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Return motivation of Bulgarian students in Austria

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# 1 Introduction

Studying abroad is increasingly seen by Bulgarian students as an opportunity to get a good education. According to the Bulgarian national statistical institute, 924 persons aged 20-29 have left Bulgaria in 2007 compared to 10.312 in 2019<sup>1</sup>. It can be assumed that the growth in Bulgarian foreign students in the years after 2007 is primarily related to Bulgaria's accession to the EU, as many bureaucratic hurdles for EU universities have been abolished or reduced. Although the desire to emigrate has gradually decreased among Bulgarian youth in recent years, it remains a problem.

Bulgaria's accession to the EU is not the only reason for the increased number of foreign students. After the fall of communism, the number of schools with a main focus on foreign languages expanded in Bulgaria. These schools are partly supported by the respective national states. Therefore, in some of them, there is a possibility to obtain a language diploma, with the help of which a student can enrol in a higher educational institution in the corresponding country. German represents a popular choice among Bulgarian students, who plan to study abroad. Due to the fact that there are generally no tuition fees at German and Austrian universities, studying in the two countries is relatively inexpensive compared to the educational opportunities in other EU countries

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<sup>1</sup> [BNSI. External migration by age and sex](#)

such as France or the Netherlands. Moreover, the geographical proximity to Bulgaria also plays a role in the choice of Germany or Austria as a place to study.

Besides the above-mentioned pull factors, which attract students to move abroad, several negatives in Bulgaria stimulate their emigration as well. One of these push factors is represented by the corrupt practices in Bulgarian educational institutions. A survey on the topic, conducted in universities in Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Moldova, showed that 60% of the students in Bulgaria knew of bribery for a grade or an exam among their faculty and 77% have heard of cheating on exams in the university (Heyneman et al. 2008, p. 5). These practices lead to various negative consequences. Educational success is more closely connected to the capacity to pay for the achievement rather than accomplish goals with knowledge. This can be confusing for an eventual employer who has no idea if the title was obtained lawfully. Therefore, the degrees stemming from Bulgarian universities are often diminished, whereas even hard-working students are employed at a lower salary due to the dishonourable reputation of the educational institutions in the country. On the other hand, graduates from Western universities are perceived as valuable potential personnel and are employed at higher salaries (Heyneman et al. 2008, pp. 10-11). These practices in their turn play the role of a pull factor and attract Bulgarian students, who obtained their education abroad, to return and develop professionally in the home country.

Deciding to study abroad introduces three options for the far or near future of the migrant: stay in the host country, move to another country, or return to the country of origin. The following research will focus on the latter, specifically exploring the motivation behind the return migration of students. The master's thesis will analyse why, and under what circumstances, international students return home after having studied abroad. The target group consists of Bulgarians, who were enrolled in tertiary education in Austria, without paying special attention to the ones who graduated, but also to those, who left Austria before obtaining a diploma. The research question is as

follows: *What was the motivation for Bulgarians, who were enrolled in tertiary education in Austria, to return to their home country?*

In the context of international migration, "return migration" refers to people returning to their home country after having migrated away from their usual location and crossed an international border (International Organization for Migration 2019, p. 186). In terms of return migration, no uniform migration theory has been developed that can clearly resolve the question (Liakova 2020, p. 337). Due to its inclusion in broader migration theories, the area remains under-theorized (Cassarino 2004, p. 253). However, return migration, has been studied by a variety of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and economics, but it is primarily discussed under five theoretical models: neoclassical economics (Constant and Massey 2002), new economics of labour migration (Stark 1991), structuralism (Gmelch 1980; Dumon 1986), transnationalism (Hsing 1998; Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Pries 2013), and social network theory (Cassarino 2004). The increasing variety of migration situations demand a separation between the diverse types of returnees. Therefore, the context, the motivation, as well as the societal and personal consequences of the return need to be considered (Cassarino 2004, p. 254). In order to do this, revisiting these approaches is essential.

Different qualitative studies have been undertaken in an attempt to better highlight the many factors that have created the unique and varied character of return migration. Constant and Massey (2002) use both NELM and neoclassical economics models to examine the factors influencing German guestworker return migration decisions. The structuralist approach distinguishes between different kinds of return motives, returnees, and their experiences and influence on the home country (Cerase 1974; Wolfeil 2013; Krasteva 2014; Van Meeteren et al. 2014). Moreover, White (2014) uses a transnational approach to understand migration as a cyclical process of economic and social ties, challenging the concept of "return" in her research study. Despite these advances in the research of return migration, the lack of trustworthy and accessible empirical data remains a fundamental difficulty in the analysis of return migration

processes. Because of the formalities for acquiring a visa, residence permit, and work permit, immigration is typically carefully documented. Emigration, on the other hand, is not, as many migrants fail to deregister when they leave the country (Glorius 2013, p. 225). Circular migrations, which include individuals migrating in and out of the nation on a seasonal basis, are even more difficult to track (Liakova 2020, p. 342).

The preceding, as well as consequent life events and the circumstances in which they happened, are extremely important in order to provide insight into the above-mentioned research question. As a result, the narrative interview, which was developed by Schütze (1977; 1983; 1992) and subsequently primarily utilized and altered by Rosenthal (1993; 2002; 2004; 2010), will be employed as a data collection method. A mix of thematic analysis (Froschauer & Lueger 2003) and grounded theory coding method (Corbin & Strauss 2015) will be used to analyse the data. Furthermore, a news media analysis (Hodgetts & Chamberlain 2014) will be conducted in order to present the context of return migration in contemporary Bulgaria.

This master's thesis is divided into several parts. The introduction (chapter 1) is followed by an overview of the central theoretical approaches and state of research (chapter 2). Specifically, the second chapter deals with five theoretical models, under which return migration is mainly discussed - neoclassical economics, new economics of labour migration, structuralism, transnationalism, and social network theory. Furthermore, after presenting the positives as well as the negatives of each theoretical approach, the most appropriate and useful way to analyse return migration will be described. In the next chapter (chapter 3), the methodological approach will be presented. First, there is a description of the field access procedure, followed by a detailed description of the theoretical assumptions and implementation of the biographical interview. The data collection took place during the COVID pandemic due to which all interviews were conducted online. Therefore, the advantages, as well as the disadvantages of online telecommunication applications in qualitative research, are also discussed. Furthermore, an overview of the sample is provided, which is based

on five biographical interviews. Lastly, the chapter concentrates on the data analysis, whereas the thematic analysis, grounded theory and news media analysis will be characterized. Chapter 4 presents the five interviews through case characterizations. Next, an analysis is conducted, elaborating on the participants' experiences and views on various topics, all considered and analysed with respect to the research question. In chapter 5 the results of the conducted media analysis are presented. The researched articles are visualized with the help of a data grid as well as through article characterizations. Next, the results are described and elaborated with respect to the biographical interviews' findings as well as the existing literature. The thesis ends with a conclusion (chapter 6) in which the results are summarized, and the contribution of this master's thesis is highlighted. In addition, links for future research are pointed out.

## **2 Theoretical overview and state of research**

The following chapter will provide information about the existing theoretical approaches and state of research on return migration. Specifically, it will deal with five theoretical models, under which return migration is mainly discussed - neoclassical economics, new economics of labour migration (NELM), structuralism, transnationalism, and social network theory. Furthermore, existing studies following these theoretical perspectives will be presented. Lastly, after discussing the positives as well as the negatives of each theoretical approach, the most appropriate and useful way to analyse return migration in the context of the relevant thesis will be described.

“Return migration” in the context of international migration refers to the movement of persons returning to their country of origin after having moved away from their place of habitual residence and crossed an international border (International Organization for Migration 2019, p. 186). Studies on return migration have been common since the 1960s (Todaro 1969; Cerase 1974; Glaser and Habers 1974) when the recruitment of a cheap workforce in the wealthier Western European countries became widespread.

Labour migrants from Turkey, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Algeria, Morocco, and Yugoslavia left their homes in search of better job opportunities. Some of these guest workers created permanent settlements in the host countries and others returned home after a temporary short-term stay (Kunuroglu et al. 2016, p. 4). Following these societal developments, the return phenomenon, and its influence on countries of origin sparked a lively debate among academics in the 1980s (Samuel & Kubat 1985; Council of Europe 1987), particularly focusing on the return of the above-mentioned guest workers and their impact on the socio-economic development of their home countries (Liakova 2020, p. 337).

From a present perspective, with regard to return migration, no uniform migration theory has been established that can conclusively clarify the issue (Liakova 2020, p. 337). The area remains under-theorized due to its incorporation in general migration theories. However, return migration has been examined by various disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and economy (Cassarino 2004, p. 253). In the following thesis, the sociological, as well as the economical approaches will be considered. Jean-Pierre Cassarino (2004) provides an extensive overview of the various perspectives of return migration, accounted for as a subprocess of international migration. Return migration is discussed mainly under five theoretical models, which will be presented in the following section - neoclassical economics, new economics of labour migration, structuralism, transnationalism, and social network theory. Based on the theoretical approaches, the following section will also concentrate on the state of research of return migration. With the help of existing studies, the implementation of each approach will be introduced.

Numerous empirical studies have been conducted from a qualitative standpoint to better demonstrate the many reasons that have shaped return migration's diverse and varied nature. Despite these contributions to the study of return migration, a major problem in the analysis of return migration processes is the lack of reliable and accessible empirical data. Immigration is usually well documented, due to procedures

for obtaining a visa, residence permit and work permit. However, emigration is not registered on a mandatory basis, as many migrants fail to deregister when they leave the country (Glorius 2013, p. 225). Even more complicated for recording are circular migrations - the movements of people who migrate in or out of the country on a seasonal basis (Liakova 2020, p. 342).

## **2.1 Neoclassical economics**

From a neoclassical perspective, the economic motives of return migration can be analysed. In this theory, the claim is made that the social actors are rationally acting individuals who migrate as a reaction to greater salaries with the goal to increase their own career prospects and income opportunities. They depart temporarily in order to compensate for market inadequacies at home (Cassarino 2004, p. 255).

### *Return migration as a failure*

In the above-described context, a return takes place if the migrants understand, based on their experience in the immigration society, that their “migration project” cannot be carried out to the planned extent because of different reasons (overwhelming costs, lack of “success”, etc.). To be specific, from a neoclassical perspective, return migration is limited to labour migrants who failed to estimate the costs of their migration and did not profit greater monetary earnings. Unmet expectation and insufficient reward lead to the return. From the perspective of the neoclassical economists, return migration is seen as a failure dictated by the initial goal, which is earnings maximization, characterized by prolonged settlement. Once the longer duration of the stay has been terminated and the expected earnings have not been achieved, a migration failure takes place (Cassarino 2004, p. 255).

### *Family relationships put on hold*

When it comes to the household and family of the migrant, they are deliberately put on hold due to the long-term resettlement plans under the neoclassical perspective. Extended periods of separation accompany the migrant's life while trying to gather enough earnings with which a family reunification could be achieved. Furthermore, remittances are not usual according to the neoclassical economics theoretical model (Constant and Massey 2002, p. 11).

#### *Relevance of social status and occupational prestige*

The selectivity expressed regarding human capital is also analysed by neoclassical economics. The approach suggests an earnings-maximizing move, in which the appreciation and reward for the human capital are essential (Constant and Massey 2002, p. 11).

## **2.2 New economics of return migration**

In comparison to the neoclassical economics perspective, the new economics of return migration (NELM) regards the return as a goal-oriented success and a logical conclusion of the migration story - the last stage of a pre-planned strategy. As a result, NELM promotes recurrent or transitory migration (Cassarino 2004, pp. 256-257).

#### *Pre-planned return as a logical outcome*

According to the perspective of (NELM), return migration is the rational conclusion of a determined plan, taking place after the attainment of goals, which were set prior to the migration. These goals are calculated based on the demands of the household in the home country. Therefore, it views return migration as a success. Those who have achieved their financial goals and are now able to enjoy their accomplishments in the home country. People who follow this model strive to go overseas for short periods of paid labour, either to remit earnings or to save money in preparation for a return home.

They are usually target earners who go home once their earnings goals have been attained (Cassarino 2004, p. 256).

#### *Maintenance of family relationships through remittances*

Household and family play a central role in the return migration from the NELM perspective – the focal point is shifted from an individual (neoclassical perspective) to mutual interdependence (NELM) (Stark 1991, p. 26). Through remittances, the migrants maintain their relationships to the country of origin and contribute to the financial resources of their households as well. This constitutes a strategy focused on performing the return sooner rather than later, and the reintegration as effortless and non-hazardous as possible (Constant and Massey 2002, p. 11).

#### *Irrelevance of social status and occupational prestige*

When it comes to social status and occupational prestige, NELM suggest that these are both unimportant, which make immigrants first and foremost appealing to employers. High status is not what the temporary migrants strive for in a foreign country, rather the status in the country of origin is what matters, which is being financed by the earnings gathered abroad (Constant and Massey 2002, p. 11).

Constant and Massey's (2002) analyse the aspects shaping the return migration decisions of German guest workers with the help of GSOEP waves 1984-1997. The research uses both NELM and neoclassical economics models, through which return migration is viewed significantly different, intending to make predictions about how different variables will affect the likelihood of return migration. Their analysis shows that low return probability was found in those migrants who were employed full-time, with a family in Germany, without close relatives in the country of origin, who felt German, held German citizenship, and did not send money to their country of origin. On the other hand, a higher likelihood of return was found in those migrants who were unemployed, had no relatives in Germany, did not feel German, with spouse and children in the country of origin, and who were sending money to the country of origin.

Return migrants were shown to be significantly connected with different economic and social bonds to Germany and their countries of origin, while the decision to return was not predicted in terms of human capital traits or socioeconomic accomplishments. Factors such as education, proficiency in German, income, or occupational prestige did not increase the probability of return migration. In contrast, various ties to Germany including having children or a spouse in Germany, having German citizenship, and “feeling” German, influenced the choice to move to the country of origin. When it comes to the cases in which the spouse and family were in the home country and/or the migrant was remitting money, this too had a strong influence on the decision to return (Constant and Massey 2002 pp. 32-33).

## **2.3 The structural approach to return migration**

In the structural approaches advocated primarily by sociologists and geographers, return migration is not understood merely as a function of the individual experience of the migrant, but also considers the dependence on the socio-political conditions of the country of origin (Cassarino 2004, p. 257).

### *Return due to awaiting opportunities in the home country*

According to the structuralist perspective the migrants’ return is triggered by the existing opportunities back in their home countries. Therefore, the context in which the return takes place is of great importance. In contrast to NELM and neoclassical economics analytical models, which ignore the importance of contextual elements, return migration, according to the structural perspective, is not just an individual issue, but also depends on the context, influenced by situational and structural variables (Cassarino 2004, p. 257).

### *Losing touch with the home country*

When it comes to the relationship of the migrant with the country of origin the structuralist approach is rather critical, stating that once they leave, they lose touch with the home country. Gmelch (1980, p. 143) suggest that this makes the migrants poorly prepared for their return since it is challenging for them to acquire insights into the economic, social, and political changes that took place meanwhile in their home countries. Furthermore, once they return the individuals struggle to pursue their goals because they have spent too much time outside of their native societies, which led to forgetting the established mindset and losing their social networks. In other words, when migrants travel overseas, they lose touch with their home countries (Cassarino 2004, p. 261).

#### *The resocialization process and the influence of the returnees on their home country*

The structural approach of return migration also concentrates on the influence that the returnees may have on their origin societies after they return. This constitutes another central difference to both the new economics of labour migration and the neoclassical economics. With regard to the status of the returnees and their native countries, time plays a central role and refers to the length of residence abroad as well as the changes that happened before and after migration. Returnees' reintegration depends on the social economic and political changes which happened meanwhile in their home communities as well as their own professional and personal growth. (Cassarino, 2014, p. 259). The resocialization process in the home country can take time, which corresponds to the time spent abroad. As W. Dumon phrased it, "the returnee can be defined as a person who, in order to be reaccepted, has to readapt to the changed cultural and behavioural patterns of his community of origin and this is resocialization" (Dumon 1986, p. 122).

Studies following the structuralist approach (Cerase 1974; Wolfeil 2013; Krasteva 2014; Van Meeteren et al. 2014) offer distinctions between different types of return motivations, returnees as well as their experiences and influence in the home country.

They set out to demonstrate that contextual or situational elements in the home country must be considered as a precursor to evaluating the return experience.

Francesco Cerase's pioneering study on Italian returnees from the United States (1974) presents archetypal examples of how intricate the interconnections between return motivations and the social and economic circumstances as well as expectations back home are. According to Cerase, the return can be systematized into four types. The first one is the "return of failure" and refers to the returnees who could not find their way into the receiving society. This can be attributed to prejudices and hostility in the host society as well as institutional restrictions on immigration opportunities. The possibilities of innovatively influencing the society of origin are low in this type. The second type is the "return of conservatism" and applies to migrants who have planned to return to the society of origin before migration after they have achieved their goal of residence (e.g., to finish their studies, to save money, etc.). Their return is usually voluntary and planned as these migrants did not intend to settle permanently in the host society and adopt the norms and patterns of behaviour established there. They do not aim to 'import' innovative ideas from the immigration society into the society of origin. Their primary goal is to improve their own social status through migration and return. The third type is referred to as "return of retirement" and is connected to a specific stage of life. The goal of the returnees is to grow old in the society of origin and thereby improve their social status. The expectations of these returnees relate to being able to achieve a high standard of living in the society of origin with the pension earned abroad. This type of returnee does not have the potential to innovate. The last type is the "return of innovation" and refers to individuals who have gained new experiences and established new networks in the host society. With the acquired social, cultural, and economic capital at their disposal, these individuals attempt to innovate in their societies of origin and to change social structures (Cerase 1974, pp. 251-261).

In contrast, Wolfeil's study (2013), which analyses the labour market positioning of Polish university graduates who return to Poland after successfully completing their studies in Germany, concentrates solely on the professional path, which each type would take on back in the home country and does not elaborate on the return migration motivations. The analysis is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with returned graduates (p. 264). A typology of the returnees is developed, and their labour market positioning is presented (pp. 265-270):

Type 1: Knowledge translators - individuals who make use of both their cultural capital acquired abroad and their professional background when returning.

Type 2: Service providers in outsourcing centres - persons who make use of their cultural capital acquired abroad, but do not benefit from the professional background when returning.

Type 3: Highly qualified specialists - Individuals who do not make use of their cultural capital acquired abroad upon return, but still benefit from the professional background.

Type 4: Job chameleons - Individuals who do not make use of their cultural capital acquired abroad or of their professional background.

Type 5: International career - Individuals who pursue an international career upon return and make partial use of both cultural capital and professional background.

## **2.4 Transnationalism and return migration**

Ludger Pries defines transnationalism as a process in which a person takes part in the political, economic, social, or family processes that occur simultaneously in two societies (Pries 2013, p. 881). The transnational approach to return migration aims at developing a conceptual and theoretical framework in order to be able to include the social and economic connections between the countries of origin and the receiving

countries in the analysis of migration movements, which are not considered in the structuralist approach. In contrast to NELM, neoclassical economics and the structuralist approach, the transnational approach does not regard return as an endpoint of the migration cycle. Rather, return migration is seen as part of a circular process of economic and social relations (Cassarino, p. 261).

