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Research article

Young returnees' sustainability of return: The case of Bulgaria

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Abstract: Return migration flow to Bulgaria is constant but not high, except for the past two years. Here, we argue that subjective and objective reasons should both be considered in line to explain life prospects of young returnees at home. An innovative approach to balancing the subjective-objective dichotomy in return migration phenomena is measuring sustainability of return through re-emigration, captured by and tested through a re-emigration index based on a national representative survey of returning Bulgarian migrants. The main hypothesis is that the sustainability of the return of young people depends on a complex group of factors, including social and emotional motives. The main findings are about the magnitude of the return migration flow and its sustainability: The factors for the return of young Bulgarians in the pre-Covid research show strong non-economic character, which intensifies in times of crisis. There are no significantly different tendencies for re-emigration/return among young people compared with all returnees.

Keywords: return migration; sustainability of return; young returnees

1. Introduction

Emigration has been part of the lives of thousands of Bulgarians for the past 30 years, after the barriers on international mobility collapsed in the early 1990s. Since then, the emigration flow from Bulgaria is constantly increasing. In the past two years, the return stream has strengthened, and data from the National Statistical Institute show a reversal in the country migration profile, making the net migration positive. According to several studies, more and more Bulgarian emigrants are willing to return home. Could this be the start of hopeful positive prospects for the nation's demographic crisis

and the labor market that is choking from a shortage of workers? The scientific method prompts us to analyze the ongoing contradiction between the stated goal and the actual reality of the sustainability of the return, as well as the attitudes of the migrants and what they suggest about their plans. Here, we refer to a 100-years-old paradigm of the social action dichotomy – the social situation and the subjective side, the social intentions or attitudes [1]. Thomas and Znaniecki believed a nomothetic social analysis targeting a comprehensive model in the context of numerous singular actions, events, experiences and behaviors. We aim to explain the difference between social intentions and attitudes in migration decisions. Here, we argue that registering an intention is insufficient for capturing the true context of choosing whether to migrate or remain by using a representative nationwide study of returnees in Bulgaria. Decisions are captured by and tested through a re-emigration index based on variable from the study both subjective and objective. The index is focused on young returnees as they are typically perceived in research literature as agents of change, due to numerous positive effects attached to their activities at home—from social innovations, knowledge transfers and entrepreneurship to institutional change [2,3].

1.1. Main definitions and hypothesis

In their world-known and pioneering research of migration, W. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki adhered methodologically to both sides of the social action – the social situation and the subjective side, the social intentions or attitudes (Thomas,W.I., Znaniecki, F., 1976). A scientific methodology they have used is revealing a social phenomenon as a persistent interaction of individual consciousness and objective social reality [1]. In migration studies, they opted for a wide range of statistical data and biographical interviews to uncover the subjective-objective dichotomy or the subjective and objective factors that had an impact on the migration behavior. An important concept for the present research, related to the subjective-objective dichotomy concerned here, is the sustainability of the return. The sustainability of the return can be defined by three main positions in relation to three dimensions of return. These positions are the subjective perception of returnees on their actual situation and migration plans, objective elements for measuring the situation of returnees and socio-economic factors in the country of return. The three respective dimensions of return are the physical, socio-economic and political (related to security) dimensions. Respectively, the three aspects can be derived for each of the dimensions of sustainability according to the three possible positions: subjective, objective and aggregate conditions [4]. A detailed operationalization of the concept of return sustainability is given in Nonchev et al. [5]:

- Physical sustainability of return
  - Subjective physical sustainability of an individual returnee would be achieved if s/he has no desire to leave one's country for a certain period of time after returning.
  - Objective physical sustainability of the individual returnee would be achieved if s/he would actually not leave one's country after the return.
  - Aggregate physical sustainability would be achieved if levels of emigration from the home country do not increase as a result of the return process.
- Socio-economic sustainability of return:
  - Subjective socio-economic sustainability of an individual returnee would be achieved if a returnee believes that s/he has a satisfactory level of well-being (in terms of income, assets, job, housing conditions) measured sometime after the return.

- o Objective socio-economic sustainability of an individual returnee would exist if he has achieved a satisfactory level of well-being (as regards income, assets, job, housing conditions) sometime after his return.
      - o Aggregate socio-economic sustainability would be achieved if the levels of wellbeing (as regards income, assets, job, housing conditions) do not deteriorate as a result of the process of return.
- Political sustainability of return:
      - o Subjective political sustainability of an individual returnee would be achieved if he or she believes that there is an adequate level of security and access to public services (such as healthcare and education), measured a certain time after the return.
      - o Objective political sustainability for an individual returnee would exist if he or she enjoys access to public services (such as healthcare and education) and would not become victim of violence or persecution within a certain time after his/her return.
      - o Aggregate political sustainability would be achieved if levels of access to public services and of violence and persecution would not be worsened as a result of the return process.

