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## **Transnational Return and Local Transformation: A Case Study of Returnee Entrepreneurs in the Negotin Region (Serbia)\*<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Our research focuses on returnee entrepreneurs in Serbia, particularly members of the 1.5 generation, amidst ongoing campaigns promoting the return of highly educated migrants and potential entrepreneurs. Using a transnational paradigm, we examine their regular homeland visits, household and community investments, and both monetary and social remittances sent to family members remaining in Serbia. Our qualitative research methodology involved fieldwork and semi-structured narrative interviews conducted in Negotin and its surrounding area, known as Negotinska Krajina – a border region characterized by significant migration patterns, economic underdevelopment, sparse population, and demographic decline. In recent years, entrepreneurial returnees have become noticeable agents of social transformation in their local communities.

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The study is guided by qualitatively oriented research questions examining how these entrepreneurs narrate their migration and return experiences, highlighting how their enterprises reflect economic, social, and cultural resources acquired abroad. It investigates how returnees interpret and navigate opportunities and constraints within the local economic environment, including the presence or absence of institutional support. Moreover, we explore their processes of reintegration and community relationships, underscoring broader visions of development and belonging articulated through their entrepreneurial activities. Our findings challenge simplistic migration-development discourses by emphasizing context-specific, socially embedded transformations that returnees initiate within this rural region.

**Key words:** return migration, returnees entrepreneurs, opportunity entrepreneurs, 1.5 generation, migration-social change nexus, human approach, Negotin Region, Serbia

## Introduction

This paper explores the role of returnee entrepreneurs in fostering social change within local communities of Eastern Serbia, focusing on members of the so-called 1.5 generation – individuals who migrated abroad as children and returned during their economically active years. While public and policy discourse often frames return migration in terms of its developmental potential, this study adopts a more nuanced perspective grounded in the concept of social change. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Negotin Region (Negotinska Krajina), one of Serbia's most underdeveloped rural regions, we examine how returnees mobilize their transnational experiences, skills, and resources to reshape everyday life in their communities – not only through business ventures, but also through informal practices, value systems, and social relations.

Rather than measuring the impact of returnees through macroeconomic indicators or policy outcomes, we focus on their embedded agency and capacity to initiate context-specific transformations. In doing so, we align with a growing body of literature that challenges the normative assumptions of the migration–development nexus and instead emphasizes the significance of returnees as vectors of social remittances (Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011) and bottom-up social change (White and Grabowska 2019).

This paper is part of the ongoing project “Return Migrations: Aspects of Return and Processes of Reintegration of Migrants in Serbia” (Antonijević and Rašić 2022), which we initiated two years ago. This year's research focuses on returnee entrepreneurs, prompted by recent campaigns in Serbia encouraging the return of highly educated migrants and those intending to set up businesses.

*Return Migration Context in Serbia*

Serbia has historically been a country of emigration, with a broad geographic dispersion of its emigrants, and is considered one of the countries with the largest diaspora relative to its total population.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the large-scale economic migration of individuals with low to medium levels of education in the latter half of the 20th century, the past three decades have seen an increasing number of highly educated young people leaving the country. While scholars emphasize the negative demographic and economic effects of these migration trends (“brain drain” and “brawn drain”), such as depopulation, a declining birth rate, population aging, and the ongoing economic crisis during the transition period, it is also important to acknowledge some positive outcomes. Chief among these is the extremely large influx of foreign monetary remittances, sent through both formal and informal channels, which were generally used to support various family needs and living expenses.<sup>3</sup> However, it is estimated that only about 3% of the total amount is invested in private business (Rašević 2016, 57). In this context, Guarnizo concluded that it is “widely substantiated that the vast bulk of migrant remittances are spent on consumption while a small proportion is actually devoted to productive investment” (Guarnizo 2003, 675). Furthermore, monetary remittances have strengthened the country’s balance of payments.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have observed that “remittances seem to be a more constant source of income than other private flows and foreign direct investments” (Nyberg-Sorensen et al. 2002, 55), a situation that appears to reflect the case in Serbia.<sup>5</sup>

For more than a decade, substantial efforts have been made in Serbia, in alignment with EU recommendations and standards, to monitor and regulate

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<sup>2</sup> According to World Bank data from 2020, Serbia has 6,8 million inhabitants, while the diaspora consists of 3,5 million people (Filipović et al. 2022, 879). According to Population Census from 2022, Serbia has over 6, 6 million inhabitants.

<sup>3</sup> The unique register of remittance recipient of National Bank of Serbia recorded 1.116.053 such recipients in 2022. Available at: <https://bizportal.rs/finansije/milijarde-avra-iz-dijaspore-pospesuju-domacu-ekonomiju-svaki-cetvrti-evro-dolazi-iz-nemacke-ali-stizu-i-dolari-iz-sad/>. Accessed: 18.10.2024.

<sup>4</sup> According to the World Bank data, the share of remittances in Serbia in 2020 was 7.3%. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/serbia>.

<sup>5</sup> “Serbia is among the countries with an extremely high number of remittances from abroad. The World Bank estimates that in 2019, about 4.2 billion dollars arrived in our country from the diaspora, which is more than seven percent of GDP. That year, the amount of money sent by guest workers, or received as foreign pensions, was greater than the money invested in factories and other businesses by all foreign investors.” Available at: <https://bizportal.rs/finansije/milijarde-avra-iz-dijaspore-pospesuju-domacu-ekonomiju-svaki-cetvrti-evro-dolazi-iz-nemacke-ali-stizu-i-dolari-iz-sad/>

migration through the development of strategies, legal frameworks<sup>6</sup>, and programs. These initiatives, along with the establishment of governmental and non-governmental organizations, aim to offer significant support to migrants, facilitate reintegration, and promote return migration, particularly among highly educated individuals and entrepreneurs (Pavlov et al. 2012; Pavlov et al. 2013; Bobić and Babović 2013). In recent years, increasing focus has been directed toward the economic dimensions of migration, highlighting the growing recognition of its potential role in development.<sup>7</sup>

This state-driven approach primarily focuses on the economic effects of return entrepreneurship on state development (Sinatti 2022, 344), often neglecting the social and cultural capital that returnees can and do bring back. Although we did not investigate the macro-level success or long-term effects of such state initiatives, it is important to note that Serbia's GDP heavily relies on remittances. Thus, there is a justified scepticism toward the state's genuine efforts to bring back migrants, as, according to Russell King, if they return, there will be no more remittances (King 2022, 316).<sup>8</sup>

A common challenge for researchers in this field is the lack of clear statistical indicators regarding the number of returnees. While the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration publishes annual figures on forced returns under the EU Readmission Agreement, there is no systematic tracking of voluntary returnees. Government bodies and ministers often cite unverified figures in the media regarding the number of people who have returned to Serbia.<sup>9</sup> Since monitoring of returnees from work abroad is not systematic in Serbia, it is mentioned only in

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<sup>6</sup> The *Law on Migration Management (Official Gazette of the RS, no. 107/2012)* was adopted in 2012 as a kind of umbrella law for other laws and by-laws because it defines different forms of migration and envisages competences and procedures for their regulation, adhering to EU definitions (Bobić and Babović 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The *Strategy on Economic Migration of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2021-2027* is an important document (*Official Gazette of the RS, no. 21/2020*). Available at: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2020/21/1>

<sup>8</sup> Ljubodrag Savić, an economics professor from Belgrade, highlights the exceptional importance of remittances for Serbia's economy: "It's a significant amount, and unlike borrowing, it costs the state nothing. It is highly beneficial for the economy, as some of that money is invested in businesses in Serbia. This improves the balance of payments without requiring any effort from the state". <https://bizportal.rs/finansije/milijarde-evra-iz-dijaspose-pospesuju-domacu-ekonomiju-svaki-cetvrti-evro-dolazi-iz-nemacke-ali-stizu-i-dolari-iz-sad/>. Accessed: 18.10.2024.

<sup>9</sup> Public officials often cite unverified or inflated figures, which are rarely accompanied by clear methodologies and are often used in political or media narratives rather than evidence-based planning.

the Population Censuses (Stanković 2014).<sup>10</sup> The general demographic picture of returnees to Serbia shows that most of them are older than 55 years. Most returnees are economically inactive pensioners (Bobić et al. 2016, 35). Returnees are predominantly men (56.9%) (Stanković 2014, 88), while women prefer to stay abroad because of their children and grandchildren who live there, even when their husbands return to their homeland (Antonijević and Milosavljević 2016a). This data reflects the international trend among first-generation returnees, who constitute most returnees to our country, particularly between 2000 and 2011, when many first-generation guest workers retired. While such demographic data provide a general picture of return migration trends at the national level – particularly highlighting the predominance of older, first-generation returnees – they do not capture the more nuanced dynamics at play in specific local context.