### *Return as a logical outcome*

According to the transnational approach to return migration, return occurs when the goal of acquiring enough resources has been reached and when the perspectives back home are deemed to be suitable. Adjusting to the new surroundings in the country of origin after the return takes place is essential. The returnees need to learn how to navigate their newly acquired skills, which differentiate them from the locals. Therefore, they may encounter difficulties in their home country – dealing with marginalization, but at the same time not neglecting their newly obtained qualities (Cassarino, p. 264).

### *Strong connection to the home country and community abroad*

“Homeland” is a main concept in the transnational approach to return migration and possesses various emotional charges. An individual may feel linked to more than one country, whereas particular places (e.g., birthplace) carry special historical and social background for the migrant. According to the transnational perspective, these perceptions influence the migrant’s decision to return as well as the resocialization process in the country of origin (Al-Ali and Koser 2002, pp. 10-12). Furthermore, the transnational approach views migrants within their community abroad, which is as essential for the development of the migrants’ personal and financial resources as their connections to family and household. Such a community is made up of migrants, who feel linked to one another by their shared ethnic roots. The transnational perspective regards migrants’ actions as a direct result of their membership in their own migrant group (Hsing 1998).

### *The transnational identity*

Transnationalists assume that returnees prepare for their reintegration in a targeted manner through regular visits to their home country, as well as in the form of remittances, which constitutes their transnational mobility. According to Cassarino the strong remaining connections to the country of origin, influence the identity of the migrants, creating a transnational identity. The transnational identity consists of the identity acquired in the country of origin in combination with the identity obtained in the host country and forms the expectations and actions of the returnees. According to proponents of the transnationalism approach, this refers to a “double identity”, rather than two opposing identities. Furthermore, this double identity is not abandoned when returning home. On the contrary, it is a main part of the following “adaptation” process in the country of origin, which can relate to difficulties on a social as well as on a professional level. Nevertheless, the transnational mobility (in the form of maintaining regular contacts, as well as travelling back and forth) mentioned above, allows the migrants to be better prepared for their return (Cassarino 2004, pp. 261-265).

In her research paper, following a transnational approach, White (2014) views migration as a circular process of economic and social relations and challenges the meaning of “return”, which has been viewed historically in migration literature as the end goal of migration. However, as global mobility options expand, it seems more likely that both return migration and migration abroad will increase and take place in a circular manner. The article explores why some migrants decide to reside long-term abroad after having experienced life abroad and returned to their home country already (White 2014, p. 75). 32 interviews in UK and Poland were conducted with return migrants who had been target earners the first time they lived abroad. They tended to distance themselves from the receiving culture (UK), either because they felt it was pointless to participate emotionally or because they were concentrated on earning money with the goal to invest them in their home country (Poland). After returning to their homeland, the migrants realized that the local stagnant economy cannot offer

them appropriate employment. With this realization and as financial demands became more acute, another relocation became more appealing (pp. 80-83). The migrants viewed the international mobility as a learning experience, which prepared them for the next steps and gave them enough knowledge and wisdom to not repeat the same mistake, in the particular case – settling in Poland again. Moving to the UK permanently was also triggered by the migrant's feelings of homesickness towards this land. Therefore, the paper uses the term “double return” to explain the homecoming to the host country, which now has greater value than the country of origin.

## **2.5 Social network theory**

The social network theory to return migration bears a lot of similarities to the transnational approach. It refers to the returnees as actors who possess financial and personal resources and maintain strong connections to their homeland as well as previous places of residence. Furthermore, it considers the circularity of cross-border mobility and does not regard the return as a last step in the migration process. The social network theory adds to this idea, introducing social networks, which the migrants are a part of. Such social networks have an organizational character, including membership, goals, and flow of resources. These resources then act in combination with the “double identity” traits, described above, and result in the returnees' return migration motivations, reintegration experiences as well as initiatives after the reintegration (Cassarino 2004, pp. 265-267).

## **2.6 Discussion**

In the following section, the positives as well as the negatives of each theoretical approach will be discussed, focusing on gaps and contradictions. Furthermore, with

consideration of the relevant research question, the most appropriate and useful way to analyse return migration in the relevant context will be described.

Considering the two approaches' opposing views of return migration, both NELM and the neoclassical economics perspective undoubtedly provide significant insights into return migration, specifically why people leave their home countries and then decide to return. However, both analytical models have several flaws. The first concerns the individuals' motivations for returning, which appear to be chosen solely for financial reasons. The aspect of how the acquired qualities are employed in the country of origin remains unexplored. The second shortcoming concerning the two analytical models is that the return experiences are not analysed in the context of the political, economic, and social state of the home country. This way there is no account about the particular plans when people return. Lastly, the above presented analytical models are limited only to labour migrants, making them inapplicable to the increasing variety of migration situations, which demand a separation between diverse types of returnees (Cassarino 2004, p. 257).

For the relevant research, the neoclassical perspective and NELM could deliver conceptual insights when it comes to the migration motives – migration with the eventual goal to increase one's own career prospects and income opportunities are to be expected as a result from the empirical part of this research. In regard to the return migration motivations, the two approaches offer limited understanding, minimizing them purely to economic reasons. Furthermore, ignoring the economic, social, and political state of the home country and reducing the return to success or failure, leaves various nuances unaccounted for. In regard to family relations during the stay abroad, the neoclassical perspective suggests a complete lack of closeness. This view is overly extreme for the relevant research and such results are not expected. Lastly, when it comes to social status and occupational prestige, the neoclassical model offers a reasonable scenario, in which the appreciation and reward for human capital are

essential. Considering that in the relevant research the actors are educated young people, it is expected that they would strive for high status in the host country.

The structural approach offers an additional perspective to return migration, suggesting that return is not seen as being solely influenced by the individual's migratory experience in the host nation. However, this theoretical model faces several constraints. First and foremost, it reduces the residence abroad to the development of new qualities, ignoring the connection between the migrants' experiences in the former host country and their current position in the home country. Therefore, the return experience itself is not accounted for from the structuralist perspective. A second flaw is represented through the overlooked importance of the acquired financial and personal resources abroad. They get lost in the traditional stereotyped behaviour, which the returnees must follow in an effort to be reaccepted back in the origin society (Cassarino 2004, p. 260). Considering the migrant in connection to the socio-political conditions in the country of origin and their interdependence is important for the relevant research. Unlike NELM and the neoclassical economics models, from a structuralist perspective, return is not just an individual issue but is also contextually dependable. Therefore, the structuralist approach can contribute by helping to draw a picture of the context in which return migration is taking place. Furthermore, the structuralist perspective sheds light on the influence the returnees can have on their countries of origin with their newly acquired social, cultural, and economic capital. However, this statement contradicts itself. The approach considers a long reintegration process, during which the returnees should readapt to the patterns of the origin community, rather than implementing new norms, which they obtained abroad. Therefore, the level of innovation, which the returnees can achieve is limited. Further gaps can be identified. Firstly, the approach suggests an unexciting relationship to the home country after the migration, which is a rather critical statement, and it is not expected in the relevant study. Furthermore, the structuralist perspective does not offer any accounts for the migrants' experiences in the host country, which are expected to have a strong influence on their return migration motivations. Lastly, similarly to the

NELM and the neoclassical economic approaches, the structural approach to return migration considers only a voluntary and nonspontaneous return. Forced return due to illegal stay or unexpected events such as the COVID pandemic is not taken into account. This is important due to the fact that considering the timing of the data collection for the relevant study it is expected to observe COVID influenced returns.

The transnational approach contributes to return migration as it questions the essence of cross-border mobility and suggests its circularity. This idea could contribute to the relevant research, where future moves abroad are expected. For young highly educated people in search of the best opportunities, a return to the homeland would probably not be the last stop in their migration process. Furthermore, the idea of a transnational identity, which consists of the identity acquired in the country of origin in combination with the identity obtained in the host country gives a more detailed picture of the changes through which the migrants go while living abroad and offers a better understanding of the complex process of character development. In the current study, the “double identity” and especially how it contributes to the reintegration process in the home country could be central. However, the approach has certain drawbacks. The transnational perspective suggests that the migrants’ personal and financial resources are strictly connected to their ethnic roots. They are developed during interactions either with a migrant community abroad from the same nationality or with their family back home. This suggestion is limiting in the sense of putting the migrants into a bubble even outside of their home country. Nonetheless, the social network theory manages this setback, introducing a returnee, who is also part of cross-border networks, which are not oriented especially around ethnicity. This theory contributes greatly to the discussion, shaping a returnee, who fits the current modern world – well connected, informed, and purposeful.

Based on the described theoretical approaches, state of research and discussion, Table 1 presents an adapted approach to return migration, which is suitable for the

relevant thesis. It borrows separate suggestions and observations from the various theoretical approaches as well as from the existing research.

Table 1 is organized into four categories. The first one refers to the returnee, who is described as a social actor who migrated with the aim to achieve a specific goal, not necessarily financial. The returnee belongs to an ethnic group as well as to cross-border networks, and strategically maintains relations with the country of origin. In this way, he/she gathers information about the opportunities in the home country, which in turn helps for a prepared and targeted return. This does not apply in the case of an involuntary return, which lacks a planned manner. Furthermore, the returnee possesses a transnational identity, which is a combination of the identity acquired in the country of origin and the one obtained in the host country. This “double identity” influences the returnee’s actions and experiences as well as the reintegration process in the home country after the return has taken place.

The second category presents the return motivations, which can be accounted for based on the theoretical approaches presented above as well as the state of research. Return can be triggered by feelings of nostalgia and loneliness abroad, caused by missing the home country. Furthermore, negative experiences in the host country such as hostility, prejudice, and restrictions, discrimination could play an essential role in one’s return migration considerations. On the other hand, a “pull” factor could be the existing opportunities back in the home country, that satisfy the returnee’s future ambitions. Lastly, considering the fact that the relevant thesis is written during the COVID-19 pandemic, forced return should be taken into account, whereas an unexpected event could be the main cause.

The third category deals with the connection to the home country, which can be perceived as a place possessing various emotional charges. Therefore, strong ties with the home country are expected and are expressed in regular communication, returns and remittances. This maintenance of the relationships to the home country results in

a fast and smooth reintegration process due to the preparedness and willingness of the returnee.

The last category discusses the possible contribution of the returnees to the home country. They are bearers of financial and personal resources acquired before (in the home country) and after (abroad) the migration. This combination of existing and newly acquired resources could be beneficial once transferred to the home country.

*Table 1: Adapted approach to return migration*

The returnee	Return motivations	Connection to the home country	Reintegration	Contribution to the home country
A social actor who migrated with the aim to achieve a specific goal, belongs to an ethnic group as well as to cross-border networks, strategically maintains relations with the country of origin, gathers information about the opportunities in the home country and possesses a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attachment to home, feelings of nostalgia</li> <li>- Negative experiences in the host country such as hostility, prejudice, and restrictions</li> <li>- Existing opportuniti</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Homeland" possessing various emotional charges</li> <li>- Strong ties with the home country expressed in regular communication, returns, and remittances</li> </ul>	Fast and smooth reintegration process due to the regular communication/visits, the preparedness and willingness of the actor (except in the case of an involuntary return)	Financial and personal resources acquired before (in the home country) and after (abroad) the migration carry contributory opportunities.

transnational identity. The actor performs the return in a planned and targeted manner (except in the case of an involuntary return) and is open to future migration.	<p>es back in the home country</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involuntary return in case of an unexpected event (e.g., COVID pandemic)</li> </ul>			
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Considering the research question aimed at identifying the return migration motivations of Bulgarians who studied in Austria the above-presented theoretical approaches are helpful but only if perceived in relation to one another. Each approach delivers a contribution to the topic, however, when considered individually, they are insufficient. Furthermore, existing research presents a general idea of the profile of the returnee, elaborating on the reasons behind the migration, experiences abroad, return motivations and reintegration. However, various gaps are visible, whereas especially the return migration motivations are left under-researched. The existing return migrants' typologies elaborate on separate reasons, not considering the interplay of more factors, which could influence the return.

### 3 Methodological approach

The following chapter will firstly present the field access, as well as the biographical interview as a data collection method. Furthermore, the advantages and disadvantages of online communication applications in qualitative research will be discussed. In the second part of the chapter the thematic analysis, grounded theory coding method, as well as news media analysis, will be elaborated on as data analysis methods used in the relevant research.

Qualitative research entails gathering, analysing, and interpreting data that cannot be reduced to numbers. For the here presented research, aiming at identifying the return migration motivations of Bulgarians who studied in Austria, preserving the richness and context of the data is essential. Therefore, a qualitative approach is appropriate, aiming at reducing and organizing this data (Ochieng 2009, pp. 14-15). The goal is to understand how people perceive the process of return migration, what meaning they assign to it and how they interpret their experiences. In order to explore the current data while at the same time honouring the participants' perspectives, qualitative techniques offer a proper response to these research necessities. On the other hand, qualitative research has several limitations, which are however embedded in the nature of the techniques. The main disadvantage of qualitative approaches is that the assumptions lack statistical representation and therefore cannot be generalized for larger populations. Furthermore, a general practical limitation of a qualitative approach is the processing of a large amount of data, which could be very time consuming and labour-intensive (Ochieng 2009, p. 17). In the case of the current study, the researcher is an inseparable part of the research process. Therefore, several quality assurance measures must be followed. At the methodological and procedural level, systematization of the doubt, as well as questioning previous knowledge, must take place. Another quality measure is the search for anomalies and contradictions to already established hypotheses. At the level of the research process, the question is how to approach the object of research in such a way as to gain as much knowledge

as possible about its specific organization. Controlled access to the research field, thoughtful inclusion of research materials and periods of reflection are essential quality measures that function on this level. They are all embedded in a cyclical research process, which enables the process of discovery, challenges preconceptions, draws out relevancies of the field, and puts findings to the test. Lastly, on the level of the scientific system, the question of the relevance of a study for social science arises. Ingenious research achievements that are not communicated are irrelevant for science and society. Therefore, demonstrating the relevance of the study is of great importance (Froschauer & Lueger 2009, pp. 200-204).

### **3.1 Field access**

As a field access method snowball sampling was used. The goal of this nonprobability sampling technique is to identify members of a rare population and ask them to name other members of this population (Goodman 1961).

In the relevant research the target group of interest was Bulgarians, who finished their secondary education in Bulgaria, afterwards came to study in Austria (whether they graduated or not) and then moved back to Bulgaria. The country's accession to the EU in 2007 led to the abolishment and reduction of many bureaucratic hurdles for foreign EU universities. Therefore, the people who left the country before 2007 had different experiences than those who migrated after 2007. For the relevant research, the latter are the ones in focus.

As a Bulgarian student in Austria myself, I already had connections to other Bulgarian students. To avoid interviewing friends or acquaintances, I used my connections only as a source of information as they redirected me to other Bulgarian students who I did not know personally. Following this method, I resulted in finding six people, five of which agreed on an interview. The process was by no means time-consuming,

contacting and arranging the interviews happened unproblematically. The interviews took place in the time span of one month.

### **3.2 The biographical interview**

In order to shed light on the above-presented research question, the preceding, as well as the consequent life events and the contexts in which they occurred are of great importance. Therefore, as a data collection method the narrative interview developed by Schütze (1976), and later predominantly applied and adapted by Rosenthal (1993; 2002; 2004; 2010), will be used.

The survey instrument of the narrative interview was presented by Fritz Schütze in the 1970s. Pointing the way for this was his study of community power research using the example of the amalgamation of communities in the 1970s in the old Federal Republic of Germany. For this study, the politicians responsible for the merger from selected municipalities were interviewed. The start of the narrative interview is thus in the area of narrative expert interviews and so-called interaction field studies, in which the interviewees are or were more or less involved in the same events (Rosenthal & Loch 2002). Schütze writes about this survey: "It was negotiated with the community politicians that they should initially tell uninterrupted questions about (...) the amalgamation, especially about their personal involvement in the corresponding events. Only after the informant had formulated an explicit coda for the narrative end, we started with the interview questions." (Schütze 1976, p. 163)

The narrative interview aims to evoke and sustain longer narratives without the interviewer intervening at first. The data collection is therefore dispensed with and initially geared towards the importance of the participants' discussion and their daily constructions. The narrative dialogue allows interviewees to provide their own presentation of their experiences and to establish their viewpoint on the subject or their own biography (Rosenthal & Loch 2002).

### 3.2.1 Theoretical assumptions

Rosenthal (2004) draws upon the developed from her gestalt-theoretical-phenomenological concept of the dialectical interrelation between experience, memory, and narration. Briefly, the concept states that the review of the past, the recollection process, the discussed experiences, and their modes of expression in the conversation are all made up of the current biographical constellation. However, the construction of the past that occurs in the present is based on the past - it is not independent of what has been encountered so far (Rosenthal 2004, p. 50).

When working with biographical texts, the researcher must contend with the fact that these sources point to a reality that has long since passed. Therefore, the decision to request the whole life story is based on foundational theoretical assumptions, which allow the researcher to interpret the significance of the events in the context of the biography as a whole. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the presentation of past events is constituted by the present narration while reconstructing a past (life history) portrayed in the present life narrative. The biographer's present decides his or her viewpoint on the past and, at times, creates a particular past. The current viewpoint affects memory collection, temporal and thematic linkage of memories, and the form of representation of recalled events (Rosenthal 2004, p. 49).

To grasp and describe social and psychological phenomena, the researcher must recreate the participants' genesis - the mechanism of their development, reproduction, and transformation. Furthermore, it is important to learn from both the individual perspectives of the actors and the paths of action in order to comprehend and justify their actions. The researcher wants to know what the actors went through, what significance they assigned to their acts at the moment, what meaning they attribute to them now, and where their stories fit into their biographical sense. Lastly, it is important to interpret the comments of an interviewee regarding specific subjects and events of his or her history as part of the broader sense of his or her daily life and the subsequent

present and future outlook in order to understand and explain them (Rosenthal 2004, pp. 49-50).

### 3.2.2 Implementation

The paper titled “Biographical research” from Rosenthal (2004) gives a comprehensive overview of the various steps which should be followed in the course of a biographical interview (pp. 50-52).

#### *Interview invitation*

The interview invitation is an important prerequisite for the success of the narrative interview and for building a relationship of trust. Motivating to participate, assuring anonymity, and giving information about the interview process as well as the research project are essential parts of the interview invitation (subchapter 0). After agreeing to participate in the interview a consent form was sent to all interviewees (subchapter 9.4), which they had to sign/agree to before the interviews took place.

#### *Narrative prompt (initial question)*

Narrative prompts can be entirely open, but they can also include the subject of the research and time constraints that offer the narrator a framework or restriction. The most open narrative request contains no thematic restriction, and this particular formulation allows the interviewees the greatest possible freedom of design. A rather more coherent initial question, which states the research context in advance and links the life story with a thematic focus, have a slightly pre-structuring effect. The most closed form of a narrative opening question concentrates entirely on the topic. In this case, with a temporal and thematic restriction, there are considerable problems for both the conduct of the conversation as well as for the reconstruction of life history experiences (Rosenthal 1995). Furthermore, in the course of a conversation, narratives become denser and denser. For this reason, experience has shown that it

makes sense to choose the period specified in the initial question before the phase of life relevant to the research interest.

In the relevant research originally, the initial question was formulated as follows: “What were the events that led up to you returning to Bulgaria?”. After conducting the first interview a wrong interpretation of the question was observed, namely, it was understood directly as what the reasons for the return were. This could be explained through the prior knowledge of the interviewees about the topic and goal of the research, in which they were about to take part. The confusion led to a short and summarized main narration, which required various internal and external narrative questions. Therefore, the initial prompt was changed to: “Please tell me your life story up until the point you returned back to Bulgaria”. In this case, the interviewees shared a lengthy story in the first part of the interview with the need for a lot fewer internal and external narrative questions.

