why people choose to migrate have not changed substantially due to Covid-19. Unless the pandemic leads to long-term restrictions and uncertainty for health care systems and economies, one would expect the current migration flow to reverse its direction and recover its pre-pandem-

4. Migration data relevant for the COVID-19 — migrationdataportal.org/themen/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic

ic volume over the next 2-3 years.

Several factors could help make the current trend a more sustainable and important event for Eastern Europe.

First, the effects for Eastern Europe will be much stronger. Discounting regions with active military conflicts, Eastern Europe has long been the world's most affected in terms of population decline and emigration. It is also the only region that has reported population decline for three consecutive decades⁵.

Since 1990 Bulgaria has lost 1.3 m people or around a fifth of its population. Lithuania has lost a quarter of its population, Romania—close to 18%, and Hungary—7%. This trend is unlikely to change. According to the UN's demographic projections for 2100⁶, only 4 out of the top 20 countries with the fastest shrinking populations are outside Eastern and Central Europe.

The return of such sizable groups of people to economies that have been suffering from population decline for so long is going to be a markedly different experience.

Second, economies in Eastern Europe have the capacity to at least partially accommodate this return wave. While many of the Asian and Latin American economies suffer from an oversaturation of the workforce or from insufficient economic activity to support the new flow of people, over the past few years Eastern Europe has been suffering from the opposite problem. Labour shortages and associated wage hikes were evident everywhere in the region.

The impact of the coronavirus notwithstanding, there are no structural reasons for these economic trends to change. On the contrary, some business fields are already undergoing a process of moving production capacities and

shortening supply chains, which should make Eastern Europe one of the major winners globally. Thus, labour demand is going to increase, rather than decline.

Third, the European Union is the key difference between these regions and others.

A large share of the countries in the regions are EU member states, which places them in a completely different position in comparison to other regional groups. Latin America is bound economically, but not politically or socially, to Northern American economies. Meanwhile, the centres of attraction in Asia are the large countries such as Japan, India and China, with remaining migratory flows directed at the USA, Australia and Europe.

None of these alternatives offer the dynamics implied by EU membership. The Union functions de facto as a single state with no restrictions on movement and settlement, with the inklings of interstate social and health coverage, while targeted investment supports improvements in the quality of life in underdeveloped peripheral regions of the EU.

This plays an important role in migration or repatriation decision making. The ease with which migrants from Eastern Europe can settle in Western Europe, which has up to this point played a negative role for CEA economies, has now turned into an advantage. Returning to Plovdiv from Milan, or to Katowice from Lyon, is a matter of a few hours' travelling and a swift financial transfer.

Freedom and ease of movement, together with the fact that many of the places people are returning to had already started developing strategies to attract human capital, could play a vital role in retaining at least some of this unexpected boon.

5. Eastern Europe has the largest population loss in modern history — FT, www.ft.com/content/70813826-0c64-33d3-8a0c-72059ae1b5e3

6. www.businessinsider.com/the-fastest-shrinking-countries-in-the-world-declining-populations

Since 1990 Bulgaria has lost 1.3 m people or around a fifth of its population.



WHY THIS MATTERS

Naturally, there are many more questions about this sudden bout of migration. Our study was carried out with an express purpose in mind and is thus unrepresentative, because its goal was to capture a momentary snapshot of the mood of a large and extremely heterogeneous group. There is not direct way of establishing how many of those who entered Bulgaria and were quarantined were migrants—especially not in a Union where people are more and more mobile. Taking into account the common trend and the structural reasons for leaving, it is very hard to believe that this powerful wave of return migration will continue or won't reverse direction.

And yet COVID-19 surprised both politicians and demographic experts. No one knows much about the characteristics or intentions of the various returnees from abroad. The new situation has been ongoing for over six months, taking into account the second wave in Europe and the ensuing economic uncertainty. Everything points to the current situation continuing at least until the spring of 2021, which will mean that a year will have passed since the return of these people to their birthplaces. That is not an insignificant amount of time.

The immediate reason for returning is medical, but the consequences may be political, social and economic. If even 10% of those who came back decide to stay permanently, this would

represent a huge impetus of human capital for local economies.

All this underlines that reverse migration is an important political and social issue with four clear characteristics:

- First, it is an unexpected boon for local economies
- Second, it could represent more than just a short-term reversal
- Third, not everyone who has returned will migrate again
- And fourth, even those who do leave could represent valuable database for further research and analysis to help attract human capital in the future

II. THE FOCUS ON BULGARIA

Over the last few months we gathered data about this human wave in Bulgaria together with ECFR. We began with data collection and sifting through official government databases. We ultimately turned to the returnees themselves to explain their motives and actions.

As we did not have much time at hand, we focused our efforts on establishing basic facts about this “great migration”, in-depth interviews and an attempt at swift analysis that could serve as the stepping stone for more in-depth and detailed studies. We do not claim to have exhausted the topic or to have presented a complete sample. However, in the absence of further available information, and due to the pertinence of the topic to many more countries than just Bulgaria, we believe it is important to share our findings.