### *A Case Study: Negotin Region*

In order to explore these dynamics in greater depth, we turned our attention to one such context: the city of Negotin and its surrounding region, known as Negotinska Krajina, part of the Bor District – one of the oldest and largest emigration zone in Serbia (Predojević-Despić and Penev 2016, 336). Situated in Eastern Serbia, along the Danube River and bordering Romania and Bulgaria, this region is sparsely populated and marked by pronounced migratory patterns and a declining demographic trend due to both emigration and low birth rates. According to the 2022 Population Census, Municipality of Negotin is home to 29,062 inhabitants, of whom a quarter (25,8%) are working abroad. The population is predominantly Serbian (80.88%) and Vlach (6.24%).<sup>11</sup> The only reliable data on returnees in Negotin Region can be found in the 2022 Population Census where it was reported that 1,211 people returned from abroad, with an almost equal number of men and women, between the 2011 and 2022 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023, 191).<sup>12</sup>

Although the region is rich in arable land, water resources, and vineyards,<sup>13</sup> for which it has been known since ancient times, there has been little investment

<sup>10</sup> Those Population Censuses date from 1981, 1991, 2011 and 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Sources: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/Pdf/G20234010.pdf>; <https://www.ngportal.rs/objavljeni-prvi-rezultati-popisa-2022-u-negotinu-29-062-stanovnika-boru-41-280-kladovu-18-002>; <https://negotin.rs/polozaj-klima-i-stanovnistvo.htm>. Accessed: 14.10.2024.

<sup>12</sup> Available on: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/Pdf/G20234010.pdf>. Accessed: 18.10.2024

<sup>13</sup> The Negotin Region is renowned for its high-quality wines, with the village of Rajac – famous for its traditional stone wine cellars known as *Rajačke pimmice* – standing out as a site of both touristic and cultural significance.

in industry and infrastructure development, dating even from the time of former Yugoslavia. The only industrial complex in the Negotin Region during the former Yugoslavia was the Prahovo Chemical Industry, established in 1960. Alongside the Prahovo Port on the Danube, which served as a key transshipment hub, it constituted the core of industrial production in the area. However, the 1990s witnessed the collapse of production and the deterioration of the industrial facilities, paralleling the decline and devastation of the port infrastructure. Coupled with severely underdeveloped infrastructure and neglected roads, which saw little to no investment, Negotin Krajina became emblematic of marginalization and neglect within Serbia. This sense of abandonment was further reinforced by the local authorities' claim that the state had shown no concern for the region's cultural, historical, or touristic assets and potential.<sup>14</sup>

This lack of development has resulted in a weak economy and overall underdevelopment of the area. Nonetheless, the small local economy plays a notable role in the economic activity of the municipality. These conditions have driven significant population outflows, with many migrating in search of better employment opportunities, particularly to Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. Consequently, villages around Negotin rely heavily on remittances sent by family members working abroad as a "poverty-reducing strategy" (Nyberg-Sorensen et al. 2002, 53).

### *Why This Region? Research Focus and Questions*

Given these demographic challenges, patterns of sustained emigration, and the chronic underdevelopment of the region, one might reasonably ask why we chose to focus our research specifically on returnee entrepreneurs in this part of Serbia. In the following section, we situate our decision to focus on this particular region within its broader socio-historical and migratory context, and introduce the ethnographically grounded questions that shaped the trajectory of our inquiry.

In addition to the information about the returnees gathered from previous research, we were drawn to announcements on websites from Negotin, and the broader Eastern Serbia region, which called upon people working abroad to

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<sup>14</sup> A turning point in the area's industrial recovery came in 2012, when the Elixir Group acquired the Prahovo Chemical Industry (IHP Prahovo). Elixir has since positioned itself as a socially responsible actor, contributing to the rehabilitation of local road infrastructure. According to the mayor of Negotin, the revitalization of the entire municipality began with the purchase and reactivation of IHP Prahovo by Elixir. The Prahovo Port, however, remains in a state of disrepair and its restoration is still pending. Sources: <https://www.elixirprahovo.rs>; <https://radar.nova.rs/ekonomija/biznis-klub-vladimir-velickovic-predsednik-opstine-negotin/>. Accessed: May 5, 2025.

invest in various business ventures, particularly in agriculture, fruit growing, viticulture, and tourism.<sup>15</sup> One specially notable organization in this context is RARIS – *Regional Development Agency Eastern Serbia* – established in 2007 as a bottom-up initiative by stakeholders from Eastern Serbia. RARIS aims to promote balanced regional development by improving the availability, scope, and quality of support services for small and medium-sized enterprises and entrepreneurs. RARIS has also launched the Digital Platform Diaspora Business Info<sup>16</sup> designed to assist members of the Serbian diaspora who are interested in starting businesses or engaging in economic activities with Eastern Serbia. With over 30.000 people from Eastern Serbia currently living and working in Austria, RARIS organized several events, workshops, and meetings with Serbian migrants in Vienna to inform them about the conditions, opportunities, and advantages of starting a business in Eastern Serbia. These efforts aim to help potential returnee entrepreneurs connect with authorities, find business partners, and invest according to their needs. Through these online platforms, we identified several examples of successful businesses launched by returnees' entrepreneurs.<sup>17</sup> While RARIS's initiative is generally important in the context of diaspora engagement, in our research it primarily served as a practical guide for identifying some of our interviewees. It is important to note, however, that some of the returnees we spoke with had returned and started their businesses prior to RARIS's establishment.

This has also prompted our interest in the question posed by Drori and colleagues: "Why, how, and when do individuals pursue new business ventures, often in far less attractive environments, while relying on abilities and opportunities stemming from the exploitation of resources, both social and economic, in more than one country?" (Drori et al. 2009, 1002). By 'resources', we refer to economic capital used for business development, social capital consisting of family, relatives, friends, and compatriots – whether in the country of origin or the host country – as well as social networks and business contacts established abroad, and cultural capital encompassing knowledge, skills, and ideas. As King notes, "This, 'capability approach' applies both to migration and the ability to materialize the benefits of migration including after return" (King 2022, 315).

The study is guided by qualitatively oriented research questions examining how these entrepreneurs narrate their migration and return experiences, high-

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.investeastserbia.com/eng/>; <https://www.raris.org/eng> ; <http://invest.negotin.rs>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.raris.org/index.php/dijaspora-biznis-info>

<sup>17</sup> <http://invest.negotin.rs/od-naputenih-imanja-u-jabukovcu-prave-idilu.htm>; <https://www.raris.org/primeri-dobre-prakse>; <https://www.raris.org/2016-06-22-23-38-42/arhiva-2021/655-predstavljamo-15-uspesnih-primeri-investicija-dijaspora-u-istocnu-srbiju>

lighting how their enterprises reflect economic, social, and cultural resources acquired abroad. It investigates how returnees interpret and navigate opportunities and constraints within the local economic environment, including the presence or absence of institutional support. Moreover, we explore their processes of reintegration and community relationships, underscoring broader visions of development and belonging articulated through their entrepreneurial activities. Our findings challenge simplistic migration-development discourses by emphasizing context-specific, socially embedded transformations that returnees initiate within this rural region.

## Theoretical Framework

We examine the research on returnee entrepreneurs through a transnational paradigm (e.g. Levitt et al. 2003; Vertovec 2003) which complements the phenomenon of return as part of transnationalism's back-and-forth system of social and economic relationships (King and Kuschminder 2022, 6; Pauli 2022, 96). In this paper, we approach returnee entrepreneurship not primarily as a driver of economic development, but rather as a socially embedded phenomenon that fosters multiple forms of social change. Following recent critiques of the migration–development nexus (White and Grabowska 2019), we argue that the developmentalist framing often masks complex, uneven, and locally situated forms of transformation that returnees initiate. The concept of social change enables a more grounded understanding of how returnees influence norms, practices, and relations in their home communities – often beyond measurable economic outcomes. This interpretation is consistent with the work of Irena Grabowska and Anne White, who argue that the migration–development nexus often overlooks the contextual, relational, and informal mechanisms through which migration shapes social life. In their view, social remittances do not produce automatic developmental effects but are embedded, negotiated, and often constrained within specific local settings (White and Grabowska 2019).

Since the earliest studies of return migration (e.g. Cerase 1974; Gmelch 1980; Callea 1986), the literature on this topic has grown significantly in recent decades. Rather than presenting the various definitions and approaches to this theme, we adopt the definition proposed by Russell King: “Return migration is when people return to their country or region of origin after a significant period abroad or in another region” (King and Kuschminder 2022, 6). Given that return migration involves movement through space, time, and social contexts, our respondents returned after spending ten or more years abroad. According to some authors, this period of more than ten years is a key factor for a returnee to be considered an “innovator” in their homeland (see Cerase 1974), as it allows

them to acquire sufficient knowledge, innovative ideas, financial resources, and personal energy to embark on a new venture (Van Haer and Nyberg-Sørensen 2003; King 2022).