#### *Main narration and narrative questions*

The biographical self-presentation of the interviewee following a request to narrate is called the main narrative. This narration is generally not interrupted by the interviewer, whose function at this stage is to listen. Interest, attentiveness, and understanding are expressed through gestures (e.g., eye contact, smile, nod, etc.) and expressions of attention (‘mhm’). During the main narration, short notes are made which serve as a personal guide for later internal inquiries. In the case of stoppages, the researcher must state a motivating question to continue, which only supports what has been said without asking additional questions. With this approach, the narrators are given space to shape their biographical self-presentation. It is completely up to them in what order to present the events, how much detail to give and which topics to cover.

The main narrative is usually concluded by a more or less explicit hint from the narrator. Possible hints for the narration are sentences like 'Now I have told you everything' or

'That is all'. These narrative closings indicate to the interviewer to move on to the next interview phase.

### *Internal narrative questions*

In this phase of the interview, further questions are requested. These inquiries should be orientated around the key points noted during the main narration. Criteria for the selection of the narrative-generating inquiries are narrative passages that remained incomprehensible or not yet sufficiently detailed during the main narrative. Here, too, the narrative, argumentation or description passages are not interrupted by questions. The design process is left to the interviewee.

### *External narrative questions*

After completing the internal narrative part of the questions there is still the possibility of asking external questions based on one's own research question. It is important that these are formulated in a narrative-generating manner. In the relevant research, most of the initially planned questions were already mentioned by the interviewee during the main narration. The external questions aimed at the desire to study abroad, the overall wellbeing in Austria and the social contacts there as well as the relationship to the home country (subchapter 9.5).

### *Completion of the interview*

The last phase is the concluding talk. A possible end to the interview is the following question: "Is there anything else you would like to tell me?". Afterwards, sociodemographic data were collected. The data of interest for the relevant research was the year of birth, marital status, children, place of residence, highest level of educational attainment and occupation.

While the recorder is switched off, an interesting discussion may develop in the form of 'small talk'. In order not to miss this information, notes should be taken, or it should be documented in a memo form right after the end of the interview.

For the relevant research, the biographical interview presents the most appropriate data collection method. Recalling past events through the prism of the present requires an interview design open enough for the participants to be able to present their viewpoints, in their own tempo and order. Therefore, the biographical interview as a collection method plays a central role in the context of this thesis.

### **3.3 Online communication applications as tools for qualitative research interviews**

The data collection for the relevant research took place during the COVID pandemic due to which interviews were conducted online. Therefore, it is essential to discuss the advantages as well as the disadvantages of online telecommunication applications in qualitative research.

The topic appears in several papers (Cater 2011; Deakin & Wakefield 2014; Lo Iacono et al. 2016; Seitz 2016), whereas ambiguous viewpoints have been presented. First and foremost a clear benefit of online communication systems is the ability to involve participants without geographical limitations. By eliminating the need to visit an agreed location for an interview, the researcher can widen the range of the sample, engaging participants from all around the world (Lo Iacono et al. 2016, p. 5). Participants have more flexibility to engage in a study whenever they want, without the need to travel. Furthermore, financial, and logistical issues can be avoided by not attempting to find a specific location for the interview. They can be conducted from the convenience of one's own home, removing not only the need to travel but also the need to choose a location, which may be new to the participants and, in some situations, may be costly to employ (Deakin & Wakefield 2014, p. 7)

Online communication applications networks are opening up a world of opportunities by linking researchers with a vast range of possible participants from all around the world while keeping time and money constraints to a minimum. However, regardless

of the many benefits in terms of democratization and time/ money savings, there are some drawbacks to online communication applications. Firstly, there may be technical difficulties – e.g., some individuals in certain parts of the world may not have an internet connection. Another common barrier to using online communication applications is having access to a device with the appropriate software, as well as the skill and/or desire to use it (Lo Iacono et al. 2016, p. 9).

The development of rapport is another controversial topic surrounding online communication applications in qualitative research. As opposed to offline face-to-face interviews, it might seem that providing the same degree of rapport through email, telephone, or other online methods is more difficult. Cater (2011) supports this statement, claiming that building rapport online is challenging. Seitz narrowed it down to a certain situational context and found that participants are more reluctant to be interviewed on Skype when it comes to personal subjects, whereas it also tends to be more difficult to elicit in-depth answers (Seitz 2016, p. 5). In these situations, the issue of reading the body language presents another drawback. When it comes to nonverbal cues, noting that data, which includes responses through body language and facial expressions, may be lost in certain interview formats, such as telephone interviews (Novick 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, technical difficulties can result in a loss of intimacy. When the connection is broken during an emotional interaction, for example, it produces an abrupt sensation (Seitz 2016, p. 4). Oppositely, Deakin and Wakefield discovered that Skype interviewees were more responsive, and rapport was established faster than in a variety of face-to-face interviews. A participant could be more willing to open up when questioned via Skype so they can remain in their own setting (Deakin and Wakefield 2014, p. 8).

In the relevant research, some aspects of the above-presented advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research through online communication were observed as well. The ability to involve interview partners from a different geographical region, in this case, Bulgaria, was undeniably convenient. Financial as well as time resources

were saved due to the usage of online communication tools. Another advantage was the willingness of almost all potential interviewees (five out of six) to participate. Some of them even admitted being shy and acknowledged the comfort of their own home while conducting the interviews.

That being said, several negatives concerning the online interviews appeared as well. A common problem was the unreliable internet connection. All of the participants agreed to turn on their web cameras during the interview for the sake of a more enjoyable and personal conversation. However, unfortunately in all of the cases, the interviews were almost fully conducted without a camera due to a bad internet connection. This made picking up nonverbal cues and establishing rapport as a whole challenging.

### **3.4 Sample**

As part of the current research, five biographical interviews were conducted online. The sample consists of five participants, who were born between the years 1992 and 1995 and their residential Bulgarian cities are Sofia, Ruse and Belene. Four of the participants are female and one is male. They all studied in Vienna, whereas four of them successfully finished their education, obtaining a bachelor's degree and one did not graduate. At the time of the interviews their occupations include researcher, graphic designer, junior buyer, and analyst. One of the interviewees is a student. When it comes to their marital status two of the interviews are married and the rest are single. At the time of the interviews, Andrea is a mother of a 1-year-old boy and Katia is expecting a child.

All of the interviews were considered for further analysis, and none were excluded. The following Table 2 provides an overview of the central characteristics of the participants with regard to the research interest.

*Table 2: Overview of central features of the cases in the sample*

Case	Sex	Year of birth	Place of residence	Marital status	Children	Education	Occupation
Maria	f	1995	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Single	None	BA	Student
Andrea	f	1992	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Married	m (1-year-old)	Secondary school	Order to cash analyst
Katia	f	1994	Ruse (Bulgaria)	Married	Expecting	BA	Researcher
Nadia	f	1995	Belene (Bulgaria)	Single	None	BA	Graphic designer
Ivan	m	1995	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Single	None	BA	Junior buyer

## 3.5 Data analysis

### 3.5.1 Thematic analysis

To answer the research question of how the interviewees perceive their return migration and what were the motivations behind it, the five interviews were firstly

analysed using the thematic analysis according to Froschauer and Lueger (2003). It was chosen because this type of analysis is ideally suited to get an overview of the existing variety of topics and their interrelationships. In its function as a text reduction method, the thematic analysis is particularly convenient for highlighting characteristic elements and differences in the presentation of a topic in different interviews. Since each interviewee had the freedom to organize their story as desired, the text reduction procedure was necessary to identify thematically relevant passages. The thematic analysis was conducted in several sequential steps. Froschauer and Lueger (2003) developed various questions for this purpose, which Lueger (2009) formulated again more concretely. The recommended questions to guide the practical implementation of thematic analysis are as follows:

1. What is a related text passage on a topic?
2. In summary, what are the most important characteristics of a topic?
3. In what contexts does a particular theme appear?
4. To what extent do differences in the topics or the handling of topics appear within or between the topics?
5. How can the results of the analysis be integrated into the context of the research question?

As a first step (question 1 on the implementation of the thematic analysis) text passages were organized and a total of thirteen themes were identified that focused primarily on the personal relationships of the interviewees, their life plans before/during the migration, experiences in both Austria and Bulgaria and their return migration motivations. The following themes were coded:

- The overall perception of Austria and Bulgaria
- Studying abroad
- Life plans before/during migration
- Family and friends
- Partnership

- Experiences in Austria
- Language
- COVID
- Contributing to Bulgaria's development as a mission
- Experiences in Bulgaria
- The aftermath of the decision to come back
- Lessons learned
- Future plans

The summary of the characteristics of the individual topics (question 2 on the implementation of the thematic analysis) enabled a more differentiated picture of the experience of return migration from the perspective of the interviewees. Already here it became apparent that the experience of going back to the home country is very diverse. In addition, many connections and correlations between the topics could be identified.

The contexts in which a particular topic appears (question 3 on the implementation of the thematic analysis) could only be portrayed to a limited extent in this analysis because the topic of return migration was introduced by the interviewer. However, it still makes sense to analyse the sequence of topics and the context they appeared in since the structure of the interviews was left to the participants. Most of the topics were already mentioned in the main narration, hinting at their importance. Others such as experiences in Austria and language were acknowledged after an internal or an external question, suggesting they were secondary themes.

The last two questions on the implementation of the thematic analysis (questions 4 and 5 on the implementation of the thematic analysis) were dealt with almost in parallel with the analysis within the framework of this master's thesis. Building on the description of the characteristics of the individual themes, it was already possible to identify initial differences in how interviewees experienced return migration and what was the motivation behind it. The integration into the context of the research question already

brought first suggestions for an additional more intensive analysis of the return migration motives of Bulgarians who studied in Austria.

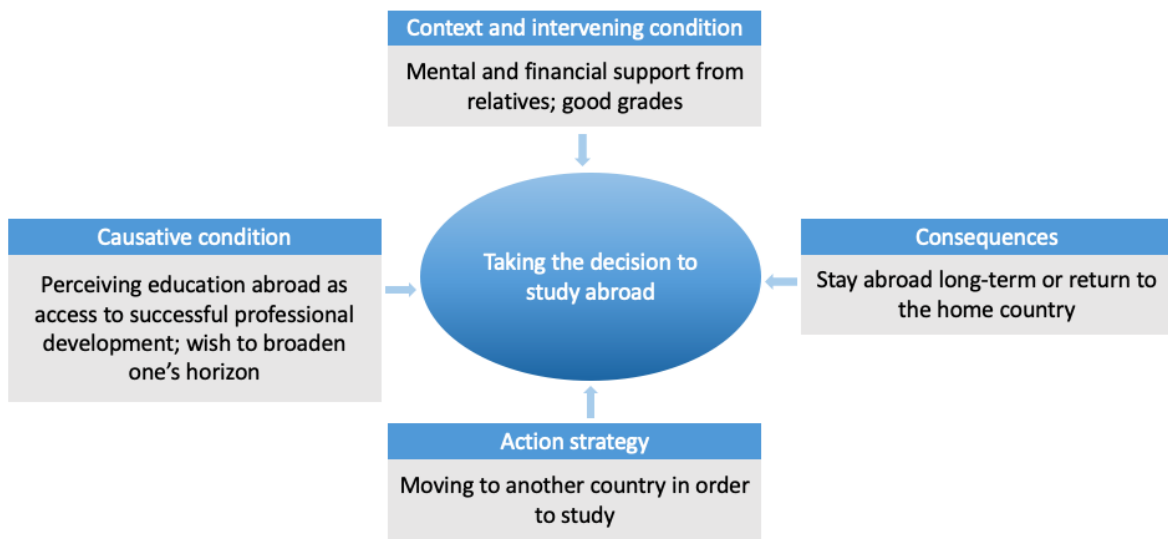
The thematic analysis played an important role, offering a first glance into the research material. With its help, the main aspects of the interviewees' stories were made clear, through getting an overview of the existing variety of topics and their interrelationships. Organizing and synthesizing the data allowed for the second step of the data analysis to take place.

### 3.5.2 Grounded theory

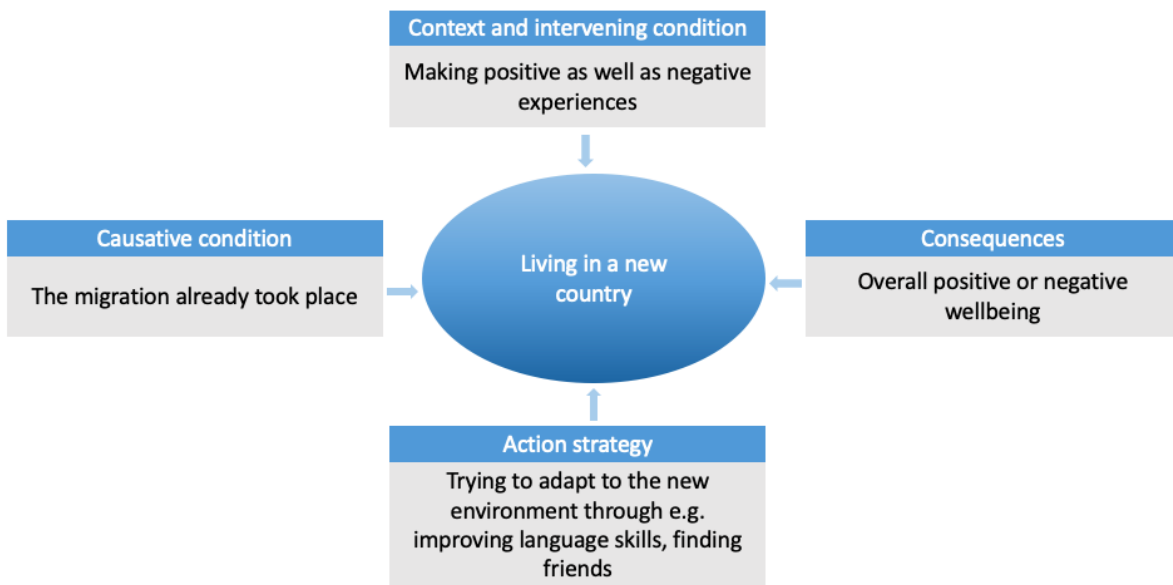
As a fundamental strategy of interpretive social research, grounded theory is not only an analysis method but an entire research approach. However, this master's thesis only used the grounded theory coding method following Strauss and Corbin (1990) and did not pursue it as a holistic research approach. The founders of Grounded Theory are Glaser and Strauss, who can be placed in the tradition of the Chicago School. This was further developed by Corbin and Strauss (2015). Grounded theory aims to contribute to the understanding of social phenomena by interpreting different data materials (Lueger 2009).

The coding process is used to translate empirical data into concepts and categories and is divided into three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The concepts can be understood as terms that are representative of the interpretation of the data and allow to group it following different characteristics. From these concepts, in turn, categories are formed through combinations that represent the central phenomenon. The categories are subsequently used to develop a theory (Corbin & Strauss 2015). In the case of the analysis in the context of this master's thesis, however, these categories were used to develop a comprehensive overview of the return migration motivations of the participants.

The first step of this process is to get familiar with the data material and to mark relevant text passages while keeping the research question in mind. Then the first coding step begins – the open coding. Posing stimulating questions and continuously comparing data and codes are essential components of open coding. It is a type of data analysis that focuses on categorizing and conceptualizing phenomena through a thorough examination of the data. The data is split down into smaller sections, which are carefully examined, aiming at establishing differences and similarities. In the context of open coding, codes are assigned for individual words or text excerpts, with the help of questions (e.g., Böhm 2017). These questions serve as guidelines to learn more about the phenomenon of interest. The goal of this analysis is to understand each part's essential concept and create a code to express it. The codes can be created *in-vivo*, which means to use an existing in the data material word or phrase as a code, or they can be researcher-generated. In the current research, both types of codes were used and were generated based on the research question. The second coding step is axial coding, where codes or concepts that refer to a similar phenomenon are grouped into categories. This way the connections between categories and concepts produced by the open coding procedure are examined. The categories resulting from the axial coding have a higher level of abstraction and are used to order and refine concepts. Specifically, for each defined category or phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual conditions, action strategies related to the phenomenon, and the resulting consequences are presented in the form of a network of relationships (coding paradigm) (Corbin & Strauss 2015). In the current study, the coding paradigm according to Böhm (2017) was used in an attempt to clearly present the categories/phenomena. Figure 1-Figure 6 below provide an overview of the six categories defined in the analysis.



