# Circular Migration without Return Infrastructure: Policy and Social-Partner Sensemaking of Labour-Market Governance in a Developing Context

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***Abstract.*** *The study examines how Macedonian policymakers, social partners, and labour-market intermediaries understand links among emigration, skill shortages, and circular migration. Reflexive thematic analysis of expert interviews, supplemented by a review of national policy documents, shows that migration is framed as a governance challenge. Although circular migration may enable knowledge transfer, remittances, diaspora networks, and return entrepreneurship, participants question its feasibility under institutional conditions. This circularity paradox reflects a return infrastructure deficit encompassing data, coordination, returnee support, skill recognition, employer matching, and trust. This context-bound sensitising concept clarifies when mobility may become developmental in migrant-origin and EU-candidate economies.*

**Keywords.** circular migration; skill shortages; labour-market governance

## 1 Introduction

Migration is often framed as a loss for small and peripheral labour markets. Yet the key issue is not only that people leave, but whether institutions can transform mobility into return, circulation and development. This question is especially important for North Macedonia, where outward migration, skill shortages and labour-market mismatch increasingly intersect with the country's EU-oriented reform agenda. Thus, the challenge gains a new dimension despite its demographic nature, looking into how the labour-market system can create credible pathways for return, reintegration and skill circulation.

Migration-development research has long debated whether emigration produces brain drain or whether it can generate remittances, knowledge transfer and brain circulation (De Haas, 2010; Batista et al., 2025). Return migration can contribute to development when migrants accumulate human capital abroad and are able to use it productively after returning (Dustmann et al., 2011). However, this positive scenario depends on more than individual willingness to return, thus requiring institutions able to recognise foreign-acquired skills, connect returnees with suitable opportunities, involve employers and social partners, and build trust in domestic labour-market prospects.

Terminologically, we use circular migration for repeated cross-border movement, return migration for relocation to the country of origin, skilled return for return with transferable human capital, retention for remaining in the domestic labour market, reintegration for post-return incorporation into work and institutions, and repatriation only for state-facilitated return.

This institutional dimension remains insufficiently explored in the context of EU-candidate and Western Balkan labour markets. Existing studies have examined emigration, youth migration aspirations, remittances, skills mismatch and brain drain in the region (King & Oruc, 2020; Peovski et al., 2026). However, less is known about how policymakers, social partners and labour-market intermediaries understand the feasibility of circular migration in a context marked by low wages, fragmented coordination, weak institutional trust and limited evidence on returnees.

Considering this, our research addresses that gap through a qualitative study of policymakers, social partners and labour-market intermediaries in North Macedonia. Thus, the study posits the following research questions: (RQ1) How do policymakers, social partners and labour-market intermediaries in North Macedonia frame the relationship among emigration, skill shortages and labour-market change? (RQ2) Which institutional conditions do policymakers, social partners and labour-market intermediaries in North Macedonia perceive as enabling or constraining return, reintegration and circular migration?

At the core of the study is a provisional interpretation of what we describe as a circularity paradox. Stakeholders recognise the potential value of

migration through foreign work experience, remittances, diaspora networks and knowledge transfer, while simultaneously questioning whether circular migration is realistic under current institutional and labour-market conditions. Their accounts point to both shortages of workers as well as perceived gaps in data, coordination, trust, qualification recognition and return-oriented policy design. We use the term return infrastructure deficit to organise these interconnected gaps and to describe the distance between the aspiration for circular migration and the institutional arrangements available to support return, reintegration and skill circulation.

This formulation is offered as a context-bound sensitising concept, whose contribution is to direct analytical attention from brain drain as human-capital loss toward the arrangements through which foreign-acquired skills, resources and networks might be recognised and absorbed after return. Its potential transferability is most plausible in small migrant-origin economies experiencing outward mobility, skill shortages, EU-linked skill portability and fragmented institutional coordination.