In this context, the return would be considered "not sustainable" not only in cases where the individual (or the group) re-emigrates but also if they have a strong desire to do so.

Recent research in Bulgaria focused on highly educated, young returnees raises doubts about the continuity of the process to a strong tendency of overturning net migration to positive. Bakalova (2021) concluded that the return of highly educated migrants is an exception in the overall picture of return, especially when it comes to migrants who have received their education abroad. In her research, B. Glorius found that returnees in Bulgaria discover more support in "communities of practice" with other migration-experienced Bulgarians rather than with local non-migrants. A motivational dissonance is also joining the choir of factors neglecting the long-term character of the phenomenon and its unsustainability. Factors for the return of young emigrants are non-economic and overlap with the health problems of elder people in Bulgaria, which they care for, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. Economic crisis and restrictive mobility measures could result in larger return flow but here question return sustainability. Another study focused on young emigrants [6] considered a circulation migration pattern, as migration intentions are more likely among people who have emigrated and later returned but ended up economically inactive. The remigration to foreign countries is highly possible especially when the first positive effects of the restoration plans are noticed among countries in Western Europe. Bulgaria, for its part, has delayed the recovery plan and is in a political crisis. This could not be a factor for a sustainable return even if migrants declare they want to return and stay in Bulgaria.

A returnee definition used here is rooted in the research of Cassarino [7], where a circular model of migration prevailed: Return is not necessarily the end of the migration cycle but may probably be a stage of the circular migration model. The return is perceived strictly through the UN Statistical Division: "Persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short-term or long-term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their own country for at least a year" [8].

The leading hypothesis of the analysis deals with the well-known dissonance in sociological surveys between intentions and actions [1,9]. Here, we use a complex approach in determining hether

returnees will stay or will leave again which includes balancing declared intentions, real actions and objective social indicators. A declaration of action alone, hereby a declaration of return/remigration or sustainable stay by the returnees, is not sufficient to forecast a scenario in the duration of return or remigration. That is why the main hypothesis is that sustainability of return and especially the sustainability of return of young people depend on a complex group of factors in which the non-economic motives play a key role.

1.2. Methodology

Compared to National Statistical Institute data, questionnaire surveys targeting return migrants can provide the most extensive and accurate information about the process and characteristics of return migration, including its segmentation and stratification specifics. The data presented below are from a representative survey of returning migrants conducted under the project "Returning Migrants: Segmentation and Stratification of Economic Mobility" (RMSSEM). The RMSSEM project was financed by the Bulgarian Scientific Research Fund. The field of the research was in the period October 28–November 20, 2017, among returning migrants, in nine regions of the country (Sofia-city, Plovdiv, Varna, Pleven, Stara Zagora, Dobrich, Kardzhali, Yambol and Montana), located in all administrative regions and in different types of settlements (capital, city, small town, village). The subjects of the study were Bulgarian citizens over 18 years of age who had resided abroad for at least 3 months in the prior 10 years. The numbers of people surveyed in each of the nine districts were proportional to their adult populations. The planned sample size was 600 individuals, and the completed sample included 604. Respondents were divided into 60 units, with 10 people interviewed in each. In order to achieve the planned interviews, 1218 contacts were made by applying two methods for selecting respondents - random route selection of respondents starting from an initial random address and, second, a variant of "snowball" sampling, in which respondents provide the interviewer with contacts of individuals from the target group. The data collection method was a face-to-face interview at the respondent's home. The term "return" in Bulgarian language has a connotation of finality or irrevocability, which implies the end of the migration cycle. In the research, "return" was used as a part or phase of the migration cycle and not necessarily its finale [5]. The number of young returnees (up to 35 years old) in the sample was 188.

An innovative approach to balancing the subjective-objective dichotomy in return migration phenomena is measuring sustainability of return (defined as lack of desire for leaving again) through re-emigration, both on declarative and objective sides. The re-emigration index was tested and developed by Bulgarian researchers [5,10]. The re-emigration index relates post-return integration to returnees' readiness for future re-emigration to assess their reintegration and the degree of return sustainability. The model and specifically the index were tested with the empirical data from a nationally representative study among migrants who returned to Bulgaria, conducted in 2017 within the framework of the project "Returning Migrants: Segmentation and Stratification of Economic Mobility" [5,10]. The index developed by the authors covers 15 variables, 5 of which are given double weight because they represent key factors for re-migration. For the purposes of this research, the tool has been upgraded to measure the sustainability of return through remigration of young returnees only, using the same methodology which is described in detail below.