*Figure 1: Taking the decision to study abroad*



*Figure 2: Living in a new country*

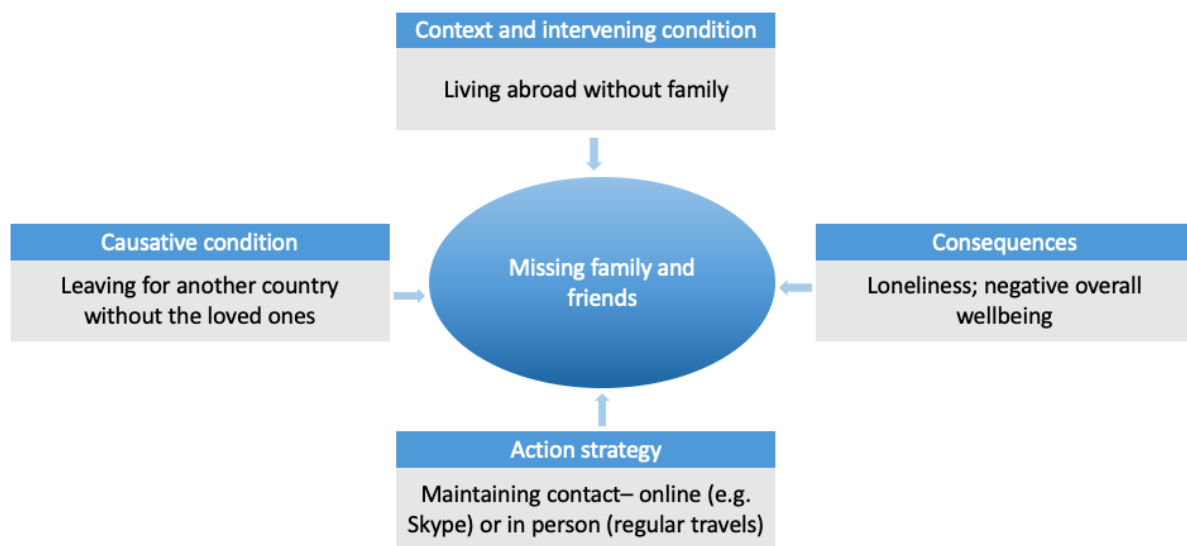


Figure 3: Missing family and friends

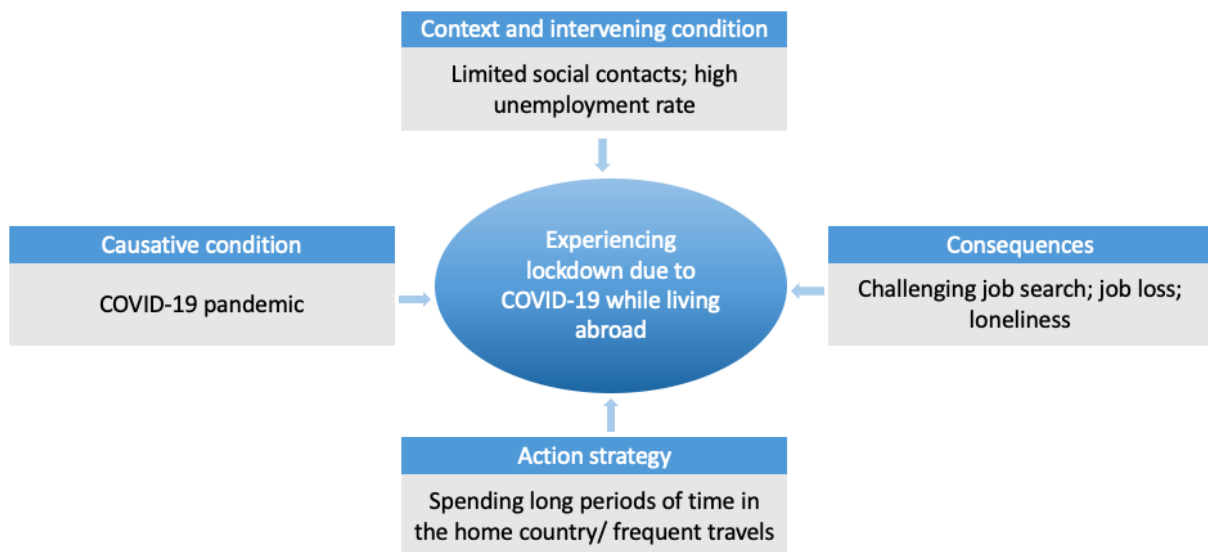
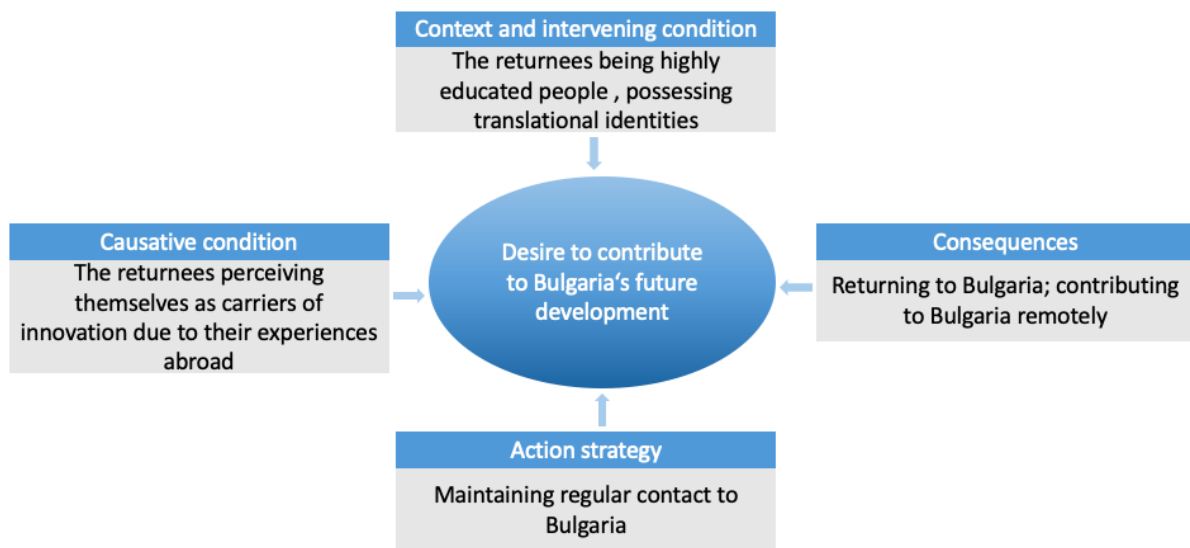
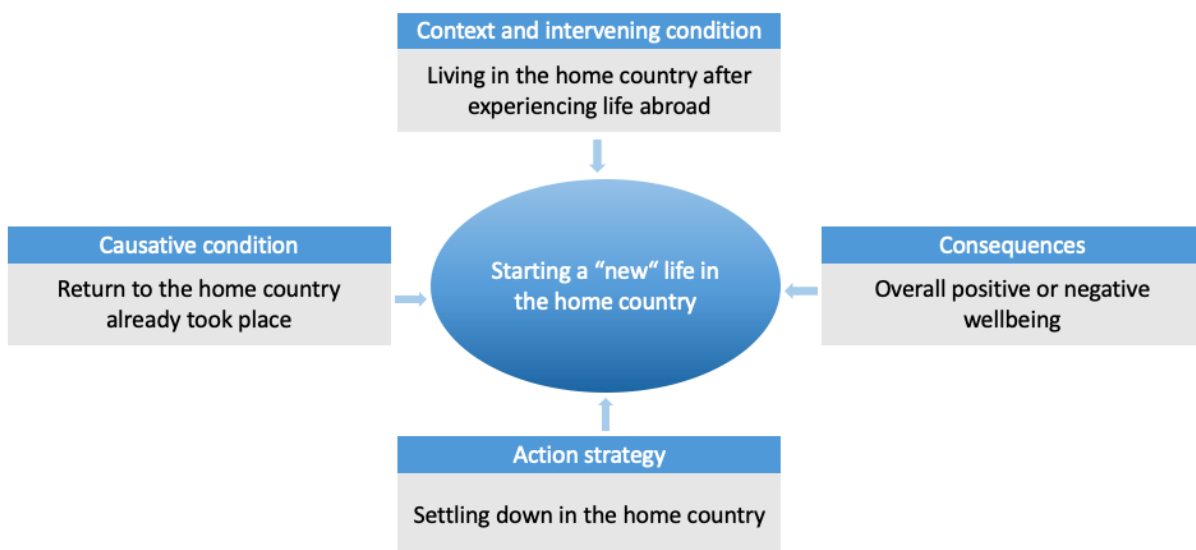


Figure 4: Experiencing lockdown due to COVID-19 while living abroad



*Figure 5: Desire to contribute to Bulgaria's future development*



*Figure 6: Starting a "new" life in the home country*

In the third and last step of the coding process, the selective coding, the categories found are finally to be related to one another in the form of key categories. A key category is one that is abstract and broad enough to be representative of all

participants in the study. The objective is to combine the categories that were established during axial coding into separate single categories with a higher level of abstraction (Corbin & Strauss 2015).

For the relevant study, the grounded theory coding method plays an essential role in structuring and translating the data material into concepts and categories. It was coded only once, whereas no major changes in the codes took place. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in Bulgarian in order for the participants to feel as comfortable as possible. They were then transcribed and coded, whereas all the relevant parts were translated into English. The translations did not cause any problems, due to the fact that colloquial language was rarely used.

### 3.5.3 News media analysis

To analyse the public debate on return migration in Bulgaria and to demonstrate the relevance of the topic, a news media analysis (Hodgetts & Chamberlain 2014) will be conducted, concentrating on articles that appeared on Bulgarian media websites. In the following subchapter, the process of implementing it will be described.

The first step is to identify a research topic. It can be based on controversies, which took place in the media, on prior research or discussions. Observations based on news media could be a very interesting source and valuable foundation for further analysis. The second step consists of aiming the topic in a particular direction and formulating research question(s), which can be changed and adjusted during the research process. The last part of this step is to evaluate what materials are required to meet the study objectives, as well as how they will be accessed and obtained.

People are constantly exposed to media, but frequently do not pay attention to how the content is constructed and shaped. As a result, overlooking nuances can happen often, while the contents are perceived as a whole. Therefore, the second step of the analysis is concentrated on the de-coding of media contents, which aims at breaking up the

data with the intention of gaining a broader perspective. This is achieved through gridding the data into separate substantial and contextual units. While uncovering patterns, the gridding system can help the researcher to see beyond the data and generate issues for additional investigation.

The third step of the analysis consists of identifying main topics and coding the sources. Inductive topics can be developed from the gridding phase and the data, whereas deductive themes can be derived from the study goals and existing literature. After that, the themes which are perceived most vital for the research question are selected.

In the fourth phase of the news media analysis, the researcher seeks to organize and integrate the parts of the analysis into a coherent sequence of thoughts. The story produced by these ideas is a result of linking the various themes together. Therefore, the result of this step is different from the news story, produced in the second phase of the analysis.

The last fifth step occurs throughout the whole analysis and is concentrated on interpreting the researched phenomenon. The main aim is to incorporate theory into the story and come up with a logical explanation while making connections to existing literature. Placing the researched phenomenon into a broader framework and analysing the function of the media in this process are essential steps of this last phase (Hodgetts & Chamberlain 2014, pp. 386-391).

The main goal of performing the news media analysis described above is to put the biographical interviews' findings into the context of the return migration discourse in Bulgaria and to paint the broader picture of the issue and its consequences for the country as a whole as well as for the individual returnees.

The combination of data collection and data analysis methods presented in this chapter aims at answering the research question. The return migration motivations of Bulgarians who studied in Vienna and then returned will be explored with the help of

the biographical interviews and then analysed through the thematic analysis followed by the grounded theory coding method. Furthermore, the phenomenon of return migration, circulating in the Bulgarian media will be analysed using the news media analysis and put in relation to the interview findings as well as to the existing literature on the topic.

## 4 Results I

The following chapter provides an overview of the perceptions of the interviewees regarding their return migration experiences mentioned. The biographical interviews are structured and analysed with the help of the conducted thematic analysis (subchapter 3.5.1) as well as the coding procedure of Grounded Theory (subchapter 3.5.2). The five interviews will be briefly presented through case characterizations. Next, an analysis will be conducted, elaborating on the participants' experiences and views on various topics, all considered and analysed with respect to the research question. Firstly, the pre-migration considerations of the returnees will be studied. The focus lies on the perception about studying abroad as a highly valuable experience as well as the interviewees' pre-migration plans about staying in the host country or returning to Bulgaria. Next, the personal relationships of the participants will be presented and examined. Issues such as missing family and other relatives in the home country as well as the challenges connected to the maintenance of contact with them illustrate a main problem, which the participants had to face while living abroad. Furthermore, the existence of a partner along with friends and acquaintances played a vital role in the return decision process. The next main topic concentrates on the participants' overall impressions, perceptions, hurdles/successes in Austria and the lessons learned that they took with them. The migrants shared contradictory experiences when it comes to life in Austria and the challenges they had to face. The latter refers to problems with finding a job and overall insecurity with the German language. However, they all evaluate their experiences in Austria as highly beneficial.

Another main return theme, expressed by the interviewees is the importance to live in Bulgaria aiming to contribute to the development of the country. The returnees acknowledge existing problems/need for improvement in Bulgaria and assume their duty to the homeland. The last and most surprising subject, which the analysis elaborates on, is the COVID pandemic and its role in the participants' return motivations. COVID-related factors directly influenced the return of one interviewee, whereas for another they had the function of a trigger of an already pre-planned return.

## 4.1 Case characterizations

### *Maria's COVID-19 forced return*

**Maria** (female) is 25 years old at the time of the interview. She was born in 1995 and lives in Sofia (Bulgaria). In Bulgaria, she studied in a German language-focused school. Therefore, after finishing she decided to move to Austria. Back then she did not make plans if she will come back to Bulgaria or will stay in Austria. In Vienna, she obtained a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. After a two-month unsuccessful job search in Vienna, hurdled by the COVID-19 pandemic, Maria moved back to Sofia where she is completing her MA at a Dutch university through distance-learning. She says that the COVID-19 crisis has been the main reason for the return. Because of the pandemic finding a job was challenging. At the same time, it did not make sense from a financial standpoint to stay in Vienna while her master's degree was taking place online. Furthermore, she shares that finding a job in Sofia is easier even only with the knowledge of foreign languages as a qualification. Despite all being said, Maria mentions with regret that she had plans to work in Austria and wanted to gain experience there, but it did not happen the way she intended. When it comes to her social contacts in Vienna, Maria had friends and communicated with her family on a daily basis. In the beginning, she used to travel back to Sofia whenever possible, but with time these visits decreased. She did not have a partner during her stay in Austria

and is single at the time of the interview. The option to move again to another country is open for Maria.

#### *In search of a better life in Bulgaria for Andrea and her family*

**Andrea** (female) is 28 years old at the time of the interview. She was born in 1992 and lives in Sofia (Bulgaria). She is married and has a 1-year-old son. At the time of the interview, she is working as an analyst. She wanted to experience life abroad and especially in Vienna and left with the main goal to learn German. Education came secondary and she did not finish it successfully.

Andrea shares that she always planned on having a family in Bulgaria. She had a boyfriend at that time, who is now her husband. They had a long-distance relationship before he decided to join her in Vienna, where they lived together. She shared that they felt incomplete in Vienna, having difficulties finding jobs because of discriminatory experiences. Their social contacts were limited as their close friends were in Bulgaria and they missed their relatives.

Andrea says that they took the right decision to move to Bulgaria and that there they can provide a better life for their child. She also speaks about their role and later on their child's role as a mediator of values obtained abroad and how these values could have a positive impact on the situation in Bulgaria, which she describes as "not perfect." Andrea does not plan on moving to another country again.

#### *Katia's preplanned return to Bulgaria*

**Katia** (female) is 26 years old at the time of the interview. She was born in 1994 and lives in Ruse (Bulgaria). Katia is married and at the time of the interview, she is expecting a child. She finished her bachelor in Sociology in Vienna and is now working as a researcher in Ruse (Bulgaria).

Katia moved to Vienna mainly because her boyfriend, now husband, wanted to study there and maintaining their relationship was important. The decision to leave Bulgaria

was not taken lightheartedly. One of the main reasons was that Katia never studied German until this point. Therefore, before starting her studies she went through a language course in Vienna. During the interview, Katia mentions various times that she is a very shy person and was worried that she will not be able to socialize in Vienna. However, she found a lot of friends there with whom she is close to this day. Katia mentions missing her family while being abroad and the importance of them being close. Furthermore, she says that she did not leave Bulgaria with the plans to stay abroad forever. Together with her boyfriend, they were open-minded about their future residence, however tended towards going back to Bulgaria and especially to their hometown Ruse. Therefore, they did not go through a targeted job search in Vienna.

Katia shares that she and her husband are very happy with their current life in Bulgaria, while still considering Vienna their second home and visit whenever they can. They do not plan on moving somewhere else, especially in the near future because of the expected child.

#### *Nadia's ambitious return to Bulgaria*

**Nadia** (female) is 25 at the time of the interview. She was born in 1995 and lives in Belene (Bulgaria) with the plan to move to the capital Sofia in the near future. Nadia studied graphic design in Vienna and finished her education successfully. She always wanted to work as a freelancer so after a 10-months job in a company in Vienna, she decided to open her own company. In order to do that she first had to move back to Bulgaria since in her opinion there it is easier to launch a company in comparison to Austria. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the return process by a couple of months. Nadia sees herself as a carrier of skills, which could improve Bulgaria. Therefore, she wants to implement her personal and professional projects in her home country. She mentions the importance of her future child growing up in Bulgaria and being able to speak Bulgarian.

Nadia is very happy with her decision to move back to the home country, while simultaneously acknowledging her stay in Austria as central in her personality development process. However, she says that her life in Vienna lacked the dynamic, which she needed to follow her ambitions. When it comes to social contacts Nadia had many friends in Vienna and felt good. She did not communicate with her family on a daily basis and did not visit them at every opportunity.

#### *Ivan's nostalgic return to Bulgaria*

**Ivan** (male) is 25 at the time of the interview. He was born in 1995 and lives in Sofia (Bulgaria). He starts his story by saying that in Sofia he studied in a German language-oriented school, which was the main reason to choose Vienna as a place to continue his education. Before leaving Ivan made plans to come back to Bulgaria after finishing university in Austria and raise a family in the home country. As time progressed, he got used to life in Vienna, felt more and more comfortable, which led to some doubts about going back to Bulgaria.

When it comes to his overall state in Vienna, Ivan shares that he felt good and safe, initial difficulties with the German language were resolved fast and he did not experience any discrimination. Furthermore, in the second half of his stay, he had a partner, who also lived and studied in Vienna. He visited his family and friends in Bulgaria whenever possible.

After finishing his bachelor's in international business administration, Ivan took the step and moved to Sofia. He shares that the decision was not easy, and he had to make a pros and cons list about Vienna and Sofia, which helped him take the concluding decision. As a main argument for the return, he mentions that he missed his loved ones and wanted to be close to them. Furthermore, Ivan realized the good job opportunities, which Sofia has to offer, for people who finished their education abroad and speak multiple languages. This recognition hints at the typical behaviour of a returnee according to the structuralist perspective presented in subchapter 2.3, according to

which the migrant's return is triggered by the existing opportunities back in the home country. Therefore, the context in which the return takes place is of great importance. After moving back to Sofia, Ivan found a job, which he was not satisfied with. This raised doubt if he made the right decision to return. However, soon after he started another job, which satisfied his professional expectations. Lastly, Ivan shares that he keeps his options open and would move to another country in case he is not fulfilled in Bulgaria.

## 4.2 Pre-migration considerations

The following subchapter will shed light on the pre-migration consideration of the participants and how they later influenced their return migration process. When analysing the interviewees' perceptions of their return motivation, it is first important to look at the incentives for the migration to Austria. The decision to study abroad and therefore live in another country for several years suggests responsible and well-informed preparations and considerations. From the research material, it has been made visible that these motives repeatedly manifest themselves in relation to various perceptions.

### *Education abroad as access to successful professional development*

The first one deals with the understanding that a studying experience abroad is highly valuable for one's professional and personal development and therefore, if circumstances allow, should be taken advantage of. Katia, Nadia, and Ivan shared this opinion and pinpointed their teenage years as the time, during which it developed. All three quotes contain specific aspects, which build on the perception of studying abroad. Nadia shares her thoughts: "for my studies, my biggest goal was to be somewhere abroad (...) just then in my head I thought that I will not get the education I want in Bulgaria, which is not true, absolutely not true". With this statement, Nadia compares her mindset then and now. She did not consider education in Bulgaria as a

valid option in the past, whereas only studying abroad was seen as a logical outcome. Moving to another country represented even the “biggest goal” for Nadia at this point in her life. However, from her current perspective, Nadia dismisses this perception and regards Bulgaria as a place, where she could have gotten the desired education. This reconsideration outlines a shift towards an attitude in favour of Bulgarian education, which may have developed during or after the return and plays a central role in the returnee’s future settlement choices.

In his turn Ivan shares a similar opinion: “my view and the view of a lot of people around me was that education abroad is at a pretty high level, especially in Austria”. He mentions a particular country, Austria, and communicates that this point of view was circulating in his social circle, which could have contributed to shaping his own perception. Unlike Nadia, Ivan does not mention his opinion on the tertiary education options in Bulgaria.

Katia’s statement presents a certain predisposition to returning to the home country: “I think it’s great to go to study abroad and then to come back but of course if you want to stay it’s a personal choice - everyone decides for themselves”. Unlike the other two quotes, this one is phrased in the present tense, which hints that Katia shared and still shares this perspective. Furthermore, it is directed to the listeners/readers, with the message that returning home is the right choice but at the same time, it is also a personal decision. However, the latter is not emphasized, which downgrades the decision to stay in the host country and suggests that Katia is convinced in her choice to return.

Nadia and Ivan’s quotes are mainly concentrated on obtaining a high-level education abroad, hinting that it cannot be achieved in the home country. Although it was not communicated by the interviewees, one of the reasons why Bulgarian higher education is looked down on is the constant corruption practices, which were elaborated on in chapter 1.