# 2 Theoretical Background

We build our study on three strands of migration and labour-market theory. The first concerns the conditions under which return migration becomes sustainable. Return is not simply the opposite of emigration, nor does it automatically follow from the accumulation of savings or skills abroad. Namely, earlier literature distinguishes between migrants who leave permanently to maximise lifetime earnings and those who migrate temporarily as part of household strategies to overcome constraints in the origin country (Constant & Massey, 2002). More recent perspectives add that return depends on both individual intentions and preparedness, or, in other words, the extent to which migrants and origin-country institutions are ready for reintegration (Engbersen & Snel, 2025). Thus, the modern literature views the migrants' return as a more structured social and institutional process.

The second literature strand concerns "what" migrants bring back. The value of migration is often assessed through remittances and formal human capital, but migrants may also transfer ideas, expectations, norms, work practices and professional standards. We apply the concept of social remittances here because it shows that migration can reshape origin societies through the circulation of knowledge and behavioural repertoires, not only through money (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). However, these transfers are not self-executing as skills and ideas become developmental when local labour markets, employers and institutions are able to recognise, absorb and use them.

Additionally, the study considers the literature on mobility regimes and labour-market governance. Mobility is not equally available to all workers, nor is it governed only by states. Instead, it is shaped by employers, employment agencies, social partners, international organisations, qualification systems and intermediaries. In this sense, mobility-regime theory highlights that movement is enabled, constrained and valued differently across groups and contexts (Schiller & Salazar, 2016). Similarly, research on the governance of return shows that return policies are embedded in broader institutional and political arrangements and do not function as isolated policy measures (Koch, 2017). We argue that in the context of labour markets in Central and Eastern Europe, social partners and intermediaries are particularly relevant because temporary and cross-border labour mobility can reconfigure their role in worker protection, skills matching and policy coordination (Danaj & Meszmann, 2024).

Xiang and Lindquist (2014) define migration infrastructure as systematically interlinked technologies, institutions and actors that facilitate and condition mobility. Adapting their commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian and social dimensions, we define return infrastructure as a return-facing configuration of employer matching, recognition rules, data systems, reintegration support and diaspora networks. Therefore, a return infrastructure deficit is relational, not reflecting an absence of all policy, but weak linkage among functions needed to foster post-return labour-market incorporation.

# 3 Methodology

We adopted an abductive qualitative research design based on nine semi-structured expert interviews with Macedonian institutional actors. The unit of interest was institutional sensemaking rather than the prevalence of individual attitudes or migrant behaviour. A role-based purposive sampling strategy was therefore used to recruit participants with direct responsibility for, or operational knowledge of, employment policy, skills development, employer representation, labour-market matching, qualification recognition or migration governance (Palinkas et al., 2015). Eligibility was based on the participant's institutional position and access to relevant policy or implementation knowledge rather than on organisational tenure alone.

The sample comprised four policymaking or policy-facing actors (PM1-PM4) and five social partners or labour-market intermediaries (SP1-SP5). Together, they represented government ministries and bodies, public agencies, a chamber or employer-facing institution, an employers' organisation, a regional migration initiative, a development NGO and a university-based professional training and career centre. Participants mainly occupied senior or middle-level positions and had up to 20 years of organisational

experience. This composition (Table 1 in the Appendix) was intended to capture perspectives across policy formulation, implementation, employer demand, skills provision and labour-market intermediation.

Potential participants were approached by email between May and October 2025. Interviews, with an average duration of 60 minutes, were conducted in person in the Macedonian language. A common interview guide covered labour-market changes, emigration pressures, skill shortages, employment measures, the roles of social partners and intermediaries, qualification recognition, and mechanisms for matching labour supply with demand. The semi-structured format ensured coverage of these common topics while allowing follow-up questions. Participants received information about the study and provided written informed consent. With their permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and all materials were anonymised. All interviews were conducted by three members of the research team, who afterward translated the transcripts into English. Quoted passages were checked against the Macedonian originals by a separate research team member. Ethical approval was granted by the host university (No. 05-3157/1, 21 May 2025).

The adequacy of the nine-interview sample was assessed in relation to the study's bounded analytical purpose and the information power of the cases (Malterud et al., 2016). The study addresses a focused set of research questions, so the participants were selected for highly specific institutional knowledge, and the interviews covered complementary positions across policy design and labour-market implementation. These characteristics enabled an intensive comparison of recurring themes and points of disagreement. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), we do not treat saturation as a fixed or fully objective endpoint because themes are interpretively constructed rather than simply discovered in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Instead, we regard the material as thematically sufficient for developing a provisional account of institutional sensemaking in this bounded setting. As such, the sample is not intended to exhaust all institutional perspectives, establish the prevalence of particular views or represent the experiences of migrants and returnees.

The interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) RTA, following a recursive analysis approach. First, the research team read the complete interview material repeatedly and prepared brief case summaries and analytical memos. Initial coding remained close to respondents' accounts and captured statements concerning emigration, labour shortages, policy measures, return, qualification recognition, institutional coordination and trust. In a second cycle, related codes were compared across cases and stakeholder groups and organised into candidate themes. Candidate themes were then reviewed against the full dataset for internal coherence, distinctiveness, relevance to the research questions, and ability to account for divergent or qualifying accounts. Analysis first proceeded inductively from participants' accounts. Emerging themes were then iteratively compared with return-migration and migration-infrastructure theory, as the mismatch between desired circularity and perceived implementation gaps prompted the interpretation of a return infrastructure deficit. We returned to the full transcripts, including divergent cases, to test and refine this explanation. This movement from observations to a theory-informed explanation constitutes the abductive element of the methodology. Eventually, the concept of return infrastructure deficit was developed during this later interpretive stage to connect several empirically identified gaps.

Coding was undertaken manually, as the primary analyst conducted the initial coding, while the co-authors reviewed the thematic structure and challenged alternative interpretations. Analytical discussions were used to refine the interpretation rather than to calculate inter-coder agreement, which would be inconsistent with the reflexive orientation of the analysis. Credibility was further supported through memo-writing, comparison across stakeholder groups, attention to divergent accounts, tracing each theme to the underlying interview material, and the use of illustrative quotations in the findings.

To distinguish perceptions from documented arrangements, we conducted a focused contextual review of the Migration Policy Resolution 2021-2025, National Employment Strategy 2021-2027 and National Youth Strategy 2023-2027 (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021; Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2021; Agency for Youth and Sport, 2022). The documents were used to verify formal provisions and stated data gaps, not implementation effectiveness, and were not coded as a second dataset.

# 4 Findings and Results

Based on the data analysis, we create several themes of policy and social-partner sensemaking related to skill shortages, brain drain and labour-market governance. They report participants' perceptions, whereas documentary observations are identified separately, and return infrastructure deficit denotes our theoretical interpretation.

*1. From unemployment to scarcity: the labour market now lacks both workers and job-ready skills.* A dominant theme across interviews is that North Macedonia's labour-market problem is no longer reflecting issues of unemployment. On the contrary, stakeholders describe a change toward labour scarcity, especially in sectors that require practical, technical or occupation-specific skills. The shortage is framed as

both quantitative in terms of not having enough people, and qualitative, or not enough workers with immediately usable competences.

"The demand for qualified labour is increasing, while the supply is decreasing." (PM2)

"[There is a shortage in the] number of people and …, skills of people who need to be in the labour market. A very large number of people who are needed in the local labour market are no longer here." (SP1)

"There is a lack of employees in certain sectors where there are gaps in terms of labour supply and demand… construction, agriculture, textile industry, tourism and hospitality… and the ICT sector." (PM4)

From this, we can deduce that these actors in the ecosystem perceive emigration as a direct pressure on labour shortages with potential implications for domestic production and service delivery.

*2. Emigration is increasingly framed as permanent exit.* Stakeholders repeatedly distinguish between temporary labour migration and what they see as a more serious pattern of permanent emigration. The language used by respondents is strong: "exodus", "epidemic" and "entire families leaving". This suggests that the circular-migration model is weakened by the perception that many migrants no longer plan to return.

"If once workers left the country with a low level of qualifications and with the possibility of ever returning, today entire families are leaving, especially young highly educated personnel." (PM3)

"What has been happening in recent years is a literal exodus, not just brain drain migration, but migration in a broader sense… we are facing permanent eviction from the country." (SP3)

"An 'epidemic' of migration is happening. Everyone goes abroad, regardless of educational profile. Even people and families who are financially well-established move out permanently." (SP5)

Subsequently, respondents also interpreted emigration as reflecting reduced confidence in domestic prospects, not wages alone.