The index is built theoretically on the assumption that while economic factors are crucial for the decision of re-emigration or sustainable return, other factors such as social ones (e.g., social status)

and subjective ones (a person's perceptions of one's status) should not be ignored as motivators of intention (respectively, decision) for re-emigration. The complex nature of migration processes requires taking into consideration variable factors of return and remigration. For an adequate and full-fledged description of re-emigration possibility, it is not sufficient to rely on respondent's declarations or subjective interpretations. There are two reasons for this. First, declared intentions do not automatically entail real action. Second, objective factors alone (income, job and owned property) are not sufficient to drive returnees back abroad. Certain limitations of the index should be mentioned. As a tool, it can be adequately applied within context similar to the situation in Bulgaria (i.e., a combination of low levels of direct threat for a person's life with not very favorable socio-economic situation), but it might be inapplicable in the same form for countries with different socio-economic background. A second limitation is that the proposed index builds only on data from the RMSSEM survey. A third limitation concerns the validation of the index, which needs further research and additional data about the dynamics of the process.

1.3. Index methodology

The index is cumulative, i.e., it is a sum of its elements. This is because the motivation for staying or re-emigration is multileveled and could consist of different motives. All the included variables are recalculated to dichotomies, where 1 means presence of the factor for staying, and 0 means its absence (including the NA answers that here are also marked with 0). The overall index of staying is calculated as a sum of all the variables with the exception of economic variables, which have the same scale, but their weight is double, as they form the core of the index.

The components of the index can be seen in the table below: On the left side is the index variable, and on the right is the explanation of how the variable is calculated.

Table 1. Re-emigration index structure and explanation.

Index variable	Explanation	Weight
Economic factors		
Own business in Bulgaria	Having one's own business is a factor for staying long-term.	2
Own property in Bulgaria: house, apartment	Leads to lower costs of living and adaptation back home.	2
Possession of another property	Although other types of property have less weight, they are still considered as sources of profit and higher sustainability of return.	1
Job in Bulgaria	Main source of regular income.	2
Is the income of every member of the household higher than the poverty line	A complex variable, recalculated based on the average income per household member.	2
Savings from abroad	Reduces the cost of the reintegration process and could be used through the first months of return or as an investment.	2

Index variable	Explanation	Weight
Other social factors		
Subjective social status	The self-defining variable of one's social status is used as opposite to the average income. Here the distinction is above/below the average.	1
Is the respondent married / in a relationship	Having a family/relationship is considered as a high motivator for staying but also could be a "push" factor for leaving.	1
Children under 18 years	Returning with children suggests high preparedness of return, which is a strong factor for sustainability of return.	1
Durability of staying in Bulgaria: is the last stay of the respondent in Bulgaria longer than 5 years	The longer the staying in the country, the better the adaptation and the more intense kinship ties the person has, which are again strong motivators.	1
Subjective factors		
Return due to family reasons	Including reasons related to children, caring for older or sick parents/relatives.	1
Nostalgia as a factor in the respondent's decision to return to Bulgaria	Homesickness and nostalgia are emotional factors with strong relevance for return and prolonged stay at home.	1
Inability to integrate / Unsuccessful integration abroad as a factor of return to Bulgaria	The lack of adaptation is in a way opposite to the nostalgia (not being able to stay abroad instead of having the desire to depart) but also can lead to lack of desire for re-emigration.	1
Completion of initial emigration goals as a factor of return to Bulgaria	If the person achieved the goal that made him/her emigrate in the first place, then the desire to leave Bulgaria again is smaller.	1
Respondent's desire to stay in Bulgaria	The desire to stay/leave is a basic subjective factor but could be misleading if taken into account with greater index weight than 1, because of the possible difference between declared intentions and real actions.	1

The index range is between 0 and 20 points. The higher the index value is, the higher the probability of staying (i.e., the sustainability of return). This index was applied for the population of young people (below 35 years old), and it was also compared with the respective index for all returnees.