### *Broadening one's horizon through studying abroad*

Aside from the professional development that studying abroad has to offer, the acquisition of further social contacts and travelling opportunities is also seen by some interviewees as a main reason for moving to another country. Maria and Katia share similar thoughts and express the importance of studying abroad in terms of expanding their worldview. Maria shares: "It [studying abroad] was a goal in my head. I imagined it was something that will give me an opportunity for the future, also will see a new culture and will meet many different people". Broadening one's horizon through increasing the range of knowledge, understandings, and experiences was evidently also appealing to Katia and her partner: „We have always believed that studying abroad is extremely important - you definitely gain a lot of experience, you see various things during your time studying, you travel around “. Both Maria and Katia do not speak of becoming part of a new culture, but rather of a temporary stay abroad, long enough for getting to meet new people and taking a glance at the culture. Therefore, their views suggest a return to the home country once this objective is accomplished.

### *Preplanned versus unplanned return*

An additional bundle of pre-migration consideration is characterized by the interviewees' contemplations on life abroad versus life in Bulgaria. They were all mentioned at the very beginning of the participants' stories, indicating that these were their initial thoughts prior to moving to Vienna and experiencing life there. Based on the essence of these viewpoints they can be separated into two groups.

The first group is represented by four out of five interviewees – Andrea, Ivan, Katia, and Nadia. During the interviews they all talk about their pre-migration plans, sharing their certainty about returning to Bulgaria. Ivan states: "From the very beginning I had said to myself that it is quite possible that I will end up back in Bulgaria so that I am not far from my relatives.". This example clearly shows a firm decision to live long-term in the home country and classifies the years spent in Austria as a transitional period. Ivan

then goes on to explain the reasons for his urge to be back in the home country. It hints at the idea of distance as a challenge in terms of relationships maintenance with his loved ones. The wish to be close to one's relatives and the return as a solution will be a reoccurring topic in this thesis.

Nadia, Andrea, and Katia's perceptions add another dimension to the pre-migration considerations and specify that one of the main reasons for wanting to live in Bulgaria is the importance of raising their families in the country. Andrea states: "I always knew that Vienna was a transitional period and that I would return to Bulgaria one day". This thought is then supported with a further statement, which emphasizes yet more on her future child(ren) and family: "I never thought that I would stay forever in Vienna, that I would start a family there, I would have children there". From these quotes, it is visible that Andrea had and still has a firm belief about where to raise her family, which did not lose its validity during and after her stay in Austria.

Katia shares similar pre-migration considerations stated in four separate quotes throughout the interviews. The prevalence alone hints at a high level of certainty, which is then supported with confident worded statements, such as: "we always imagined building our family here [Bulgaria] - we will make an apartment here, we will get married here, we will have a child here". The shared details in this quote show a very clear plan about the future, which similarly to this of Andrea did not change during and after the stay abroad. Furthermore, the emphasis on the word "here", which in this case points to the home country Bulgaria adds an emotional aspect to the statement.

Nadia also formulates her pre-migration considerations in several statements, elaborating on different elements, all essential for building a family – place of residence, partner, and child(ren). Firstly, she shares: "I always thought that I wanted to build a family in Bulgaria rather than in Austria". Unlike Katia and Andrea, she mentions a specific country, Austria, which in comparison to Bulgaria is less favourable in terms of raising a family. She then continues her thoughts: "I don't see myself being with an Austrian (...) I didn't feel them as my type of people". Nadia did not perceive

the locals in the host country as possible partners. This suggests the inability to find a suitable partner as another reason for the return to the home country, where there are more appropriate options. Nadia's last statement on this topic is as follows: "I want my child to learn and speak Bulgarian". The importance of national identity and pride in the form of speaking the official language is visible here. Nadia does not want to transfer her "foreigner" status directly to her future family and children.

Taking a glance back at the presented literature in chapter 2 some parallels between the results and the existing research on the topic can be drawn. The statements of the first group, consisting of Andrea, Ivan, Katia, and Nadia can be classified according to Cerase's second type of return - the "return of conservatism". It applies to migrants who have planned to return to the society of origin before migration after they have achieved their goal of residence (e.g., to finish their studies, to save money, etc.). Their return is usually voluntary and planned as these migrants did not intend to settle permanently in the host society and adopt the norms and patterns of behaviour established there. They do not aim to 'import' innovative ideas from the immigration society into the society of origin. Their primary goal is to improve their own social status through migration and return. (Cerase 1974, pp. 251-261). From this description, it is visible that Cerase's depiction of this type of returnees is limited and does not fully cover the experiences shared by the interviewees in the context of this research.

The second group which consists of only one interviewee is characterized by the uncertainty of returning to Bulgaria or living abroad. Maria's statements are the only ones that differentiate themselves from the rest. She expresses her thoughts in two quotes, corresponding to different times in Maria's migration experience. The first one points to the beginning when she left for Austria: "When I left, at the age of 18-19, I didn't think at all if I would go back, or I will stay". She emphasizes on her age back then as being too early for her to take a firm decision about her future plans. Next Maria talks about her thoughts after staying in Austria for a couple of years: "over the years in Austria, I definitely had thoughts that want to finish [my education] and go home

immediately “. The challenging nature of a stay abroad led Maria to contradictory considerations, making her feel unsure about the next steps. “Home”, in this case, Bulgaria, represented a safe place, which was always welcoming in case Maria wanted to return. She finishes her considerations with a glimpse to the future: “I expect that there can be any outcome of the circumstances and I'm absolutely open to all possibilities”. As the only returnee who kept her options open before and during the migration process, Maria continues to consider all possible scenarios and does not exclude another future resettlement.

From the above-presented quotes, it is evident that studying abroad was seen as a goal by the returnees, which once achieved marked the end of this particular phase in the migrants' lives. Whether the aim has been a completed education, or a number of newly visited countries and gathered experiences, the completion of this objective characterized a pivotal moment in the interviewees' return migration process, followed by pre-return migration considerations: „I achieved my goal, I got my diploma and now where? “(Ivan).

### **4.3 Relationships during life abroad**

The following subchapter will elaborate on the various relationships of the returnees at the time of their residence abroad and their return. On the one hand, they were faced with challenges in regard to maintaining their existing relationships with family, friends, and partners and on the other they were attempting to create new ones in Austria, which was not always successful. These experiences played a central role in the participants' stories and directly correlate to their decision to return to Bulgaria.

Seeking life abroad in most cases means separating from one's friends and family. This generates feelings of loneliness and disconnection, which contribute to the need for reunification. The participants dealt with these feelings with the help of various strategies, which mainly included maintaining regular contact – online and physical.

Nevertheless, being far away from their loved ones led to the participants' decision to return to Bulgaria and constitutes one of the main reasons behind it.

### *Missing family*

A central point in all the stories shared by the returnees is the relatives, who were left behind in Bulgaria after the migration took place. They were always mentioned already in the first part of the interview and constituted a main topic. All of the interviewees except Katia migrated to Austria on their own. Therefore, missing family and rethinking the importance of having them near was communicated various times by all five interviewees. These thoughts can be connected to the idea of the transnational approach presented in subchapter 2.4, according to which the "homeland" is a main concept and possesses various emotional charges. These perceptions influence the migrant's decision to return as well as the resocialization process in the country of origin.

Andrea and Katia share similar thoughts in two statements each. Firstly, they both express the importance of their families and how much they missed them: "for me, family is very important. I missed my mother and father terribly" (Andrea); "I am such a person who loves to constantly meet my parents" (Katia). Through these quotes, the two interviewees articulate their strong attachment to their loved ones and the insufficient time they got to spend with them, which led to feelings of loneliness. Secondly, Andrea and Katia elaborate on the specific situations, which were experienced as challenging. The limited frequency and uncertainty of the travels to the home country constituted a breach between the migrants and their families. Katia shares: "during the five years [in Austria] a lot of good and bad things happened with our families and it's very difficult to be present at the right moment". Andrea in her turn: "I had to wait for the holidays (/) I had to wait for certain dates when I could return to Bulgaria". Feeling left out of the family dynamic, unable to share the happy as well as the sad moments, represents a main hurdle for the migrants. Furthermore, the restricted access to the family, controlled by multiple factors such as available flights,

money etc., gave the interviewees a feeling of limitation in terms of seeing their families.

In comparison with the above-presented interviewees and their statements, Nadia shares a very different perspective: “In Austria, it was absolutely never a problem for me to be alone “. This quote was an answer to an external question, targeted at understanding how the interviewee maintained her relationship with the family. Before answering she explained that since a teenager she lived alone in another Bulgarian city, which helped her to get used to a daily routine without her relatives. Therefore, Nadia represents a unique case, where the lack of contact with the relatives did not constitute a return migration motivation.

#### *Strategies to cope with the distance*

According to all interviewees, moving to another country without family was a difficult step and the maintenance of the relationships back home introduced further challenges for them. Therefore, the participants used different strategies to cope with the distance. All of the interviewees shared that they talked to their families either on a daily basis or every 2-3 days, on the phone or using online applications. Nadia says: “We talked once every few days (...) I have always tried to keep in touch not only with my parents but also with my grandparents”. From this statement, it is visible that Nadia put effort into the maintenance of the relationship, not solely for her to cope with the distance, but also for her relatives. This mutual reassurance was also mentioned by Maria: “I talked to my parents, of course, every day even just for two minutes, to make sure that everything is fine and they to be reassured”. From this statement, it can be observed that distance triggered additional worries, which demanded calming down more often than usual. With all that being said, the geographical proximity to one’s family played a central role and according to the interviewees it could not have been adequately substituted through distance communication. Andrea shares: “no matter if you have, for example, Skype, Viber and so on, the connection is not the same as seeing each

other face to face". The emphasis is put on communication through physical closeness as a preferred type of contact.

Next to the regular phone calls and video chats, the consistent visits to Bulgaria constituted another coping strategy. Maria, Ivan, and Katia elaborated on their travels to the home country. Maria compares the frequency of her visits to Bulgaria shortly after she arrived in Austria and after a couple of years. According to her in the beginning she "used to come home a lot more often, once every two months", but "over time, she started going home less often, however still on every occasion like a holiday". The often visits at first could be analysed as a transitional period for Maria, during which she was trying to get used to the new environment without having her loved ones by her side. Furthermore, as Maria explains "when you are 19 years old you are very young, you do not realize at all what is happening to you". This quote hints at the initial confusion, which she felt at the beginning of her migration. It can be assumed, that with time, she got more comfortable in the host country, organizing her day-to-day life without the constant presence of her family, which led to fewer visits to Bulgaria.

The next interviewee, who talks about his travels is Ivan. He shares: "I always came home at the first opportunity for a vacation - Christmas vacation, spring vacation, Easter vacation and so on". This quote hints at the urgency and need for these visits, which took place on every possible occasion. The constant travels between Austria and Bulgaria were also mentioned by Katia: "we went back for all the holidays like Christmas, New Year, Easter (...) also every summer for two-three months". Stays in Bulgaria that lasted for longer periods of time suggest that the returnee lived in two countries at the same time, rather than just visiting. As mentioned in subchapter 2.4, according to transnationalists, these acts of regular and/or longer visits to the home country are a form of preparation for the return and contribute to the easier future reintegration as well as constitute the returnees' transnational mobility.

#### *Maintenance of romantic relationships during the migration process*

Partners also played a central role in the interviewees' stories and especially in their decision to return. Firstly, a crucial factor was if a partner was present or not and secondly if the partner lived in the same country at the time of the residence abroad as well as the return.

Three of the interviewees did not have a partner at the time of their return, but only one of them elaborated on the topic. Maria shared in an intriguing statement: "if I had a partner, it would probably be different, I would give a lot more time and nerves to find a job and the opportunity to stay [in Austria]". From this statement, it is visible that the lack of a partner was a crucial factor, which influenced the duration of the job search and in turn played a decisive role in the actual return. These considerations are in unison with some of the findings from Constant and Massey (2002) presented in subchapter 2.2, which state that having a family in the host country is one of the factors linked to low return probability.

Two of the five interviewees, Andrea and Katia, were in a relationship at the time of the migration as well as when they went back to Bulgaria. Andrea was in a long-term relationship when she decided to move to Austria. She shares: "I went completely alone even with the idea that maybe my relationship with my boyfriend, now husband, was going to end". Andrea risked her relationship so that she can experience life in Austria. She then continues to explain that this shared experience strengthened their relationship and her partner eventually moved to Vienna as well. In contrast, Katia was the one to join her boyfriend in Vienna after he migrated there first: "in fact, he left two years before me, he paved the way and then I came too [to Austria]". She describes herself as a shy person, who needed this push and stability in order to migrate. Therefore, having the support of her partner played a big role in her decision to move to Austria. In the cases of Katia and Andrea, the thoughts concerning the migration are communicated as mutual decisions and a combined effort: "we knew that maybe we would return to Bulgaria" (Katia). The usage of the pronoun "we" shows that they planned the return as a couple.

### *Friends and acquaintances*

Similarly, to romantic relationships, the existence of friends and acquaintances played a vital role in the return decision process. Furthermore, this factor heavily influenced the overall experience of the migrants in Austria, which in turn could have had an effect on their return motivations. In this regard, the interviewees can be divided into two groups - those who could create meaningful friendships in Austria and those who longed for their friends back home, without having close friends in the host country.

The first group consists of three interviewees, who built strong social connections in Austria. Nadia shares: “in Austria, I have met the people who are closest to me at this stage”. Then she follows to say that she felt good in Austria and leaving these friends behind was not an easy decision. This statement hints that this deliberation was part of the return decision process. However, it did not play a central role, made visible from the following statement, which also presents a coping strategy: “with today's digital world there is no problem at all to keep in touch with these people and Vienna is not so far, I can always visit”. Katia and Maria shared similar experiences, stating that they had enough friends in Austria. For the interviewees in this group, it is valid that having friends in the host country directly influenced their wellbeing positively.

Andrea is a representative of the second group of interviewees, who attached greater value to their social contacts in Bulgaria. She shares: “in Vienna as much as we have had close acquaintances, if I needed something, there was no one really to rely on”. She uses the word acquaintances, rather than friends, which already hints at the level of closeness. She continues to compare these relationships with the “real” friendships in Bulgaria, which are “friendships for life”. Andrea’s thoughts were not an answer to an additional narrative question, as was the case in all of the other interviews, rather was included in the main narration, as an answer to the initial question. Therefore, in this case, it can be argued that the lack of friendships in Austria and the existing ones in Bulgaria was a vital part of Andrea’s return motivation process.

Ivan's perceptions also belong to the second group with the difference that he attached greater value to his social contacts not just in Bulgaria, but also in other countries. He shares: "The closest friends scattered in different locations around the world and more or less something is torn apart". The overall sad tone of this quote suggests that this situation influenced Ivan's wellbeing abroad. Furthermore, he does not mention friends or acquaintances that he had in Austria, meaning that he either did not have any or the level of closeness was low.

The various types of relationships that the interviewees had during their migration process played an important role in their lives. Despite their efforts to maintain them with the help of coping strategies, living abroad without family and friends represented a big hurdle in achieving wellness. Therefore, it constituted a main return migration motivation, aiming at the reunification with the loved ones.

#### **4.4 Experiences in Austria**

Return migration motivations could be directly influenced by the experiences, created during the stay abroad. In the conducted interviews, they were referred to repeatedly and therefore constitute a main topic. The following subchapter will concentrate on the participants' overall impressions, perceptions, hurdles/successes in Austria and the lessons learned that they took with them. When it comes to life in Austria the interviewees shared contradictory experiences. While it was described as peaceful and organized, negative emotions were an inseparable part of it.

##### *The importance of national identity*

In five different quotes, Andrea shares the most experiences out of all the interviewees, whereas all five were negative. A motive, which is visible in all five quotes is the lack of sense of identity and nationality that Andrea and her partner felt while living in Austria. She states: "in Vienna, we still remain foreigners" and then continues: "there

was always something that wasn't finished (...) I knew that something (/) we just miss something". The lacking sense of belonging contributed to an overall feeling of loneliness and rejection, which influenced their overall wellbeing negatively. For Andrea and her partner, a strategy to deal with the situation was to get close to other Bulgarians living in Vienna. However, this was unsuccessful: "purely from a national point of view (...) you expect that maybe the attitude will be a little different and they [Bulgarians] would help you when it comes to anything". In the search for a community, which can offer support, Andrea and her partner were left disappointed.

### *Seeking employment abroad*

Another negative encounter refers to practical difficulties in terms of finding a job. Concerning the latter, Andrea shares: "if there is an Austrian and a Bulgarian [applying for a job], they will take the Austrian, it is logical". The unsuccessful job search situation contributed to the increase of the perceived lack of inclusion. Andrea emphasizes that it is one based on nationality and not on required experience and adds "it is logical" to the end of her statement. This part is highly compelling as it unveils Andrea's insecurities regarding her professional and personal qualities, which according to her own opinion are not enough to compete with an Austrian. In contrast, the other returnees who expressed their opinion on a job search in Austria all shared positive experiences and autonomously highlighted that they did not face any nationality-based prejudice. Ivan states: "I have not encountered any kind of discrimination [in the context of a job search] due to being a foreigner".

### *German language as a challenge*

Problems in regard to the German language were another main topic, mentioned by all the interviewees. Katia never studied German before. Therefore, the preparatory courses offered by the university were essential for her further development in Austria. The other four interviewees had prior knowledge of the language before moving to Austria. However, they shared initial difficulties, which made them feel isolated and

caused a challenging integration process. These language difficulties took place both in everyday unofficial interactions, e.g., in the supermarket, as well as in official ones - at the university or in government institutions. Despite these hurdles with the German language, the returnees shared that once they got used to the environment in Austria and started speaking more, they felt more comfortable and confident, which improved their overall wellbeing in the country.

### *Positive experiences in Austria*

Regarding positive experiences in Austria, the participants shared fewer opinions. Most of them were mentioned with respect to the city of Vienna. It was described various times as organized, safe, and peaceful. Ivan shares: „In Austria something, which I really can't deny, this peace that I felt there purely in terms of security, I haven't felt it anywhere else”. On the flip side, none of the participants shared personal positive experiences in Austria. Their thoughts on life in Vienna were purely practical oriented rather than emotional.

### *Lessons learned*

The topic of how the gathered experiences influenced the returnees and what they learned from their stay in Vienna was also covered. Two of the participants shared their thoughts, which were predominantly oriented around gaining qualities such as discipline, independence, and responsibility. Andrea says: “you have to rely only on yourself [while being abroad] - this is an experience that is very useful”. In her turn, Nadia states: “I lacked a little discipline (...) for me it was a very rich experience and I do not regret it at all”. With all of the returnees leaving for Austria in their teenage years/early 20s, the time spent there is seen as essential both for their personal and professional development as young adults. Nadia goes as far as saying “thanks to Austria I am the person I am, and I am not sure that in Bulgaria I would have reached this level”. Furthermore, the returnees mention that during these vital years abroad

they gathered knowledge, which they would like to transfer to Bulgaria and further educate others.

## 4.5 Knowledge transfer

A reoccurring topic in four of the interviews is the importance and desire to contribute to the development of the home country. In an effort to realize this aspiration, the interviewees believe that they should live in Bulgaria, whereas returning is an essential feature of this plan. The issue consists of two aspects – acknowledging existing problems/need for improvement and assuming one's own duty to the homeland.

