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How do global crises affect privileged migrants?
Return migration of German emigrants one year into the Covid-19 pandemic

Nils Witte†, Andreas Ette and Nikola Sander

Federal Institute for Population Research, Germany

Abstract

This article discusses how global crises affect the return of international migrants. It develops a theoretical model and tests this contribution empirically taking Covid-19 as an instance of a global crisis. Existing studies have treated migration and mobility mostly as phenomena of virus dispersion. The reverse impact of Covid-19 on migration has attracted less attention. This article draws on a unique probability-sample of German emigrants to investigate actual return migration during the first year of Covid-19. These panel survey data were collected immediately before the pandemic onset in winter 2019 and one year later in winter 2020. We enhance these data with publicly available country-level data on Covid-19 incidence, excess mortality, and Covid-19-induced democratic violations. Our findings from multi-level regression models suggest a moderate impact of country-specific pandemic indicators on return migration behaviour. Moreover, democratic violations in countries of residence and aggravating economic situations of individual households increase the likelihood of return. We conclude with a discussion of what can be learnt from the case of German return migrants about crisis migration in general.

Keywords: crisis migration, Covid-19, high skilled migration, return migration, origin country perspective

† Corresponding author: nils.witte@bib.bund.de

1 Introduction

After the first cases of Covid-19 were reported from Wuhan, China, in December 2019, the virus affected economies, labour markets, health care provision, education and tourism around the globe in unprecedented ways. The measures that had been implemented by governments to limit the spread of the virus, including social distancing, travel restrictions and lockdowns, had profoundly altered people's daily lives. Travel bans and border closures in response to Covid-19 had restricted cross-border movement after March 2020 (O'Brien and Eger 2021; Piccoli, Dzankic, and Ruedin 2021). The pandemic has likely caused severe disruptions to the spatial patterns and intensities of global international migration flows (S. Martin and Bergmann 2021). Empirical research on the impact of Covid-19 on international migration, however, is lagging behind. Existing empirical work mostly concentrates on vulnerable migrants in particular in the Global South. We still know little about potential changes to individual migration decision making of voluntary migrants in the Global North in response to the joint health and economic crisis caused by Covid-19.

In the past 100 years, crises of global scale have often been primarily economic, initiated either by financial market breakdown, such as the Great Recession of 2008-2009, or by shortages of crucial resources like the petrol crises of 1973 and 1979. Similar crises in the near future are likely, owed to the cyclical breakdown of financial markets, shortage of resources (e.g. water, petrol, natural gas, electricity), or zoonosis. It is therefore desirable that we gain a better understanding of the consequences of global crises for international migration. Previous work on the impact of economic crises on migration has been suggestive of a dampening effect on international movements and an increasing effect on return migration among labour migrants who would retain options of reentry after they returned to their home countries (Beets and Willekens 2009). In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, some countries of the Global South witnessed massive flows of return migration (Karim, Islam, and Talukder 2020). Because Covid-19-induced border closures usually target foreign nationals rather than nationals returning to their country of citizenship, return migration decisions are an ideal starting point for research on the impact of Covid-19 on international migration.[1]

This paper contributes by investigating the impact of Covid-19 on return migration to Germany in 2020. We estimate the probability of return and the country-specific effect of Covid-19 on the decision to return through multilevel models. Our survey data come from the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS), a unique and nationally-representative panel survey that targets German citizens who emigrated from or returned to Germany. Wave three captures information about Germans who had been living abroad immediately before the onset of the pandemic in late 2019 and the subsequent panel wave fielded one year thereafter. This timing facilitates the analysis of actual return migration instead of focusing on mere return migration intentions, as common in the field (Ette, Sauer, and Fauser 2021; Kley 2017). We enhance these data with publicly available country-level data on Covid-19 incidence, excess mortality, and Covid-19-induced democratic violations.

Germany is an ideal case study for investigating the impact of Covid-19 on return migration, given its sizable emigrant population. The most recent estimate of Germans resident in other OECD member countries is 3.5 million; that is 0.6 million and 20.7 percent more than a decade earlier (OECD 2019). After the global financial crisis in 2008, net migration of Germans averaged around minus 23,000 per year before dropping to zero in 2020 owed primarily to a dip in emigration, whereas return migration averaged around 110,000 before decreasing to 94,000 in 2020 (Bundesverwaltungsamt 2021; Destatis 2022; Ette and Erlinghagen 2021).[2] The aggregate decline in return migration conceals much variation between countries of previous residence. The GERPS data enable us to shed light on cross-country differences and enhance our understanding of the drivers of return migration. We aim to disentangle individual- and country-level factors in the decision to return to Germany from abroad during the first year of the pandemic.

German emigrants stick out when compared with other countries of origin. There are several reasons to define Germans as 'privileged' migrants (Amit 2007; Croucher 2012). German emigrants benefit from generous visa regulations in global comparison (Recchi et al. 2021) also regarding free labour mobility within the European Union and affiliated countries like Switzerland. They are positively selected from origins in terms of skills (Ette and Witte 2021)—87 percent of them hold occupational degrees including 72 percent tertiary degrees against 67 percent (26 percent) in the general population (Ette, Genoni, and Witte 2021)—and the favorable German economy yields a safe fallback option.[3] Given much tighter visa restrictions in the Global South, the implications of Covid-19 for return migration would be entirely different for precarious labour migrants in the Global South (Czaika, Haas, and Villares-Varela 2018; Piper 2022).

In the following section, we summarise the literature on the consequences of global crises for international migration and discuss potential differences in crisis migration between privileged, non-privileged, and precarious migrants. Subsequently, we explore the relationship between crisis indicators and return migration decisions based on migration theory and research findings. In the last two sections, we estimate the likelihood of return through hierarchical regressions and discuss our findings in light of the literature on migration decisions in general and crisis migration in particular.