1.4. Some demographic tendencies in Bulgaria

We focus on young returnees not only because of the scale of the phenomenon but also for demographic and economic reasons. The all have negative effects for Bulgaria—the "*demographic replacement coefficient*" (the ratio between the populations in the inflowing age group 15–19 years and the outgoing group 60–64 years of the working age population, calculated in percentages.) In 2016 (the last available data from the National Statistics Institute of Bulgaria), the coefficient was 62.8 which means that for every 100 people who are about to leave the labor force, there are less than 63 people who are about to join it in the country. The decreasing trend is disturbing, and analysis of how to overcome the downfall is required. A possible answer along with the low fertility rate and low natural growth of the population is the migration flows and especially the returns. *The coefficient of age dependence* shows the number of persons from the population in the "dependent" ages (the population under 15 and 65 and over) per 100 persons from the population in the "independent" ages (from 15 to 64 years), calculated in percentages (NSI, Methodological notes). In 2021 the coefficient was 56.7, which means that to any person of dependent age (under 15 and over 65) there are less than two persons

of active age. The future prognosis based on the convergence hypothesis is about a further increase of the ratio and a decrease in population in active age. The trend of an aging population leads to changes in the basic age structure of people under, in and over the working age. Both the aging of the population and legislative changes in the retirement age influence the groups of the population in and over working age, but the steady flow of emigration prompts the negative processes in the country demographic profile, labor market and socio-economic development.

1.5. Recent data on return migration for Bulgaria

The pandemic of COVID-19 has shrunken immigrant labor markets in destination countries and pushed more Bulgarians to come back home. According to a pre-pandemic study of return migration to Bulgaria [5,11] main reasons of return were non-economic: nostalgia, homesickness and the need of caring for elder members of the family or children. Mobility restrictions, worsening economies in the main destination countries for Bulgarian emigrants (like Greece, Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom, amid Brexit) and also health issues have driven more migrants to their homelands. This socio-economic complex and the fact that Bulgaria is perceived as a transit country for immigrants / third-country nationals have driven a return migration flow which exceeds the emigration in 2020 and 2021. There is a change in immigration to Bulgaria, and it is due more to returning Bulgarians than to immigrants from third countries outside the EU. However, we must be careful in considering it as a long-term trend due to abnormal conditions in the last two years because of the pandemic – with mobility restrictions and fear of the people for their health and jobs.
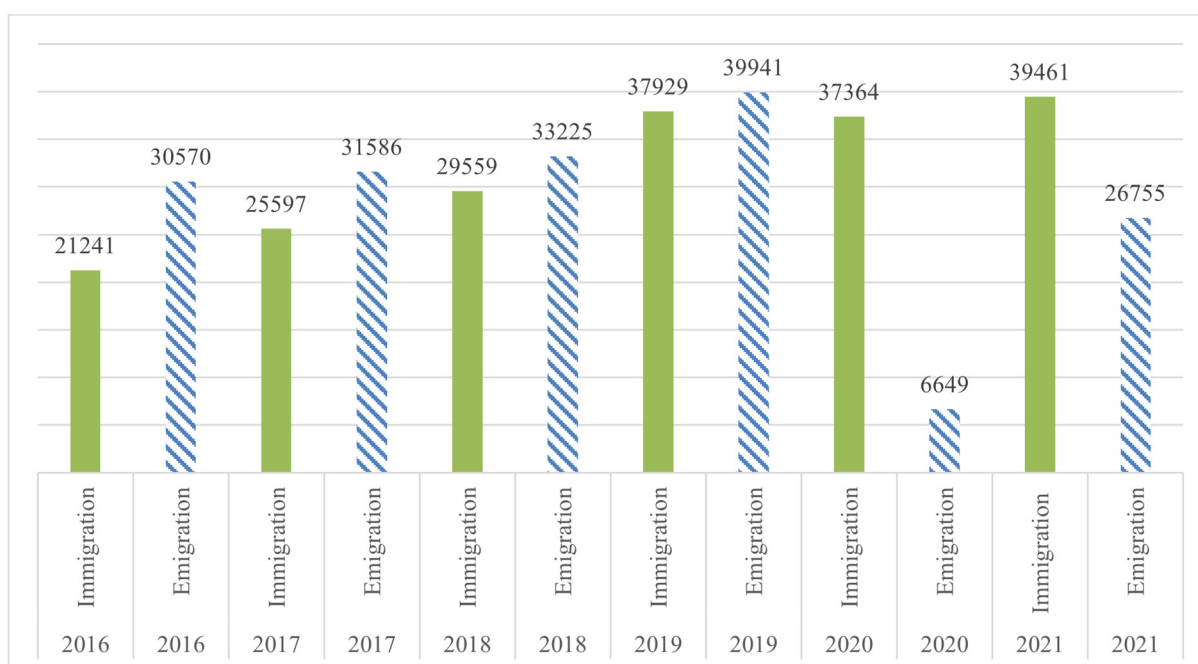
Figure 1. Migration flows – Bulgaria, source - National Statistical Institute.