Lack of full and interconnected databases makes it very hard to track internal EU migration.

1. HOW MANY PEOPLE CAME BACK?

We started with the total number of people who returned to the country in the period under review. Determining the number of internal migrants in the EU is usually a very difficult task. This stems from how this type of mobility is registered and tracked.

Internal migrants in the EU are not mandated to register either in their destination of origin, or at their point of arrival and even if they do, these databases aren’t interconnected, so the data is ultimately lost. In a normal situation the state does not gather data for the number of people travelling to EU destinations, nor for those returning from EU destinations. In theory, address registrations should play the role of a registry for determining the location of any given Bulgarian citizen. For decades, however, the way this register has been maintained does not meet the standards of statistics. Registering a new address happens only at the request of each respective person and almost none of the necessary services rely on changing one’s address registration. A number of complications can delay notification of a person’s change of address, or even render it unknown forever. These include landlords’ reluctance to declare lease arrangements and associated income, administrative bureaucracies regarding a change of address, and a lack of coordination with other state structures that maintain respective services. Consequently, the address registry does not fulfil its stated function of informing government services of one’s loca-

tion. This hinders a range of activities—from compiling adequate electoral lists, to state censuses and forming adequate forecasts for collection of local taxes.

Taking this into account, the current situation represents a new precedent for researchers and authorities. The strict provisions, associated with tracing and containing the coronavirus, set a new standard for accounting for the entrants into the country. Thus, starting from the middle of March, the border and health authorities began registering every entry into the country, regardless whether it came from the EU or not. In some cases the entrants are even traced to their final destination.

With the help of the state agency responsible for gathering and analysing data—“Information Services”, we received the number of people who had returned during the months of the pandemic and tried to assess how many of them fell into this study’s sphere of interest.

We used several determinants for our assessments.

First, we took March as the starting point of the crisis—Bulgaria was one of the first European countries to issue a state of emergency and a lockdown—on March 13, 2020. This situation de facto continued until Easter on April 19. After that most of the restrictions began being tacitly eased. Officially, the state of emergency continued until May 13, although most restrictions began to be officially lifted on May 3. Google data on the movements of people in different countries, summarised in the COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports, is particularly useful here. Thus, the period we focused on was that of the strictest restrictions—between March and May.

How mobility is measured

Google estimates the change against a baseline reference value calculated on the basis of the months before the pandemic began. It represents the average value of the indicator for the same day of the week in the period

from January 3 to February 6. For example, on March 29 (Sunday) people in Bulgaria spent 11% more time at home than the average time they spent on the five Sundays of the reference period. On the Friday prior to that (27/03), however, they spent 22% more time at home than they did on the reference Fridays.

This is motivated by our **second assumption**: for the purposes of this study, we assumed that anyone with Bulgarian citizenship who returned to the country in March and April, as well as in early May during the worst part of the crisis, and faced a mandatory 14-day quarantine and huge travel restrictions, did travel for leisure, tourism or business, but rather returned to stay in the country for at least a notable period.

Thirdly, we did not take into account the border checkpoints with Greece due to the possibility of statistical “noise” and blurring of data—this is the main entrance and exit for tourist travel in Bulgaria and especially with the warming of the weather, it was risky to take traffic through these checkpoints into account.

It is important to add one other important note to the data: the numbers reported area mix between the numbers from Border Police and from “Information Services”. “Information Services” only began to collect and analyse the data in the last days of March because of insufficient coordination with Border Police and health services. This is understandable as hitherto no structures of the Ministry of the Interior have ever been connected to another state structure in real time, which obviously took time for setting up. Unfortunately, this also means that at least 2 active weeks of people returning were missed.

We got the overall number of entries (Greek border excluded) of Bulgarian citizens for the period March-June from Border police and we were able to calculate the number of entrees for March by comparing it with the far more detailed data we had from “Information Services”.

RETURNEES AND QUARANTINED

(for the whole period - data Information service)

	Bulgarian citizens	Foreign citizens	Altogether	Quarantined
March	14	3	17	0
April	27 011	26 313	53 324	14 625
May	129 462	122 288	251 750	80 495
June	302 731	386 968	689 699	19 144
July	408 763	715 623	1 124 386	19 533
August	378 723	762 174	1 140 897	6 139
September	400 423	464 014	864 437	473
	1 647 127	2 477 383	4 124 510	140 409

RETURNEES IN MARCH

(data from Border police - without Greek border)

	Bulgarian citizens
March-June	801 755
April-June	399 764
Only March	401 991

LOCKDOWN RETURNEES

(A calculation between Border police and IS data)

March-May	558 464
Greek border excluded	533 860

In that way, we were able to estimate that the overall number of citizens who returned to Bulgaria for the period March-May was a little over 558 000 people. If we exclude the Greek border entries for that period, the number is around 534 000 people. March was by far the busiest month in terms of people returning—over 401 000 entries were recorded. Yet we couldn't get any detailed data for March, so we decided to focus on April-May, with the breakdowns we got from "IS".