2 The consequences of global crises for migration

There is little research on the consequences of Covid-19 for migration. The literature that does exist mostly relies on qualitative interviews with migrants in the Global South. It suggests that semi- and low-skilled migrants around the world have been initially entrapped in their residence countries (Ullah, Nawaz, and Chattoraj 2021). India, for example, initially hampered return migration by issuing a travel ban in late March 2020, but launched a repatriation program in May 2020 that would lead to the return of more than nine million nationals by the end of October (Rajan and Pattath 2022). Similar programs

of repatriation have been reported for Nepal (Foley and Piper 2021, 475) and the Philippines (Liao 2020). In contrast, Bangladeshi migrant workers were forced to return home after a job loss in their destination countries without much support from their government (Karim, Islam, and Talukder 2020). Overall, research on the consequences of Covid-19 for migration remains sketchy. There is a growing body of literature but little peer-reviewed research. We therefore also include the literature about the consequences of various kinds of crises for international migration.

In spite of several crises in the last hundred years and their implications for migration, there is surprisingly little systematic research about the consequences of global crises for international migration (Beets and Willekens 2009). Obviously, the establishment of causal links between a crisis and migration is not straightforward. National statistics are unhelpful because the counterfactual migration figures, had there been no crisis, are unknown. Longitudinal survey data of international migrants would be an alternative source but they are scarce (Willekens et al. 2016). Existing quantitative research therefore usually aims to establish the link between crises and migration by comparing migration figures before and after crises, counting claims of return migration benefits, sometimes offered by host countries to incentivise return migration, or counting participants in repatriation programs as in the first year of Covid-19.

When labour markets become tense during economic crises migrant workers are often the first to get sacked (Fix et al. 2009; Kogan 2004). Moreover, there are indications that, under certain conditions, crises increase the vulnerability of migrant workers to wage theft (Foley and Piper 2021). This economic vulnerability makes return migration of those who labour abroad more likely and it makes emigration of potential future migrants less likely. This is indeed what happened to (temporary) labour migrants in the South-Asia-Gulf migration corridor. The *kafala* system is an extraordinary facilitator of the exploitation and abuse of migrant workers leaving them at the fate of employers (Parreñas and Silvey 2021). Because of the high insecurity of their residence status, this group has been referred to as precarious labour migrants (Foley and Piper 2021). Precarious labour migrants have seen increased return migration through the first Covid-19 year.

In established democracies of the Global North governmental policies rather than employers seek to manage the migration of labour (Freeman 1994). Unlike the employer sponsorship of the *kafala* system, immigrants in countries of the Global North are more difficult to expel because they attain basic social and economic rights as 'denizens' (Hammar 1990; Joppke 2001). Accordingly, governments have often tightened the regulation of labour immigration after economic crises. For example, during the 2008 global economic crisis, migration of Mexican men to the US dropped from 25 per thousand in 2005 to seven per thousand by 2012 as a result of tighter visa regulations (Villarreal 2014).

When it comes to the interpretation of return migration from the Global North, it is vital to understand the significance of work visas and residence permits. Privileged labour migrants, whose visas permit

reentry, tend to be more likely to return during crises compared with non-privileged labour migrants, who have a less secure visa status. For example, the 2008 recession prompted Polish and other Eastern European EU citizens in Ireland to return home, while non-European migrants were unlikely to leave, absent guarantees of reentry (P. Martin 2009). Bolivian labour migrants quickly escaped the Argentinean crisis of 2001 by returning home, whereas their compatriots in Spain were prompted by missing guarantees of reentry to stay through the 2008 economic recession although that involved economic hardship (Bastia 2011). South American migrants who had acquired Spanish citizenship moved on to more prosperous destinations during recession (Ramos 2018). In the US, return migration of Mexican migrants declined by a third in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis (Rendall, Brownell, and Kups 2011).

In summary, research findings suggest that health and economic crises increase the likelihood of return among privileged migrants. For different reasons, a similar effect has been found for precarious labour migrants residing in the Gulf countries. One could argue that the privileged have been less vulnerable to the consequences of Covid-19 than non-privileged and precarious migrants in terms of health and employment making them less likely to return. Our review of the broader literature on crisis migration, however, suggests that privileged migrants are more likely to return during crises than non-privileged migrants are. German migrants squarely fall into the category of privileged migrants making them an ideal most-likely test case (Gerring 2007): if their return migration remains largely unaffected, that applies a fortiori to non-privileged migrants, who are even less likely to return during crises.

3 Theorizing privileged return migration during crises

Theories of (return) migration are underdeveloped when it comes to flows originating from developed economies. Existing theories tacitly suppose migration from less to more developed countries. Although several authors identified this conceptual (and empirical) gap (Erlinghagen et al. 2021; Favell, Feldblum, and Smith 2007), theoretical development is lagging behind. A key limitation is that economic disparities at national level−a common explanation for international migration flows−do not necessarily account for emigration from economically developed countries. In this chapter, we build on the rich literature on migration decisions and on crisis migration to develop hypotheses regarding return migration of privileged migrants in the context of Covid-19.

Linked lives: the role of partners and family

Life course research has known this for long: the lives of individuals are linked through social relationships and contingent on the lives of significant others (Settersten et al. 2020). Similarly, migration researchers have suggested the family as the control center and unit of analysis when it comes to migration decisions (Cooke 2008; Mincer 1978; Mulder 2018). Bailey, Blake, and Cooke (2004) argue that individuals aim to achieve work-home balances, which usually rely on linked lives with

family members. Cohabiting partners are likely to have sensitive work-home balances whereas living apart points to imbalances and is therefore more likely to trigger migration than cohabitation

Next to the social and care-aspects of households and family there is, obviously, an economic dimension of the family (Mincer 1978). Covid-19 heterogeneously affects the employment situation even of cohabiting individuals (Reichelt, Makovi, and Sargsyan 2020). The effect of Covid-19 on employment and income depends among other things on occupation, industry, public social protection (e.g., short time allowances), the nature of employment (dependent vs self-employment), and the variation of these factors across countries of residence (Crossley, Fisher, and Low 2021). Because macro-economic effects have heterogeneous consequences across individuals and their households, we refer to the (subjective) stability of household income as a compound measure for the economic stability of households.

H1 Migrants living with minor children are less likely to return than migrants living in couple- and single households without minor children.

H2 Migrants living apart from their partner are more likely to return than migrants cohabiting with their partner or migrants who are singles.