Our interlocutors returned to a familiar social environment, as they frequently visited their homeland during holidays, vacations, or for other familial and communal purposes. Therefore, they did not return to some imagined, static place from their childhood, but rather to a local setting that they had observed changing over time through their periodic visits. For this reason, we prefer to refer to their chronotype and practices as *trans-local* (Nyberg-Sørensen et al. 2002, 55). It is particularly important to note that tens of thousands of migrants from Eastern Serbia live and work in Austria, frequently engaging in cross-border activities related to their homeland. As Portes observes, such a large co-ethnic community in the diaspora, in our case a co-regional community (as it is ethnically mixed)<sup>18</sup>, creates numerous opportunities for transnational ventures (Portes 2003, 880), relying on “strong ties” rooted in a shared region and intra-group solidarity.

*Returnee entrepreneurs* (RE) are skilled individuals who return to their home countries to launch new business after gaining experience and/or education in another, predominantly developed, country. The economic, human and social capital they bring back can give their ventures advantages that businesses started by domestic entrepreneurs might not achieve. Additionally, their business and expertise, combined with local skilled labor, can function as a catalyst for local social change and economic revitalization (Drori et al. 2009, 1006; Gruenhagen et al. 2020, 310).

Before leaving abroad, most of our interlocutors had neither work experience nor entrepreneurial background. Instead, they developed their skills, knowledge, and business connections while working abroad, which they later leverage upon their return to Serbia to launch their own businesses. Their products not only serve the domestic market; many of them also export their goods or plan to expand their activities to other countries. As such, some can be regarded as true transnational entrepreneurs (TE) “who leverage opportunities that arise from dual fields and networks, optimizing resources where they may be most effective” (Drori et al. 2009, 1003).

Within the broader framework of the migration–development nexus (Van Haer and Nyberg Sørensen 2003), these authors examined various relationships between remittances, migrants, entrepreneurship, and development. As noted in our introductory remarks, both state institutions and regional governmental and non-governmental organizations have promoted policies aimed at attracting

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<sup>18</sup> It is about two communities, Serbs and Vlachs, who live intermingled in their native villages in Eastern Serbia. The Vlachs, in addition to their native Vlach language, are fluent in Serbian.

entrepreneurs and highly educated individuals to invest their money, knowledge, skills, information, and social networks in what is framed as the country's accelerated development. However, such policy narratives often obscure more informal and socially embedded processes through which returnees contribute to change in their communities.

While the migration–development nexus has served as a dominant framework in both academic and policy debates—emphasizing remittances, investment, and return migration as drivers of national or regional development—we find this perspective insufficient to capture the socially embedded and often informal dynamics observed in our fieldwork. Rather than entirely discarding the migration–development approach, we treat it as a discursive and institutional backdrop against which returnee practices unfold. Our analytical lens, however, shifts toward the concept of social change, which enables a more nuanced understanding of how returnees reshape community life, norms, and relationships in ways that are not reducible to economic outcomes or state-led development metrics.

On the other hand, there is a belief that the combination of financial and social remittances, together with the migrants' entrepreneurial spirit and their business initiatives, can make a significant contribution to the sustainable development of the country of origin (Filipović et al. 2022, 874). However, this “development from below” approach (King 2022, 315) has not always proven effective at the macro level. Based on our previous research on guest workers (Antonijević 2011; Antonijević et al. 2011; Antonijević 2013; Antonijević and Rašić 2022), we agree with the long-standing opinion that “that there is a myth that returnees help the economic development of their countries” (Cases Mendez and Cabezas Moro 1976, 142). We concur with the view that “the contrast between necessity– and opportunity-driven entrepreneurship is important because it has been proved that they have different impact on home countries' economic growth” (Zapata-Barrero and Rezaei 2019, 1962).

As a starting point, we draw on general typologies of entrepreneurial activity, which classify entrepreneurs according to their motivations, opportunities, and capacities—most commonly into *necessity entrepreneurs* and *opportunity entrepreneurs* (Reynolds et al. 2002; Hessels et al. 2008; Baron 2006; Newland and Tanaka 2010; Mainela et al. 2014; Lintner 2018). Necessity entrepreneurs typically enter self-employment due to limited access to the formal labor market, often as a result of lower levels of social and economic capital. This is particularly true for low– and medium-skilled returnees who, even when inclined to invest – a relatively rare occurrence – tend to be risk-averse and prefer to launch small-scale service businesses. These micro-enterprises usually sustain the entrepreneur and a handful of employees, contributing modestly to reducing local unemployment but without broader impact on regional or national economic

development. In contrast, opportunity entrepreneurs are generally more highly skilled individuals who operate in dynamic, high-demand sectors of the knowledge economy. They identify specific market opportunities and have both the expertise and resources necessary to pursue them. This type of entrepreneurial activity is far more likely to produce significant contributions mostly to regional or even national economic development.

The phenomenon of returnee migrants belonging to the so-called *1.5 generation* constitutes a distinctive feature of our sample, as this study is among the few that explicitly focuses on this demographic groups. The term *1.5 generation* typically refers to individuals who were born in the country of origin and migrated at a young age together with their parents. However, the definition remains fluid – encompassing individuals who arrived as infants to those who migrated during adolescence – resulting in significant variation in their educational trajectories, processes of acculturation, linguistic repertoires, and social integration (King and Christou 2010, 169; King and Christou 2011, 459).<sup>19</sup> Although we acknowledge that many established distinctions do not encompass all the criteria that define different generations, and that context can narrow or expand definitions (Kiliñ 2022, 284), only one interlocutor in our sample belongs to the first generation, having migrated to Switzerland in 1972, while the others are part of the 1.5 generation. Their return has not been widely studied, which distinguishes our research from studies of the second-generation “return”. They were born and raised in Serbia, often left in the care of grandparents or extended family. The reason for their emigration throughout the 1990s, when their parents “pulled” them abroad, lies in the socio-economic and political circumstances in Serbia during the last decade of the 20th century, marked by war, inflation, international sanctions, insecurity, and poor living standards. According to some authors, as well as our respondents, the 1.5 generation faces the greatest challenges in adjusting to life abroad (see Lee et al. 2015). This generation, constantly straddling two cultures and two languages, experiences primary socialization in their country of origin and a need for integration into the host country, which they join in their teenage years, confronting numerous challenges (Antonijević 2013, 67-73). Some authors consider them a “lost generation” (Davidović 1999, 19-20), deeply emotionally and psychologically connected to the culture of the

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<sup>19</sup> Some scholars argue that the term *1.5 generation* should be reserved for infants and children up to the age of 16 who were born in their parents’ country of origin and subsequently brought to a new country, while those who migrate as older teenagers—after the age of 16—are more accurately categorized as first-generation migrants (see Caron 2019, 3). In our study, however, we adopt a broader definition of the 1.5 generation, following the approach proposed by King and Christou (2010; 2011), because all of our interlocutors had parents who had previously migrated abroad as part of the first generation of *gastarbeiter*.

country where they were born and raised. Perhaps it is not surprising that this group includes most of the returnee entrepreneurs in our research.

We conducted our analysis guided by a *micro and meso-level approach*, which Julia Pauli explains as follows: “Research working on the micro and meso-levels pays attention to how the individual, the household, the wider (kin) networks and the community perceive and influence return” (Pauli 2022, 98). By applying a micro-level approach through a *human approach* (De Haas and Rodriguez 2010; Gasper and Truong 2010; Wright 2012), we emphasized the experiences of the returnee entrepreneurs themselves. Our focus was on their motivations for returning, how they established their businesses, and how they evaluate the changes in their communities upon return. This approach does not view returnees solely as economic investors but acknowledges that their “entrepreneurial project are embedded in (transnational) social field and moral economies that shape migrant’s own capabilities, those of other members of society around them, and the multidimensional outcomes of their investments” (Sinatti 2019, 613). Therefore, our research also explored the concept of *social remittances* (Levitt 1998), which returnees bring back with them and apply in various ways in the local context. These social remittances represent a key mechanism through which returnees generate social change, often by introducing new work ethics, modes of communication, or community engagement practices.

To shed light on the changes influenced by returnee entrepreneurs, we opted for analysis at the *meso-level*. We accept the premise that everyday processes and small-scale changes are highly significant because they can have a “cascading effect that concatenate into deep transformations” (Fauser and Anghel 2019, 8). We believe that context plays a crucial role in the meso-level analysis of changes triggered by migration (Van Hear 2010), and that the application of the economic or social capital acquired abroad – and the changes it potentially generates – equally depends on the returnees’ ability to apply these in the local context (Sinatti 2019). In other words, the context and individual skills of migrants often determine the pace and extent of the changes that will occur in their communities.