Keeping these conditions in mind, estimates show that between April and the end of May, a little more than 121 000 people returned to Bulgaria, of whom 36 000 travelled by airplane, and the rest across land borders.

There is no adequate method to determine how many of them were long-term returnees or just people who had been left stranded abroad when the pandemic broke out.

RETURNEES - APRIL-MAY

(selected border crossings)

	April			May			Bulgarian citizens
	Foreign citizens	Altogether	Quarantined	Foreign citizens	Altogether	Quarantined	
Kapitan Andreevo	4501	5882	3059	22 371	28 536	8 122	7546
Vidin bridge	3766	9905	406	15 615	41 767	20 370	32291
Ruse bridge	5362	9792	3550	23 722	41 535	15 591	22243
Kalotina	2589	3574	1919	12 128	19 299	5 335	8156
Gyueshevo	894	1276	519	3 156	4 423	1 479	1649
Kalotina rail	0	318	0	0	744	0	1062
Ruse port	247	309	0	810	1 003	49	255
Durankulak	367	1032	364	1 687	3 663	1 650	2641
Svilengrad rail	0	274	0	0	818	0	1092
Bregovo	291	344	0				53
Vrashka chuka	66	275	119	246	1 070	576	1033
Lesovo	1010	1574	649	7 316	9 997	2 600	3245
Stanke Lisichkovo	161	415	147	459	1 194	589	989
Zlatarevo	297	532	161	1 551	2 263	711	947
Silistra	416	914	533	1 551	3 157	1 198	2104
Malko Tarnovo	15	48	17	126	516	399	423
Sofia airport	1101	3990	0	8 422	35 748	902	30215
Burgas airport	8	8	0	120	968	863	848
Varna airport	1	1	0	590	5 496	4 542	4906
							121 698

2. WHERE DID THEY GO?

The other extremely useful dataset, which has been collected for the first time and can be used, is that of the quarantined. Bulgaria began quarantining people with an extremely strict imposition of a state of emergency and measures in the initial month-and-a-half. According to the latest data, there are more than 3000 pre-trial proceedings of people who violated the first lockdown's restrictions, and there have been several hundred convictions.

In order to guarantee the traceability of entrants into the country and to register where they would self-isolate, every person crossing the border into Bulgaria had to fill out an address declaration, stating where they could be found in the following 14 days. "Information services" provided us with this information in summary form, in order to avoid leaking the personal data of any individual citizen.

This summarised dataset is extremely useful as it allows for something that had so far been impossible in migration research—seeing exactly where people return to from abroad.

Overall, the quarantined make up around one third of all entrants into the country, out of both foreigners and Bulgarians. The breakdown by municipality provides a very interesting dataset, which allows for different comparisons.

The summary is of the quarantined, by municipality, for two months in a row, April and May (due to the absence of adequate data for March, which also leads to a sample that is smaller than the actual numbers). There are more people who were quarantined in May than in April in nearly every municipality. This is understandable due to the virus's spread through Europe but cannot solely account for the significant differences between the two months. It is probable that the flow of returnees simply intensified. In June, the number of quarantined people declined in most places. However, by June the abolition of stricter measures had begun, which makes this

QUARANTINED

April-May

Municipality	April	May	Sum
Sofia	688	5181	5869
Ruse	398	2568	2966
Varna	157	2179	2336
Petrich	323	1979	2302
Plovdiv	246	2010	2256
Sandanski	258	1394	1652
Blagoevgrad	207	1387	1594
Burgas	101	1326	1427
Vidin	77	1318	1395
Pazardzhik	77	1154	1231
Sliven	98	1051	1149
Pleven	98	1008	1106
Dobrich	103	921	1024
Haskovo	77	875	952
Montana	48	897	945
Shumen	70	784	854
Stara Zagora	72	763	835
Pernik	111	722	833
Vratza	37	764	801
Razgrad	82	715	797
Targovishte	68	724	792
Kyustendil	84	670	754
Kardzhali	43	608	651
Svilengrad	74	556	630
Silistra	71	548	619
Dupnitza	66	541	607
Gotze Delchev	49	515	564
Dulovo	39	499	538
Dimitrovgrad	50	486	536
Simitly	47	467	514
Lovetch	57	442	499
Veliko Tarnovo	56	431	487
Asenovgrad	47	434	481
Kazanlak	44	428	472
Botevgrad	17	429	446
Yambol	40	398	438
Lom	21	363	384
Rodophy	34	332	366
Berkovitsa	36	330	366
Nova Zagora	22	335	357
Gabrovo	25	330	355
Provadia	28	323	351
Dobrich-villages	25	321	346
Ruen	23	314	337
Karlovo	17	318	335
Popovo	27	305	332
Sevlievo	15	313	328