H3 Migrants living in households that experience economic decline are more likely to return than households with economic stability (or improvement).

The privileged among the privileged: Expatriates

As opposed to self-initiated movers, expats move within firm internal labour markets (Althauser 1989; Salt 1988). Depending on the nature of the assignment expats often keep their housing in the country of origin while the employer pays or organises accommodation in the destination country (Bonache and Stirpe 2012). Some employers assign relocation agencies to take care of practical and administrative difficulties and expenses for their expats. German employers have a Duty of Care for their expats by civil and social law (Claus 2009). In addition to providing return options, employers are likely to cater for reentry into the firm in the origin country and for eventual re-assignment abroad. The risks are therefore lower for expats and returning to their home country on short notice is easier than for self-initiated movers.

H4 Emigrants who were assigned abroad by their employers (expats) are more likely to return than self-initiated movers are.

The privileged among the vulnerable: German international students

The Covid-19 pandemic has specific consequences for international students, a vulnerable group. Our working definition of international students refers to individuals enrolled abroad either temporarily or permanently. Universities were among the first institutions to adapt to the pandemic by closing down

campuses and switching from in-person to remote instruction (Skulmowski and Rey 2020). As non-citizens, international students typically fall into a separate visa category. They are often ineligible to social protection and their options for work are usually legally constrained (Bilecen 2020). Research finds national students to be more likely than working population to have returned to their parental home during the Covid-19 lockdown in France (Kushtanina and Vinel 2021) and in Spain (Duque-Calvache, Torrado, and Mesa-Pedrazas 2021). Just like for national students, the universal provision of remote learning makes returning home feasible without incurring consequences for study progress of international students. This argument only holds, however, if universities offer a fully remote learning model and students have the financial resources to cover the travel costs to return home.

H5 International students are more likely to return than non-students.

Health risks: Covid-19 incidence & excess mortality

One key issue is how Covid-19 changed objective and subjective health risks that are related to migration. Our measures include incidence and excess deaths per 100,000 population. We conceptualise both the German incidence and Germany's pandemic governance as constant points of reference throughout 2020. This simplifying assumption has three major advantages. One is parsimony. Instead of modelling the dynamic evolvement of risk-country-dyads through 2020, we can model host country risks against a constant 'anchor' which is computationally more efficient. The second one is technical: the constant measure works for both return migrants and those who stay abroad. The third advantage is more substantial. Migration decisions are not updated on a daily basis and we have to make some (arbitrary) assumption about the frequency at which individuals update their migration plans and the period that individuals account for in their risk assessment. German governance throughout the pandemic has been described as confident, democratic, and rational (Meng and Seipp 2021). We therefore expect that return becomes more likely when the health threat in countries of residence increases.

H6 Higher health risks (Covid-19 incidence or excess mortality) in the host country are associated with a higher likelihood of return migration.

Democratic violations

In addition to the health threat per se, democratic violations—the violation of democratic standards in policy responses to Covid-19—could increase the likelihood of return migration. Western democracies are unlikely to witness system change through the pandemic and trust in institutions has proved stable except for eventual short-term decreases (Rapeli and Saikkonen 2020). In spite of public perceptions to the opposite, Covid-19 containment measures in 2020 enjoyed broad public support in Western democracies (Jørgensen et al. 2021). Elsewhere, the V-dem project observes a risk of democratic backsliding that is either caused or accelerated by the pandemic, even in some European democracies

like Hungary and Poland (Edgell et al. 2021). Concrete violations of principles of liberal democracies include media restrictions and strategic use of electoral delays. Because no democratic backsliding was registered in Germany during 2020, we exclusively refer to countries of residence and we assume that German migrants tend to disapprove of democratic violations through 'exit' although, at least in theory, they could also 'voice' their concerns or approve by staying (Hirschman 1993).

H7 Migrants living in countries that witness democratic violations are more likely to return than migrants living in countries without democratic violations.

4 Data sources and empirical conceptualisation of theoretical constructs

We use the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS), a unique longitudinal migration survey, that enables the analysis of international return migration processes within a panel structure. GERPS relies on probability-based sampling of emigrants from German population registers. Postal invitation letters to an online survey were sent to emigrants' new addresses abroad (Ette et al. 2020). The sample was restricted to German citizens who moved abroad between July 2017 and June 2018. This cohort of emigrants was first interviewed between November 2018 and February 2019 when migrants had stayed abroad on average for one year. Subsequently, this internationally mobile population has been interviewed on a regular basis. The third survey wave was online in winter 2019/20, shortly before the WHO declaration of a global pandemic, and the fourth wave was online in winter 2020/21, one year into the pandemic. There were 10,325 panel participants in the first wave (response rate = 21.6%), and 4,219 remained in the fourth wave (response rate of eligible = 56.2%). Detailed comparisons of GERPS data and official (migration) statistics indicate that the combined design and nonresponse weights successfully adjust the distribution of key characteristics in GERPS (Ette et al. 2020, 106–12). We thus applied combined sampling weights and design weights that account for the sampling strategy alongside varying response probabilities across the four panel waves to our descriptive statistics. The sample is representative of the 2017/18 cohort of emigrants, not of all German migrants living abroad. Thereby, the survey provides a rich data source to study return migration processes. The survey data yield detailed information about the living situation and migration intentions of return migrants and emigrants just before the pandemic onset.

The analytical sample comprises all individuals who participated in survey wave 4 and had lived abroad at the time of their last participation before that. We excluded 91 participants who returned from abroad before January 2020, failed to provide dates of migration, or failed to provide information about destination countries.[4] Because media coverage of Covid-19 began in January 2020 and thus sparked public awareness (Pearman et al. 2021), we include returns between January and November in our main models.[5] We used listwise deletion for missing values on variables that are part of the multivariate model

excluding 61 interviews. This results in 2,208 observations in the analytical sample. We generally use the most recent information available.