*3. The circularity paradox of views where circular migration is desirable, but weakly evidenced and institutionally uncertain.* Respondents recognise that migration could produce benefits if migrants return with savings, knowledge, networks and entrepreneurial ideas. However, this positive interpretation is consistently conditional. Respondents presented circular migration as desirable as desirable but not yet supported by strong evidence or institutional mechanisms.

"People who go out don't all stay there. Most of them come back here and come back with ideas… They worked, saw how well it worked, made a good network there and came back here." (SP1)

"Migration is good if young people migrate for a certain period, get further education and acquire new knowledge and skills… and when they return, they contribute to the development of the national economy." (SP2)

"If young people would return to their country and take with them the experience and knowledge gained in other countries, they would certainly have benefits, but we have no data on such a trend." (PM1)

"It is still early for such processes." (SP5)

In this sense, this theme creates the central paradox of the study. On one hand, stakeholders value circulation in principle, while, on the other, they do not yet see a credible system that makes return and skill circulation likely. In other words, respondents recognise the potential benefits of migration in the form of remittances, foreign experience, new standards, networks, business ideas and possible diaspora investment. However, they also repeatedly state that circular migration is weak, rare or "too early."

The tension between accounts of increasingly permanent exit (Theme 2) and claims that many migrants return (Theme 3) is itself informative. Hence, the disagreement indicates that institutional actors lack a shared evidence base for assessing circularity, which is an informational component of the proposed deficit.

*4. Active labour-market measures exist, but they are not sufficiently targeted toward return and retention.* Interviewees frequently mention active employment measures, training schemes and the Operational Plan. Some respondents evaluate these measures positively, especially for youth employment and employability. However, others argue that the measures are unevenly evaluated, poorly targeted or insufficient for employers who primarily need workers rather than financial incentives.

"I think an evaluation should be done to see the effectiveness of these measures. Which of these measures specifically give greater results, and which ones give less results…" (SP2)

"Not very successful because the trainings are redirected to cities where there is no need for the corresponding occupations, or there are very few people who want to participate in retraining." (PM3)

"We don't need financial benefits, we need workers." (SP5)

"In the previous period, we had weak measures, and therefore it is necessary to work on their promotion and introduction of new measures that will be considered to act on several spheres in society." (PM4)

From this, we can conclude that policy activity should not be confused with policy capacity. Existing measures may support employability, but they do not yet amount to a coherent migration-retention-return strategy.

*5. Qualification frameworks are seen as useful, but also incomplete and potentially double-edged.* The National Qualifications Framework and European qualification instruments are viewed as important for recognition, transparency and labour-market matching. Yet respondents also identify implementation weaknesses, poor communication with users and the risk that internationally recognised qualifications may make outward mobility easier without improving return.

"The National Qualifications Framework [is] a great thing, but if you ask a young person in an employment office how much the National Qualifications Framework has helped you, they won't be able to say. What we lack in the country is the contact and sharing of information." (SP1)

"There were attempts to create a laboratory for the labour market… but I don't think it took off… [there is no] observatory in our country that would follow the trends and skills needs and would harmonize all this in a framework." (SP2)

"The EQF has helped increase the mobility of skilled workers… However, it also contributes even more to an increase in brain drain, as workers with EU-recognised qualifications often choose to migrate to higher-paid jobs in other EU countries." (SP4)

"It enables and facilitates the comparison and recognition of acquired qualifications… [and] creating programs according to the needs of the labour market." (PM3)

This theme shows the ambivalence of skills policy in migrant-origin countries where recognition systems can support matching and return, but respondents perceived skills portability as potentially facilitating outward mobility.

*6. Perceived gaps in return infrastructure.* Across the interviews, participants described a fragmented set of policies for facilitating return and reintegration. Their accounts identified weak data, unclear return measures, limited returnee-specific support, low institutional trust and insufficient attention to broader quality-of-life conditions.