TOP 30 ALL MUNICIPALITIES

Quarantined as % of working-age population

Municipality	Quarantined	Working age population	%
Strumyani	243	2561	9.5
Byala	145	1839	7.9
Petrich	2302	29 425	7.8
Sandanski	1652	21884	7.5
Ivanovo	263	3931	6.7
Simitly	514	7899	6.5
Svilengrad	630	12661	5.0
Makresh	26	526	4.9
Dimovo	131	2741	4.8
Kaynardzha	143	3001	4.8
Vidin	1395	29 711	4.7
Novo selo	49	1044	4.7
Hadjidimovo	245	5368	4.6
Brusartzi	95	2154	4.4
Gurkovo	128	2914	4.4
Varshetz	161	3712	4.3
Slivo pole	231	5344	4.3
Krushari	92	2178	4.2
Kula	72	1717	4.2
Berkovitsa	366	8790	4.2
Mizia	137	3310	4.1
Nevestino	33	800	4.1
Samuil	158	3903	4.0
Suvorovo	162	4098	4.0
Hitrino	143	3847	3.7
Iskar	114	3079	3.7
Belogradchik	106	2875	3.7
Nikopol	136	3781	3.6
Lesichovo	100	2820	3.5
Sitovo	96	2714	3.5

indicator unusable for data comparisons past the studied period.

In real terms, data from big cities understandably stands out the most because the biggest number of people returned to them. However, it is interesting to make an initial cross-section of the places where the increase in May compared to April is greatest: i.e. cities with a population of over 20,000, with the highest number of returnees in April.

However, if a comparison is drawn between returnees and quarantined and the working age

population, there are other cities that stand out. For example, in Petrich, the quarantined amount to almost 8% of the working age population. In Vidin, 1241 people were quarantined, which is about 4.6% of the working population. In Montana, Blagoevgrad and Ruse—other large cities, this percentage varies between 3 and 4%.

Three cities

Three cities that are situated near a border stand out—Petrich, Sandanski and Svilengrad. All three are ranked high both in real terms and as a percentage of the population, whether in the overall ranking or in that of cities with over 20 000 people (excluding Svilengrad due to the smaller population). However, more than one explanation applies here. All three cities have long been losing labour to nearby Greece and Turkey, mostly in the fields of agriculture and tourism. On the one hand, it is perfectly understandable that at the first signs of a serious health and economic crisis affecting those spheres, much of this labour force returned quickly to their native places. On the other hand, it is not impossible that these cities could have been used as a “quarantine zone” for those returning from abroad by car. However, such information cannot be found officially; moreover, since the authorities allowed quarantine to take place after reaching one’s final address, this is less likely.

It is impossible to draw definitive conclusions from this dataset without further research and information. It is, however, important to note that these are some of the places where the greatest outgoing migration has occurred in previous years. Cities from the three parts of the country that have suffered the most from the outflow of human capital—the area Ruse-Razgrad-Silistra, the line Kyustendil-Blagoevgrad-Petrich and Northwestern Bulgaria—all make it into the top 10 of cities with a population of over 20 thousand people, where those quarantined lead in terms of percentage of the working age population. This cannot

MUNICIPALITIES OVER 20 THOUSAND

Quarantined as % of working-age population

Municipality	Working age pop	%
Petrich	29425	7.8
Sandanski	21884	7.5
Vidin	29711	4.7
Montana	27536	3.4
Blagoevgrad	47580	3.4
Ruse	95944	3.1
Razgrad	27331	2.9
Dupnitsa	21712	2.8
Kyustendil	29530	2.6
Targovishte	31895	2.5
Silistra	25522	2.4
Vratza	37259	2.1
Lovetch	23507	2.1
Dimitrovgrad	25960	2.1
Dobrich	49600	2.1
Pazardzhik	63908	1.9
Haskovo	50503	1.9
Sliven	67217	1.7
Pleven	68177	1.6
Shumen	52679	1.6
Pernik	51821	1.6
Kardzhali	42416	1.5
Asenovgrad	36388	1.3
Gorna Oriahovitza	23865	1.3
Karlovo	27291	1.2
Kazanlak	38543	1.2
Gabrovo	31401	1.1
Burgas	127160	1.1
Yambol	39774	1.1
Svishtov	20674	1.1
Varna	216003	1.0
Plovdiv	54169	0.9
Veliko Tarnovo	93606	0.9
Stara Zagora	20854	0.9
Smolyan	49600	0.7
Sofia	851188	0.7

be explained solely by the fact that these cities shrunk due to depopulation and thus, the percentage of returnees is higher. For example, more people were quarantined (i.e. returned from abroad) in real terms in Ruse than in Varna, which is twice the size of Ruse. There are more quarantined individuals in Vidin than in Bourgas, which is five times bigger.

These differences would probably become even more pronounced had we received access to the full data on all returnees rather than just those who had to be placed under quarantine. However, if one follows the logic of the general sample, in which the quarantined make up half of all entrants with a Bulgarian citizenship, it is normal to assume that the flow of returning people was much stronger.

Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of those who returned, regardless whether they were placed under quarantine or not, were part of the earlier wave of outgoing migration, which Bulgaria experienced.

It is important to note that the number of returnees quarantined as % of working-age population is high in some places where the greatest outgoing migration has occurred in previous years.

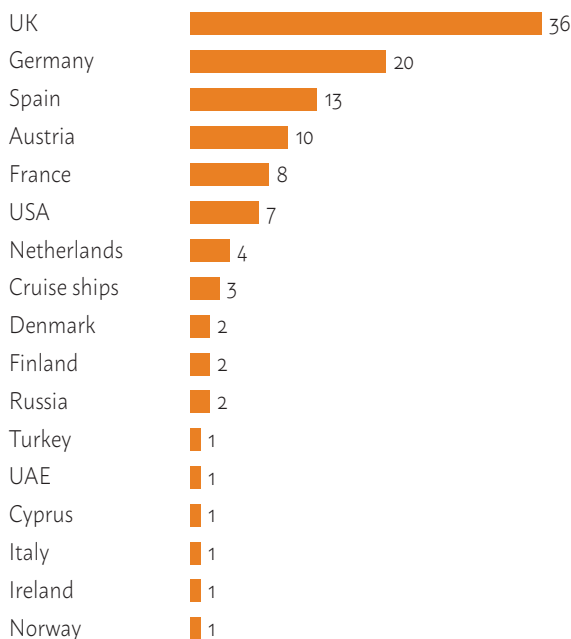
3. REASONS TO RETURN AND STAY

Due to the lack of systemic data about the intentions of all these people, there is only one way to attempt to find out about some of the motivation behind such a wave: by talking to those who have returned. We used the only swift and relatively cheap way to reach such a diffuse and heterogeneous group of people—social media. We chose Facebook because it is the preferred social network for a majority of working age people in Bulgaria. Although Facebook is not a very accurate or reliable source, it allows the acquisition of some initial sense of the attitudes of the participants in the survey.

We specifically targeted people of working age living in large cities and places with a known history of outgoing migration and launched a survey looking for “returnees because of COVID”. We also used a feature on Facebook, which allows targeting people with a declared interest to live in a particular country—usually an indicator of residence in the place, as it allows connecting with other expats there.

We received over 130 answers from all over the country. The main return destinations were

WHERE DID YOU RETURN FROM?

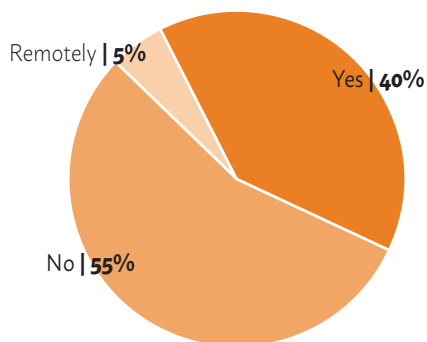


not surprising—the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Spain, and France were the top 5.

The most popular reason to return by far was the “desire to be with one’s family and relatives”, which reaffirms the yearning for a connection to home and a social network in a time of crisis. The second most popular reason was “job loss”. Combinations of the two likely also play a significant role. The huge majority of such responses in the sample group implies that these two reasons probably dominate in the wider group of repatriates as well.

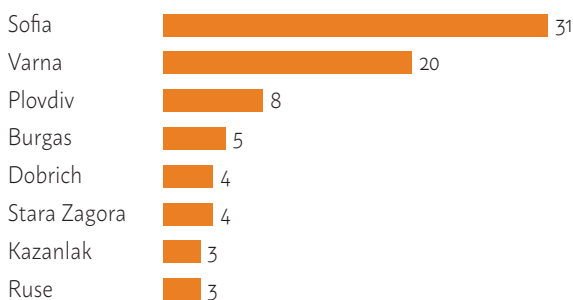
What was most interesting for the purposes of our study was whether she / he planned to return abroad. Over 10% of respondents answered “No”, and around 16% said they had not decided yet. It is interesting to note that the longer someone has stayed abroad, the more inclined they are to come back to Bulgaria. If we isolate the group, which has remained abroad for over 1 year, then over 19% of people in it state they have no plans of departing again,

DO YOU WORK PRESENTLY?



WHERE DID YOU RETURN TO?

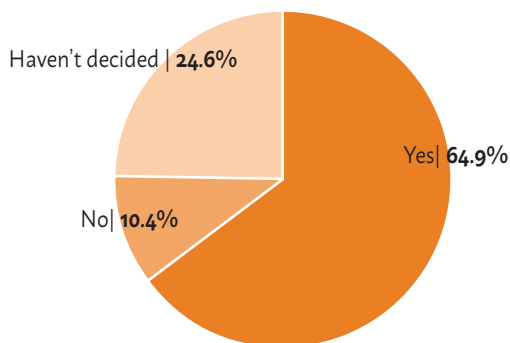
main cities



LENGHT OF STAY ABROAD



DO YOU PLAN TO MIGRATE AGAIN?