Table 1 Variable means and standard deviations

	$\bar{x}$	σ
Individual-level		
Dependent variable		
Return to Germany	0.12	
Control variables		
Woman	0.47	
Age*	37.97	11.64
Return intention	0.47	
Permanent residence permit	0.65	
Explanatory variables		
Single household	0.28	
Couple, no children	0.37	
Household with children	0.35	
Partner lives not in CoR	0.05	
Aggravated econ. situation	0.18	
Employed	0.71	
Expatriate	0.08	
Student	0.10	
Not employed	0.15	
Country-level		
Covid-19 infections*	30.83	23.24
Excess mortality*	44.13	41.33
Democratic violations*	10.39	12.78
Distance to Germany in 1,000 km	3.04	4.01
Gross national income 2019 (GNI) in 1,000 $	51.03	17.65
Unemployment ratio 2020/2019	1.29	0.35
Human development index 2019 (HDI)	91.19	6.62
Current health expenditure per capita 2018 (CHE)	8.49	0.74
International travel restrictions	2.83	0.61
Containment and health index (CHI)	55.32	5.95
Observations	2,208	

Notes: Excess mortality data are available only for 58 countries. The resulting models are based on 2,097 observations. *In all subsequent analyses continuous variables are standardized ($\bar{x} = 0;\ \sigma^2 = 1$).
Individual-level data: GERPSw1-4 (unweighted); Country-level data: Covid-19 infections, https://mrc-ide.github.io/global-lmic-reports; Excess mortality, https://github.com/akarlinsky/world_mortality; Distance, http://www.cepii.fr/CEPII/en/bdd_modele/download.asp?id=6; GNI, http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI; Unemployment ratio, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?view=chart; HDI, http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI; CHE, https://apps.who.int/nha/database/ViewData/Indicators/en; International travel restrictions, https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker; CHI, https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker.

The central outcome of interest is the event of return migration to Germany during 2020. Individuals who lived abroad immediately before the outbreak of the pandemic and remained in their country of residence throughout the year 2020 are the reference group. Table 1 indicates that 12 percent of German emigrants returned during 2020. The distribution of return migration over the year according to the GERPS data shows three peaks in January, March, and July 2020 that account for 12, 11, and 13 percent of total returns between January and November. Before the start of the pandemic, German emigrants in our analytical sample were distributed across six continents and 86 countries. They were concentrated, however, in Europe and English-speaking oversea countries. Before the pandemic onset, almost a third

of the sample lived in Switzerland and Austria (30.9 %) whereas 16.0 percent lived in the US and the UK. Spatial proximity and common languages like German and English are the main sorting mechanisms. The strong concentration on few destination countries aligns with official statistics (Destatis 2021; Ette et al. 2020, 110).

At the individual level, the models control for gender and age of respondents. Following the sampling frame of the GERPS data, all respondents are in the range of 21 to 71 years. For better comparison of the size of effects, all continuous variables were rescaled ($\bar{x} = 0; \sigma = 1$) producing standardised effects in the multivariate analyses. To account for the counterfactual development in the absence of the Covid-19 pandemic, all models also control for return intentions stated before the start of the pandemic. These were derived from answers to the question on how long individuals wanted to stay: 'no longer than one year', 'some years', 'for good', or 'undecided'. The information was dichotomised indicating that 47 percent of all respondents intended temporary stays compared to those who wanted to stay abroad for good or were undecided.[6] Finally, we included residence status which might mediate return probabilities. Table 1 indicates that two in three German emigrants had permanent residence permits in their host countries.

To test the influence of the household and family context on return migration decisions, we distinguished single households, couples without children in the household, and households with children. Furthermore, we tagged whether respondents' partners lived in the same country. Third, we accounted for an aggravating economic situation of households through a subjective assessment. The respective item had participants assess the pandemic impact on their individual household income situation on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'much better than before' to 'much worse than before'. We dichotomised this information where the two lower bound categories indicate a deteriorated economic situation. This operationalisation is more likely to capture actual economic consequences for individual households, which may vary below national level, than macro-economic indicators. In additional robustness tests, we accounted for macro-economic developments in countries of residence. Additionally, we included dummy variables to test for the influence of labour market participation on return migration. Particularly, we compared expatriates, students, and respondents who were not employed (inactive, unemployed, pensioners) with the reference group of self-initiated (self-)employed emigrants. We defined expatriates as employees who had been posted abroad by their employer, and we defined students by enrolment in tertiary education.

At country level, we included measures of the pandemic situation as well as of governmental violations of democratic standards in their responses to the pandemic. With respect to the pandemic situation, we opted for two measures: one reflects the inferred numbers of Covid-19 infections provided by the MRC Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis. It draws on raw Covid-19 infection data provided by the Johns Hopkins University to estimate the actual number of people that have been infected (Walker et al. 2020). Whereas raw infection numbers are potentially biased by cross-national variation in testing and

underreporting, these age-structured stochastic modelling techniques provide for better cross-national comparability and are standardised to 100,000 population.[7] We calculated average infections for the period from January 2020—directly after the start of the pandemic—until September 2020, one month before field work of wave 4 of the GERPS survey started. The resulting variable shows high variation between the 86 countries of residence of German emigrants. To illustrate, they range from low Covid-19 incidence in Taiwan (0.016) to high incidence in Peru (123.4). We selected this measure of Covid-19 infections and the specific period with the aim to attain realistic temporal references for individuals who made their return migration decisions in 2020.

The second measure of the pandemic situation is excess mortality. Because infection numbers are difficult to compare across countries and over time, excess mortality data are generally considered a more objective indicator of the Covid-19 pandemic for cross-national comparisons. We used national average excess mortality estimates by Karlinsky and Kobak (2021) who draw on the World Mortality Dataset as well as other sources (e.g. Eurostat, Short Term Mortality Fluctuations data) and provide the most extensive resource today covering 103 countries. Their measure is calculated as the difference between the expected mortality in the year 2020 based on data for the years 2015-2019 and the actual mortality in 2020. For each country, they computed the excess mortality from the beginning of the pandemic (starting in March 2020) on a weekly or monthly basis. As with our measure for Covid-19 infections, we used the average excess mortality for the period between March and September 2020 proportional to each country's population. The resulting variable has a high variability ranging from negative excess mortality in Uruguay (-61.2) to highly positive excess mortality in Peru (240.8).

