

DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT: MULTINATIONAL NETWORKING BY DIASPORA PROFESSIONALS

DIASPORAS IESAISTES LOMA ATTĪSTĪBAS VEICINĀŠANĀ: DIASPORAS PROFESIONĀĻU DAUDZVIETU TĪKLOŠANĀS

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Abstract

The paper investigates diaspora engagement in Latvia's development, by analysing diaspora professionals' multinational and multilevel networking and cooperation practices with Latvian public administration. The main questions addressed in this paper are: 1) what type of support is provided by diaspora professionals? 2) are there any links between geographical location, institutional affiliation, and networking and cooperation practices at the individual and organisational level? The study was carried out using parallel mixed methods research design. The main results show that Latvian diaspora professionals working at international organisations are willing to cooperate with representatives of Latvia. Even though respondents evaluate existing cooperation opportunities as being rather good, just 56% of respondents have had some cooperation with representatives of Latvia over the last five years. An important key finding on factors contributing to or hindering cooperation and networking at an institutional level was that it is not geographical location itself, but an institutional culture of cooperation and strategic vision on the part of the state or institution responsible for this cooperation that matters the most. Today, cooperation and networking take place primary at the individual level – as a result of pro-active searching for cooperation possibilities on the part of diaspora professionals, and as a result of specific interests, openness, motivation and strategic vision on the part of employees of Latvian public administration.

Keywords: *migration, diaspora engagement, high-skilled professionals*

Introduction

The growth of global migration in recent decades has led to a new geography where there is a distinction between the state and the nation – the former referring to a particular territory and the latter being scattered over many territories. The number of international migrants has been increasing in the last few decades (UN DESA, 2020), and large-scale migration has turned many European countries, including Latvia, into diasporic nations.

Recently, an understanding that the diaspora (emigrants and their descendants) can be a partner in promoting development has emerged (Kuznetsov, 2013; Newland & Plaza, 2013). Countries are paying increasing attention to the maintenance of links with emigrants in order to engage them in the development of their country of origin

(Craven, 2021; Kingsley, 2018). The contribution of the diaspora relates not only to the transfer of knowledge but also to the transfer of new values, ideas, practices, as well as identity and social capital (Kuznetsov, 2013; Oliinyk et al., 2021; Šūpule 2020). In this light, emigrants are seen not as lost taxpayers but as a “national asset”, contributing in different ways (Kingsley, 2018). In the past, ties with emigrants were maintained mainly by family and friends, but today the role of government is growing. Now states are looking for different opportunities to maintain various links with their diaspora in order to convert “brain drain” into “brain gain” (return migration) or at least “brain circulation” (diaspora engagement) to attract diaspora resources and promote cooperation (Pande, 2018). However, research less frequently focuses on the networking and cooperation practices of high-income countries in relation to their diasporas, or on the contribution of high-skilled professionals to the development of their country of origin.

There is a growing awareness in migration research that the traditional interpretations and approaches to migration do not adequately fit with the increasingly fluid and unpredictable patterns of migration observed today. People often migrate back and forth between their country of origin and destination, as well as maintaining diverse cross-border links of varied intensity with those who are left behind (Kivisto, 2001). A growing body of migration scholarship uses a multilevel framework – focusing on extended temporality, the multispatiality and complexity of multinational migrations, and on processes at multiple levels (individual, organisational and societal) (Hajro et al., 2019; Paul & Yeoh, 2020). Nevertheless, empirical research and validation of new theoretical frameworks is scarce.

This paper explores the engagement of high-skilled Latvian migrants (professionals who work at international organisations) in the development of their country of origin, focusing on their networks and their cooperation practices with Latvian public administration. Focus on diaspora professionals is important in the context of the race for global talent to promote innovation and growth (Bailey & Mulder, 2017; Toma & Villares-Varela, 2019). The main questions addressed in this paper are: 1) what type of contribution is provided by diaspora professionals? 2) what is the role of geographical location in networking at the individual and organisational level?