The data in Figure 1 about immigration concern Bulgarian citizens who have changed their permanent address from a foreign country to Bulgaria and third country nationals for the stated year. The figure shows the migration flows in Bulgaria from 2016 to 2021. The data is divided into two

categories: immigration and emigration. Immigration refers to people moving into Bulgaria, including returnees, EU citizens and third country nationals, while emigration refers to people moving out of Bulgaria. As shown in Table 2 returnees were the largest part of the incoming migrant flow to Bulgaria in 2017, the most recent data from NSI on citizenship of immigrants.

Table 2. Citizenship of settled in Bulgaria migrants, Bulgarian National Statistical Institute.

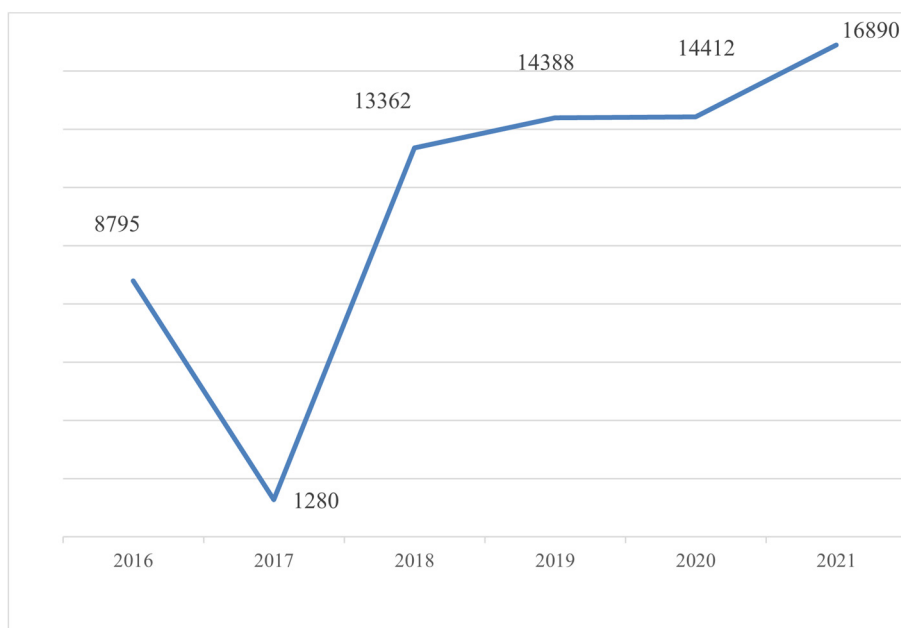|	Bulgarian	EU	Third-country nationals
2017	13 060	649	11888
2018	16 169	1038	12352
2019	23 555	1222	13152
2020	24 007	887	12470
2021	22 087	5459	11915

Young returnees and immigrants in Bulgaria are increasing in numbers since 2017 but not as a total share of the active population seen as a labor force. Here the group of young is defined up to 35 years old according to Bulgarian National Statistical Institute research methodology. Table 3 shows the age distribution of immigrants from 2017 to 2021, grouped by their relation to the labor market – Group 1 – Young (Total 16,890 persons in 2021), Group 2 – Active (Total 18,070 in 2021) and Group 3 – Inactive (Total 4 501 in 2021).

Table 3. Ages of the immigrants in Bulgaria 2017-2021, National Statistical Institute.

Age	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
0–4	2218	2474	2482	1657	2308
5–9	1167	1215	1334	1217	1571
10–14	762	715	823	862	970
15–19	1109	1201	1410	1362	1787
20–24	1862	2090	2214	2549	2917
25–29	2312	2636	2782	3175	3571
30 - 34	2650	3031	3343	3590	3766
Total	12,080	13,362	14,388	14,412	16,890
35–39	2430	2727	3052	3471	3530
40–44	2090	2380	2938	3340	3352
45–49	1712	1947	2491	3034	2975
50–54	1441	1900	2798	2827	2702
55–59	1665	1941	3215	2856	2726
60–64	1591	2028	3578	2963	2785
Total	10,929	12,923	18,072	18,491	18,070
65–69	1556	1 907	3086	2459	2356
70–74	532	794	1433	1157	1236
75–79	323	359	597	476	535
80+	177	214	353	369	374
Total	2588	3274	5469	4461	4501

In the pre-Covid period of 2017 and 2018, more young immigrants settled in Bulgaria, although almost half of them were children. From 2019 to 2021 immigrants in the age group 35–64 years were prevailing in settling in Bulgaria, and the smallest group was the pensioners – above 65 years old.