We included an index of potential democratic violations in ostensible response to the pandemic to account for the potentially mediating role of political instabilities. The Pandemic Violations of Democratic Standards Index compiled by the Varieties of Democracy Institute measures seven types of violations such as official disinformation campaigns, limitations on the legislature, and restrictions of media freedoms (Edgell et al. 2021). As with our measures of the Covid-19 pandemic, we calculated average scores for each country of residence of German emigrants for the period from the beginning of the pandemic until September 2020. Empirically, the index {0; 100} ranges from no violations as in the case of many European countries (0), for example, to major violations as in the case of Sri Lanka (67.5). In the robustness checks we accounted for five additional country-level indicators, which we described in Section 6 (robustness checks).

Our theoretical assumption that country-level pandemic indicators frame individual risk perceptions requires an analytical strategy that accounts for both country- and individual level characteristics. We therefore opted for multi-level logistic regressions with random-intercept, individuals at the first level and countries at the second level. Because German emigrants are clustered in different countries of residence, hierarchical techniques provide for more accurate estimations than non-hierarchical ones and account for clustered standard errors (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2022; Snijders and Bosker 2011).

The intercept-only model estimates the variance at the second level ($\sigma_u^2 = 0.32$, $\sigma = 0.14$) and results in an intraclass correlation of 0.09 and a highly significant chi-squared test for equality of the proportions in all 86 countries ($\chi^2 = 36.8$; $df = 85$). Thus, systematic differences between the clusters do exist, which would be disregarded by non-hierarchical modelling techniques. Absent consensual model fit statistics, we reported McKelvey & Zavoina's pseudo R-squared.[8] We reported average marginal effects in the main text because they provide for a more intuitive interpretation than logits (Best and Wolf 2015); logits are reported in the appendix.

5 Results

Table 2, Model 1 shows the coefficients of first-level variables only. Models 2 and 4 present the direct context effects of our two Covid-19 measures. Models 3 and 5 account for the direct effects of potential mediating factors testing the stability of the Covid-19 measures (see also Table 3).

Model 1 only includes the individual level variables. Starting with the control variables, our results show that gender differences in the probability of return are small and not statistically significant. In line with existing studies on return migration, a negative relationship exists with age. An increase of the age of emigrants by one-standard-deviation, which corresponds to an increase by ten years, decreases the probability of return on average by 3.9 percentage points. The positive sign of the quadratic age term indicates that the negative correlation becomes weaker with increasing age (see appendix, Table A1). As one would expect, previously stated return intentions are positively correlated with actual return migration. Those who planned for temporary stays from the outset were 6.8 percentage points more likely to return than those without intentions to return to Germany. Everything else equal, the likelihood of return was on average 7.6 percentage points lower among those with permanent as opposed to temporary visa.

The situation of the household is particularly relevant for understanding return migration decisions within the context of a pandemic. Our findings suggest that individuals living in single households were more likely to return to their country of origin than individuals in all other household constellations. Partnered individuals with children living in their household were 4.8 percentage points less likely to return, while couples without children were 9.3 percentage points less likely to return compared with single households. Partners' country of residence (H2) is even more relevant. As expected, couples who were separated by national borders were particularly likely to return home. Although the temporality of living-apart-together-across-borders arrangements may partly account for the association (Beauchemin et al. 2015), the increase by 12.7 percentage points is most likely also explained by the serious difficulties the pandemic and its travel restrictions caused for such living arrangements (Gerber and Ravazzini 2022).

Table 2 Results of hierarchical logistic regressions of return migration decisions (average marginal effects)

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Individual-level					
Woman	0.012	0.010	0.009	0.011	0.014
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.014)
Age	-0.039**	-0.036*	-0.039**	-0.038**	-0.039**
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.013)
Return intention	0.068***	0.069***	0.060***	0.065***	0.058***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.014)
Permanent residence permit	-0.076***	-0.083***	-0.051**	-0.067**	-0.041*
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.019)
Couple, no children[a]	-0.093***	-0.095***	-0.085***	-0.086***	-0.081***
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.015)
Household, with children[a]	-0.048**	-0.049**	-0.045**	-0.043*	-0.042**
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.016)
Partner lives not in CoR	0.127**	0.125**	0.114**	0.096*	0.090*
	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.035)
Aggrav. economic situation	0.064**	0.066**	0.055**	0.061**	0.057**
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.020)
Expatriate[b]	0.048	0.047	0.031	0.071+	0.051
	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.029)	(0.038)	(0.033)
Student[b]	0.071*	0.070*	0.060*	0.063*	0.062*
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.027)	(0.029)	(0.027)
Not in labor market[b]	0.014	0.015	0.011	0.009	0.006
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.023)	(0.025)	(0.023)
Country-level					
Covid-19 infections		0.025**	0.022**		
		(0.009)	(0.007)		
Excess mortality				0.029***	0.019*
				(0.008)	(0.008)
Democratic violations			0.035***		0.031***
			(0.007)		(0.008)
N_1	2,208	2,208	2,208	2,097	2,097
N_2	86	86	86	58	58
R^2 (McKelvey & Zavoina)	0.238	0.243	0.252	0.237	0.247

Notes: Average marginal effects with standard errors in parentheses. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. [a]Reference category: single households; [b]Reference category: (self-)employed.

The economic activity, which eventually had been affected by the pandemic, influenced the decision to return to the country of origin. The subjective experience of an aggravating economic situation of the individual household is associated with a 6.4 percentage points higher likelihood of return compared with migrants who indicated that the pandemic did not negatively affect their household income situation (H3). In contrast to the other variables that strictly measure the situation of the respondents before the pandemic, this variable is based on the assessment in wave 4. Although the sequence of return and the economic situation cannot be disentangled, it is plausible that aggravating economic situations provoked return migration.