The paper aims to add to the understanding of contributions made by high-skilled migrants to the development of their homeland and to the understanding of multilevel networking practices due to the location of actors in a range of different countries.

The paper investigates diaspora engagement in the development of Latvia, by focusing on diaspora professionals’ multi-sited and multilevel networking and cooperation practices with Latvia’s public administration. Previous migration studies in most cases focused on networking practices between the diaspora living in a single

country and their country of origin. This study provides new insights into the networking practices of diaspora professionals living in a range of countries (many of whom also have experiences of multinational migration) but who must cooperate with each other as well as with their home country partners across multiple territories and at multiple levels (individual, organisational and societal).

The paper is based on data collected for purposes of two research projects – “Involvement of Latvian Professionals in Diaspora Diplomacy”, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia (further – MFA) – and the National Research Programme’s “Cutting-Edge Knowledge and Solutions to Study Demographic and Migration Processes for the Development of Latvian and European Society” (further – DemoMigPro). MFA is starting to develop targeted and systemic cooperation with diaspora professionals working at international organisations in order to acquire the necessary knowledge and contacts to advance Latvia’s interests, as well as to provide support for the career advancement of Latvian nationals, thereby extending the network of Latvian representatives and improving their opportunities at international organisations. The primary aim of the MFA research project is to provide an in-depth understanding of the attitudes and views of the diaspora professionals on potential opportunities for cooperation and engagement to advance Latvia’s strategic objectives and interests, as well as barriers that have so far hindered closer cooperation (Bela, Mieriņa & Pinto, 2022). The data revealed that diaspora professionals’ expectations are broader – they see their engagement in Latvia’s development as equally important to diaspora diplomacy. This is why the data can be analysed for the specific objectives of DemoMigPro, where the aim of the talent migration study group is to advance knowledge about high-skilled migrants from Latvia and about diaspora engagement. This focus on networking and cooperation practices between diaspora professionals who work at international organisations and Latvia’s public administration provides a unique case to study diaspora engagement and talent migration.

Data and methods

The study used parallel mixed methods research design with equal emphasis on qualitative and quantitative methods. The main target group of the study was diaspora professionals working at intergovernmental organisations (the UN, NATO, the OSCE, the OECD, the European Union, the Council of Europe) and at various international non-governmental organisations (human rights, nature protection and other fields). Data collection was carried out in the summer of 2022. Initially a pilot study was conducted to identify Latvia’s current cooperation practices. Six of the most experienced Latvian professionals working at international organisations or in public administration were interviewed. This information was of paramount importance in the development of the survey questionnaire, as well as guidelines for in-depth

interviews and focus group discussions (further – FGD). As the target group is numerically very small and specific, it was necessary to use all kinds of opportunities and sources to recruit respondents. First, information about the study was sent to Latvians listed in the ESI.lv database (a grassroots network of Latvian professionals living abroad) as working at international organisations. Secondly, a database of email addresses of Latvians living outside Latvia who had been interviewed for previous surveys conducted by the University of Latvia and had agreed to participate in future research was used. Finally, support with distributing information about the survey was also provided through their channels by the MFA, the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, diaspora organisations and diaspora media. In total, 150 respondents participated in the survey of Latvia’s diaspora professionals working at international organisations (permission to re-use data N=100). Of all the survey respondents, 116 (77%) currently work for an international organisation, and the rest have worked for an international organisation in the last 10 years. Fifteen respondents (or 10% of all) have worked for more than one international organisation.

In addition, six FDGs (18 participants) and four in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Table 1). The participants represent a broad spectrum of institutions and organisations covering a wide geographical area. Members of the FGD were recruited using information collected by the MFA from Latvian embassies, and information from the ESI.lv network. Each source contained information about 40 professionals; several persons were mentioned by both. Recruitment of participants focused on ensuring that geographical coverage (including Latin America, Africa and Oceania) and institutional affiliation was as broad and useful as possible (from the point of view of the objectives of the study). As members of the target group live in different countries of the world, discussions were organised on-line using Zoom.

