

Successful International Practices in Return Migration of Citizens: Recommendations for Ukraine

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Specifics of Return Migration as Socioeconomic Phenomenon

Return migration is a process in which migrants or their families voluntarily return to their country of origin after prolonged or short-term residence abroad. It should not be equated with repatriation, which is usually associated with forced or compulsory return (for example, due to loss of refugee status or deportation), nor with circular migration, which means regular movement between the country of origin and the receiving country (for example, seasonal workers).

Return migration is a key component of the complete migration cycle, completing the logic of the "migration loop" (departure-stay abroad-return to country of origin). However, return does not always mean the final completion of migration: many people who have returned retain the possibility of emigrating again. Thus, return migration is both a social and economic practice that depends on a number of factors – both systemic and individual.

Classifications of Return Migration

According to existing approaches in migration studies, return migration can be classified by:

- ▶ Degree of voluntariness:
 - Voluntary – return on one's own initiative.
 - Formally voluntary – under pressure of external circumstances (visa expiration, economic crisis abroad).
 - Forced – deportation or repatriation.
- ▶ Duration of stay abroad:
 - Short-term returns – for example, after seasonal work.
 - Long-term or permanent returns.
- ▶ Motives for return, which are often generalized within the push-pull model:
 - Push factors (repelling): contract expiration, discrimination, job loss, nostalgia for homeland.

- Pull factors (attractive): improvement of economic situation at home, investment opportunities, family circumstances, national patriotism.

Institutional Return Regimes

The analytical model of French researcher Jean-Pierre Cassarino distinguishes two types of policies regarding migrant return [1]:

- ▶ Reactive (passive model) – the state reacts to already existing return flows, usually providing minimal services or simply registering the fact of return. This approach is characteristic of countries with limited resources or unstable political systems.
- ▶ Active (active model) – the state implements proactive return policies, creating incentives, information campaigns, providing grants, tax benefits, or employment programs specifically targeted at re-emigrants. Often implemented with support from the EU, World Bank, or other partners.

These models are not mutually exclusive and can be combined.

Key Scientific Approaches Applied to Analysis of Return Migration Processes

1. Push-Pull theory

This theory, formulated in the late 1960s, remains the main paradigm in migration analysis in general. In the context of return migration, the emphasis is on changing the balance between factors of attractiveness of the country of origin and factors that complicate further stay abroad [2]. For example, economic recession in the receiving country may coincide with the opening of new opportunities in the homeland..

2. Aspiration-Capability Framework

According to Dutch sociologist Hein de Haas [3], return occurs as a result of combining the desire to return (aspirations) and the ability to realize it. The state, therefore, can/should influence both aspirations (through positive image, communication, patriotic narratives) and capabilities (through infrastructure, work, housing).

3. Human Capital Theory [4]

This approach (whose developers Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker were awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1992) is based on the assumption that migrants are carriers of specific and valuable human capital (professional skills, foreign language proficiency, international experience), and return occurs if this capital can be profitably realized in the country of origin. On the state's part, adequate and fair assessment of this experience is required, as well as facilitating the opportunity to start one's own business.

4. Social Approach to Return Migration

Comprehensive studies of the 2020s [5] show that connections with family, compatriots, diaspora, and employers in the country of origin significantly (and sometimes decisively) influence the decision to return. They also contribute to "soft reintegration".

5. Consideration of Return Migration Specifics as Part of Transnational Multimodal Migration Flows

Modern migration is often not unidirectional – many migrants maintain transnational connections, sometimes working in one country but investing in another. Accordingly, policies to stimulate return migration should consider not only permanent return, but also temporary, periodic, or partial return (for example, digital nomads or businesspeople operating between countries) [6].

Thus, return migration is a complex multifactorial phenomenon that combines individual, economic, sociocultural, and political motivations. It does not happen automatically after the end of wars or economic crises, but requires conscious stimulation policies. The more thoughtful and flexible the state policy in this area, the greater the likelihood of return, as well as its sustainability.

Ukraine, having years of experience with mass labor emigration and facing the challenge of war-related displacement (according to the most conservative [estimates](#), approximately 5 million people), faces an urgent need to develop comprehensive return migration policies. These policies must consider geopolitical challenges (war, instability), economic transformations, and social factors (changes in family structure, educational system, etc.).

The following sections will examine return migration practices in Poland, Lithuania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BaH) as examples of three models of return facilitation that are relevant to Ukraine to varying degrees. In Poland's case, these are solutions adopted in a country comparable in area/population size, culturally and mentally close to Ukraine, with typologically similar problems related to long-term mass labor migration. The Lithuanian case is interesting considering it is a post-Soviet country that inherited problems similar to Ukraine's in organizing state apparatus work and the need to organize strict control over the implementation of migration decisions. Finally, BaH had the most extensive experience (until 2022) related to developing and implementing (usually with the decisive role of international organizations) programs for returning populations that left the country due to military actions.