Our hypotheses concerning specific migrant categories are mostly supported. Although less pronounced than expected, expatriates were more likely to return than other employed emigrants (H4). For German expatriates, the probability of return was 4.8 percentage points higher compared to self-initiated (self-)employed movers, although the coefficient is not statistically significant at conventional levels. The coefficient is sensitive to the contextual variables at the country-level, decreasing when incidence is added to the model and increasing when mortality is added. Most likely, the return of expatriates concerned only specific countries or they returned to Germany only for a comparatively short time before continuing their assignment abroad. In line with our expectations, international students were 7.1 percentage points more likely to return to Germany compared with self-initiated (self-)employed emigrants (H5). Finally, respondents who were not in the labour market were not discernable in their return migration behaviour from employed emigrants. Retired emigrants, who show a generally lower inclination to return, and (tied) migrants, whose migration depends on their employed partners, are likely to account for this finding. Additional models, where we included interaction terms between these statuses and pandemic indicators indicate that students are particularly likely to return in response to higher Covid-19 incidences and excess mortality (see appendix, Table A2).

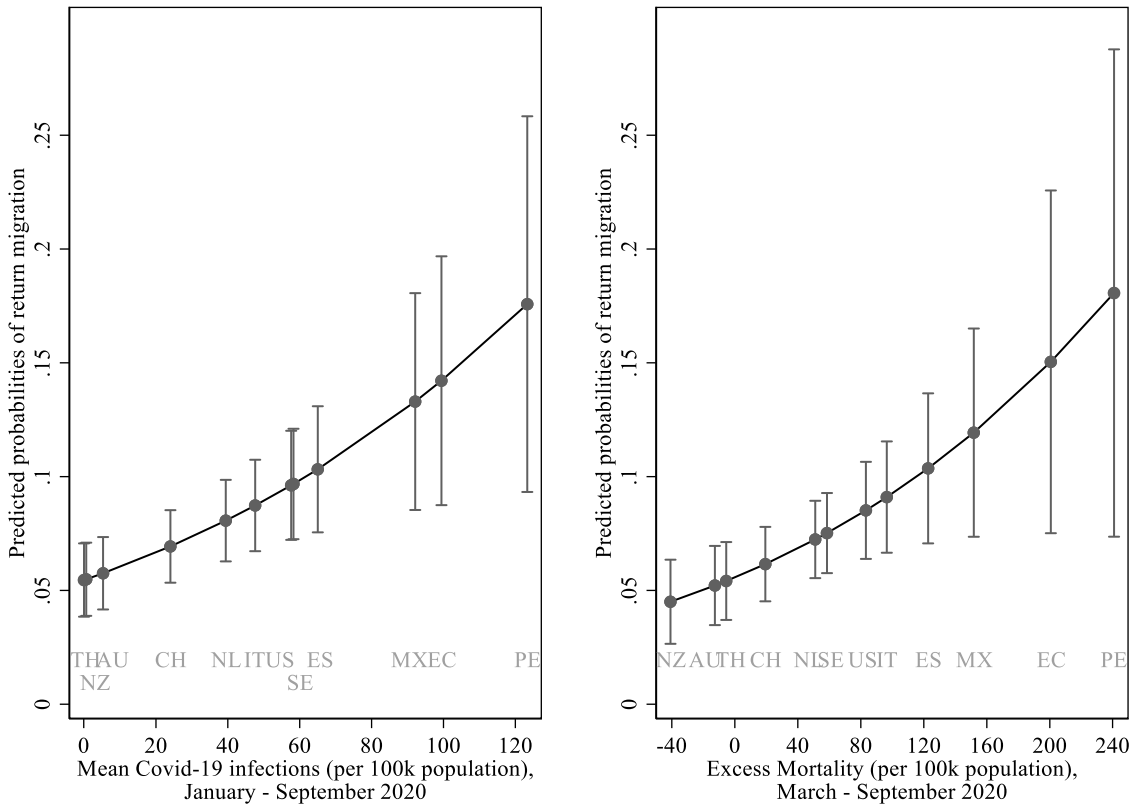
Models M2 through M5 include various operationalisations of country-level variables that account for the spread of Covid-19 and political dynamics following the pandemic in addition to individual-level variables. All findings from M1 are remarkably stable to the inclusion of macro-level variables. Internationally mobile Germans may variously experience the impact of the pandemic as serious or not. Their subjective experience depends on national variation in the timing and severity of the pandemic, national opportunity structures to handle the crisis, and the impact of the pandemic on individual economic circumstances. Despite those highly individual experiences of the pandemic, we find a direct context effect of the pandemic situation in the countries of residence of German emigrants on their likelihood of return. This finding is in line with our sixth hypothesis (H6) and holds for both measures of the pandemic: An increase of the incidence by one-standard-deviation is associated with a 2.5 percentage point higher probability of return (M2). Similarly, a one-standard-deviation increase in the excess mortality is associated with a 2.9 percentage point higher probability of return (M4). Because of lacking information about excess mortality in several countries of residence, M4-M5 are based on a reduced sample. Replications of M1-M3 based on a balanced sample with 58 countries, however, validate the reported results.[9]

Figure 1 displays the predicted probabilities at representative values of both measures of the pandemic and selected countries for individuals with average characteristics on all other variables of the base models, because the interpretation of standardised continuous variables is not intuitive. The figure illustrates that the predicted probabilities of return migration are lower for less affected countries like Australia, New Zealand and East Asian countries (e.g. Thailand) than for countries that witnessed higher Covid-19 infections and excess mortality like the United States, Spain and many South American

countries (e.g. Mexico). To illustrate, the difference between the Covid-19 incidence in Mexico and Thailand, for example, means that the probability of return from Mexico was 7.8 percentage points higher than in Thailand.

Models M3 and M5 account for democratic violations to test our final hypothesis (H7). Both models support the hypothesis of a positive correlation between democratic violations and the likelihood of return. The standardised average marginal effects of democratic violations are even stronger compared with the measures of the pandemic situation. A one-standard-deviation increase in the democratic violations index is accompanied by a 3.5 (3.1) percentage point higher probability of return according to M3 (M5) based on Covid-19 incidence and excess mortality respectively. The marginal attenuation of the context measures of Covid-19 once we account for democratic violations does speak in favor of a partial mediation through democratic violations.