Table 1. **Affiliation of research participants in focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews**

Code	Affiliation
FGD1	International justice professionals (judges at the European Court of Justice)
FGD2	Professionals working at international intergovernmental organisations (UN, OSCE, WHO, PB)
FGD3a	Professionals working at EU institutions outside the EU
FGD3b	Professionals working at EU institutions inside the EU
FGD4a	Professionals working at international non-governmental organisations
FGD4b	Professionals working at international non-governmental organisations
I1	Professional working at the European Commission
I2	Professional working at the Foreign Affairs Council
I3	Professional working at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
I4	Professional working at United Nations Development Programme agency

The level of experience of the participants ranges from 5–10 years of experience at one or a number of international organisations to more than 25 years of experience at various international organisations.

For quantitative data analysis, descriptive statistics and analysis of variance are used. The qualitative data analysis uses a thematic analysis, using open coding to identify topics and focused coding for an in-depth analysis of the topics.

Results

The research data shows that Latvian diaspora professionals working at international organisations are willing to share their knowledge and experience. The key findings on the **type of contributions provided by diaspora professionals** sheds light on tendencies in cooperation over the last five years, as well as highlights the evaluation of networking and cooperation opportunities by the target group, and the perceived interest on the part of Latvian public administration.

The survey respondents evaluate cooperation opportunities between them and representatives of Latvia (including the state administration, parliament, local governments, courts, military and specialised services, and academic and non-governmental sector) as rather good. According to the answers provided, 23% consider that there is ample scope for cooperation, while 46% consider that there are some opportunities for cooperation. Just 14% evaluate that there are very limited opportunities for cooperation and 5% do not see any opportunities for cooperation. Professionals working at non-governmental organisations, even more often than those working at intergovernmental organisations, are highly enthusiastic about cooperation opportunities with Latvia: 36% see broad opportunities for cooperation.

At the same time, most respondents – 71% – indicate that the Latvian state administration and diplomatic service so far have not shown any interest in them and their knowledge. Only 14% have clearly felt such an interest, while others mentioned sporadic, inconsistent interest in cooperation. A perceived low level of interest on the part of Latvia's public administration was mentioned in interviews and FGDs too.

About half (56%) of respondents have had some cooperation with representatives of Latvia over the last five years (state administration, parliament, municipalities, courts, military and specialised services, academic and non-governmental sector, etc.). However, just 10% have worked closely, while 18% have collaborated sometimes, and 28% on rare occasions. Answers do not show statistically significant differences between those working at intergovernmental organisations and at non-governmental organisations. The FGD participants also see the current cooperation as irregular, ad hoc, depending on the people in office (Latvian ambassadors, specific public administration employees, etc.). Several participants see a positive trend in networking and cooperation patterns – increasing interest from

Latvia and diversifying forms of collaboration, regularity in some sectors, but still based mainly on individual initiative, rather than on a systemic and strategic approach.

An analysis of the types of contribution to Latvia suggests that there is both formal and informal cooperation; however, informal cooperation at the individual level dominates (Table 2). In total, 64% of those who have had any cooperation with Latvia indicate that they informally, privately consulted Latvian representatives and shared experience in their field of competence. Important kinds of knowledge transfer to Latvia are provision of information on the situation, position, customs, plans, etc. of their current country of residence or other states they are familiar with (34%). Knowledge transfer about Latvia to foreign partners is far more limited. Despite diaspora professionals having a good knowledge of both Latvia and the international environment, less than a quarter (23%) have explained or defended the position of Latvia in discussions with representatives of other countries or organisations.