"We have no data on whether there are measures for repatriation." (PM1)

"We have no knowledge of strategies and measures for the repatriation of qualified emigrants, only in the Youth Strategy 2023-2027, which is late in its implementation." (PM3)

"We do not have them yet, and we cannot know if they are effective." (SP2)

"I don't even see the measures at all. I have not heard that some people saw a benefit from them, so they returned to the country. Much more needs to be done so that these people feel safe to return home." (SP5)

"The return will depend on the economic policies, but also on the quality of life in the country… These policies are economic, cultural, social, legal and labour to provide opportunities for them." (PM4)

The document review qualifies participants' claims. The Migration Policy Resolution supports circular and return migration and reintegration, while acknowledging sparse data on circular and return flows, while the employment and youth strategies contain broader matching and qualification-recognition measures. Thus, participants' accounts evidence limited awareness and perceived implementation gaps, so subsequently, return infrastructure deficit is our interpretation of weak return-facing linkage across existing instruments.

In this vein, these accounts suggest that weaknesses in data, coordination, qualification recognition, employer matching, returnee-oriented support and institutional trust may combine to make return and skill circulation less credible. We use return infrastructure deficit as an interpretive label for this recurring pattern, meaning the gap between the aspiration for circular migration and the institutional capacity to make return, reintegration and skill circulation credible. At this stage, the concept summarises how the interviewed stakeholders understand these interconnected gaps; it should not be read as an independently measured institutional index or as evidence that the same configuration applies across all migrant-origin economies. Additionally, it is worth noting that stakeholders do not reject circular migration as an idea, but suggest that it cannot function without data, trust, coordination, recognition, employer matching and returnee-oriented policy design.

Moreover, respondents support cooperation with the EU, Erasmus+, IPA, ILO, EU qualification frameworks and bilateral or sectoral partnerships. However, the policymakers strongly warned against copying foreign models without adapting them to the Macedonian economic structure, institutional capacity and long-term development strategy, calling for "Europeanisation as learning, not imitation".

# 5 Discussion

The interviews suggest that institutional actors increasingly frame migration as a labour-market governance problem characterised by worker scarcity, practical skill shortages and weak retention. This framing is consistent with research on labour mobility and institutional change in Central and Eastern Europe (Danaj & Meszmann, 2024). In our case, however, this mobility is experienced asymmetrically. So, while destination economies may benefit from available labour, the situation in origin-country labour markets points to a reduced capacity to fill vacancies and retain skilled workers.

The findings reinforce the relevance of the brain-drain debate but also shows its limits. Brain drain captures the loss of human capital, yet it does not fully explain why emigration fails to become circulation. Stakeholders recognise that migration could support development through savings, experience, diaspora networks and knowledge transfer. This corresponds to work on social remittances, which shows that migrants may transfer ideas, practices, expectations and professional norms, not only money (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

Recent research also suggests that return can contribute to entrepreneurship, labour-market reintegration and institutional learning, but only when returnees are able to use their accumulated resources productively (Wahba, 2026). In our analysis, participants perceived this condition as weak,

considering that return is imagined as beneficial, but stakeholders repeatedly point to limited data, fragmented coordination, unclear repatriation measures, weak employer matching and low trust in domestic opportunities.

Namely, the study's central contribution lies in showing that North Macedonia, as a developing country in a resource-constrained context, illustrates a circularity paradox. Stakeholders support the idea of circular migration yet still perceive current arrangements as insufficient. Return-migration scholarship increasingly emphasises that return is not a single event, but a process shaped by expectations, reintegration conditions, institutional support and the possibility of re-migration (Meļķe, 2024; Schreier, 2024; Tjaden et al., 2025).

Our study extends this argument to an EU-candidate origin-country labour market by showing that the problem encompasses institutional preparedness as well. Existing employment measures, qualification frameworks and social-partner mechanisms are present, but they are not sufficiently connected into a coherent strategy for return, reintegration and skill circulation.

The interviews also highlight the ambivalent role of skills policy. Qualification frameworks, recognition systems and skills-development measures can improve transparency and labour-market matching. Yet for migrant-origin countries, they may also increase the portability of labour without guaranteeing domestic absorption. If wages, working conditions, career prospects and institutional trust remain weak, better-recognised skills may make outward mobility easier rather than making return more attractive. This supports wider arguments that migration systems are shaped by mobility regimes that distribute opportunities unequally across places, actors and labour-market positions (Schiller & Salazar, 2016).