Figure 1 Predicted probabilities of return migration of German emigrants at representative values of Covid-19 incidences and excess mortality for selected countries of residence



Sources: Individual-level data: GERPSw1-4 (unweighted); Country-level data: Covid-19 infections: https://mrc-ide.github.io/global-lmic-reports/; Excess mortality: https://github.com/akarlinsky/world_mortality; Democratic violations: https://github.com/vdeminstitute/pandem. Notes: Confidence intervals 90 percent. Country-shorts are ISO alpha-2 codes.

6 Robustness checks

The definition of our context variables involves several critical decisions. We therefore tested to what extent our findings are robust to changes in our variable definitions. The reference period for the calculation of the average number of infections and excess mortality is one critical decision. We constructed our measure based on the period from the moment of first data availability to September 2020. Alternative reference periods, however, hardly changed the substantial findings (see appendix, Table A4). Both Covid-19 measures based on shorter time periods effectively support the presented findings. Only measures that are confined to the very first weeks of the pandemic, yield smaller coefficients. This is likely to result from the varying spread of Covid-19 and the time-lag between countries of residence particularly during the first weeks of the pandemic. Substantially, we take extended reference periods to be more plausible references.

The reference period for return migration is another critical decision. Widespread media coverage began in January 2020 (Pearman et al. 2021) and raised public awareness of the health threat. This is likely to have induced immediate return migration among some respondents, while others returned once Covid-19 cases soared. We therefore replicated our main models (Table 2, M3 and M5) based on adapted samples excluding return migration events in January, January-February, January-March, and January-April (see appendix, Table A3). The more months we exclude from the analysis, the smaller the coefficients of our pandemic indicators and the higher their p-values. These findings suggest that pandemic return migration was more likely in the first months of the pandemic and that incidence is a more robust indicator of return migration than excess mortality.

Additional potentially mediating country-level factors represent another possible disturbance. In Table 3, models M6-M12 are based on Table 2, M3 (Covid-19 infections) but replace the original measure of democratic violations with alternative mediating factors. In Table 3, models M13-M19 are based on Table 2, M5 (excess mortality). The first test refers to travel distance, approximated by the logarithm of geodesic distances between countries (M6/M13) (T. Mayer and Zignago 2011). Distance and return migration are correlated but the coefficient of the pandemic indicator is robust. We account for the economic development of residence countries by including the logarithm of gross national income per capita in 2019 (GNI). The probability of return migration in the context of a global crisis decreases with increasing wealth of host countries (M7/M14). It is beyond the scope of this article, however, to determine whether this is related to the pandemic or generally shorter durations of stay in more developed countries. In any case, the positive correlation between Covid-19 measures and the likelihood of return remains unchanged by the inclusion of economic indicators.

Table 3 Results of hierarchical logistic regressions on return migration decisions based on alternative mediating variables (average marginal effects)

	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12
Individual-level	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-level							
Covid-19 infections	0.025** (0.008)	0.025*** (0.007)	0.024* (0.010)	0.025*** (0.008)	0.028*** (0.007)	0.026** (0.009)	0.018* (0.009)
Distance (log.)	0.028** (0.009)						
GNI 2019 (log.)		-0.020*** (0.006)					
Unemployment (2020/2019)			0.005 (0.013)				
HDI 2019				-0.019** (0.006)			
CHE 2018 (log.)					-0.025*** (0.006)		
Int. travel restrictions						0.006 (0.012)	
CHI							0.023** (0.009)
N_1	2,192	2,192	2,192	2,192	2,192	2,192	2,192
N_2	84	84	84	84	84	84	84
R^2 McKelvey/Zavoina	0.241	0.237	0.240	0.238	0.239	0.240	0.241

	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19
Individual-level	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country-level							
Excess mortality	0.028*** (0.007)	0.019* (0.008)	0.027** (0.009)	0.019* (0.008)	0.021** (0.007)	0.030*** (0.009)	0.021* (0.009)
Distance (log.)	0.023** (0.008)						
GNI 2019 (log.)		-0.038*** (0.008)					
Unemployment ratio (2020/2019)			0.014 (0.013)				
HDI 2019				-0.039*** (0.009)			
CHE 2018 (log.)					-0.036*** (0.008)		
Int. travel restrictions						0.005 (0.011)	
CHI							0.019* (0.009)
N_1	2,081	2,081	2,081	2,081	2,081	2,081	2,081
N_2	56	56	56	56	56	56	56
R^2 McKelvey/Zavoina	0.234	0.238	0.234	0.240	0.240	0.232	0.236

Notes: Average marginal effects with standard errors in parentheses. All models based on Table 2, M3/M5. Because of missing data, models are based on subsets of 84 and 56 countries respectively. Individual-level coefficients omitted. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Next, we controlled for the change in unemployment to account for immediate effects of the pandemic on national labour markets (M8/M15). Our measure is based on the ratio of the unemployment rates in 2020 and 2019. We dichotomised this information to identify countries that witnessed increasing

unemployment in 2020. The results support the expectation that German emigrants have returned particularly from countries with a deteriorating economic situation, although standard errors are large. The result is clearer when we replace the unemployment ratio with the Human Development Index (M9/M16), where we do find a pattern rather analogous to the pattern on the GNI. Finally, we accounted for the quality of national health systems using the logarithm of current health expenditure per capita provided by the WHO (M10/M17). The findings suggest a declining probability of return migration from countries with higher levels of spending for their national health care systems. The final models account for official pandemic containment measures. Measures of international travel restrictions and pandemic containment come from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al. 2021). International travel restrictions in host countries are positively related to return migration, but standard errors are large (M11/M18). Finally, the Containment and Health Index (CHI), a combined measure of 'lockdown' restrictions and closures, testing policies and contact tracing etc., partly mediates the relationship between the pandemic and return migration (M12/M19). Overall, the positive association between our Covid-19 measures and return migration decisions is robust. The results of the sensitivity checks suggest that the association between Covid-19 and return migration is not mediated by any of the additional context variables, except for the CHI.