Table 2. **Answers to the question on support that was provided to Latvia (%)**

Provided consultation to representatives of Latvia informally and shared expertise in their field of competence	63.9
Promoted Latvia, its recognition and attractiveness in the international environment	49.2
Helped to establish the necessary contacts in their current home country or in another country	42.6
Provided information about the situation, position, customs, plans, etc. of their host country or other countries they know well	34.4
Invited or recommended Latvian professionals for positions in their organisation	27.9
Led or presented at seminars, lectures, classes for civil servants, specially organised courses, summer schools or other forums	24.6
Explained and argued the position of the Latvian state to representatives of other countries or organisations	23.0
Prepared explanatory opinion articles or gave interviews to Latvian media	19.7
Participated in Latvian government-organised expert/working groups in their area of competence	9.8
Helped a state institution to evaluate a project application or a candidate for a position, or provided an expert opinion	8.2
Prepared explanatory opinion articles or gave interviews to foreign media about Latvia	6.6
Other	14.8

Another significant contribution type is related to networking: social capital and contacts. In total, 43% have helped Latvian representatives to establish the necessary contacts in their current country of residence or in another country, and 28% have invited or recommended Latvian professionals for positions in their organisation. This study reveals that other types of cooperation are far less common.

The key findings **on the role of geographical location for networking at the individual and organisational level** illustrate the scope of organisations and

geographies covered and reveals the most important factors contributing to or hindering cooperation and networking.

Most survey respondents – 90 of them – currently work or have worked in the past 10 years for various institutions of the European Union (most frequently employed by the different Directorates-General of the European Commission). A number of people are working (or have worked) at various EU missions outside Europe, for example, the EU External Action Service delegations, or the EU Common Security and Defence Policy structures and agencies. A total of 24 respondents are currently working for the United Nations in various geographical locations. Overall, 79.9% of respondents are or were employed by an intergovernmental institution, and 22.8% are or were employed by an international non-governmental organisation. Although relatively few respondents noted that they work at an international non-governmental organisation, the range of these organisations is diverse (for example, GlobalGiving; Médecins Sans Frontières; Amnesty International; the Baltic Human Rights Society; Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe; the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria etc). Since these organisations and their agencies are spread throughout variety of countries, the research participants are familiar with a wide range of geographical regions, and their locations imply the presence of international migrations (Table 3).

Geographical proximity and physical meetings are important for cooperation. First, professionals working in more distant locations (from Latvia) were harder to reach; they were considerably less represented in sources from MFA and ESI.lv. Second, in FGDs and interviews it was recognised that direct face-to-face contacts continue to play an invaluable role in building social networks and professional contacts even in the age of the Internet. Some participants stressed that on-line networking works better if one knows the person and have met him or her before. In addition, geographical proximity allows for denser networking among professionals themselves as well.

An important key finding on factors contributing or hindering cooperation and networking at an institutional level was that it is not geographical location or institutional affiliation itself, but the institutional culture of cooperation and strategic vision of the state or institution regarding such cooperation that matters the most. Research participants repeatedly stressed the absence of a collaborative institutional culture and the absence of a strategic approach to cooperation in Latvia. As a result, cooperation and networking depends primary on individuals involved. What is decisive is a proactive search for cooperation on the part of the diaspora professional, and the specific interests, openness, motivation and strategic vision of the particular employee of the particular public administration body in Latvia, or Latvian embassy. The institutional level cooperation exists primarily where it is formally requested: between Latvia's public administration and delegated representatives of Latvia to EU

institutions (FGD3a, FGD3b). Even those who were supported for particular positions by Latvia later were rarely if ever contacted for their knowledge, expertise or contacts (FGD4b).

Table 3. Countries where respondents have worked and are working (%)

Country	Have worked during last 10 years	Are working now
Belgium	37.7	26.2
Latvia	28.7	11.5
Luxembourg	24.6	18.0
France	14.8	9.8
USA	12.3	5.7
Great Britain	12.3	3.3
Germany	11.5	6.6
Denmark	9.0	4.9
Sweden	8.2	4.1
Italy	8.2	3.3
Switzerland	8.2	1.6
Spain	7.4	0.8
The Netherlands	7.4	2.5
Austria	6.6	2.5
Norway	5.7	1.6
Ireland	4.9	0.8
Russia	4.1	2.5
Other countries	42.6	26.2

An additional contributing or hindering factor for cooperation at the individual level is the professional's career development path, i.e., whether his or her career started inside or outside of Latvia. Qualitative data suggest that those who started their professional careers in the public administration sector in Latvia had more frequent and successful networking practices thanks to long-lasting personal contacts with former colleagues in Latvia. Those who were born abroad or received higher education and started their career abroad lacked such contacts and struggled to start cooperation and networking with public administration in Latvia. This contributes to the findings on the role of institutional culture and strategic approach for such cooperation – in the absence of cooperation-oriented institutional culture, individual-level factors play a crucial role in successful networking.