### *Acknowledging existing problems in Bulgaria*

Various statements indicate the participants' opinions on the situation in Bulgaria in terms of issues, which can hurdle personal and professional development as well as the overall wellbeing. The given examples are (grand) corruption and poor quality of life. Problems connected to local attitudes were also shared: "no matter how much you want to eradicate the mentality of the Bulgarian - it sometimes simply does not work" (Andrea). She continues her thought with an example of typical misbehaviour being the reluctance to recycle one's trash. As further negatives, the other interviewees acknowledge that Bulgaria is not as "advanced" as Austria. Despite the returnees' critics, they communicate these drawbacks in a way, which does not make them sound irresolvable or catastrophic. On the contrary, the participants are filled with aspiration and desire for the future improvement of Bulgaria, in which they plan on playing a central role.

A link between the two aspects is the realization of the differences between Bulgaria and Austria and the perspective that young professionals, with experience abroad, are the ones, who can make a change in the home country. Concerning this assumption Nadia shares: "I want to help our country to develop because I think that exactly the

people, who have seen how things should happen correctly, could make a change". The returnees are perceived as people, who bear both sides of the problem at the same time – the experiences in an organized country such as Austria as well as in a more chaotic one such as Bulgaria. The results from this comparison are the awareness of the gaps and the desire to make a change through offering their own experiences and qualities.

### *Perceived duty to the homeland*

One's own duty to the homeland is expressed in different ways. All the statements on the topic took place during the main narration, hinting that it is an essential part of the participants' migration story and more specifically one of the reasons behind the return. Contributing to Bulgaria's development is seen as a mission by the interviewees – a "debt" to the home country. With their newly gained skills and changed attitudes, the return migrants are confident that they can make a difference and influence the local environment. Katia states: "it's not bad at all to come back and start working in Bulgaria and in fact to show this experience to others". As a highly educated person, Katia's goal is to transfer new expertise and knowledge. The literature suggests that such returnees often boost their home country's human capital pool and can even make up for the loss of human capital due to emigration (OECD 2008, p. 249). Furthermore, Katia shares: "about the career development itself, I think we have something to give for the development of Bulgaria". From this quote, it is visible that Bulgaria is not described as a country of good career opportunities, but rather as a country, which needs young professionals, who can contribute.

A further example introduces a different perspective, putting the focus on contributing to Bulgaria in the sense of supporting the local economy. Nadia shares her entrepreneurial ambitions: "if I really want to open a company, I prefer it to be in Bulgaria (...) I prefer to contribute to the economy in Bulgaria rather than in Austria". This statement emphasizes on the possible contributions to Bulgaria, rather than on the start-up conditions and opportunities that the country has to offer. The selfless

nature of this quote implicates the pursued fulfilment of the duty to Bulgaria and the return as a required step towards it. Furthermore, this statement corresponds to research findings, showing that return migrants are more likely than non-migrants to start their own business. This corresponds to the transfer of financial capital, obtained abroad, which can be invested in entrepreneurial activities in the home country. However, a possible impact on the economy depends mostly on the establishment of new workplaces (OECD 2008, p. 249).

Both Katia and Nadia wish to perform a "return of innovation" as explained in subchapter 2.3. According to Cerase this type of return refers to individuals who have gained new experiences and established new networks in the host society. With the acquired social, cultural, and economic capital at their disposal, these individuals attempt to innovate in their societies of origin and to change social structures (Cerase 1974, p. 258).

A third perspective on the topic of contributions to the home country lies in the future generation and more specifically in the (future) children of the returnees. The transfer of knowledge is targeted towards the children who then in their turn will use it to influence others. Andrea elaborates: "I want our child to be able to change the situation that is here and if we don't do it then there is no one to do it really". The quote ends in a sacrifice sounding manner while using the pronoun "we". This implies the feeling of belonging to a community and the duty towards it.

The wish to help Bulgaria's development is one of the main return migration motivations shared by the interviewees. Either at the workplace or at home, the returnees want to transfer their newly acquired skills, knowledge, and attitudes from abroad with the hope to make Bulgaria a better place for this as well as for the future generation.

## 4.6 Returns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a challenging time for many. Related factors could cause various problems in personal and professional terms, for example trying to develop professionally and/or finishing an education, overcome by feelings of loneliness and despair. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related measures were mentioned by two of the interviewees as having influenced their return. Maria and Nadia had contrasting experiences during the pandemic, which also affected their return differently. For Maria COVID-related factors directly influenced her return migration motivations, essentially forcing her to leave Austria. For Nadia, on the other hand, COVID-19 was a trigger for an already planned return.

### *Forced return due to COVID-19*

At the time of the lockdown Maria had just finished her education and started searching for a job/internship in Vienna: “2020 I started looking for a job in Austria, I started applying for various internships and unfortunately in the first two months there was absolutely no one looking for people, which is absolutely understandable”. The increased unemployment among workers of all educational levels (AMS 2020, p. 15) and the overall uncertainty about the future were the main problems for job seekers. Maria planned to stay in Austria and develop there professionally after completing her education. Therefore, in comparison to the other interviewees, she spent a considerable amount of time (six months) looking for a job/internship in Austria, after finishing her studies. Such a long period of job search is not observable by the other returnees, which indicates a correlation between openness to continue living in Austria and motivation for further professional development there, in the form of a lengthy job search. However, her intentions changed because of the disappointment, resulted from not finding employment. From the quote it is evident that the returnee acknowledges the situation, describing it as “understandable” and makes peace with it. The next step for Maria was the return: “I decided that maybe I should finish for the moment with Austria and come back here because I knew that I would find a job in Bulgaria much

faster". For the next months, Maria continued to search for employment in Austria, while living in Bulgaria. This can be seen as a transitional phase. On the one hand, Maria did not want to give up on her hopes for Austria, but on the other, she preferred to spend this time in the home country. Another reason for this is the financial side of the issue: "in Bulgaria, I do not have to pay rent ". After four months went by, Maria started looking for opportunities in Bulgaria. She shares that she is on the search for a student's job. An internship was no longer the goal since "internships in Bulgaria are not paid". This line of thought hints at a lowering of the criteria when it comes to Maria's professional development and experience due to the job/internship conditions in Bulgaria.

#### *COVID-19 as a trigger for the return*

The COVID-19 pandemic had a similar effect on Nadia's situation: "The COVID situation helped me a little, to be honest, with the return to Bulgaria because since COVID-19 I haven't been at this job". In comparison to Maria, Nadia has had plans to return to Bulgaria for a longer time. Therefore, COVID-19 played the role of a trigger for the return rather than a main reason. As she formulated it, the situation "helped" her to fulfil a plan, which was already set into motion. Furthermore, compared to Andrea, she does not feel like having unfinished business in Austria and does not regret quitting her job. Maria started visiting Bulgaria more often and for extensive periods of time: "(...) I spent the whole summer in Bulgaria, in the winter I was again for two months, and this also strengthened my desire to return". As mentioned in subchapter 2.4, from a transnational point of view, frequent visits to the home country prepare the returnees for their future reintegration. Nadia's experience of regular returns, marking a transitional period before the actual return takes place, coincides with this assumption.

In the relevant research COVID-19-related factors represent the only reason which partially caused spontaneous and unwanted returns. Seeking the comfort and safety

of the homeland and relatives in this challenging situation has proven as the preferred strategy for the returnees.

## 4.7 Post-migration considerations

Once the return took place, the returnees started their life in Bulgaria. After spending a long period of time abroad, it can be seen as a new beginning, connected to unique impressions and experiences. The returnees elaborated on their overall feeling in Bulgaria at the time of the interview, their experiences so far, and their future plans.

### *Overall wellbeing in Bulgaria*

All of the participants shared that they feel good for the moment in Bulgaria and think that they took the right decision. Andrea states: “for us personally, the decision to go home has only advantages”. This statement can be regarded in connection to the above-mentioned mixed notions about life in Austria in comparison to the fully positive ones when it comes to Bulgaria. Furthermore, Andrea clarifies: “we provide a much better material life and life in general for our child than if we had stayed in Vienna”. As a returnee who is now a mother, Andrea elaborates not only on hers but also on her child’s quality of life. A satisfying financial and overall situation is essential for her and her husband as well as for their child.

Katia is another returnee, who is very happy with her decision to return. From a personal point of view, settling down and finding a suitable job are the main factors mentioned by her to describe why Bulgaria has been the right place for her. Katia says: “we returned to our hometown, created a home and found very good jobs”. From this statement, it is evident that the interviewee lacked these aspects during her life in Austria and now once she obtained them, she feels completed and successful. From an emotional point of view, Katia describes her life in Bulgaria as more comfortable, while she “feels more herself”. The mentioned motives behind are the closeness to

relatives and loved ones as well as the feeling of national affiliation, worded by Katia as: "I'm a Bulgarian in Bulgaria". This patriotic sounding quote hints at a certain belief that for a Bulgarian Bulgaria is the right place to be. Furthermore, a comparison can be drawn between the above-mentioned lack of feeling of national identity (subchapter 4.4), that the interviewees experienced in Austria, and the perceived comfort and belonging in Bulgaria.

Ivan's post-migration considerations focus on his emotional and professional state, which are leading in his experiences in Bulgaria. He shares: "purely emotional, it is much calmer in Bulgaria, among the people you love and appreciate". Similarly to the rest of the interviewees, Ivan also acknowledges the importance of having his loved ones close by. When it comes to his professional path, the first job, which Ivan started in Sofia did not satisfy him professionally. Therefore, he had a period of contemplation on whether he took the right decision to return to Bulgaria or not. He then began another job, which turned out to be fulfilling. He shares: "then I calmed down completely and said OKAY for the moment I took the right decision for myself". From this situation, it is visible that being with the loved ones is not the only prerequisite for a peaceful life in the home country for Ivan. Possessing a diploma from a good university, he had certain goals when it comes to his professional development, which if not achieved, would maybe have been a reason for another move.

Nadia's return took place only a week before the interview took place. She shares: "When you come home you know that you have already come home, and you don't feel like going anywhere else". Similarly, to the other interviewees, Nadia refers to "home" as a place of comfort, which she does not want to leave. From her quote, it is visible that she found immediate ease back in Bulgaria and did not experience a transitional phase of confusion. However, she then adds: "I still don't fully realize it because I'm at home [Belene], maybe when I move to Sofia then I will more or less realize that I will not be returning to Vienna ". Nadia is aware of the possibility that maybe she is idealizing the situation in the comfort of her childhood home. When the

moment comes that she becomes independent through moving to another city, Nadia expects to go through a transitional period, truly understanding of the decision that she took.

Maria's experiences can be considered an exception due to the fact that at the time of the interview she finds herself in a transitional phase with an unclear outcome. As mentioned above (subchapter 4.6) she returned to Bulgaria due to COVID-19-related factors and is now doing her Dutch master's degree program remotely. Therefore, Maria's perceptions are not connected to the present in Bulgaria, but rather to her future abroad, which will be discussed next.

#### *Future plans in terms of migration*

When it comes to the interviewees' future plans two out of all five share that they are open to the possibility of moving again to another country in the future. Both Ivan and Maria do not make certain claims about their future place of residence. Maria shares a feeling of an unfinished business concerning her professional development abroad: "I would certainly try to work abroad to see if I can deal with it". In contrast, Ivan's future plans to possibly move abroad directly correspond to his personal and professional success and satisfaction in Bulgaria: "if things don't really work out for me, I'm not satisfied and it's not according to what I imagined, I could move". With this quote, he indirectly communicates doubts about his upcoming experiences in Bulgaria, which if happen to be negative, could be the reason for another move abroad. Furthermore, perceiving a future migration process as a possibility, hints at the openness of Ivan and his confidence that he can perform it successfully.

The rest of the returnees firmly declare their unwillingness to move to another country again. Already settled down, having a child and/or a good job are the reasons behind these statements. An example is a quote from Katia: "we do not even think about moving since we have already settled down here". Bulgaria is seen as the last stop of the migration process rather than another transitional phase.

The participants' reflections on their lives in Bulgaria after the return has taken place are essential. Influenced by their experiences, achievements and hurdles in the home country, the returnees categorize the success of their return, which in its turn constitutes the level of openness to future migration. These results coincide with White's research (2014) presented in subchapter 2.4, whereas migration is viewed as a circular process and the return does not indicate the end goal.

The formation of the participants' return migration motivations took place before as well as during the migration process, which does not end with the return. In the context of pre-migration considerations, the returnees share their perceptions on studying abroad as an enabler for a successful future as well as their settlement plans, which were in favour of eventually returning to Bulgaria. During their life abroad the returnees were faced with challenging maintenance of their contacts back home. At the same time, they were attempting to create new relationships in Austria, which if successful, strongly influenced their wellbeing in the host country. Other experiences in Austria were overwhelmingly negative and included a lack of support and feeling of belonging as well as challenges when it comes to finding employment and mastering the German language. These experiences played a central role in the participants' stories and directly correlated to their decision to return to Bulgaria. The COVID-19 pandemic was also elaborated on as another factor, which influenced the participants' return migration. Related factors such as high rates of unemployment and social isolation triggered an already pre-planned return as well as directly forced another one. Unlike the other returns, these two were partially spontaneous and unwanted due to the surprising nature of the situation. Another return migration motivation is related to the participants' conscious sense of duty to the homeland. They wish to contribute to Bulgaria's development by transferring knowledge and experiences. If this goal can be achieved and if the returnees will feel fulfilled in the home country is hinted by their post-migration considerations. They show that the returnees feel mostly happy with their decision to return. However, another move as part of their migration process is not completely excluded as a possibility.

## 5 Results II

In the following chapter, the results of the conducted media analysis (Hodgetts & Chamberlain 2014) will be presented in relation to the interview findings. The researched articles will be visualized with the help of a data grid as well as through article characterizations. Next, they will be described and elaborated on in regard to the biographical interviews' results as well as literature.

### 5.1 Data grid

As mentioned in subchapter 3.5.3, the goal of the gridding system is to help the researcher to see beyond the data and generate issues for additional investigation. The data grid presents ten articles, their release dates, and the main messages they communicate. In separate rows, the various return migration motivations as well as other additional topics, mentioned in the articles, are introduced.

In the titles of four out of ten articles, the word “return” had been used through which the main topic of this group of articles is revealed – the (increased) return as a surprise. The goal of these titles is to trigger curiosity, created by the question of why educated young people, who studied and worked abroad, returned to Bulgaria. On the other hand, this wording can be analysed as motivating, taking the role of an example, which more people should follow.

Another central issue that initially emerges from the grid, presented below, is that of “brain drain” in Bulgaria. It constitutes a main topic in four of the articles and is perceived as a problem. This is apparent from the fact that three out of these four articles also discuss existing return migration incentives as well as necessary new ones in order to deal with this phenomenon. Further main topics visible from the articles are represented by various return migration motivations such as missing family and friends and good job opportunities in Bulgaria as well as COVID-19 pandemic-related factors.

Table 3: Articles data grid

Article title	Release date	Main message	Return migration motivations	Additional topics
Why did we return to Bulgaria?	26.01.2017	Living in Bulgaria is worth it despite the various hurdles	Great job opportunities in Bulgaria Missing family and friends	Return migration incentives 'Brain drain' in Bulgaria Bulgaria vs. abroad
Young people from abroad are increasingly choosing to work in Bulgaria. Why?	20.01.2019	Returning back to Bulgaria is a step worth taking but at the same time an individual decision	Missing family Missing the home country Good career opportunities in Bulgaria Contributing to Bulgaria's development	Return migration incentives 'Brain drain' in Bulgaria Bulgaria vs. abroad
They are young and educated.	23.01.2020	"These three young Bulgarians	Felt being treated	Regular visits to Bulgaria as

And they return to Bulgaria.		chose to return. Bulgaria needs many more like them.”	unequally abroad  Want to raise a family in Bulgaria  Applying what they have learned to Bulgaria	preparation for the return  Bulgaria vs. abroad
Will they return to Bulgaria for 1200 leva?	28.01.2020	Overall improvement in Bulgaria is necessary to keep the ones who already live in Bulgaria	-	Return migration incentives  ‘Brain drain’ in Bulgaria
Combating the brain drain requires a joint effort to improve the quality of life in all EU regions	12.02.2020	‘brain drain’ as a future risk and the need for economic and social cohesion	-	‘Brain drain’ in Bulgaria

		between regions		
"The departed" and "the rest": young Bulgarians between dreams and reality	24.07.2020	Bulgaria can learn valuable practices both from the returnees and from those who live abroad.	-	Tension between those who left and those who stayed in the country
How can COVID-19 help Bulgaria in the demographic crisis?	03.12.2020	After the big wave of returnees during the COVID-19 pandemic Bulgaria should think of ways to keep them in the country and attract others.	Missing family COVID-19 pandemic-related factors More security	The need for return migration incentives
Golden chance for Bulgaria: How to keep	09.04.2021	Returnees could have a positive effect	-	Return migration incentives

returnees from abroad		on the demographic decline		
What are the main reasons why Bulgarians choose to live abroad?	14.04.2021	Life abroad has more positives. However, success in Bulgaria is also possible.	-	Return migration incentives  Bulgaria vs. abroad
NSI (National Statistical Institute): For the first time more Bulgarians return from abroad and stay than leave the country	12.05.2021	High rates of return migration to Bulgaria due to COVID-19	-	Returnees having a positive influence on local markets

## 5.2 Article characterizations

The article **“Why did we return to Bulgaria?”** illustrates return as an inspiring story, while giving an example of two young persons, who studied and developed professionally abroad and now live in Bulgaria. It mentions various times an organization called “Tuk-Tam” (“Here and There”), which supports the return of young professionals by connecting them with employers in Bulgaria. The main topic of the article is the various opportunities that Bulgaria has to offer. According to the two interviewees, the country developed a lot in the last years and now holds excellent job possibilities.

Another article with a predominantly positive connotation when it comes to life in Bulgaria is titled **“Young people from abroad are increasingly choosing to work in Bulgaria. Why?”**. It states that a trend is to be observed according to which more and more young people with degrees from Western universities and experience in big companies are beginning to return to Bulgaria. It then presents four returnees, who studied in Austria or Germany and decided to move back to Bulgaria driven by a mixture of emotional and economic factors. The latter involves the increasing salaries in Sofia, excellent conditions for starting a business and good overall working conditions for professional realization. When it comes to the emotional side of the issue the four interviewed returnees share that being close to their families is of great importance. Furthermore, pointing out some negative aspects of living in the country as well, they share that they are excited to be able to work towards change in Bulgaria. Next, the article elaborates on the freedom of choice and the opened geographical borders for young people today as well as the change that Bulgaria needs to undergo in order to attract more professionals to return. The article finishes with a motivating call for return from one of the interviewed persons.

An article with a negative connotation about life and professional realization in Bulgaria is titled **“What are the main reasons why Bulgarians choose to live abroad?”**. It presents the opinion of two people, who studied and worked abroad. According to them

Bulgaria's constant dysfunctions and uncertainties push the young people away. The article elaborates on the current trend due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas more people are returning to their home country. However, it is concluded that Bulgaria has not yet developed a policy to keep Bulgarians who come back from abroad.

Precise statistical data on this topic is presented in another article – “BNSI (Bulgarian National Statistical Institute: For the first time more Bulgarians return from abroad and stay than leave the country”. According to data of the BNSI<sup>2</sup> five times more Bulgarians returned to the country in 2020 than those who left due to the pandemic – respectively 30 000 and 6 000 Bulgarians. This event is unprecedented. As stated in the article the returnees are people who returned for objective reasons - loss of jobs, reduced income, which make their stay abroad meaningless. Therefore, they decide to look for new opportunities in Bulgaria. Lastly, it is mentioned that the growing number of returnees has a positive impact on some markets, for example in the second biggest Bulgarian city, Plovdiv.