Figure 2. Immigration, returnees and third country nationals, in the age group 0–34, National Statistical Institute.

For further analysis of the flows, which exceeds the present theme but must be mentioned, there is another source of data on the amount of return migration—the annual Labor Force Survey (LFS). In the questionnaire of the study, there is a question "Country of residence other than Bulgaria, one year before the study", which makes it possible to determine the number of returnees and some of their characteristics.

2. Results

The data from the survey in 2017 show that the majority of young return migrants in Bulgaria have completed at least secondary education, with 54.3% having completed general or vocational secondary/postsecondary education and 28.7% having completed higher education. This suggests that the education level of young return migrants in Bulgaria is relatively high compared to the general population. However, it is worth noting that 17% of young return migrants in Bulgaria have only completed basic or lower education, which may present challenges for their integration into the labor market and society more broadly.

According to the RMSSEM survey, men were prevailing in the return flow of young people to Bulgaria in 2017—62% of the young returnees were men, and 37% were women. A significant proportion of the young returnees are residing in urban areas, as shown in Table 4. The majority of the returnees in the sample live in big cities, with 45.2% residing there. The second most common place

of residence for returnees is Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria, with 27.7% residing there. Smaller percentages of returnees live in small towns (13.8%) or villages (13.3%).

Table 4. Distribution of young return migrants (returnees) in Bulgaria by their place of residence, RMSSEM survey.

	Frequency	Percentage
Sofia	52	27.7
Big city	85	45.2
Small town	26	13.8
Village	25	13.3
Total	188	100.0

Table 5 provides some insight into the income groups of young return migrants in Bulgaria. However, it is important to note that the percentage of respondents who did not provide their income group is relatively high, which may limit the reliability of the data.

Table 5. Income groups of young returnees in RMSSEM survey.

	Frequency	Percentage
Not responded	37	19.7
Up to 800 BGN	26	13.8
Over 800 to 1200 BGN	38	20.2
Over 1200 to 2000 BGN	48	25.5
Over 2000 BGN	39	20.7
Total	188	100.0

Among the respondents, the most common income group for returnees is 1200 to 2000 BGN (600–1000 EUR), with 25.5% falling into this category. Significant proportions of returnees also reported incomes over 2000 BGN or 1000 EUR (20.7%) and over 800 (400 EUR) to 1200 BGN (600 EUR) (20.2%). The smallest percentage of returnees reported incomes up to 800 BGN, with 13.8% falling into this category.

Regarding the families of young returnees, the majority in the sample (64.9%) reported having no children under 18 in their household. Among the respondents who reported having children under 18, having one child was the most common situation, with 20.2% falling into this category. The second most common situation for returnees who reported having children under 18 was having 2-3 children, with 14.9% falling into this category. The data suggests that the majority of returnees in the sample do not have children in their household, which may have implications for their employment, housing and social integration in Bulgaria.

The majority of the young returnees (51.6%) are employed full time, while a smaller percentage work part-time (4.2%). A significant number of returnees are unemployed (24.5%), while others are studying (7.4%), self-employed (9%), or own their own businesses (5.9%).

Table 6 provides some insight into the financial responsibilities of young return migrants in Bulgaria. It suggests that a significant proportion of returnees do not have financial dependents, which may have implications for their employment, housing and social integration in Bulgaria. However, it

is important to note that the sample size is relatively small and may not be representative of the larger population of return migrants in Bulgaria.

Table 6. Unemployed members of the family of young returnees in RMSSEM survey.

	Frequency	Percentage
One	46	24.5
more than one	14	7.4
No one	128	68.1
Total	188	100.0

The majority of the returnees in the sample (68.1%) reported not being financially responsible for any family members or dependents. Among the respondents who reported being financially responsible for family members or dependents, having one person to support was the most common situation, with 24.5% falling into this category. Only a small percentage of returnees (7.4%) reported being financially responsible for more than one family member or dependent.