The choice of these approaches for analysis emerged from the material we collected during our research. As we noted, our study did not involve a statistical analysis, as such data do not exist. Instead, we employed qualitative analysis, focusing on the personal stories of individual returnee entrepreneurs in specific villages. By shifting our analytical lens from the migration–development framework to the perspective of social change, we are better able to capture the situated, relational, and often informal ways in which returnee entrepreneurs reshape their communities – not only economically, but also culturally, socially, and morally. This broader understanding moves us away from narrow developmental metrics and toward a more context-sensitive appreciation of how migration reshapes everyday life through locally grounded forms of agency.

## Research Methodology

The research methodology is based on fieldwork conducted in Negotin and surrounding villages, as well as semi-structured narrative interviews, which were subsequently analyzed using qualitative methods.

Initially, we established contact with the Pejčić family, returnee pensioners from the village of Kobišnica, whom we knew from our previous research on guest workers. Their assistance provided us with access to the local community and helped us identify our target group – entrepreneurs whose business names we found on the RARIS websites. Although we recognize the limitations of this sampling approach, particularly the fact that our study primarily included successful returnee entrepreneurs, an alternative data collection strategy was neither methodologically nor logistically feasible. The main reason for this lies in the absence of official databases or registries that systematically track returnee entrepreneurs. Instead, our sampling process relied on referral networks and the snowball sampling method, with our respondents most often referencing individuals who had made a notable economic and social impact in their local communities. While inherently limited, this approach allowed us to gain deeper insights into the dynamics of successful returnee entrepreneurial practices, yet it leaves room for future research to encompass a broader range of returnee experiences. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 individuals, 13 of whom run businesses of varying degrees of success. Their enterprises are as follows<sup>20</sup>:

1. NTS food doo (Bukovče), NTS System doo (Kobišnica), NTS elektro (Kobišnica), the companies owned by S.N.
2. Aluminex Euroline doo (Kobišnica), owner V. Dj.
3. Appletown (Jabukovac), owner A. V.
4. Primula veris (Jabukovac), owner T. P.
5. Reggina (Jabukovac), owner J. M.
6. Spajić doo (Negotin), owner Z. S.
7. Vila Tea Hotel (Negotin), owner V. M.
8. Winery Mikić (Rečka), owners D. and D. M.
9. Winery Radulović (Crnomasnica) owner D. R.

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<sup>20</sup> The business affiliations listed here are based on publicly available information, while the names of the individuals have been anonymized and are presented only as initials. All entrepreneurs mentioned are publicly visible as business owners, and several have themselves openly identified as returnees. This approach respects the principles of informed consent, while acknowledging the public nature of their entrepreneurial activity.

10. Restaurant “Sač” (Prahovo), owner M. M.
11. Nikolić transport doo (Samarinovac), owner G. N.
12. Sale and production of charcoal (Miloševo), owner B. A.

In addition to entrepreneurs, we also conducted interviews with several individuals who are returnees but do not own businesses – including D.P, M.P, V.N from Kobišnica, as well as I.F. and S.S. from Bukovče. Their inclusion was motivated by the recognition that returnees contribute to local development not only through formal entrepreneurship, but also by introducing new social norms, values, and practices – both explicitly and implicitly – shaped by their time abroad.<sup>21</sup> These individuals often participate in informal economies, community life, and social innovation in ways that extend beyond measurable economic activity. Including their narratives allows for a more nuanced understanding of the broader spectrum of returnee impact on the region’s socio-economic transformation.

### Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Returnee Entrepreneurs

The *demographic characteristics* of returnee entrepreneurs provide a deeper understanding of the specific nature of this group and serve as a basis for analysing their experiences and motivations in starting and managing businesses. Furthermore, we maintain the argument that characteristics of entrepreneurs often play a decisive role in personal decisions and the overall development of their businesses (Block and Sandner 2009). Our research involved 13 returnee entrepreneurs, members of the 1.5 generation. All the returnee entrepreneurs in our sample have *migration experience*, which is the key criterion for their inclusion in this study.

In terms of *social backgrounds*, the returnee entrepreneurs in our sample share similar pre-migration circumstances (born and raised in the homeland), with more notable differences emerging after migration and upon their return to Serbia. None of our respondents had any prior work or entrepreneurial experience before migrating; thus, they developed their foundational work habits abroad. By the time they returned to Serbia, they were already successful work-

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<sup>21</sup> The inclusion of non-entrepreneurial returnees is grounded in theoretical framework that emphasize the broader transformative potential of migration. As Levitt (1998) and Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) argue through the concept of *social remittances*, migrants act as carriers of ideas, values, and practices that influence change in their communities of origin. This perspective aligns with a broader understanding of returnees not merely as economic actors, but as agents of social transformation.

ers, and some had even become entrepreneurs. Apart from the first-generation interviewee, the others migrated during similar periods, mainly from the late 1980s to the 1990s.

*The length of time spent abroad* varies significantly among the respondents. While two interviewees spent less than five years abroad, the rest lived and worked abroad for ten or more years. This difference in duration is crucial for understanding their experiences, reintegration into local communities, and the establishment of transnational connections. Returnees with more extensive experience abroad developed stronger social and economic networks, which for some proved vital for establishing their businesses in Negotinska Krajina. One of the most illustrative examples of this is the owner of the company "Spajić" from Negotin, which produces steel fibbers, steel shot, and machines for their production. The owner returned to Serbia in 2002 with the idea of opening a factory in Negotin based on the skills he had acquired in Germany, convinced that "We can produce this here and sell it to them (the Germans)." His business was successful from the outset because he brought not only knowledge but also client contacts from his previous German employer: "I bought the machines, but I also knew the clients, where to send the goods. I took over customers from the German (former owner)." In contrast, those with less experience abroad lacked the resources to support their ventures. A case in point is a sock factory in Jabukovac, whose owner spent only a few years in Austria with his parents. His limited connections with people and markets in Austria forced him to hire a sales manager for export purposes. Unfortunately, this proved disastrous, as the manager's unprofessional conduct nearly halted the company's export operations:

We produced socks with a logo for an Austrian company, we produced them here on purpose, maybe 10,000 pairs of socks according to all possible norms of theirs, which we fulfilled. ... However, since we didn't know the clients, we had to hire a manager. Our middlemen were embedded 10 times, and we didn't know it. For example, we sold socks for 0.72 euros, and he resold them for 10 euros. So that's over 1000 percent. We found out later, when it was already late and those business contacts and interest in doing something further were terminated." (Jovan, village Jabukovac)

It is important to emphasize that all our interlocutors returned to Serbia *voluntarily*. *The reasons for their return* varied, but were most often related to professional, family, or emotional factors. Some participants came back to Serbia in response to business opportunities, particularly those who already had an established enterprise in the country. For many interlocutors, their parents played a pivotal role in shaping their migration decisions, often expressing resistance to living and working abroad while simultaneously encouraging their return and support for starting a business in Serbia. Some returnees found life abroad challenging, particularly in terms of adapting to norms and integrating

socially, which fuelled a desire to return to Serbia, where they perceived the local way of life as more relaxed and of higher quality. Others returned to ensure that their children could be educated in Serbia, making the decision when their children were about to start primary school: “The deciding factor was that our daughter was starting first grade. We didn’t want her to go to school there. We hadn’t even considered that option” (Violeta, Negotin). In other words, the responses from our sample reveal complex and varied motivations for returning, often driven by a combination of practical, cultural, emotional, and personal factors. However, it is important to emphasize that for some of our interlocutors, returning to Serbia does not mark the end of their migrator journey, but rather the beginning of a new phase of transnational movement. This is particularly pronounced among retired returnees or those whose children and grandchildren have remained abroad. In such cases, returnees often maintain a life split between Serbia and the country where their family resides, traveling back and forth for various events tied to family life cycles (Antonijević and Milosavljević 2016b).

While global research typically shows that young people are more inclined to start and manage their own businesses,<sup>22</sup> our sample reveals somewhat different indicators.<sup>23</sup> *The age structure of the returnee entrepreneurs* shows that most of them are middle-aged or older, ranging from about 40 to 70 years. This age distribution is not surprising, given that all our respondents had prior work experience and lived abroad. The accumulation of economic, cultural, and social capital abroad, which naturally took time, played a crucial role in the business ventures of our target group. Moreover, starting a business in later life aligns with our respondents’ perception of having taken the final step in their migration journey—the return, which they view as a static conclusion, even though it is not, where they seek stability and security in their ancestral homelands.