An article that gives more details about the context of the returns is titled “**How can COVID-19 help Bulgaria in the demographic crisis?**”. It is based on a survey (Georgiev 2020), which took place online with people who had returned to Bulgaria after some time abroad and elaborates on the country, from which the participants returned, the reasons for the return as well as the reasons for deciding to stay and future plans.

The article “**Golden chance for Bulgaria: How to keep the returnees**” is based on a UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) report, which deals with the unexpected

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<sup>2</sup> [BNSI. External migration by age and sex](#)

opportunities that that COVID-19 pandemic has created for Bulgaria due to the already mentioned drastically higher return migration since March 2020. The report suggests that the returnees could have a positive effect on the demographic decline, with which Bulgaria is confronted through the revitalization of the rural areas in the country.

The article “**Will they return to Bulgaria for 1200 leva?**” criticizes the financial support plan for highly educated returnees with the goal to tackle ‘brain drain’ in Bulgaria, which is part of the EURES platform. The 1,200 BGN (around 600 EUR) per month is planned to cover expenses such as rent, babysitter, etc. Furthermore, free language courses for non-Bulgarian partners are foreseen. Bulgarian graduates who have lived abroad for at least six months and then started working in Bulgaria will be entitled to this money. The article outlines the problems connected to this plan. Firstly, the question arises of who exactly the successful Bulgarians are and why are those who studied and worked in Bulgaria not considered as such. Secondly, the launched financial incentives are considered nonsense in the context of Bulgaria’s low GDP per capita and the widespread corrupt practices in each sector, which are presented as the main hurdle on the way to a successful and happy life in Bulgaria. Therefore, the state should try harder to improve working and living conditions in the country in order to retain those Bulgarians who have decided to stay, rather than attempting to bring back the ones who already left the country.

The article “**They are young and educated**” deals with the question of why Bulgarians who finished their education in good European universities decided to live in Bulgaria and how they feel now after the return took place. The first returnee quoted in the article shares that he felt treated unequally in Germany, where he studied. Therefore, he decided to return to Bulgaria and is now satisfied with it. Other reasons highlighted by the returnee are that he always wanted to raise a family in Bulgaria and not abroad. He also mentions that the reintegration in Bulgaria wasn’t challenging due to the fact that during his stay in Germany he often visited Bulgaria. All three interviewed

returnees share that they want to transfer what they learned abroad in terms of professional and personal qualities to their home country.

The article **“The departed” and “the rest”: young Bulgarians between dreams and reality**” explains that nowadays there is tension between the “departed” and the “rest”, whereas Bulgarians abroad are sometimes considered as “traitors”. However, the article argues that leaving is not a one-time act that removes a person from the community. Furthermore, Bulgaria can learn good practices not only with the help of returnees but also of those who reside in two or sometimes more countries at the same time.

The article **“Combating the brain drain requires a joint effort to improve the quality of life in all EU regions”** elaborates on the observed phenomenon of ‘brain drain’ in several eastern and southern EU member states. It is leading to a vicious circle and hindering the transition to a sustainable and competitive economic model based on a knowledge economy. Therefore, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) calls for adapted policies and instruments that combine cohesion policy and other sources of funding. The focus should lie on the balance between the free movement of workers and economic and social cohesion between regions.

### 5.3 Analysis

In the following subchapter, the results from the researched articles will be presented in accordance with the data grid. First, the analysis will concentrate on the return migration motivations mentioned in the articles, which will be compared to the interview findings and literature on the topic. Next, the analysis will concentrate on the additional topics introduced in the articles – the role of the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem of ‘brain drain’ in the country and return migration incentives.

#### *Return migration motivations*

Seven out of the eight analysed articles discuss the particular reasons behind the return motivation through presenting/quoting thoughts of returnees. All of them are young, highly educated, and skilled. They studied and/or worked in European countries – Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands. The return migration motivations mentioned in the articles are fully identical with the findings from the conducted biographical interviews and with some of the literature insights presented above.

Regarding the economic return migration motivations, the perceptions of the returnees presented in the articles correspond to these of the interviewees. When it comes to professional development, Bulgaria is described as a country of many opportunities. Factors such as great job offers, and good working conditions stand behind this opinion. However, some of the articles also mention negative viewpoints on the job market in Bulgaria and the hurdles with which the young professionals may be confronted. A participant talks about the importance of connections when searching for a job, whereas professional qualities are not enough without a stable network of people who could be of help. Another challenge is the lack of promotion prospects of some jobs, which the employers in Bulgaria offer. Nonetheless, all of these problems which job seekers may face are not perceived as sufficient enough for the quoted participants in the articles to choose life abroad.

From an emotional point of view, missing family, and friends as well as the importance of being close to loved ones were some of the main reasons for the return, on which the quoted interviewees in the articles elaborated. As it is visible from the results of the biographical interviews, the regular visits to the home country and the constant maintenance of contact with the loved ones are strategies with the help of which the returnees deal with missing family and friends. Furthermore, as mentioned in subchapter 2.4, according to transnationalists, these acts are a form of preparation for the return and contribute to the easier future reintegration as well as constitute the returnees' transnational mobility. The findings from the articles mirror these claims. Two of the presented interviewees share identical experiences – the regular visits to

Bulgaria helped them cope with the feeling of loneliness and led to a smooth reintegration into the home country.

Future family considerations constitute another main reason behind the return motivation. The participants quoted in the articles shared identical future plans when it comes to creating a family and raising children. Their views fully coincided with the results from the biographical interviews. According to the articles, the returnees want to have children in Bulgaria and not abroad. "Raising Bulgarians and not foreigners" was stated various times throughout the articles.

Contributing to Bulgaria's future development is another reason for return migration mentioned both by the participants in the articles and the conducted interviews. They, as highly educated people, wish to transfer their knowledge and attributes, which were acquired abroad, to the home country and more specifically in their future family and workplace. The feeling of duty to the homeland constitutes a main topic in the articles and is communicated through a patriotic and motivational tone: "The responsibility lies within us, the young, to get involved directly and indirectly in all areas so that Bulgaria can be a good place for our children and grandchildren. The contribution of each one of us is important, even if it is a drop in the ocean".

A contrast between the results from the interviews and these from the articles are the fewer presented negative opinions towards Bulgaria by the latter. Only two of the articles show returnees' views on the corruption, instability, and financial insecurities, with which people in Bulgaria are confronted. Therefore, it can be concluded that the articles intended an overall positive connotation on life in Bulgaria. This is also evident from some of the concluding lines, hinting that Bulgaria is worth living in despite the various problems and that more people should return.

#### *The role of the COVID-19 pandemic*

Four of the presented articles elaborate on a current trend connected to a big wave of returnees since March 2020. Only one of them clarifies further on the particular reasons

for the return. The article is based on a survey, which took place online with 130 people who had returned to Bulgaria after some time abroad and found that the two main reasons for doing so were "wanting to be with relatives" (46%) and "losing a job" (32%). 10% of them said they would not go back after the COVID-19 pandemic and 25% were undecided. The top three countries of return are Great Britain (36%), Germany (20%), and Spain (13%), whereas Austria is in fourth place with 10% (Georgiev 2020, pp. 13-14).

The results from the online survey and these based on the biographical interviews could be interpreted similarly. For the 46%, who returned to Bulgaria due to the desire to be with their relatives, COVID-19 could have played the role of a trigger, rather than a direct reason. The pandemic could have caused an earlier return, which was already predetermined due to the mentioned reasons. This assumption corresponds to Nadia's experiences presented in subchapter 4.6. The direct reason for her return was her wish to start a business in Bulgaria, whereas the COVID-19 pandemic was the last push towards this plan.

The second main return motivation stated by 32% of the participants in the online survey was a job loss in the host country. It is not clear in how many of these cases the unemployment was caused by COVID-19-related factors, but if these cases are considered, the assumption can be made that the pandemic had a direct effect on the return migration motivations. Maria's experiences presented in subchapter 4.6 resemble these of the participants in the online survey. After a long unsuccessful job search due to the low demand and high unemployment rate caused by the pandemic, she had no other option but to go back to Bulgaria and search for a job there.

### *'Brain drain' in Bulgaria*

The researched articles describe 'brain drain' as a phenomenon, which gained attention in Bulgaria in the 90s when a great wave of emigration began at the end of socialism. During these events, highly qualified Bulgarian citizens left for the USA and

Western Europe. After 2007, when Bulgaria's accession to the EU took place, the gradual lifting of restrictions on Bulgarians in the EU has been observed. Due to this fact, more and more people are emigrating. Furthermore, the profile of the emigrant has changed, also people with lower qualifications are going abroad to work. Therefore, the phenomenon can be now formulated not only as a 'brain drain', but generally as a 'workforce drain'.

Further articles concentrated on 'brain drain' elaborate on the country's demographic profile. Bulgaria is among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with a large number of emigrants - about 1.5 million, mostly in working and fertile age (Marinov et al. 2019, p. 55-56). Based on this demographic indicator the articles discuss that there is a need for the development of a proactive immigration policy to attract both Bulgarians living abroad and immigrants from third countries with the necessary educational and professional qualifications, to be actively involved in the labour market in Bulgaria and to reduce the negative impact of labour shortage.

The problem of 'brain drain' was mentioned neither in the biographical interviews nor by the cited participants in the articles. However, the need for young, educated people in Bulgaria was elaborated on several times, hinting that the interviewees had observations on the topic. Especially their desire to return to Bulgaria and contribute to the country's development shows that they recognize the shortage of people and consider themselves suitable for this challenge. These returnees wish to perform a "return of innovation" as explained in subchapter 2.3. According to Cerase this type of return refers to individuals who have gained new experiences and established new networks in the host society. With the acquired social, cultural, and economic capital at their disposal, these individuals attempt to innovate in their societies of origin and to change social structures (Cerase 1974, p. 258).

#### *Government and EU incentives promoting return*

For the issue of `brain drain` in Bulgaria to be tackled several incentives are set in motion, elaborated on in six of the articles. One of them is represented by an online platform called Tuk-Tam (Here-There)<sup>3</sup>. It is an NGO based in Sofia, which aims at building the world's largest network of Bulgarians, allowing users and members to stay connected to one another as well as to the home country from any part of the world. The platform provides information and decision support regarding career development, moving abroad and returning. A central idea is an attachment to a community with shared values and motivations, whereas the main one is to work and live in Bulgaria or at least to be connected to the country, participating, and contributing to different projects. The Tuk-Tam platform provides opportunities in four main areas: life, work, education, and community.

Another government incentive for return migration was planned to start in April 2020. The project<sup>4</sup>, worth 9.060.749 BGN is part of the EURES platform and is implemented by the Employment Agency under the guidance of the Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The project aims at creating prospects for the supply of intermediary services to a wider number of job seekers and businesses, motivating highly skilled Bulgarians to return home as well as attracting workforce from the EU Member States. An additional goal is to increase the coverage and improve the access and quality of the transnational mobility services provided by building a new structure of the national EURES network. The duration of the project is 90 months, and the target groups are represented by jobseekers, economically inactive persons, and employers. According to one of the analysed articles, 1.200 BGN per month is planned to cover expenses

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<sup>3</sup> <https://tuk-tam.bg/companies/tuk-tam>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/nacionalna-eures-mreja/>

such as rent, babysitter, etc. Furthermore, free language courses for non-Bulgarian partners are foreseen. Bulgarian graduates who have lived abroad for at least six months and then started working in Bulgaria will be entitled to them.

With all mentioned above, at the beginning of 2020, it was decided that the budget of BGN 10 million planned for the project will be redirected to emergency measures against the rising unemployment in the country. The COVID-19 pandemic was referred to as a reason for the cancellation of the incentive. Only two months after this decision, in March 2020, an unprecedented number of Bulgarian returnees was accounted for. According to data of the BNSI<sup>5</sup> five times more Bulgarians returned to the country in 2020 than those who left– respectively 30.000 and 6.000 Bulgarians.

This big wave of returnees is seen by the media as an opportunity for positive developments in Bulgaria. Some plans and suggestions have already been made, specifically in which sectors they could contribute and how they can be motivated to do so. According to a UNFPA (2021) report mentioned in one of the articles, the returnees could have a positive effect on the demographic decline, with which Bulgaria is confronted. As young, educated people, who now have the opportunity of flexible working conditions such as Remote Work and Home Office, the returnees could contribute to the revitalization of the rural areas in the country. Following the far more recent urbanization trend in Bulgaria (in comparison to Western Europe) and the opened access to properties in rural areas, the report suggests that life in the countryside would be preferred by many young people. To take advantage of this opportunity, a comprehensive approach must be created, which should include

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<sup>5</sup> [BNSI. External migration by age and sex](#)

modernization of the infrastructure and full digitalization, creating a network of interested actors, who want to exchange thoughts and experiences on the topic.

The articles analysed in this chapter paint a picture of the return migration discourse in Bulgaria. In the first part of the analysis, the presented aspects coincide with the results from the biographical interviews. Return migration motivations such as missing family and friends, perceiving Bulgaria as a country of good opportunities and wishing to contribute to the homeland appeared in the articles. Furthermore, the topic of COVID-19-related factors influencing the return was also elaborated on. The second part of the analysis concentrated on the problem of 'brain drain' with which Bulgaria is faced. The topic gained momentum in the context of the pandemic due to the unprecedented number of young people, who returned to Bulgaria, whereas developing adequate incentives to keep these people in the country has become another focus. When it comes to the existing measures, they are ignoring the need for overall improvement of the living conditions in Bulgaria, which should be of main importance. They suggest "taking advantage" of the returnees, who come back to their home country in search of a successful and peaceful life without offering them anything in return. This rather one-sided relationship was also made visible in the biographical interviews through the participants' stories. Another critic is that the incentives refer only to the returnees as young highly educated capable professionals, not focusing on the Bulgarians, who studied and now work in their home country. Many of them have achieved the same level of success in their professional lives and also have the potential to contribute to the country's development.

## **6 Conclusion**

In the context of higher education, Bulgaria is facing multiple challenges, which already influence the country's demographic profile. Bulgaria is among the five countries in the EU with the most dynamic ageing processes (measured by the highest percentage of

the adult population aged 65 and over) and among the top six in the world (five in Europe plus Japan). Furthermore, Bulgaria is confronted with many emigrants - about 1.5 million, mostly in working and fertile age. As a result of both influences, the population of the country decreased from 9 million in 1988 to 7 million in 2018 (Marinov et al. 2019, pp. 55-56). As of December 31, 2019, the population of Bulgaria consists of 6.951.482 people. A population decrease of 48.557 people is observed in comparison to 2018<sup>6</sup>. Emigration from Bulgaria has a great negative impact on the demographic structure of the population and intensifies the already initiated process of population ageing. The large-scale emigration of mainly young people of working age has led to a reduction of the labour force in Bulgaria and will have a significant effect on the future economic and social development of the country<sup>7</sup>. Due to these developments, the public debate on return migration in the country has been gaining momentum, focusing primarily on `brain drain` as an issue related to the population decrease in the country.

The relevant thesis dealt with the return of young people, specifically analysing the return migration motivations of Bulgarians, who were enrolled in tertiary education in Austria, without paying special attention to the ones who graduated, but also to those, who left Austria before obtaining a diploma. First and foremost, with the aim of gaining knowledge of the participants' experiences, background research of the migratory reasons was conducted. The first one is connected to Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, after which many of the bureaucratic hurdles related to studying abroad have been reduced or even cancelled. Foreign universities are easily accessible and

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<sup>6</sup> [BNSI. Population and Demographic Processes in 2019](#)

<sup>7</sup> [BNSI. Population forecast by sex and age](#)

therefore desirable. A further reason for the increased number of Bulgarian students abroad is the high number of language schools in the country, which give students the opportunity to obtain a language diploma. German represents a popular choice because of multiple reasons. Firstly, universities in Germany and Austria are generally free, which makes them a lot more affordable than higher education institutions in other European countries. Secondly, the two German-speaking countries are in relative proximity to Bulgaria.

A negative factor, which „pushes “the young people out of Bulgaria is the ongoing corruption in the higher education sector. According to a survey on the topic, conducted in universities in Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Moldova, 60% of the students in Bulgaria knew of bribery for a grade or an exam among their faculty and 77% have heard of cheating on exams in the university (Heyneman et al. 2008, p. 5). These practices are a part of a bigger issue, leading to the limited professional opportunities, which the country has to offer. The dishonest way in which some diplomas are being obtained also lowers the value of the ones acquired fairly. Therefore, people, who graduated from Bulgarian universities are often employed at lower salaries, whereas contrastingly, graduates from Western universities are perceived as valuable potential personnel and are employed at higher salaries (Heyneman et al. 2008, pp. 10-11).

After deciding to leave the home country and study abroad, the migrant is faced with three options – to stay in the host country, to move to another country or to return to the country of origin. The relevant thesis dealt with the latter, whereas in order to examine the research topic, firstly an analysis of theoretical approaches as well as existing research on the topic was conducted, which presented five theoretical approaches on return migration.

From the perspective of the neoclassical economics, the return is seen as a failure. It takes place when the pre-determined plan could not be executed, which is always connected to monetary earning maximization (Cassarino 2004, p. 255). Furthermore, according to the neoclassical economics the household and family of the migrant are

put on hold during the migration process due to the long-term resettlement plans (Constant and Massey 2002, p. 11).

The NELM perspective regards return as a success, which takes place after the attainment of pre-determined goals. Similarly, to neoclassical economics, the aim of the migration is represented by strictly financial accomplishments (Cassarino 2004, p. 256). However, a difference between the two approaches is their perceptions of family relationships during the emigration process. NELM believes that household and family play a central role, whereas the relationships are maintained through remittances (Constant and Massey 2002, p. 11). For the relevant research, the neoclassical perspective and NELM delivered conceptual insights when it comes to the migration motives for some of the returnees – migration with the eventual goal to increase one's own career prospects and income opportunities.

In its turn, the structural approach to return migration also considers the dependence on the socio-political conditions of the country of origin. The context in which the return takes place is essential and is not only an individual issue but is also influenced by situational and structural variables. When it comes to the relationship of the migrant with the country of origin the structuralist approach suggests that they lose touch with the home country, which makes the migrants poorly prepared for the return. Furthermore, the approach takes into account the influence that the returnees may have on their origin societies after they return (Cassarino 2004, p. 257). Therefore, the structuralist approach contributed to the relevant thesis by helping to draw a picture of the context in which return migration takes place. Specifically, the presented studies from Cerase (1974) and Wolfeil (2013) in subchapter 2.3 introduced the idea of the influence the returnees can have on their countries of origin, which constituted a main topic throughout this thesis.

According to transnationalism return occurs when the goal of acquiring enough resources has been reached and when the perspectives back home are perceived as suitable. Furthermore, the transnational approach concentrates on the migrant as a

carrier of a double identity, which is a combination of the identity acquired in the country of origin and the identity obtained in the host country. This transnational identity helps the migrant to be a part of communities abroad, maintain contact with the home country and navigate his/her resocialization in the origin society (Cassarino, pp. 261-264). The transnational approach and specifically White's research (2014) presented in subchapter 2.4 contributed to the relevant thesis, introducing the idea of migration as a circular process and the term "double return" to explain the homecoming to the host country.