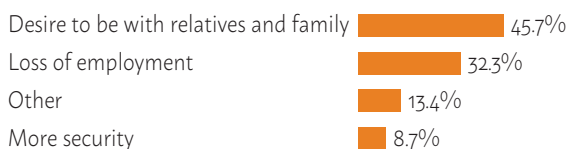


and over 47%, or at least half, have not decided yet.

However, the motives for staying or returning are among the most interesting in the study. Participants through both voting channels (Google form and Facebook) were given several initial options to choose from:

- the COVID situation
- finding work here
- finding work abroad
- improvement in the situation (urban environment, amenities, social life) in the place where I live
- improvement in the situation in the country (corruption, business environment, justice system)

WHY DID YOU COME BACK



Separately, participants were given the option to add their own motives for wanting to stay in Bulgaria or return abroad. Many of the respondents pointed to more than one factor—the differences during data collection mean it is not entirely possible to standardise the sample (Facebook does not give the option for questions with more than one answer, but the survey in the app substantially increases the number of respondents). However, some trends are clearly visible in the reasons, most commonly attributed as important.

MAIN REASONS FOR DECISION

Main reasons to influence the decision



*good salary, enough money to live good

Finding work here (or not) holds first place among the possible motivating factors. 41% of people (if all respondents are considered — 134) indicated this as a factor. This is consistent with all research on migration processes, which points to this as the main reason for the movement of people. More interesting, however, is the mix of several reasons that follow. In second place among these factors is “corruption” — 23% of people believe that this is one of the deciding factors for whether they should stay or leave. “Covid” as a motive comes in third after these two factors—the current situation in Europe created by the corona crisis will obviously play a decisive role for mobility across the continent and beyond in the short term. Finding work abroad is cited as a motivating factor by 13%.

It must be taken into account that because of the free-form nature of the replies, some of the aforementioned reasons mix or overlap with

each other, or are interdependent. Corruption, for example, is very often given as an answer together with finding work. If one takes into account all the responses that mention “money” or “good pay”, which we could safely count towards the factor “work”, then 50% of respondents gave such a reply.

The number of people who give answers in which “social environment” and “urban environment” appear, is not insignificant. These two categories are neglected incredibly often both in research of motivation for city-to-city migration and in Bulgarian cities’ recent development plans, which lack an adequate definition of what constitutes good urban environment, how it is formed, how it is preserved and in what ways it is interdependent and in symbiosis with the social environment in that city. In total, about 20% of respondents cited one or the other as a factor in their decision-making process.

Naturally, this study is not a representative sample for 117,000 people and its conclusions should not be taken as valid for a large group of people. And yet they are indicative of at least some of the sentiments running among such types of repatriates.

4. LET’S TALK TO THEM

In order to go into more detail and to try to understand a little more about the motivation to return, as well as the factors that play a role in the decision to depart or to stay, we conducted several in-depth interviews with people, who had filled out the survey. Separately, we used conversations on the topic with several business representatives, as well as with highly qualified personnel, carried out in the last few months by the “Capital Weekly” journalist Zornitsa Stoilova. They assemble and complete the picture of this migration wave. The details in them are important for the conclusions we draw.

The group of students who’ve gone abroad after their secondary education in order to study, or have just graduated, is a special category. These are people who have until recently resided in Bulgaria and still have strong and stable ties here, and who also see opportunities to start working here.

Mariela, 21, is one such student. She left Bulgaria at the age of 19 in order to study at the University of East London. Her intentions were never to stay in the long term. She returned to Bulgaria when her university course switched to online learning, but she went to Sofia and not to her native Kyustendil. She took the opportunity to find a job in Bulgaria, as well as an apartment. She even secretly harbours hopes that her education will remain online, which would allow her to remain here until the end of her studies. Her desire to stay here is not motivated so much by satisfaction with the situation — she herself says that things are not flourishing in terms of infrastructure, for example, but in her field, art, choice is very poor. Nevertheless, Mariela believes that there is a lot of opportunity for development for young people and is planning to complete an additional IT specialisation at SoftUni, as well as to start her own business.

To a certain extent this coincides with the opinion of **Denitsa, 20**, who is from Bansko. She studies in Florence, Italy, but she returned

to her home city, also because of the switch to online learning. Unlike Mariela, Denitsa had no intention to return to Bulgaria after finishing her degree. Her opinion now, however, is different. Covid has led her to radically change her position—the student says that the pandemic “definitely affected her”. “I intended to stay there, but now, and not just because of the virus, I would very much like to return to Bulgaria permanently. To start something of my own, to start working and to be of use to society here with what I study.” What’s more—Denitsa claims that nearly her entire class, which went abroad after graduation, has returned, even from places such as the USA. She does not see her future in Bansko, however, but rather in one of the big cities.