Regarding the *gender perspective* of the returnee entrepreneurs, in our sample, only one woman leads a business, highlighting a significant *gender gap* among returnee entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, this fact is not surprising, especially considering statistical data from the Republic of Serbia, which shows that 82%

<sup>22</sup> See for example: <https://www.gemconsortium.org/news/Youth%20are%20more%20entrepreneurial%20than%20adults:%20GEM%20report%20on%20youth%20entrepreneurship>; [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://cdn-group.bnpparibas.com/uploads/file/2018\\_bnpparibas\\_entrepreneur\\_report\\_2.pdf](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://cdn-group.bnpparibas.com/uploads/file/2018_bnpparibas_entrepreneur_report_2.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> And available analyses in Serbia indicate that the number of young entrepreneurs in Serbia has been increasing over the years. According to extracts from the APR in 2023, there were a total of 67,256 entrepreneurs between the ages of 18 and 35 in Serbia (see <https://biznis.rs/vesti/sve-vise-mladih-preduzetnika-u-srbiji-ukupno-67-256-iz-medju-18-i-35-godina/>).

of entrepreneurs are men, while only 18% are women.<sup>24</sup> These statistics align with broader trends of gender inequality in entrepreneurship, not only within our target group but also more generally, and are particularly striking given that women outnumber men in Serbia.<sup>25</sup> Similar findings on male dominance in entrepreneurship are reflected in other relevant international studies (Verheul et al. 2006; Martin and Radu 2012). Despite this, our research highlights the significant, albeit less visible, role women play in entrepreneurial activities. Many of our respondents emphasized that they work together with their wives. A notable example is a winery in the village of Rečka, where the husband and wife jointly run the business, even though he is officially listed as the owner. Throughout the interview, they spoke in plural terms about the business, underscoring the equal division of labour between them, and stated:

We do everything together, even during the harvest, we work alongside the pickers. Yesterday, I was alone in the seven-hectare vineyard. ... Until three years ago, when we were living between Austria and Serbia, we were jointly investing the capital we earned there into this business. (Dragana, village of Rečka)

Another example of a woman's key role is seen in the sock factory in Jabukovac, where the entire factory infrastructure was imported with the help of the owner's mother, who, as a returnee, had tax benefits. In the first few years of the factory's operation, the mother was also listed as the owner to take advantage of other benefits for returnees:

My mother worked in the textile industry there (Austria) ... When we started the business, I opted for the arrangement where she would be the founder of the company, which helped us with paperwork, given that she had pension contributions from abroad. (Jovan, village of Jabukovac)

The only woman leading a business in our sample runs a hospitality business (Violeta, town of Negotin) which is a family legacy, thus explaining why she is the business leader. The explanation for the gender gap can also be found in the patriarchal structure of Serbian society, where women face more obstacles in the business environment compared to men.

The *education levels* among returnees vary, reflecting the different social and economic conditions they faced throughout their lives. The lowest level of education observed in this sample is primary school, while several returnees hold

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<sup>24</sup> [https://www.ey.com/sr\\_rs/eoy/serbian/ey-preduzetnicki-barometar-2023](https://www.ey.com/sr_rs/eoy/serbian/ey-preduzetnicki-barometar-2023); <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/strukturne-poslovne-statistike/godisnji-pokazatelji-poslovanja-preduzeca/>.

<sup>25</sup> According to the statistical data of the Republic Institute of Statistics, in the last ten years, the number of women in Serbia has increased (see <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2024/HtmlL/G20241179.html>).

university degrees. Most of our respondents completed their education in Serbia, while two studied abroad. However, education level is not directly linked to business success, as our data shows. In other words, educational qualifications do not significantly influence the business strategies or market adaptation of returnee entrepreneurs. What proves to be more critical for these businesses are the experiences and knowledge gained abroad, as many of their business strategies and activities are based on those experiences. For instance, one of our respondents, the owner of the company “Appletown”, acquired additional skills and training while working in Austria, which, though not directly related to his field at the time, turned out to be highly beneficial for running his own business in Serbia:

I had the opportunity, through the company, to go to additional training, since it had its own academy, according to their needs, and you also could choose what you would do yourself. I had that opportunity for lean production and win supply chain training. It was interesting to me. Some things can be applied in our country, and some things cannot be applied even in them, in those developed countries. I applied lean production at us. I initially had a problem with some of my colleagues from the cooperative, that they did not understand it. They didn't see the purpose of it. Later they understood and it turned out to be very useful. (Alen, Jabukovac village)

### The Development of Returnee Entrepreneurship

One of the most successful examples of opportunity-driven entrepreneurship in our sample is an interviewee from the village of Kobišnica, who established a company producing ribbed pipes for electrical installations. He spent his working life in Switzerland, employed by a company specializing in electrical installations. His son also moved to Switzerland after finishing technical high school in Negotin and found employment in the same field. After retiring, on his brother's initiative, our interviewee recognized a gap in the Swiss market and decided, together with his son and other relatives, to establish a factory in his village:

In that factory, we saw what they use and what they need. My son and our cousin in Switzerland have a store that sells those pipes. We all sat down, and my brother said – why don't you make them, since you're already in the business and selling pipes. We agreed that we would all invest and start. You get what God gives you. If you lose – you lose, but you didn't gamble, you tried. And it worked out. (Saša, Kobišnica)

Since 2009, this factory in Kobišnica has been producing ribbed pipes for insulation and exporting them to Switzerland, where they are sold by the interviewee's son to companies that require these pipes for their business. After the success of his first company, this interlocutor went on to open two more

businesses in Negotinska Krajina. The second venture, NTS Food, is dedicated to the cultivation and sale of pome fruits, with orchards located in the village of Bukovče, spanning 14 hectares. His third company, NTS Elektro, specializes in designing and drafting electrical installation plans, operating not only in Serbia but also transnationally, exporting services to Switzerland.

Several of our interviewees reactivated old family businesses upon their return to Serbia, but particularly noteworthy are those who incorporated skills gained abroad into the reactivated businesses. One example is “Appletown”, an herb production company. Having spent his childhood with his grandparents, the owner of this company was frequently involved in the processes of herb production and procurement:

My grandfather was one of the first herb buyers in Yugoslavia. He worked for Krka in Slovenia, for some Italians... and I literally grew up with that. Really, 40-50% of the village lived off what my grandfather procured from them. I grew up surrounded by that, and it had a huge impact on the people in the village at that time. (Alen, Jabukovac)

It was precisely family heritage and village tradition – in the sense that the owner was aware that knowledge of cultivating and processing medicinal herbs was a traditional skill in this settlement – that prompted him to reactivate the business. As mentioned earlier, this entrepreneur introduced new work systems and skills that he acquired while working in Austria. These skills primarily relate to production organization, work scheduling, and collaboration models with business partners.

*The dominant sectors* in which businesses in our sample operate are services, hospitality, agriculture, fruit growing, and the production of various parts and equipment for industry and construction. These activities are directly linked to local resources and needs, emphasizing, on the one hand, the importance of the local context in returnee business development, while, on the other hand, being adapted to the markets with which the companies collaborate.

*The geographic distribution* of the businesses shows that most are in rural and village areas of Negotinska Krajina, which are less developed in terms of infrastructure. Only one business is situated in the urban area of the town of Negotin. All businesses are located on their owners' estates, and this concentration in rural areas highlights the challenges returnees face, particularly in terms of logistics and solving infrastructural difficulties. It also reveals the potential returnees see in developing these areas.

*The initial economic capital* that helped returnee entrepreneurs start their businesses was unequivocally earned abroad, either through the direct work and savings of our interviewees or through their parents, who assisted them in starting their businesses. The owner of an aluminium joinery production and installation company from Kobišnica points out that the success of starting the

business in 1990 was due to the capital his parents earned while working in Germany: "...Thanks to my parents, they gave me the initial capital to buy machines and get the business going. They earned all that in Germany" (Vojislav, Kobišnica). The significance of foreign capital in starting businesses is also emphasized by the owner of a hospitality company, who stated, "We didn't build this from the work here, we built it with capital from abroad" (Violeta, Negotin).

Our interviewees mostly did not receive or seek *state assistance* when starting their businesses, often fearing they would later owe favours to the political elite. The high level of bribery and corruption in Serbia clearly explains this stereotypical perception among our interviewees.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, the issue of bribery and corruption in the context of return migration is an intriguing yet often overlooked area of research in academic studies (Paasche 2022). However, two interviewees did take advantage of state incentives. One example is the "Reggina" factory from Jabukovac, which used a returnee program to import machines from abroad with tax relief: "My mother, as a returnee, had a limit for customs exemptions, so we imported machines that way, but she didn't even use the full limit" (Jovan, Jabukovac). Another example is the rural cooperative "Primula Veris" from the same village, which participated in regional development agency programs and received grants for business development: "We participated in the '500 Cooperatives in 500 Villages' project. We got a grant of 64,000 euros in machinery. Then we bought combine harvesters, some machines for tea packaging, for plant processing, etc." (Tomica, Jabukovac).