Also, we highlight the constrained but important role of social partners and labour-market intermediaries. These actors are expected to bridge employers, workers, education providers and the state, yet their bridging capacity is limited by weak data, fragmented coordination and uneven influence over implementation. Danaj and Meszmann (2024) show that labour-market intermediaries can reconfigure the regulatory role of social partners in Central and Eastern Europe. We add that, in an origin-country setting, social partners and intermediaries are also central to whether migration becomes extractive or developmental. Without stronger institutionalised cooperation, respondents associated weak coordination with greater risks of permanent emigration, fragile retention and underused diaspora potential.

In this sense, Figure 1 presents a provisional analytical framework derived from the stakeholder accounts. It organises the relationships that participants perceived among external labour-market pressures, domestic institutional capacity, gaps in support for return, and plausible mobility outcomes. The arrows indicate a proposed sequence for future investigation rather than causal relationships tested in this study. Moreover, the interviews suggest that low wages, demographic decline, EU labour demand, emigration and sectoral skill shortages are interpreted through domestic arrangements involving ministries, employment agencies, social partners, qualification systems and training providers. Where these arrangements are perceived as fragmented, data-poor or weakly connected to credible domestic opportunities, stakeholders anticipate less circulation and greater risks of permanent emigration, fragile retention and underused diaspora potential.

Theoretically, the paper contributes with a bounded concept development by moving beyond brain drain as a human-capital loss and toward the institutional conditions under which mobility may become circulation. Thus, conceptually, the contribution is directional and relational. Whereas migration infrastructure explains how mobility is mediated, return infrastructure examines how mobility-acquired skills and resources are identified, recognised, matched and absorbed after return. The proposed deficit signals weak connections among existing functions, not a generic absence of institutions. As such, it is advanced as a context-bound sensitising concept whose dimensions and generalisability require comparative testing. This becomes especially relevant for small EU-candidate economies, where European alignment can increase skill portability without automatically improving domestic retention or return.

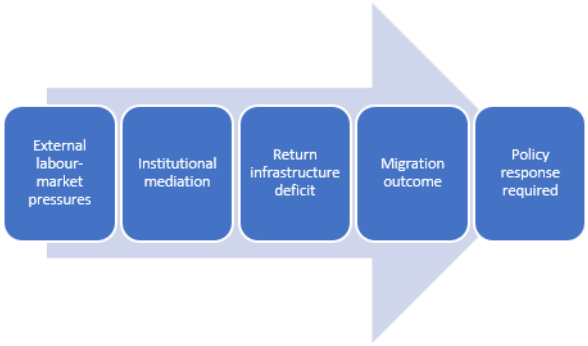



**Figure 1.** Provisional analytical framework of perceived return-infrastructure gaps

Policy-wise, the findings support a unified governance response instead of typical stand-alone programmes. First, the state statistical bodies and migration authorities together with relevant ministries should create an annual dashboard linking emigration, return and vacancy data. Second, the government employment agency and employer organisations should establish a voluntary, data-protection-compliant returnee skills register and vacancy-matching service. Third, the role of education and qualification-recognition bodies would be to publish processing standards and accelerated pathways for foreign qualifications and prior learning. Fourth, a

permanent interministerial authority with social partners should assign a lead institution, budget, deadline and indicator to each action. Pilots in shortage sectors should track recognition time, job-skill match, employment quality and 12- and 24-month retention. Respondents' accounts suggest that return depends not only on available jobs but also on a predictable and dignified future.

# 6 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on nine purposively selected institutional stakeholders from one national setting. Considering that, the findings should be interpreted as a context-bound account of expert sensemaking rather than as a representative description of all Macedonian institutions or as evidence of how frequently particular views are held. Although the sample incorporates perspectives from policy design, employment services, skills development and migration governance, its aim is not to capture the full diversity of all relevant sectors, regions or institutional positions. It also excludes the first-hand perspectives of emigrants, returnees, diaspora organisations and most individual employers, per the proposed research question.