Poland: Strategies for Stimulating Returns in Context of Mass Labor Migration

The Republic of Poland is an example of a country that experienced powerful migration processes after 1989, covering both the first stage of post-communist transformation and integration into the European Union. According to [data](#) from Central Statistical Office of Poland, in 2004-2017 alone, over 2.5 million people left the country, mainly as part of labor migration to the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands. From 2018, this indicator gradually began to decline, but in the early 2020s, up to 2.2 million Polish citizens still permanently [resided](#) abroad, representing almost 6% of the entire population. The most "represented" among them [remain](#) people aged 25-40 who sought economic opportunities or continued education.

Programs and Institutional Initiatives

In response to long-term human capital loss, Poland began forming return migration policies in the 2000s, emphasizing stimulating the return of educated specialists with families and institutional support for this process.

In 2008-2011, Poland implemented a special state program ("Program wsparcia powrotów do Polski"), coordinated by Ministry of Labour and Social Policy with financing from the European Social Fund. Its goal was to create conditions for voluntary return of Polish migrants by providing legal, social, and economic consultations. The key instrument was the information portal www.powroty.gov.pl, which still functions and covers a wide range of practical information about return, registration, taxes, employment, and social insurance. The program was accompanied by the information campaign "Masz PŁan na powrót?" and received significant attention: over 5 million visits were recorded on the portal.

During the 2010s, in [cooperation](#) with the EURES network and "Zielona Linia" contact center, consultation models were implemented and regional projects in Pomerania and Lesser Poland were realized. Among them were those aimed at support through specialized consulting and coaching for re-emigrants under 30 years old (for example, the [project](#) "Wróć z POWERem!", Krakow, 2020).

As part of the "Polski Ład" economy development program, Poland has operated a [benefit](#) "Ulga na powrót" since 2022, which exempts re-emigrants from personal income tax on amounts up to 85,528 zł annually for 4 years. The benefit is available to persons who had no tax residency in Poland for at least 3 years, returned after December 31, 2021, and became residents again. It covers income from work, B2B (Business-to-

Business) contracts, and entrepreneurship. Currently, this is one of the key instruments for stimulating return migration, particularly among youth and qualified personnel.

The "Poland. Business Adventure" program launched on March 12, 2025, is aimed at stimulating re-emigration of top-level young specialists – a pilot [initiative](#) of Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Polish Investment and Trade Agency. The program offers paid 3-month internships in Polish companies for diaspora representatives aged 18-35 living in EU countries, the United Kingdom, USA, and Canada. Participants receive a monthly stipend of 7,000 zloty (approximately \$1,950 USD), flight cost reimbursement, and logistical support – coverage of accommodation costs, cultural adaptation, Polish language classes, tourist and educational events. The program is a promising component in the architecture of national return migration policy: it combines financial incentives with the goal of integrating youth into Poland's socio-economic life, opening opportunities for professional and personal establishment.

Process Dynamics

After 2017, Poland demonstrates gradual growth in the number of returns. In 2017-2022, [between](#) 65,000 and 95,000 people returned to the country annually. However, it is not always obvious that this was a result of creating favorable conditions for re-emigrants rather than deteriorating situations in countries of residence. In particular, the most active returns were observed from the United Kingdom (a key destination for Polish labor migration) after Brexit, as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic years. Nevertheless, the potential for increasing return migration volumes is significant. Exact data may vary depending on the study and sample, but it can be stated that more than 50% of Polish migrants living in the United Kingdom and EU express theoretical readiness to return to Poland, particularly due to career growth opportunities, proximity to family and other personal factors, and patriotic considerations [7].

Overall Assessment of Polish State Policy Effectiveness

Poland implements a mixed model of return migration policy that combines elements of active strategy with favorable circumstances (particularly crisis phenomena in migrant destination countries). Its main advantages lie in flexible combination of financial incentives and information support. Among shortcomings, one can note the fragmentary nature of approaches (which periodically undergo changes) [8], lack of long-term integration strategy in housing and education for re-emigrant families, etc. [9].

Lithuania: Return Migration as Strategic Investment in Human Capital

The Republic of Lithuania is an example of a post-Soviet state with deep socio-economic transformation and significant outward migration volumes. According to data from State Data Agency (Statistics Lithuania), since 1990, the country has lost over 800,000 people, representing about 22% of its population. Of this number, 484,000 people emigrated, with this process being most active after joining the European Union in 2004 [10]. The outflow of youth and specialists with secondary specialized or higher education was particularly intense. In response to this threatening dynamic, Lithuania's government consistently formed a return migration strategy based on the concept of active diaspora engagement and creating a favorable environment for return.