The companies established by returnee entrepreneurs in Negotinska Krajina mostly fall into the category of *small and medium-sized enterprises*, employing between 10 and 70 people. Many relied on the reactivation of old family businesses, thereby reviving long-standing family economic traditions. Most of these businesses were started or reactivated in the early 2000s, which can be linked to changes in Serbia's socio-economic environment. The early 21st century in Serbia represented hope for a better future, as well as significant changes in the socio-political landscape, moving toward a democratic path. This motivated our interviewees to believe in the stabilization of Serbia, prompting many of them to relocate here. On the other hand, two interviewees started their businesses in the last five years, indicating the presence of a new wave of entrepreneurship among returnees, undoubtedly influenced by appeals and calls from local and national authorities, as well as incentives for starting new businesses in Serbia.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> According to available data, bribery and corruption rank as the second most significant social issues in the country, following unemployment. See more: [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnmbnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://seldi.net/fileadmin/public/PDF/Publications/CAR\\_Serbia/CAR\\_Serbia\\_RS\\_final.pdf](https://efaidnbmnmbnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://seldi.net/fileadmin/public/PDF/Publications/CAR_Serbia/CAR_Serbia_RS_final.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> For example, the government agency *Tačka povratka* (*The point of return*) was established in Serbia in 2020, which set itself the goal of supporting returnees who decide to pursue business ventures or scientific and professional careers in Serbia. Although the

Our interviewees either started or reactivated their businesses immediately upon returning to Serbia, while some began operating their businesses while still living abroad. These findings point to the remarkable proactivity of our target group, with the trend of starting businesses immediately upon return indicating a high level of readiness to invest the knowledge, resources, and experience gained abroad into the local community. Those respondents who decided to establish businesses while still living abroad managed them remotely, using transnational business strategies: “We worked remotely from abroad for a long time. I would often come here before we moved. We would spend a month here and a month in Austria.” (Dejan, village of Rečka). However, over time, they realized that being physically close to their business was essential for effective management: “...at some point, we had to make a decision about where we would live and what we would do.” These experiences highlight the importance of being present in the local community and personally involved in the day-to-day operations, especially for smaller businesses. As other interviewees pointed out, “It’s a business where you need to be involved at every step, from production to processing and presentation. It’s not just about being the boss and letting the business run itself” (Dragana, Rečka). Their return was also part of their business strategy, as they moved to Serbia specifically for business purposes, aiming to expand or stabilize their operations.

### (Re)Integration of the Returnees-Entrepreneurs

We believe that the *reintegration process* into the local community is crucial for the return of our target group, as the community has significantly changed socially, economically, and even culturally during their time abroad. For this reason, we view reintegration as the process of reincluding individuals in the everyday life of the community. By reintegrating, returnees not only become part of the local community’s daily life again, but they also ensure the smooth operation and further development of their businesses. However, this process is not the same for all returnees, and it largely depends on the length of time spent abroad, the degree of integration into the foreign community where they lived, and the conditions they encounter upon returning to Serbia. Another factor that can decrease the reintegration process is the high expectations returnees set for

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official data of this agency is not available, on their website they occasionally publish the experiences of returnees as part of a podcast (see <https://tackapovratka.rs/>). In 2020, Serbia also introduced tax incentives in the form of paying up to 70% reduced taxes and contributions for the employment of returnees from the diaspora, which are part of the measures for the development of an innovative economy (<https://www.paragraf.rs/dnevne-vesti/030320/030320-vest16.html>). e

the local environment, often comparing Serbia to more developed Western European countries where they spent a significant part of their lives.

Our interlocutors do not face significant issues with reintegration into the local community. Economic reintegration does not present a problem in this case, as returnees come back with savings from abroad or foreign pensions, while in Serbia they own properties and houses built by their ancestors. Cultural and social integration also poses no challenges. Our interlocutors are familiar with the socio-cultural context, speak Serbian fluently, and are well accepted by the local population, particularly because a significant share of the local community has migration experience. This has created a true “culture of migration” (Massey et al. 1993), or a “migration chain” (Anghel 2024), which increases understanding due to shared experiences.

The challenges faced by returnee-entrepreneurs in Negotinska Krajina are more technical in nature and often affect the operation of their businesses, which indirectly influences their daily lives. As Anastasia Christou observes in her research, returnees find themselves caught between “what I want–what I am used to” and “what I found–what I cannot get used to” (Christou 2006, 131). In other words, returnees must, to some extent, make compromises and adjust their needs, attitudes, and behaviours (Christou 2006, 217).

The underdevelopment of local infrastructure is the first major issue hindering returnees’ entrepreneurial activities. Our respondents pointed out the problem of local roads that have not been maintained for a long time and are difficult to travel on. Additionally, most villages in Negotinska Krajina lack proper water supply and sewage systems, which poses significant challenges not only for factory operations but also for daily life. Another challenge affecting factory operations is the irregular distribution of electricity in villages around Negotin. Frequent power outages have had devastating effects on uninterrupted operations and the financial gains of returnee-entrepreneurs:

In the beginning, we didn’t always have electricity. Whenever someone at the electricity distribution office felt like it, they would turn off the power from Negotin. One year, some idiot decided to cut the power every day at 8:05. Just like that, my machines would stop as soon as there was no power. By the time I cleaned the machines, everything hardened quickly... Many times, the power went out while I was sleeping at night. In the morning... it was a disaster. (Saša, village of Kobišnica)

Another significant challenge for returnee-entrepreneurs is the current demographic structure of the population in Negotinska Krajina. Intense emigration and low natural population growth have affected the region’s demographics, with the majority of the population now older and inactive, that is, retired. Therefore, it is challenging for our interviewees to find suitable labour, as well as workers interested in the type of work they do:

When we started, there were plenty of young people. Now, all the young people are gone. But even with the ones who stayed, it's hard to work. You know how it is with kids, they go out at night, they go to clubs, and then they come in tired... they don't have a work ethic. But we managed somehow. But then they left for abroad again, and only the old people are left... (Saša, village of Kobišnica)

Entrepreneurs often face issues with government administration, which is either inefficient or simply lacks the necessary knowledge to assist them at the moment. Returnees frequently mention the problem of lengthy bureaucratic procedures, especially regarding personal document processing:

When we came here for our ID cards, we waited in line for 5-6 hours before we got in and were seen... then it took another half an hour... My grandson said: 'Grandpa, now that we've submitted this, I'm not coming back!' What is this, he said. In Switzerland, you have an appointment, you come at your scheduled time, and in 5, 10, 15 minutes tops, you're done. What is this?! It's ridiculous! (Goran, village of Samarinovac)

Another issue with the administration is that the staff often lack sufficient knowledge about the system and procedures, even when they are well-designed. Our interlocutors frequently cite state administration employees as a major obstacle, while also pointing out that there are not enough employees in such positions. A notable example is a respondent from Jabukovac, whose mother had problems with double taxation. According to Serbian law, as an Austrian pensioner, she was not required to pay additional contributions. However, due to mistakes made by the tax administration, she regularly received notices for unpaid taxes:

We had serious problems and misunderstandings with the local tax office. I had to prove in court that my mother didn't have to pay contributions because she's already a pensioner. We invoked the convention between Serbia and Austria. I proved the injustice, but I was left approx. 3300 euros poorer at the time. The only satisfaction was when they said: 'Sir, thanks to you, we realized we had been misinterpreting the law, causing harm to both you and others.' (Jovan, village of Jabukovac)

For our entire sample, the most prominent issue remains the underdeveloped infrastructure system in this part of Serbia, which they compare to the more developed Western European countries. Interestingly, this often leads to a new form of nostalgia directed towards the host countries where they once dreamed of returning to Serbia. In these moments, they frequently point out that in those countries, there were never power outages, breakdowns in the healthcare system, or bank failures:

There, the power never went out. You don't know what happens when the power goes out. Also, in 15 years, I never heard of a bank's system being down.

It doesn't exist. There's no such thing as the system is down. But here, every other day the system is down, or the power goes out. What does it mean that your system is down? The system crashed, and now the bank isn't working, and you're waiting. (Violeta, city of Negotin)

There, you book an appointment, go to the doctor, and everything is done. Here, it's total confusion. Even when you book an appointment, you still wait for a long time. And private care is... expensive and uncertain. There have been some cases that are strange to us; there's no control here at all. (Miroslav, village of Prahovo)

## The Influence of the Returnees-Entrepreneurs on the Local Environment

In this section, we examine the resources brought back by returnee entrepreneurs, which are often interpreted through the lens of the migration–development nexus (Van Hear and Nyberg Sørensen 2003). However, rather than adopting this developmentalist framework, we shift the analytical focus toward the concept of social change, emphasizing how returnees' actions reshape everyday life through informal practices, values, and relationships.