According to the NSI in the last ten years (2011–2021) 7.5% of persons aged 15–74 have resided abroad for more than three months without interruption years. 37.0% were outside Bulgaria for a period of three to six months, 18.1% were for six months to a year, and 44.9% were for more than a year. Work is the main reason for their stay outside the country regardless of the period of residence. The economic reasons prevail also in the 2017 research and for the young migrants, combined with a strong pull factor of existing social networks in the foreign country, which Bulgarian emigration diasporas created over the last 30 years of intensive emigration.

Return factors are mainly non-economic. Almost every third returnee in Bulgaria has stated that homesickness, nostalgia and care for family has pulled him back home. Here, young returnees make no difference with all other groups in the survey. Emotional reflexivity is the motivation of the majority of the respondents. These are personal, mostly emotional motives (such as longing for home and homeland, sadness for children and loved ones, health problems, desire to develop in Bulgaria, desire to study in Bulgaria, desire to be with his family and relatives, old age, desire for change) (Bakalova, Misheva, 2019). On the negative side of push factors are the problems with integration in a foreign country and discrimination – 3% have stated that they just do not want to live abroad anymore, and 3.7% have mentioned discrimination as a reason for returning to Bulgaria.

Table 7. Non-economic reasons for return of young returnees, RMSSEM survey.

	Frequency	Percentage
Family attachments	63	33,50%
Migration plans achieved	31	16,5%
Desire to marry a Bulgarian	11	6%
Nostalgia	15	8%
Reunion with the kids	11	6%
Other non-economic (problems with legalization, couldn't achieve plans, education)	51	20%
Total	188	100

Pulling back Bulgarians at home are their families and homesickness, combined with a rationalized perspective of migration planning; 16% have returned because they think their aims are important. On the other hand, young returnees feel confident about achieving their migration plans – 73% of them mentioned achievement of migration plans abroad.

More than half of the young returnees stated that they are here to stay (53.7%), and those who would like to remigrate for a different period of time are the other 46%.

Table 8. Declared future plans of young returnees in RMSSEM survey.

	Frequency	Percentage
Would stay in Bulgaria	101	53.7
Would like to leave again for good	29	15.4
Would like to leave again temporary	58	30.9
Total	188	100

When a more complex approach is applied, it can be seen that the share of potential re-emigrants is increasing. This tendency can be illustrated by the results of the application of the index on the return migrants data.

The index defines four groups of re-emigrants that can be seen in Figure 3. The one marked with red are re-emigrants with the highest probability to leave and low probability of staying in Bulgaria (low sustainability of return). The index value interval is between 0 and 5. This group is considered potential re-emigrants who are about to leave the country but for several reasons have still not departed. This group consists of 16% of the young people, and its percentage among all is 12.4%.

The orange group consists of returnees with lower risk of re-emigration than the red ones but, at the same time, with low probability of staying in Bulgaria. The index value interval is between 6 and 10. While this group is considered also with relatively considerable risk of re-emigration, it can be influenced by different policy measures especially if they are connected to socio-economic factors. Among the young people, the share of this group is 57%, although the percentage among all people is similar: 56.3%.

The yellow group could be defined as returnees with average risk of re-emigration and average probability of staying in Bulgaria. The index value interval is between 11 and 15. While the probability of staying for this group is higher than the orange one, the risk of re-emigration still exists. In this group the non-economic factors could become the possible motivator for staying or re-emigration, so the policies should be dedicated to such opportunities. This group consists of ¼ of the young people and almost 30% of all people.
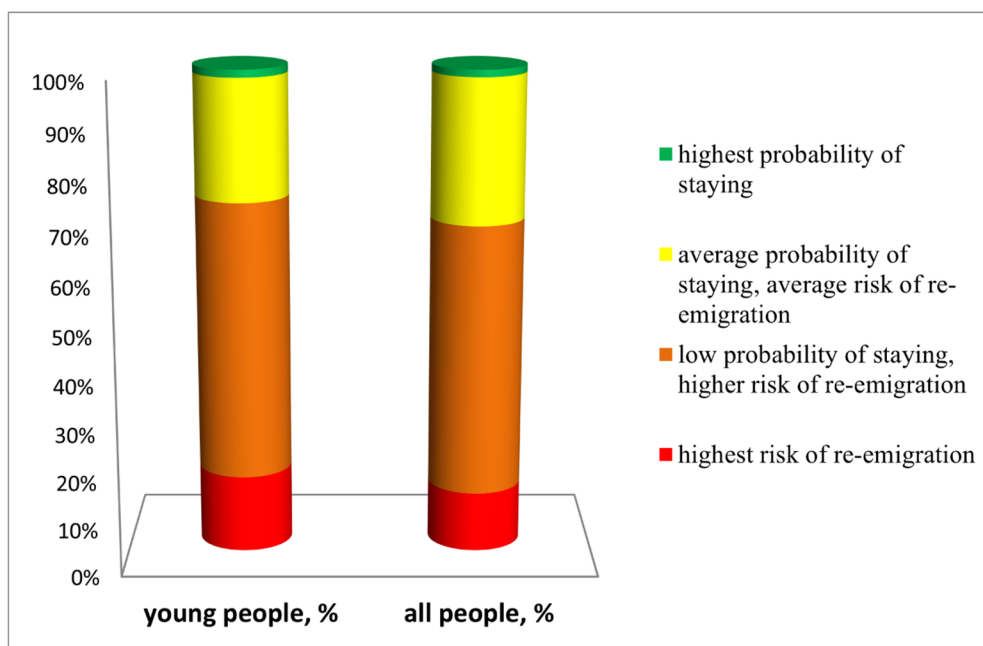
Figure 3. Probability of staying of young returnees vs. all respondents.