Institutional Initiatives and Programs

The first significant step was creating the "Kurk Lietuvai/Create Lithuania" program in 2011, which provides young Lithuanian specialists who received education abroad with opportunities to implement projects in the public sector. Within this initiative, over 300 projects have been implemented (as of 2023), particularly in digitalization, innovative economy, education, and ecology. The program is [financed](#) by Lithuania's government in partnership with the EU.

Since 2012, the strategic framework policy "Global Lithuania" has operated, which provides for forming a contact database with the Lithuanian diaspora, organizing "days of Lithuanians abroad" and career fairs, and supporting local community initiatives for re-emigrant adaptation.

In 2024, Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania launched the interactive digital platform "Grįžtu LT" ("I'm Returning to Lithuania") on the portal <https://globalilietuva.urm.lt>, offering individualized support to migrants planning return. The service includes consultations on legal, educational, tax, and medical issues; access to employment, housing, and school network databases; and psychological adaptation services. An information [platform](#) with interactive maps has also been created, allowing future re-emigrants to analyze over 50 quality of life indicators in individual regions: availability of kindergartens, salary expectations, housing, transport, utility costs.

Process Dynamics

In 2019-2024, Lithuania demonstrated positive migration balance, meaning the number of returns exceeded the number of emigrants. In 2024, 18,934 Lithuanian citizens

returned while 9,486 left – for the first time since independence, the number of returnees exceeded the number of emigrants by a factor of two.

According to data from a 2022 sociological survey, 55% of Lithuanians abroad consider return desirable, and 23% plan to settle in small towns or rural areas upon return. Key factors for return indicated by potential re-emigrants are nostalgia, desire to be closer to family, improvement of economic conditions in the homeland, and availability of specific job offers.

Assessment of Lithuanian State Policy Effectiveness

The Lithuanian case illustrates a model of non-financial stimulation of return migration, in which the government not only reacts to returns but also initiates infrastructural, institutional, and importantly, "emotional-cultural" channels for its preventive stimulation.

Positive aspects of this policy also include deep "digitalization" of the process (integrated online services) and multichannel communication with the diaspora (through networks of informal "compatriot" connections, social networks, systematic organization of cultural and artistic events, etc.). At the same time, the effectiveness of this policy in the context of challenges of re-emigrant adaptation in the Lithuanian labor market remains unclear [11].

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Return Migration in Post-War Context

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is an example of a country that experienced large-scale armed conflict (1992-1995), after which it faced one of the most massive challenges in return migration in modern Europe. According to UNHCR estimates, during the war, about 2.2 million people were forced to leave their homes, of whom over a million went abroad. After signing the Dayton Agreement (1995), the state began a series of return programs that unfolded in several waves, depending on geopolitical, legal, and financial context [12].

Institutional Framework and Programs

The first stage of return migration (1996-2002) was [coordinated](#) by the international Return Task Force, a joint initiative of the EU, UNHCR, World Bank, and OSCE. This period was characterized mainly by a "reactive" policy regime aimed at ensuring mass physical return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) through reconstruction of destroyed housing.

Within the Open Cities and Return Directive initiatives, over 200,000 housing units were restored, allowing approximately 1.1 million people to return. The Open Cities program provided for stimulating multi-ethnic return through political and financial support for "open" municipalities. However, only about 20-25% of returns [occurred](#) in areas with ethnically mixed populations, and in several cases, repeated displacement was observed due to hostility or lack of infrastructure.

The second stage (2003-2010) included [adoption](#) of the Strategy for Implementation of Annex VII of the Dayton Agreement, which established the right to return. In cooperation with the Danish Refugee Council, Norwegian Refugee Council, Catholic Relief Services of the US, and other international structures, assistance was provided in employment, reintegration in communities, and legal registration of property rights. At the same time, despite significant financial resources, the absence of coordinated national policy constrained the effectiveness of sustainable return.

After 2010, the emphasis shifted to socio-economic reintegration, support for micro-entrepreneurship and the agricultural sector in cooperation with the UN Development Programme, IOM, and USAID. For example, the EU Floods Recovery [Programme](#) (2014-2020) partially integrated re-emigrants from abroad and IDPs into the process of rural area restoration, especially those affected by climate disasters. Overall, tens of thousands of people have benefited from reintegration support programs over the past decade, but these initiatives had regional fragmentation and limited scalability.

Process Dynamics

Despite declared successes, return migration in BaH faced a number of structural obstacles:

- ▶ Social integration remained limited. According to monitoring data, only a small number (about 10%) of re-emigrants were able to find permanent work in the first years after return.
- ▶ Institutional barriers: numerous conflicts over property rights, problems with document registration, and absence of unified social protection mechanisms.
- ▶ Geographic asymmetry: most successful returns were to rural areas of Republika Srpska and less urbanized parts of the Federation of BaH; large cities remained less accessible due to high competition in the housing market.