Undoubtedly, the most significant transnational resource that returnees have transferred to Serbia and mobilized for their businesses is money. The entire economic foundation for launching all the businesses in our sample was acquired abroad, as our data shows. In addition, by operating in the local environment, returnee entrepreneurs further strengthen the economic capacities of local government by employing workers and paying taxes and contributions. Each company in our sample employs, on average, between 10 and 70 workers, thereby creating employment opportunities for a substantial number of local residents.

Returnees also invest their own economic capital in the development of villages and infrastructure, organizing collective efforts to address current problems. An example of this is our respondents from the village of Kobišnica, who, in cooperation with other entrepreneurs and returnees, invested significant funds in the restoration of local infrastructure and even public facilities such as the local clinic and community centre:

To pave this road, I contributed 2.500 euros, and the total cost was 10.500 euros. Most of it came from people living abroad. Everyone gave money from their own pocket. For the village water system that was built, each household with members abroad contributed between 500 € and 1.000 € to create the village water supply. They have invested in everything that was needed here. (Mirko, Kobišnica)

We also renovated the health clinic, contributing 50 € or 100 € as needed. The community centre, the football field as well, to keep the 'Sloga' football club running here. Each of our visits cost us between 50 € and 100 € to support the village's renewal. (Vaskrsa, Kobišnica)

As for social capital, we primarily focused on the networks of relationships, connections, and acquaintances within our target group. What stands out in their business activities are the contacts they established abroad, through which they create sales channels, acquire new clients, or engage in various collaborations. On the other hand, local networks are equally important, as through them they employ workers, often sell their products and services, and socialize. In the village of Kobišnica we documented an interesting practice of returnees forming the Association of Active Returnees of Kobišnica. The key aspect of their activities is networking and strengthening social ties among local returnees, providing mutual support and fostering stronger integration into the local community through joint initiatives and gatherings:

They socialize with peers who are also returnees from abroad. They go on trips together, celebrate birthdays together. They have their own space in the centre and gather there. They play dominoes, chess, chat, bring food and drinks... They spend about an hour or two there several times a week, enjoying their free time. (Daniela, Kobišnica)

This is a new form of social gathering, which had not existed in these villages for a long time, given that most of the population lives and works abroad. Returnees have thus initiated the reactivation of social life in some villages around Negotin, revitalizing the community by creating spaces for mutual interactions, cooperation, and the renewal of local social ties. A similar initiative for organizing returnee entrepreneurs was observed in the village of Miloševo. The returnees from this community launched a campaign to raise funds for the renovation of a local road; however, they also considered the broader social activities of returnees. As a result, they invested the funds in constructing a pedestrian pathway to Negotin and renovating a sports field. Additionally, one of our interlocutors in the village of Jabukovac initiated the formation of a village cooperative, thereby re-engaging the local population in the traditional craft of medicinal herb cultivation, a skill deeply rooted in the region.

In the analysis of meso-level changes, it is important to include aspects that go beyond economic capital and concern the personal satisfaction of returnee entrepreneurs derived from their engagement. Such a people-centred approach “allows appreciating that return migration, and entrepreneurial investments are about much more than just the pursuit of economic goals” (Sinatti 2019, 614). Our respondents often emphasize that fulfilling personal satisfaction plays a key role in their entrepreneurial activities. Many returnee entrepreneurs feel deeply fulfilled and proud of the success of their business ventures, recognizing the value of their hard work and the significance it holds for the local community, aware that their efforts have a multifaceted impact not only on the economy but also on the social and cultural capital of the local area:

I've paid a lot through taxes. We work so hard and pay a lot of taxes and contributions for both of us and our workers. The state collects that and can do something with it. This business wasn't built easily. It's all been done with hard work. The whole family has been working for 100 years to build this. And that's our satisfaction and privilege, having had the chance to be there (in Germany) and build this here" (Violeta, city of Negotin)

When the respondent says that the whole family has been working for 100 years, she is emphasizing the amount of effort that has been invested across generations in their business endeavours. Her grandparents were successful farmers in the village of Bukovče near Negotin, and her father inherited their business, later developing the first carnation plantations in Negotinska Krajina. In 1986, he moved to Germany, where, after briefly working in construction, he established his own construction company. Upon returning from Germany after 35 years of work, he reactivated the agricultural and carnation business. Our respondent opened her hotel in Negotin, beginning her own entrepreneurial career.

Finally, the returnee entrepreneurs from our sample aspire to serve as role models for others in their local communities, in various ways. One of the most dominant narratives among our respondents is that the local population lacks sufficiently developed work habits and ethics. In one of our previous studies, we highlighted the "missionary role" that returnees recognize in themselves.<sup>28</sup> This role is often assumed by those who have lived abroad long enough to acquire new knowledge, skills, and habits. As shown by previous research, they often try to teach their fellow citizens how to work more efficiently and profitably, to transfer their knowledge and experiences, and to stimulate local life in the village (Antonijević and Rašić 2022, 1255). However, in previous research locations, such efforts by returnees to influence changes in their local communities were sometimes met with negative reactions. On the one hand, the local population viewed these efforts as lectures, while, on the other hand, returnees saw the locals as conservative, and lacking work habits (Antonijević and Rašić 2022, 1255).

The examples from Negotinska Krajina diverge significantly from these previous findings, indicating the ability and proactivity of returnee entrepreneurs in mobilizing the local population to improve conditions in their communities.<sup>29</sup> However, it is crucial to emphasize once more that the results of our research

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<sup>28</sup> Similar situations, where returnees strive to influence change not only in their local communities but also among their compatriots, have been documented in other, significantly distinct cultural and socio-political contexts as well (see Kleist 2015; Eriksson-Baaz 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Guided by these results and other indicators, we are continuing our research, with plans for further investigations in Negotinska Krajina, as well as expanding the scope of the study to other parts of the neighbouring Braničevo district – specifically in the

reflect the specific situations within the particular villages and individuals we interviewed. In this regard, we believe that these changes stemmed from the initiatives of returnees and do not represent a generalized phenomenon throughout the Negotinska Krajina. To draw broader conclusions, more comprehensive research in this area is necessary.

Often, the state and the place of return determine the opportunities for business development, as well as the dynamics of the changes that will occur. This was evidenced by our previous research in other regions of Serbia (Antoniјеvić, Banić Grubišić and Rašić 2020; Antoniјеvić and Rašić 2022), and similar interpretations are offered by other researchers. In the case of Turkey, Kiliñç and King present the example of Turkish-German returnees who return to Turkey, choosing locations that are attractive for business opportunities, showing that the relationship between returnees and social change is reciprocal (Kiliñç and King 2019, 193).

Certainly, the state and the locality play a significant role in shaping the economic and political conditions in the place of return, and accordingly, returnee investments are framed within this context: "...the structural and institutional conditions they set may sustain or hinder the productive endeavours of return migrants" (Sinatti 2019, 353). However, our findings from Negotinska Krajina point to a specific case where the returnees, despite being aware of all limitations, actively shape their local environment. They often manage to overcome structural barriers, adapting to local challenges and leveraging their transnational experience and networks to improve their businesses, thereby also enhancing the local community.

## Conclusion

This paper provides an analysis based on qualitative research conducted on the return of the 1.5 generation of migrants, focusing on their migratory experiences, the economic, social, and cultural capital they have accumulated abroad, and the entrepreneurial practices through which they influence their local environments upon return. All our interlocutors voluntarily left Serbia – though often under the pressures of adverse socio-political conditions – and returned voluntarily. For each of them, Negotinska Krajina represents a familiar social world, not only as their place of birth and childhood but as a space they continuously maintained ties with through periodic visits and trans-local engagement.

Rather than offering statistical generalizations or macro-level impact assessments, our study adopts a qualitative and micro-analytical lens, privileging the

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municipalities of Petrovac na Mlavi and Veliko Gradište, where we have also identified a significant number of returnee entrepreneurs.

narratives and lived experiences of returnee entrepreneurs. While the number of interviewees – 13 returnee entrepreneurs and 5 additional returnees – may seem modest, in the context of Negotin municipality's broader demographic and socio-economic conditions (low population density, high average age, significant emigration, and infrastructural neglect), these individual stories provide important insights into processes of localized social transformation. Our research covered only a selection of villages in the Negotinska Krajina region, and we therefore interpret our findings as reflective of specific localities where returnees act as catalysts of change. Improved infrastructure and more responsive local governance would likely enhance the impact of such returnee initiatives and further support bottom-up revitalization.