Christina Ivanova, who is the director of TELUS International Europe, confirms these observations. “In the last few years we’ve observed a trend that brings us a lot of joy—young people with a very good education, who left to get their higher education or to work abroad and decided to return to Bulgaria. Since the start of the pandemic we’ve hired about 20 people in Sofia and Plovdiv who had returned to Bulgaria and had actively started looking for a job.

Another group of people are **those who work temporarily outside Bulgaria** and the crisis has currently anchored them here. They are understandably dissatisfied with the lack of work, as well as with the closed borders, and they think they will venture

away from Bulgaria as soon as possible. For them, the question of “whether to return or not” is a little different, because they periodically return to their hometowns. Such is the case with **47-year-old Christina** from Varna, who works on river cruise ships. Due to the disappearance of tourism, she has reoriented herself to work in her hometown. This brings her no pleasure. “I definitely don’t like staying. I am happy to have stayed with my family, but I am not happy financially. I tried to work in two places—in a hotel and as a merchandiser.” Christina has run into some of the most problematic parts of the Bulgarian business landscape. “I thought the ‘90s were long gone—with wage delays and an unfair employer,” she said. According to Christina, salaries have not changed significantly over the six years since she left Varna to work abroad. “They don’t do anything to retain us—there is work to go around, but its remuneration is just ridiculous. As a merchandiser, I take in a salary of BGN 650.” This is incomparable to the money she makes on cruise ships—1800-2000 euros a month, which is why staying in Varna is not a realistic option for her.

When it comes to **people with families abroad**, or those with already established employment there, the situation offers more options. **Elenitsa**, for example, could not return to Britain because of the crisis. **Aged 34**, she left three years ago and is there with her son, and Covid has scuppered her business plans. Elenitsa owned her own cleaning business. However, she used her return to Bulgaria to work, self-employed again, but she is not satisfied with the pay and with the attitude of the institutions. “Salaries are ridiculous. Huge demands, little money, disgusting working hours and I don’t have any time for my son,” she said. She is not satisfied with how online learning is organised here, or with the fact that she has been waiting for 6 months for the Bulgarian state to restore her healthcare rights. “I feel discriminated against,” she says. She has so far stayed because of her parents, but she will definitely return abroad.

“Overall, it started to get hard to bear at some point. When you’re abroad with your family and have no social environment, you can’t socialize.”

Bogdan, moved from Paris to Plovdiv

Boris Sarabeev, manager of the Plovdiv office of IT company Modis Bulgaria, points out that “in the last few months, all those who ostensibly returned just for a few weeks or a few months, stay and look for work in Bulgaria due to the epidemiological situation or forced circumstances”.

The most difficult group to attract, as well as the one that is the most economically valuable in the short term, is that of **highly qualified specialists who have already tapped their potential abroad**. Such is the case with **31-year-old Lilly**. She left Bulgaria a long time ago — 11 years ago and lives in Copenhagen. Lilly is an engineer by education and works in the aviation sector, for RyanAir. During the big layoffs in the sector due to the collapse in flights, she took a leave of absence and returned to Sofia (not to her home town of Gotse Delchev) together with her husband. She is worried about her mother but has no intention of staying, because she earns more in Denmark.

The fact that it is harder does not mean it is impossible. **Bogdan** is from Plovdiv and has come back to his hometown in order to work. “In 2013, I started work at Schneider as financial director of the plant near the city of Plovdiv. I spent three years in that position and in 2016 was granted the opportunity to move to Grenoble, France, where I held a senior position as financial director of a cluster of ten plants scattered across nine countries in Europe. In the middle of last year I received an offer to take a higher position, which I accepted and I am currently the Global CFO for Logistics and Planning for the Schneider Group, responsible for the entire distribution network of the group of 100 distribution centres worldwide and for Schneider’s warehouse inventory, which amounts to about 3 billion euros,” he said. Bogdan then lived in Paris. With the advent of the pandemic, the Schneider group imposed a policy of total travel bans and France entered a full lockdown for about two months. “Overall, it started to get hard to bear at some point. When you’re abroad with your family and

have no social environment, you can’t socialise,” he explains. At one point he took stock of the situation and decided that he could move to Bulgaria and perform his functions from here. “Covid,” he says, “was just an accelerator.”

Elena Vatrachka, Human Resources Manager at Schneider Electric, confirms that there is interest from Bulgarians abroad, similar to Bogdan’s. However, she points out that his case is not widespread. “During the pandemic, we contacted a lot of professionals who showed interest in our company. We saw more people who showed interest, but I did not see them returning actively and starting work. Rather, they were testing the waters and exploring the possibilities—to see how competitive and viable we were compared to the level they were looking for in order to return.

Several conclusions can be drawn from talking to people directly. There is a visible change in the attitude of young people on returning to Bulgaria—this is now considered an equivalent, if not outright preferred, option. Some of the people who have returned here have already found work. There is a lot of indecision and hesitation among the group of returnees, which can be explained by several overlapping factors in the study above:

Corruption

This sentiment is present in every conversation as a basis for their dissatisfaction with the situation in Bulgaria. Lilly cites the example of fixed competitions for people in Air Traffic Control, where she was not accepted when she applied.