Lastly, the social network theory to return migration adds to the idea presented by the transnational approach by introducing social networks, which the migrants are a part of. In comparison to communities, such social networks have an organizational character, including membership, goals, and flow of resources. These resources then act in combination with the "double identity" traits, described above, and result in the returnees' return migration motivations, reintegration experiences as well as initiatives after the reintegration (Cassarino 2004, pp. 265-267).

Based on the described theoretical perspectives an adapted approach to return migration was presented, which was deemed suitable for the relevant research. It borrowed separate suggestions and observations from the various theoretical approaches as well as from the existing research. According to this perspective, the migrant left the home country to achieve a certain goal, maintains relationships with the homeland and performs the return in a prepared and targeted manner. An exception is represented by an unexpected event, which can force the return prematurely. Furthermore, the migrant is a part of an ethnic group as well as to cross-border networks, navigating them through his/her transnational identity. When it comes to the return motivations, they range from nostalgia towards the homeland to negative experiences in the host country. The essential aspect is that the return should be seen neither as a failure nor as a success, but as a complex issue influenced by multiple interconnected factors. After the return has taken place, the migrants go through a fast

and smooth reintegration process due to the regular communication and/or visits to the home country during the migration process. Lastly, when it comes to the returnees' ability to contribute to the home country, he/she possesses financial and personal resources acquired before (in the home country) and after (abroad) the migration, which carry contributory potential.

With the purpose of answering the research question of how the participants perceived their return migration and what was the motivation behind it, interviews with five returnees were conducted. At first, the participants were accessed using the snowball sampling method (Goodman 1961). Next, they were interviewed following the biographical Interview (Schütze 1976; Rosenthal 1993, 2002, 2004, 2010). It allowed an in-depth glance at the participants' past, present, and future experiences considering their migration process. The interviews took place online, which presented certain limitations such as the difficulty of building rapport due to technical issues. However, all interviewees shared extensive stories, which were the data material for further analysis. When it comes to the data analysis, the five interviews were initially analysed with the help of the thematic analysis in order to get an overview of the topics and their interrelations (Froschauer and Lueger 2003). In a second step, the interviews were coded following the grounded theory coding method (Corbin & Strauss 2015), which resulted in six key categories – pre-migration considerations, relationships during life abroad, experiences in Austria, knowledge transfer, returns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and post-migration consideration.

In the context of pre-migration considerations, the returnees share various thoughts. The first one is connected to their perception that only studying abroad can offer good future professional development. The ambition to leave the home country developed during the teenage years of the participants and can be seen as one of the main reasons for the migration. A shift in the opinions can be observed by some of the returnees, who now believe that Bulgaria can offer a good education. Another thought in the context of pre-migration considerations is that living and studying abroad

provides opportunities for broadening one's horizon through increasing the range of knowledge, understandings, and experiences. However, the participants do not mention becoming part of the host country's culture but rather experiencing it only temporary. The last aspect of the pre-migration considerations is represented by the returnees' contemplations on life abroad versus life in Bulgaria. Four out of the five participants shared their certainty about returning to Bulgaria, whereas the stay in Austria was regarded as a transitional period. The opinion was supported by further arguments such as their wish to be close to their relatives and to raise a family in the home country. In contrast, only one interviewee shared that she was too young to make certain future plans. Therefore, she was more open about her migration opportunities.

Another main aspect of the participants' return migration motivations is their relationships during life abroad. On the one hand, they experienced difficulties in maintaining their current connections with family, friends, and partners. Living alone in a foreign country influenced the returnees negatively, which generated feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Therefore, regular phone calls/video chats and visits to the home country constituted their strategies for dealing with the situation. On the other hand, the participants attempted to establish new relationships in Austria. The presence of friends and acquaintances played an important part in their return motivation process and influenced the overall wellbeing of the migrants in the host country. In this regard, the respondents are separated into two groups: those who could form meaningful connections in Austria and those who missed their friends back home but did not have close friends in the host country. All these relationships were crucial to the participants' narrative and were closely related to their desire to return to Bulgaria.

The participants' general impressions, perspectives and challenges/successes in the host country comprise another main topic. Experiences abroad were directly connected to the migrants' wellbeing, which in its turn influenced their return migration motivations. The returnees shared more negative than positive encounters. The former

is represented by various challenges such as the lack of support and feeling of belonging in the host country, which led to an overall feeling of rejection and loneliness. Finding employment was another problem for the migrants, which contributed to the increase of the perceived lack of inclusion. Furthermore, the returnees experienced difficulties with the German language, which they gradually overcame. When it comes to the positive perspectives on life abroad, the interviewees shared opinions in respect to the city of Vienna, which was described as peaceful, safe, and organized.

Another return migration motivation is expressed through the participants' desire to contribute to Bulgaria's future development. They elaborate on the country's various problems while perceiving them as solvable. As people who lived in another country, the returnees have a good basis for comparison between Bulgaria and Austria. In this regard, they are aware of both countries' negatives as well as positives and wish to transfer knowledge and experiences to the home country. They aim at performing this in different ways. Firstly, working in the home country is seen as a contribution to the local economy. With their newly gained skills and changed attitudes, the return migrants are confident that they can make a change. Another way of transferring knowledge is through the future generation. The returnees point to their (future) children as carriers of the change. Therefore, the parent's task is to teach them what they learned abroad in order for their children to influence others in the future. Overall, in regard to the perceived duty to the homeland, the emphasis is put on what the returnees can give to the country, rather than the opportunities that the country offers them. This one-sided relationship between returnees and their home country is visible in the public discussion about return incentives and the 'brain drain' in Bulgaria.

The COVID-19 pandemic was elaborated on as another factor, which influenced the participants' return migration. A challenging period related to various hurdles in personal and professional terms, the pandemic had a direct effect on the returns. On the one hand, the COVID-19-related factors triggered an already pre-planned return. In this case, they did not constitute a main return reason, rather they "helped" realize

a plan, which was already set in motion. On the other hand, pandemic-related factors forced the return, after making it impossible for the migrant to find a job in the host country. In this case, the return was not desired as well as not pre-planned. In the relevant research COVID-19-related factors represent the only reason which partially caused spontaneous and unwanted returns. Seeking the comfort and safety of the homeland and relatives in this challenging situation has proven as the preferred strategy for the participants.

The returnees' reflections on their life in Bulgaria after the return has taken place are essential. They present their overall feeling in Bulgaria at the time of the interview, their experiences so far and their future plans. The participants share a positive overall feeling in their home country at the time of the interview. Being close to their relatives and feeling more comfortable are the main reasons behind their statements. However, life in Bulgaria does not come without any negatives. The returnees share not being satisfied with their professional development in the country as well as facing hurdles connected to the country's long-standing problems. Despite these statements, the returnees are filled with hope for their future in Bulgaria, in which they want to participate, and three out of the five interviewees do not plan on migrating again in the future. In these cases, settling down in the home country is mentioned as the last phase of the migration process. In contrast, two of the participants share that they are open to future migration. Unsatisfying professional development or eagerness to explore another country are mentioned as possible reasons.

The above-presented results were put in the context of the public debate on return migration in Bulgaria. Through analysing it the relevance of the topic was demonstrated. Ten articles were taken into account. They all appeared on Bulgarian online media websites in the years between 2017 and 2021. The articles were analysed using the news media analysis (Hodgetts & Chamberlain 2014), which culminated in building upon the results from the biographical interviews as well as revealing new topics within the return migration realm. The main focus lied on the

phenomenon of 'brain drain' in Bulgaria and the government incentives, which promote return. Due to Bulgaria's large number of emigrants in working and fertile age, there is a need for a proactive immigration policy to attract Bulgarians living abroad and immigrants from third countries with the necessary educational and professional qualifications. However, the incentives in place only offer temporary help to the returnees. In March 2020, an unprecedented number of Bulgarian returnees was accounted for, posing the need for a long-term development plan. Furthermore, the articles elaborated on return migration motivations as well as the role of the COVID-19 pandemic when it comes to return migration. The findings largely coincide with the insides, gathered by the biographical interviews. Missing family and friends, seeking better professional development in Bulgaria and wishing to contribute to the country are the reasons mentioned by the articles when it comes to return motivations.

In the course of this work, the return migration motivations were represented from the perspective of young Bulgarians, who after studying abroad, returned to the home country. These insights can contribute to a better understanding of return migration as a complex process, depending on multiple interconnected factors. From the analysis, it is visible that all five interviewees could not give a one-sided answer to the question of why they returned to Bulgaria. Various perceptions, experiences and external factors influenced their decision. Further research could examine more cases of return migration focusing on gender-based differences when it comes to return migration motivations. Furthermore, the focus could be shifted from students to workers and draw conclusions based on different social classes. A historical analysis of the return migration of different generations would also be intriguing. Migration, as well as return before Bulgaria's EU accession in 2007, possessed different contextual conditions, which would be interesting to analyse following Bulgaria's historical development. Furthermore, an in-depth look into the returnees' experiences and motivations could be helpful in designing and implementing appropriate return incentives, which Bulgaria urgently needs.

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## 9 Annex

### 9.1 Abstract

In order to contribute to a better understanding of return migration, the following thesis examines the motivations for Bulgarians, who were enrolled in tertiary education in Austria, to return to their home country. With the aim of shedding light on the topic, five biographical interviews were conducted with returnees, which were analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and grounded theory coding method. Furthermore, to analyse the public debate on return migration in Bulgaria and to demonstrate the relevance of the topic, a news media analysis was implemented, examining ten articles, which appeared on Bulgarian media websites. Neoclassical economics, new economics of labour migration, structuralism, transnationalism, and social network theory served as the theoretical basis for the research. In the context of the opened EU borders in combination with Bulgaria’s various problems, such as the widespread corruption in the higher education sector, studying abroad is increasingly seen by Bulgarian students as an opportunity to get a good education. However, once they leave the home country, the migrants start encountering new problems such as missing family and friends and facing hurdles in their integration. These factors influence the migrants’ decision to return greatly due to their poor personal wellbeing in the host country. COVID-19-related factors represent the only reason which partially caused

spontaneous and unwanted returns. Seeking the comfort and safety of the homeland and relatives in this challenging situation has proven as the preferred strategy for some of the returnees. Another main return motivation is connected to the migrants' knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which they acquired during their lives abroad. With a glance into the future, they wish to transfer them to the home country and thus tackle the ongoing 'brain drain' phenomenon, explained by the emigration of workforce. In addition, adequate government incentives concentrated on attracting returnees as well as keeping the young people in home the country need to be developed. Without such, a further move as part of the returnees' migration process is not completely excluded as a possibility.

## **9.2 Zusammenfassung**

Um zu einem besseren Verständnis der Rückkehrmigration beizutragen, werden in der folgenden Arbeit die Rückkehrmotivationen von Bulgar\*innen, die in Österreich ein Hochschulstudium aufgenommen haben, untersucht. Um das Thema zu beleuchten, wurden fünf biografische Interviews mit Rückkehrer\*innen geführt, die mittels einer Kombination aus Themenanalyse und dem Kodierverfahren der Grounded Theory ausgewertet wurden. Um die öffentliche Debatte über die Rückkehrmigration in Bulgarien zu analysieren und die Relevanz des Themas aufzuzeigen, wurde außerdem eine Medienanalyse durchgeführt, bei der zehn Artikel untersucht wurden, die auf bulgarischen Medienwebsites erschienen. Als theoretische Grundlage für die Arbeit dienten die neoklassische Theorie, die neue Ökonomie der Arbeitsmigration, der Strukturalismus, der Transnationalismus und die Netzwerktheorie. Vor dem Hintergrund der liberalisierten EU-Grenzen in Verbindung mit den verschiedenen Problemfeldern Bulgariens, wie z. B. der weit verbreiteten Korruption im Hochschulsektor, wird ein Studium im Ausland von bulgarischen Student\*innen zunehmend als eine Möglichkeit gesehen, eine gute Ausbildung zu erhalten. Sobald sie jedoch ihr Heimatland verlassen haben, stoßen die Migrant\*innen auf neue

Probleme, wie z. B. das Fehlen von Familie und Freunden sowie Hürden bei ihrer Integration. Diese Faktoren haben einen wesentlichen Einfluss auf die Entscheidung der Migrant\*innen zurückzukehren, da sie sich im Aufnahmeland nicht wohlfühlen. COVID-19-bezogene Faktoren sind der einzige Grund, der zum Teil zu spontanen und ungewollten Rückkehrern geführt hat. Die Suche nach dem Komfort und der Sicherheit des Heimatlandes und der Verwandten in dieser schwierigen Situation hat sich für einige der Rückkehrer\*innen als die bevorzugte Strategie erwiesen. Ein weiteres Hauptmotiv für die Rückkehr hängt mit den Qualifikationen, Kompetenzen und Verhaltensweisen der Migrant\*innen zusammen, die sie während ihres Lebens im Ausland erworben haben. Mit Blick auf die Zukunft möchten sie diese in ihr Heimatland übertragen und so dem anhaltenden Phänomen des "Brain-Drain", das durch die Auswanderung von Arbeitskräften erklärt wird, entgegenwirken. Darüber hinaus müssen angemessene staatliche Fördermaßnahmen entwickelt werden, die sowohl auf die Anwerbung von Rückkehrer\*innen, als auch auf den Verbleib der jungen Menschen im Heimatland ausgerichtet sind. Andernfalls ist ein weiterer Umzug als Teil des Migrationsprozesses der Rückkehrer\*innen nicht völlig ausgeschlossen.

### 9.3 Interview invitation



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wien

#### 'Should I stay or should I go': Return motivation of Bulgarian students in Austria

*In cooperation in the University of Vienna*

- Topic: why and under what circumstances did Bulgarians who studied in Austria (whether they graduated or not) decide to return to Bulgaria?
- Loosely structured interview in Bulgarian
- Duration: maximum 1.5 hours
- Audio recording in order to analyze the interview
- Completely anonymized: all personal information will be removed
- Interviewer: Zora Vakavlieva (sociology student at the University of Vienna)

For contact and questions  
zora.vakavlieva@gmail.com

### 9.4 Information for the participants and declaration of consent (in Bulgarian)

*Информация за участниците*

Уважаеми интервюиран!

Благодаря Ви за готовността да участвате в индивидуално интервю като част от проекта: „Да се върна или не: Мотивация за връщане на българските студенти в Австрия“.

Целта на проучването е да изследва защо и при какви обстоятелства българи, които са учили в Австрия (независимо дали са завършили или не), са решили да се върнат в България?

Поемам ангажимент да третирам Вашите данни като строго поверителни. При обработката на личните Ви данни се придържам към законовите изисквания на Общия регламент за защита на данните (Регламент 2016/679 на Европейския парламент и на Съвета). Интервютата ще бъдат анонимизирани и използвани единствено за изследователски цели.

Само изследователите имат достъп до косвено личните аудио файлове. Напълно анонимизирани извадки от транскриптите (т.е. без назоваване на имена и след премахване на каквато и да е информация, която би позволила да се направят изводи за Вашето лице, като информация за образование, семейно положение и др.), може да се използват в магистърската дисертация. Магистърската работа е квалификационна работа; публикуване не се планира.

Ако сте дали съгласието си за обработване на личните Ви данни, имате право да оттеглите съгласието си по всяко време с ефект за в бъдеще, т.е. оттеглянето Ви не засяга законността на обработката на Вашите данни въз основа на съгласието преди оттеглянето.

На Ваше разположение съм по всяко време за допълнителни разяснения и въпроси относно защитата на Вашите данни – Зора Вакавлиева (zora.vakavlieva@gmail.com).

Този магистърска работа се извършва под надзора на доц. Проф. Д-р Ема Даулинг, Институт по социология, Виенски Университет. Можете също така да се свържете с Д-р Ема Даулинг ([emma.dowling@univie.ac.at](mailto:emma.dowling@univie.ac.at)).

### *Декларация за съгласие*

Име на участника с печатни букви:

.....  
.....

Прочетох и разбрах този информационен документ. На всички мои въпроси е отговорено и в момента нямам повече въпроси.

С моя личен подпис, аз доброволно давам съгласието си да участвам в интервю.

Знам, че мога да оттегля това съгласие по всяко време и без да посочвам причини.

Получих копие от „Информация за участниците“ и „Декларация за съгласие“.

Съгласявам се личните ми данни да бъдат използвани в рамките на научното изследване.

София (България)

.....

Място, дата, подпис (интервюиран)

Виена (Австрия)

.....

Място, дата, подпис (интервюиращ)

## 9.5 Guidelines for the narrative interviews

### *Step 1: Interviewee selection and preparation*

- People who came to study in Austria after 2007 (Bulgaria's accession to the EU)
- Interviewing a stranger vs. someone I personally know (the interviewee could leave information out; could influence future relationship)
- Field access through Facebook
  - ⇒ Snowball sampling
- Prepare for the interview
  - Make sure the dictation device works properly before the interview
  - Memorize the stimulus questions
  - Preparation for "Erzählstrümpfe" - processes that are not fully explained by the interviewee and need to be questioned further after the main narration

### *Step 2: Preliminary talk*

- The preliminary talk is an important prerequisite for the success of the narrative interview
- Important for building a relationship of trust
- Motivate to participate
- Assure anonymity
- Information about the interview process
- Brief information on the research project
- Consent to recording the interview -> try to take away the "fear" of the voice recorder

### *Steps 3-4: Narrative stimulus*

- Narrative-generating question: Please tell me your life story up until the point you returned back to Bulgaria"

- Think of 2-3 paraphrased versions of the question
- Emphasize that if the interviewee does not feel comfortable, he/she does not have to share everything
- Reassure that they can trust you

#### *Step 5: Main narrative*

- Leave the design entirely to the respondent, never disturb the flow of the narrative
- Be “silent, stimulating the story” – nod, keep eye contact, laugh along, show understanding and participation
- Noting “Erzählstrümpfe”
- Enduring pauses and emotions

#### *Step 6: Coda*

- The main narrative ends with a clear coda
- The end of the story is marked often with a balancing coda in which the narrated events are assessed and/or a moral is drawn by the interviewee

#### *Step 7: Internal questions*

- Questions about gaps or irregularities in the narrative (Erzählstrümpfe)
- Utilize the narrative potential
- Ask narrative “how” questions

#### *Step 8: External questions*

- Introduction of other research-related topics
- Request for descriptions and arguments
- Similarity to guided interview
- Some questions will be brought into the conversation and answered by the interviewee already

- Why did you choose to study abroad?
- Why did you choose Austria and not another country?
- Was your return to Bulgaria pre-planned (already before leaving for Austria)?
- How did you feel in Austria – social contacts, German language, study courses, job (optional)?
- How often did you speak to your friends/relatives in Bulgaria? How often did you travel back to Bulgaria?
- Did you have any family members/friends, who also lived in Austria at this point?
- Did you have a partner back then and where did he/she live?

*Step 9: Collect sociodemographic data*

- It is essential to collect this information after the interview
- Relevant data for my survey:
  - Year of birth
  - Marital status
  - Children
  - Place of residence
  - School education
  - Profession

*Step 10-11: Follow-up discussion/ protocol*

- Switch off the dictation machine
- Relevant information is often provided that has to be noted in the protocol
- Collect contact data in case of unclear details later
- Write/Record interview protocol
  - Recording of events before and after the interview
  - Abnormalities, atmosphere, and situation
  - First impressions and spontaneous thoughts related to the research question