The transferability of the findings consequently rests on analytical generalisation. The proposed interpretation may be informative for settings that share key contextual characteristics with North Macedonia, including a small migrant-origin labour market, strong outward mobility, sectoral skill shortages, EU-linked skill portability and fragmented governance capacity. With that in mind, we treat the return infrastructure deficit as a provisional sensitising concept whose dimensions and boundary conditions require corroboration through additional broader, comparative and multi-actor research.

Future research could extend the concept of return infrastructure deficit in several directions. Comparative studies across Western Balkan or EU-candidate countries would help examine whether similar institutional gaps exist in other migrant-origin economies facing skill shortages and demographic decline. Further research could also include interviews with returnees, skilled emigrants, employers and diaspora networks to explore whether the institutional deficits identified by stakeholders are confirmed by those directly involved in migration and reintegration. Finally, longitudinal studies would be valuable for assessing whether employment measures, qualification recognition systems, social-partner initiatives and returnee-support programmes influence reintegration outcomes and skill circulation over time.

# 7 Conclusion

The study examined how policymakers, social partners and labour-market intermediaries in North Macedonia frame the relationship among emigration, skill shortages and the possibility of circular migration in a resource-constrained, national context.

Moreover, the findings show that migration is generally perceived as a broader labour-market governance challenge by policymakers and social intermediaries in the labour market. Illustratively, stakeholders describe a context in which unemployment-centred policy concerns are increasingly replaced by worker scarcity, practical skill shortages and difficulties in retaining young and qualified people. At the same time, they recognise that migration could generate development benefits through knowledge, experience, remittances, networks and return entrepreneurship.

The central conclusion we draw from the data points to a circularity paradox in North Macedonia. Circular migration is widely regarded as desirable, yet participants perceived the institutional conditions needed to make it credible as weak. Existing employment measures, qualification frameworks and social-partner mechanisms provide important foundations, but they are not viewed as sufficiently coordinated into a coherent system for return, reintegration and skill circulation. The study provisionally conceptualises this gap as a return infrastructure deficit, encompassing weaknesses in data systems, institutional coordination, returnee-specific support, skill-recognition pathways, employer matching and trust in domestic opportunities.

By developing this context-bound concept, the study contributes to migration and labour-market scholarship by shifting attention to the brain drain phenomenon in a new light, meaning the institutional conditions under which mobility may become developmental. The findings suggest that the key policy challenge is deeper than just reducing emigration but building a labour-market system in which return becomes meaningful, feasible and attractive. For North Macedonia and similar EU-candidate, migrant-origin economies, the findings suggest that circular migration may remain more aspiration than reality unless skills and employment policy, social dialogue, and broader institutional reforms are integrated into a credible migration-skills-return strategy.

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# Appendix

**Table 1.** Respondent profile of the qualitative sample

| Stakeholder group | Code | Institutional type | Main institutional role in the labour market | Role seniority | Years of organisational experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policymaker and policy-facing actor | PM1 | Government ministry / public sector | Digital transformation and public-sector employment policy | Senior/middle | 3–10 |
| Policymaker and policy-facing actor | PM2 | Government ministry / public sector | Economy, employment measures and labour-market policy | Senior/middle | 0–3 |
| Policymaker and policy-facing actor | PM3 | Chamber / employer-facing policy institution | Employer needs, skill demand and business-sector coordination | Senior/middle | 3–10 |
| Policymaker and policy-facing actor | PM4 | Central government body | Strategic labour-market and migration-policy coordination | Senior/middle | 3–10 |
| Social partner / labour-market intermediary | SP1 | NGO / development organisation | Skills development, employability and workforce support | Senior/middle | 10–20 |
| Social partner / labour-market intermediary | SP2 | Regional migration initiative | Migration governance and regional cooperation | Senior/middle | 3–10 |
| Social partner / labour-market intermediary | SP3 | Public employment agency | Labour-market matching, employment services and active measures | Senior/middle | 0–3 |
| Social partner / labour-market intermediary | SP4 | University-based professional training/career centre | Career development, professional training and skills support | Senior/middle | 3–10 |
| Social partner / labour-market intermediary | SP5 | Employers' organisation | Employer representation, social dialogue and labour-demand articulation | Senior/middle | 3–10 |