Administrative services and responsiveness

For a country that is trying to attract people back, Bulgaria is still not up to the task of minimising administrative hurdles. This is especially evident when it comes to basic systems such as social security, healthcare or education. Elenitsa, for example, says that she’s been waiting 6 months for the

Bulgarian state to restore her healthcare rights. “I feel discriminated against,” is how she puts it.

Urban Environment

It is interesting how often this topic, which is usually relegated as a side issue, enters the discourse. People who are completely different in terms of education, occupation, or location, rate this as something that plays a role in their decisions. Christina, from Varna, is extremely annoyed by the absence of basic regulations—for example, being unable to stop your neighbours from playing loud music due to the lack of clearly responsible institutions. “The police do not respond,” she says. Lilly likes that Sofia is changing but does not like the repair works in the centre and the abandonment of the tram lines.

Bogdan believes that low taxes and social security are “a double-edged sword, because in the end you get what you pay for. The state is absent, the infrastructure is extremely broken; there is no meaningful planning regarding how the city should grow. From the point of view of cleanliness, healthcare, and general government, there is a huge gap between France and Bulgaria”.



III. SEIZE THE MOMENT

Reading into larger trends from such a small sample size is, of course, difficult. One must take into account that the opinions expressed in this paper are representative. The decision to migrate is complex and depends upon a lot of factors.

And yet we have reasons to believe that this could be something more than just a temporary reversal of the migration wave. First of all, the signs that the mass outflow of labour to the West had begun to reverse, were visible before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some cities, such as Cluj-Napoca and Katowice, already have campaigns running to attract the populace. Companies in fast-growing sectors, such as IT and outsourcing for example, had outreach strategies directed at young people abroad. The Bulgarian government had a small working group, tasked with reaching out to Bulgarians abroad and persuading them to return. The same goes for other countries as well.

Covid has proven to be a huge change in this regard and its effects are yet to be fully understood. One of the hardest things about attracting people, for example, is getting them to physically come and stay for a certain period of time in a given location. Given the current uncertainty and the second wave in Europe, as well as the labour market situation and the

sudden entry of online and remote working into a number of sectors, this stay may turn out to be more than just a short-term change for some of these returnees.

This mandates an **emergency shift in perspective for local and national authorities and the redirection from long-term policies to short-term measures**, in order for them to try and retain at least some of this unexpected human talent.

There are many policies and measures that are already being implemented elsewhere and can thus be copied:

- Easy access to loans with low or no interest
- Some places can decide on direct subsidies and tax relief from local taxes for people whose interest to remain for longer periods is proven, which should be linked to certain metrics
- Administrative assistance in finding places to live; facilitating the registration and use of local services. Especially for young couples with children—places in local schools and kindergartens with a minimal administrative burden
- Social benefits and salary supplements

for people from sectors with a proven local or national importance (education, healthcare, people with specific knowledge in certain areas)

■ A functioning and easy to use local database for job opportunities

■ Improvements in the urban landscape and the creation of social public spaces

The measures proposed could be implemented everywhere outside of Sofia (which is a separate case because it continues to attract people and suffers from a different set of problems).

Cooperation with business could transfer some of the responsibilities for this to the private sector while contributing to a better response and understanding of the situation. Switzerland, for example, offers tax breaks for companies that pay salaries to employees living on its territory. Such agreements exist in a lot of places and the relocation of some employees would be met flexibly by international companies, which would make significant savings from the fact that their social security and tax costs are significantly lower in Bulgaria. Companies in Bulgaria like TELUS already have several years of experience with relocating people and could point out what works—from consultations for finding a job, social benefits, maintaining a standard of living, to meeting prospective employees at the airport and helping them find their first place to live. Much of the above costs have been saved due to people returning after Covid, which means that there is an open window of opportunity for cooperation with local authorities on new initiatives.

Most of these measures do not require massive financial injections, but only a reorganisation of priorities and certain administrative changes. As for the financial measures, there are two large portfolios, which local and national authorities could tap into: The Recovery and Resilience Facility and React EU, which allows money from the current financial framework to be redirected to meet challenges posed by the pandemic. These measures should not last forever and are simply a response to a unique and time-limited window of opportunity.

The time to think and act about it is now. Countries in the region have already missed many opportunities to retain and attract talent. They should not miss this one.

M E T H O D O L O G Y

- The online survey data has been compiled with a targeted Facebook survey amongst 18-65 age groups in big cities and several regions with high levels of returnees. The dates for the survey were 18.09-08.10.2020
 - In-depth interviews were conducted by Ognyan Georgiev and Iliana Kondareva in the period September-October 2020
 - Some of the interviews as well as business interviews are conducted by Zornitza Stoilova in the period September-October 2020
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