7 Conclusion

This article contributes by developing both a theoretical model of high skilled return migration in the context of a global crisis and by applying this model to German nationals. We draw on unique longitudinal survey data from the GERPS project that fielded immediately before the pandemic in winter 2019/20 and one year later in winter 2020/21. The data provide a unique opportunity to assess the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic among a probability sample of German emigrants using a multi-level modelling approach. One key finding is that the Covid-19 pandemic has not prompted a massive return of privileged international migrants. The relative incidence of Covid-19 infections in the residence country is positively related to return migration but the association is only moderate. Whereas precarious migrants in the Global South were often forced to return because of Covid-19 (Foley and Piper 2021) and immobility was involuntary among non-privileged groups of migrants (S. Martin and Bergmann 2021) including high skilled migrants originating from less developed countries (Nardon et al. 2022), the privileged status of German migrants in terms of their visa and skills suggests that a larger share stayed voluntarily in their countries of residence. We have argued that these privileged migrants should be more likely to react by return migration than non-privileged groups. If even German migrants were just moderately affected in their return, Covid-19 is unlikely to have triggered massive return migration among non-privileged migrants.

In spite of German migrants' tendency to stay in their residence countries, both the incidence of Covid-19 infections and excess mortality owed to the pandemic are positively correlated with the likelihood of

return migration. This finding is robust to the inclusion of various related macro-level disturbances, for example democratic violations in policy responses to Covid-19, which are also positively related to return migration. At the level of households, migrants cohabiting or living with their children were less likely to return than migrants living in single households. That resonates well both with existing migration theories (Cooke 2008; Mincer 1978) and the life course concept of linked-lives (Settersten et al. 2020). Two groups of migrants were relatively more likely to return than the rest: expats and students. While the correlation for expats is rather weak, the higher likelihood of return among students resonates with findings that show national students to have moved to their parental homes during the pandemic (Duque-Calvache, Torrado, and Mesa-Pedrazas 2021; Kushtanina and Vinel 2021). An aggravated economic situation of individual households during the pandemic has an additional positive association with the likelihood of return, in line with findings that migrants with an option of reentry at a later point are likely to leave during crises (P. Martin 2009; Ramos 2018). A summary interpretation of this heterogeneity in return migration is that strong social ties in the residence country and economic stability of privileged migrants' jobs yield a low probability of return, whereas relative social independence and economic decline are associated with a higher likelihood of return.

Notwithstanding the unique qualities of our data, they have a few limitations. One is that we have no information about the causal relation between virus incidence and return migration decisions. We aimed to establish this connection by linking cross-country variation of Covid-19 incidence and return migration rates and by controlling for previous intentions of return. Although our measures are robust to varying reference periods of pandemic indicators and actual return migration, we cannot unequivocally determine which periods are ultimately relevant for migration decisions and we are ignorant of migrants' awareness and perceptions of actual incidence and excess mortality at the time of migration. Sensitivity analyses do suggest, however, that pandemic return migration was most likely to occur during the early months of 2020. Generally, migration decisions are best understood from bundles of motives in which the pandemic is one. A second limitation is the low number of observations per country given the global distribution of migrants in our sample. Our results are robust, however, to replications with minimum thresholds of 5 and 20 observations per country of residence. Third, we have insufficient data to fully account for the role of households, although they are likely to represent the migration decision-making unit rather than individuals. The high proportion of single households in our sample relaxes the potential impact but does not remove the substance of this critique.

What can we learn from the case of German return migrants about crisis migration more generally? We have defined them as relatively privileged in terms of their skills, the economic situation at home, and visa regulations they are subjected to. While generous visa regulations and a rather stable economic situation in their country of origin facilitate their return, their demanded skills tend to stabilise their employment situation and make return optional. There are indications that high skilled workers have been generally less affected by the pandemic compared with less skilled ones, who are more likely to

have suffered from poorer employment protection (Perry, Aronson, and Pescosolido 2021). Moreover, the possibility to fulfil tasks from home reduces the health threat represented by Covid-19 compared with those who risk infection while commuting and at work (Bartik et al. 2020). Consequently, German migrants should be relatively less vulnerable to the pandemic and its economic repercussions compared with less skilled migrant groups. Unfortunately, investigating the role of remote working is beyond the scope of this study. When it comes to legal vulnerability, German migrants should be more likely to return than non-privileged migrants because they retain their options of reentry. Under the assumption that legal vulnerability dominates economic vulnerability, our finding of a moderate pandemic effect on German return migration implies a low pandemic impact on return migration in non-privileged groups.

Our study shows how we can understand crisis migration by combining individual survey data and pandemic macro-data. This is a promising approach given the scarcity of empirical evidence about the consequences of crises for migration (Beets and Willekens 2009). Future research should expand on this by linking readily available pandemic data to migrant survey data and enlighten the interrelation between migration and global health crises. With increased availability of vaccinations and a reduction in Covid-19 infections, we would expect a return to previous levels of international migration.

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Endnotes

[1] Article 12(4) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that "[n]o one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter his own country".
[2] These statistics update the procedure by Ette and Erlinghagen (2021) for 2019/20, netting the raw statistics of ethnic Germans and de-registrations ex officio.
[3] According to Henley & Partners, an agency that assists citizenship by investment, the German passport ranked 3rd in 2022 in a global ranking and yielded visa free travel to 190 destinations.
[4] Additionally, 87 participants who lived abroad in wave 3 and moved to another country in 2020 have been excluded. These onward migrants have been excluded for conceptual reasons because their migration decisions follow different rationalities than return migration decisions. Note that our main findings are robust when we adjust the sample to alternative reference periods (see appendix, Table A3).
[5] Note that the coefficients are slightly smaller when we exclude January (see appendix, Table A3).
[6] In an additional question, participants were also asked whether they have seriously considered moving back to Germany or moving on to another country. Additional analyses based on this alternative operationalisation yield identical results with respect to all substantial hypotheses. Because of lower item non-response, we give preference to information about intentions to stay.
[7] All Covid-19 measures throughout this study are standardised to 100,000 population always based on the United Nations standard projection for 2020 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2019).
[8] The model fit is estimated applying the fit_meologit_2lev package for Stata provided by Wolfgang Langer (https://langer.soziologie.uni-halle.de/stata/index.html).
[9] Furthermore, replications based on two smaller samples excluding countries of residence with fewer than 20 (5) observations did not change the substantial results.