Our focus on returnees who established businesses in rural Eastern Serbia allowed us to explore their motivations, transnational skills, and visions for the future. These individuals are not merely economic actors but also agents of cultural and social negotiation, shaping their surroundings in line with the knowledge, work ethics, and expectations formed abroad. The findings of this study indicate that returnee entrepreneurs can play a significant role in fostering locally situated social change – often independently of formal institutional structures. Their agency is embedded in community relationships, informed by transnational experiences, and oriented toward reconstructing everyday life in environments marked by depopulation, economic stagnation, and institutional withdrawal. Our findings resonate with recent critiques of the migration–development framework, which emphasize that returnees' contributions should not be measured solely in terms of economic output or institutional effectiveness. As Grabowska and White argue, the impacts of migration are often shaped through informal, relational, and locally embedded mechanisms that unfold over time (White and Grabowska 2019). In line with this perspective, our study demonstrates that returnee entrepreneurs contribute to context-specific forms of social change – reworking local norms, practices, and expectations in ways that may not align with top-down policy goals, but are nevertheless transformative for the communities in which they live and work.

By framing our research within the lens of social change rather than development, we capture the complex, layered, and often informal ways in which return migration transforms the social fabric of rural communities. This perspective foregrounds returnees not only as investors or entrepreneurs, but as cultural intermediaries and agents of change who enact forms of reimagining and reinhabiting their home regions.

This study therefore offers several key contributions. Empirically, it provides a detailed account of returnee entrepreneurship in one of Serbia's most underdeveloped rural regions, expanding the anthropological literature on return migration with grounded insights from a context that remains under-researched.

By focusing on members of the 1.5 generation who return during their economically active years, the research challenges dominant narratives that frame return primarily in terms of retirement, failure, or familial obligation.

Theoretically, it contributes to the scholarship on the migration–social change nexus by demonstrating how transnational experiences, social remittances, and personal motivations intersect to shape both entrepreneurial practices and broader community-level transformations. Through a micro– and meso-level lens, we foreground the agency of returnees as drivers of socially meaningful and contextually embedded change.

Methodologically, the paper underscores the importance of narrative inquiry and qualitative ethnography in capturing the lived complexities, aspirations, and contradictions of returnee entrepreneurship – particularly in regions where quantitative data is scarce, and official records often overlook informal and emergent forms of social action.

Finally, the study has relevant implications for policy. In contexts where return is predominantly interpreted through an economic lens, our findings suggest that sustainable return and rural revitalization depend less on formal state programs, and more on individual initiative, community embeddedness, and infrastructural support. The returnee entrepreneur thus emerges not merely as an economic agent, but as a cultural intermediary and a catalyst for social change.

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#### *Transnacionalni povratak i lokalna transformacija: Studija slučaja povratnika preduzetnika u Negotinskoj krajini*

U ovom radu se bavimo povratnicima preduzetnicima u Istočnoj Srbiji, s posebnim fokusom na pripadnike takozvane 1.5 generacije migranata – osobe koje su detinjstvo provele u Srbiji, a potom u adolescentnom dobu migrirale u inostranstvo kod svojih roditelja. Njihov povratak u Srbiju obuhvata složen proces prenosa resursa i aktivnog delovanja u lokalnim sredinama. U istraživanju se oslanjamo na transnacionalnu paradigmu i kvalitativnu analizu podataka na mikro i mezo nivou, zasnovanu na etnografskom terenskom radu i polustrukturiranim intervjuima, sprovedenim u Negotinu i njegovoj okolini – području poznatom kao Negotinska krajina. To je granični region Srbije sa dugom emigrantskom istorijom koji danas karakterišu ekonomska zapuštenost, izražen demografski pad, ostarelo stanovništvo, slaba naseljenost i loša infrastruktura. Upravo zbog višedecenijske marginalizovanosti, Negotinska krajina predstavlja izuzetno pogodan teren za uočavanje i razumevanje mikrotransformacija koje povratnici iniciraju, kako kroz formalne preduzetničke aktivnosti, tako i kroz prenos društvenih praksi, normi i vrednosti.

Istraživačka pitanja usmerena su na to kako povratnici narativno oblikuju svoje migracione putanje i iskustva povratka, kako interpretiraju lokalne izazove, kakve strategije reintegracije razvijaju i na koji način koriste ekonomski, socijalni i kulturni kapital stečen u inostranstvu. Poseban akcenat stavljen je na

koncept „društvenih doznaka“ – prenos ideja, normi, radne etike, odnosa prema zajednici i znanjima koja su deo svakodnevnih praksi oblikovanih migracionim i transnacionalnim iskustvom. Povratnici u ovom kontekstu ne funkcionišu samo kao akteri koji ekonomski doprinose lokalnoj zajednici, već i kao posrednici između dva društvena sistema – oni su nosioci znanja i navika koje dugoročno doprinose razvoju lokalnog života.

Iako već više od decenije postoji nacionalna strategija za podsticanje povratka visokoobrazovanih migranata i potencijalnih preduzetnika, u praksi su institucionalne barijere, birokratija, nepouzdana infrastruktura i demografski pad faktori koji ovakve inicijative, pa i sam povratak, čine težim. Ipak, mnogi povratnici pronalaze načine da te prepreke prevaziđu, oslanjajući se na transnacionalne mreže, znanje, porodične resurse i ličnu motivaciju. Njihova preduzeća zapošljavaju lokalno stanovništvo, oživljavaju stare porodične poslove, a pojedini učestvuju i u obnovi lokalne infrastrukture i društvenog života kroz donacije, udruživanje i lični angažman.

Na kraju, ovde osporavamo pojednostavljene, a često dominantne diskurse o direktnoj vezi između povratnih migracija i društvenog razvoja na makro nivou, ukazujući na veći značaj lokalno ukorenjenih, društveno posredovanih i kulturno specifičnih procesa promena. Umesto linearnog ekonomskog razvoja, povratak ovih aktera generiše složene i često neformalne transformacije, poput promena u načinu rada, mobilisanju zajednice u zajedničkom delovanju i svakodnevnim interakcijama. Na ovaj način otvaramo prostor za dublje razumevanje povratničkih migracija kao društvenog procesa, gde su upravo povratnici ključni u pokretanju promena u lokalnim zajednicama iz kojih potiču.

**Ključne reči:** povratne migracije, povratnici preduzetnici, 1.5 generacija, pristup usredsređen na aktere, Negotinska krajina, Srbija

*Retour transnational et transformation locale:  
Étude de cas d'entrepreneurs revenants dans la Krajina de Negotin*

Dans le présent travail nous discutons sur les entrepreneurs revenants en Serbie Orientale, avec une attention particulière consacrée aux représentants de ce qu'on appelle la génération 1.5 de migrants – des personnes qui ont passé leur enfance en Serbie, et qui ensuite, dans l'adolescence, ont émigré à l'étranger chez leurs parents. Leur retour en Serbie comprend un processus complexe de transmission de ressources et d'action énergique dans les milieux locaux. Dans cette recherche nous nous appuyons sur le paradigme transnational et l'analyse quantitative des données aux niveaux micro et méso, basé sur le travail de terrain ethnographique et des entretiens semi-structurés, menés à Negotin et dans ses alentours – la région connue comme la Krajina de Negotin. C'est une région frontalière de la Serbie avec une longue histoire d'émigration, aujourd'hui

caractérisée par l'abandon économique, une chute démographique drastique, une population vieillie, un peuplement faible et une mauvaise infrastructure. C'est justement en raison d'une marginalisation qui dure depuis plusieurs décennies que la Krajina de Negotin représente un terrain particulièrement convenable pour relever et comprendre les microtransformations qu'initient les revenants, aussi bien à travers les activités formelles entrepreneuriales, qu'à travers la transmission des pratiques, normes et valeurs sociales.

Les questions de recherche sont orientées vers la manière dont les revenants façonnent narrativement leurs trajectoires migratoires et leurs expériences du retour, comment ils interprètent les défis locaux, quelles stratégies de réintégration ils développent et de quelle manière ils utilisent le capital économique, social et culturel acquis à l'étranger. Un accent particulier est mis sur le concept des „apports sociaux“ – la transmission des idées, des normes, de l'éthique du travail, le rapport envers la communauté et les connaissances qui font partie des pratiques quotidiennes façonnées par l'expérience migratoire et transnationale. Les revenants ne fonctionnent pas seulement dans ce contexte comme des agents qui contribuent économiquement à la communauté locale, mais aussi comme des médiateurs entre deux systèmes sociaux – ils sont porteurs des connaissances et des habitudes qui à long terme contribuent au développement de la vie locale.

**Mots clés:** migrations de retour, entrepreneurs revenants, génération 1.5, approche concentrée sur les agents, Krajina de Negotin, Serbie

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