Conclusion

Latvian diaspora professionals are a rich asset for development – their expertise and contacts cover a broad spectrum of international stakeholders in multiple

countries. The main results of this study show that Latvian diaspora professionals working in international organisations can be valuable partners in promoting the development of Latvia. They are willing to cooperate with Latvian representatives, but the majority of respondents have not so far felt any interest from the Latvian state administration and diplomatic service. In total, 56% of respondents have had some cooperation with Latvia's representatives over the last five years, but for only 10% was this cooperation close and frequent. The main type of support provided was informal.

Important key findings on links between the geographical location, institutional affiliation and networking and cooperation practices at the individual and organisational level suggest that geographical proximity and face-to-face contact still matter in developing networks and cooperation. However, it is not the geographical location itself, but the institutional culture of cooperation and strategic vision of the state or institution for such cooperation that matters the most. Today, cooperation and networking take place primarily at the individual level.

Acknowledgement

This study is developed with the financial support of the Foreign Ministry of Republic of Latvia (cooperation agreement Nr. LV-40) and the National Research Programme “New solutions to study demographic and migration processes for the development of Latvian society” (grant agreement Nr. VPP-LETONIKA-2021/4-0002).

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā pievērsta uzmanību diasporas iesaistei Latvijas attīstībā, analizējot starptautiskajās organizācijās strādājošo diasporas profesionāļu sadarbības praksi ar Latvijas valsts pārvaldi. Galvenie aplūkoti jautājumi ir: 1) kāda veida atbalstu sniedz diasporas profesionāļi; 2) vai pastāv kāda saikne starp ģeogrāfisko atrašanās vietu, institucionālo piederību un tīklu veidošanu un sadarbības praksi individuālā un organizatoriskā līmenī? Pētījuma konceptuālo ietvaru veido atziņas par augsti kvalificētu speciālistu lomu izaugsmē un valstu dažādo stratēģiju, lai iesaistītu savu diasporu. Līdz šim veiktajos pētījumos norādīts, ka mūsdienu migrācija kļūst arvien kompleksāka, migranti ilgstoši uzturas vairākās valstīs un sadarbojas ar izcelsmes valsti dažādos līmeņos, un iepriekš veidotie migrācijas izpētes instrumenti un skaidrojumi ir pārāk ierobežoti. Pētījuma mērķis ir veicināt mūsdienu migrācijas un diasporas iesaistes kompleksā rakstura izpratni.

Pētījumā tika izmantots paralēlais jauktu metožu pētījuma dizains. Galvenie rezultāti liecina, ka Latvijas diasporas profesionāļi, kas strādā starptautiskajās organizācijās, labprāt sadarbojas ar Latvijas pārstāvjiem. Respondenti pašreizējās sadarbības iespējas vērtē kā diezgan labas, tomēr tikai 56% respondentu pēdējo piecu gadu laikā ir bijusi kāda sadarbība ar Latvijas pārstāvjiem, no tiem tikai 10% – cieša. Nozīmīgākie sadarbību veicinošie un kavējošie faktori ir saistīti nevis ar ģeogrāfisko atrašanās vietu, bet gan ar institucionālās sadarbības kultūru un valsts vai iestādes stratēģisko redzējumu attiecībā uz šādu sadarbību. Mūsdienās sadarbība un tīklojums veidojas galvenokārt individuālajā līmenī – pateicoties

proaktīvai sadarbības iespēju meklēšanai no diasporas profesionāļa puses un ieinteresētībai, atvērtībai, motivācijai un stratēģiskajam redzējumam no Latvijas valsts pārvaldes darbinieka puses.

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