Overall Assessment of Effectiveness of Programs Implemented in BaH

Bosnia and Herzegovina's return migration policy is essentially a hybrid and "passive" model that largely depends on external donors, primarily international organizations and Western governments, with only partial involvement of national institutions. On one hand, programs such as housing reconstruction provided hundreds of thousands of displaced persons with comfortable conditions for return. On the other hand, the absence of a comprehensive government strategy [13] after completion of financial interventions leaves the state unprepared for independent management of these processes.

Recommendations for Supporting Return Migration of Ukrainian Citizens

Return migration is not only the physical return of citizens to Ukraine, but a complex and multidimensional process of social, economic, and cultural adaptation. This process requires systematic coordination at the level of state policy, local self-government, and civil society. It becomes particularly significant in post-war reconstruction conditions, where citizen return can become a powerful factor in restoring human capital.

Methodological Foundations of Return Migration Encouragement Policy

Analysis of international experience shows that applying the "Aspiration-Capability" model is appropriate for Ukraine, which involves synchronous stimulation of the desire to return and creation of conditions for this. Return should be based on:

- ▶ voluntariness and safety;
- ▶ availability of socio-economic opportunities;
- ▶ institutional support at all stages of reintegration.

Application of "human capital" theory allows viewing migrants as carriers of knowledge, experience, and innovation potential that should be integrated into state reconstruction and development. Policy in this area should consider not only permanent re-emigrants, but also those who may participate in Ukraine's development remotely or temporarily [14].

Development of National Return Migration Strategy

Return migration should be officially recognized as a state policy priority, and the following points should be considered when preparing the corresponding document:

- ▶ The strategy should be long-term with a clear action plan, budget financing, and monitoring system.
- ▶ It is necessary to identify target migrant groups (youth, specialists, families), determine priority economic sectors, and develop legal mechanisms for simplifying return.
- ▶ Return migration support policy should be closely linked to IDP support, as these groups face similar adaptation and reintegration challenges. A unified strategy should cover both categories, ensuring equal access to assistance programs.

Ensuring Multi-level Adaptation Support (Housing, Education, Psychological Support)

The Bosnian experience shows that a) war and social trauma require enhanced adaptation support, and b) it is impossible/inadvisable to rely entirely on "exported" and completely externally donor-funded projects.

In this context, Ukraine needs to:

- ▶ Ensure affordable housing for re-emigrants, especially in regions of economic growth.
- ▶ Create social integration programs, particularly psychological support.
- ▶ Develop education integration mechanisms (particularly for children with foreign educational experience).

Promoting Employment and Creating Conditions for Entrepreneurship Development

The Polish case emphasizes the importance of economic incentives for return. While the idea of providing tax benefits to re-emigrants is not relevant to the Ukraine's case, other financial incentives (grants, preferential loans) for startups, innovative projects, etc., can be considered.

Important aspects include:

- ▶ Legal support for return: document restoration, property rights protection, access to legal services.
- ▶ Creating business cooperation programs for job creation, special employment support in reconstruction (construction, infrastructure).
- ▶ Implementing monitoring and evaluation systems for project implementation success in this area, particularly tracking the percentage of re-emigrants who found employment or started businesses in the first year after return.

Large-scale Use of Digital Platforms and Implementation of Communication Interaction

The experience of Lithuania and Poland demonstrates that integrated digital services significantly facilitate information provision, preparation, and adaptation, and ultimately substantially influence return migration decisions.

Ukraine should develop similar platforms with personalized support and provision of:

- ▶ Creating a unified digital registry of re-emigrants with case management functions.

- ▶ Providing those returning/planning to return with maximum completeness of information about rights, social services, employment opportunities, housing.
- ▶ Organizing online expert consultations, access to support networks, involvement in cultural events, etc.

Considering Regional Specificities and Decentralization

In all examined foreign experience examples, active involvement of local self-government in return programs is recorded.

This, particularly in Ukraine's case, means the need for:

- ▶ Creating a network of Reintegration Centers in key regions with involvement of local authorities and civil society organizations.
- ▶ Developing local return support strategies that consider economic potential and community needs.
- ▶ Direct financial incentives for communities: special funds for infrastructure development, grants for local initiatives, community ratings for reception effectiveness, etc.

Cooperation with Diasporas and Conducting Information Campaigns

It is important to make return migration policy not only a response to international community expectations or utilitarian interests of Ukraine's economy, but also to implement it as social dialogue with migrants themselves.

For this purpose, it is necessary to:

- ▶ Involve the diaspora (through consulates and civil society organizations) in close cooperation within the framework of developing and implementing return programs.
- ▶ Ensure timely information about return procedures, available programs, and successful reintegration stories, promptly dispel myths and concerns about security.
- ▶ Launch the information campaign "Ukraine is Waiting for You" in media and social networks.

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