The group marked in green are returnees with exceptionally low risk of re-emigration and very high probability of staying in Bulgaria. The index value interval is between 16 and 20. The group is the exact opposite to the red one, and "green" respondents would not re-emigrate except in some emergency situations. It is the smallest group among the young people (1.6%) but also among all people (1.5%).

It can be concluded that the largest group are returnees with relatively substantial risk of re-emigration and relatively lower probability to stay. In general, the attitudes towards re-emigration are higher among young people, and it is not surprising. However, the tendencies within the group of young people are similar to those within the group of all respondents: The biggest share consists of returnees with relatively high risk of re-emigration but still some probability to stay "at home." So, the index does not show some significantly different tendencies for re-emigration/return among young people.

3.   Discussion

An interpretation of combined objective and subjective factors for sustainability of return named here as a remigration index is limited to the data of the aforementioned survey. There were made two approbations of the index: one with the whole sample and second only with sample for young returnees- both have proved its efficiency and analytic potential. The index does not show significantly different tendencies for re-emigration among the young people. When evaluated, the remigration index for young returnees shows that the largest part will leave again, making their life prospects abroad. It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the study: a survey-based methodology. The presence of children in the sample could potentially affect the study's conclusions, as they may face different legal and integration challenges than their parents. However, it is assumed that these children are part of the returnee families and would follow their parents' decisions regarding remigration. Another

limitation is that data was collected before the Covid-19 pandemic. Recent years of positive net migration for Bulgaria, where the migration inflow exceeds the inflow, is not a prolonged phenomenon but rooted in an extraordinary event in social and economic background during the pandemic of Covid-19 and the specific factor of migrant motivation – both for leaving and for return.

Return migration policies in Bulgaria are not among our research objectives as they are very limited to few information campaigns and job placement services and focused on the return of Bulgarians from so called "old diasporas" – Bulgarian communities that have historical ties to Bulgaria and have maintained their Bulgarian identity despite living outside the country for many years (Banat Bulgarians, Bessarabian Bulgarians).

4. Conclusions

Return migration is a social process influenced by wide range of factors, and the most important way to analyze the life prospects of people involved is good quality data and information. Different sources and methods should be combined in order to avoid narrowed definitions and to steer clear from the deceptive simplicity of declarative attitudes.

The factors for the return of young Bulgarians in the pre-Covid research show strong non-economic character, which intensifies in times of crisis. Especially, one of the most repeated reasons for return (care for an elder family member) became even more important in times of pandemic disease due the fact that in Bulgaria the crisis was poorly managed, and the rate of Covid caused death was enormous. The responsibility for help and support fell upon the young. Nevertheless, a circulating pattern is more plausible for returnees due to strong pull factors in destination countries and the positive qualification structure among the young returnees. After all, the hypothesis of this research is more likely to be accepted but in limited conditions which relate to the lack of consequent and representative data.

According to young returnees' attitudes towards leaving again for a foreign country – almost half of them declare staying at home. However, a more complex analytical method brought to balance subjective/declarative and objective factors proves the group of re-emigrants is significantly larger and could be drawn to over 70 % of the young returnees. This proves the hypothesis about the complex approach to dealing with declared intentions through improving the analytic model with objective socio-economic indicators. The complex analysis of young returnees in Bulgaria reveals their high probability to remigrate in search of new prospects in different countries abroad.

Use of AI tools declaration

The authors declare they have not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the creation of this article.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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