

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
School of Business and Governance

Mai Peksen

**REPATRIATION OF BALTIC EXPATRIATES  
AND THEIR FAMILIES:  
CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES**

Master's thesis  
Programme Entrepreneurial Management

Supervisor: Kristjan Jasinski MA

Tallinn 2023

I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors have been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading.

The document length is 14551 words from the introduction to the end of the conclusion.

Mai Peksen

3.01.2023

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	3
INTRODUCTION .....	5
1. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW .....	9
1.1. Expatriation.....	9
1.2. Main challenges with repatriation.....	12
1.3. Organizational support and knowledge transfer to HMCO .....	13
1.4. Repatriate career perspectives.....	16
1.5. Family adjustment.....	19
2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....	21
2.1. Research method.....	21
2.2. Sampling procedure and sample size.....	22
2.3. Method and data analysis .....	23
3. DISCUSSION.....	24
3.1. The motivators for repatriation.....	24
3.2. Benefits of the international assignments.....	28
3.3. Challenges upon repatriation .....	31
3.3.1. Fitting back to home country organization and career possibilities .....	32
3.3.2. Difficulties with family adjustment.....	34
3.3.3. Intentions for the future assignments.....	36
3.4. Repatriate support.....	38
CONCLUSION .....	41
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	45
APPENDICES .....	50
Appendix 1. Interview guide .....	50
Appendix 2. Table of interviews .....	52
Appendix 3. Transcribed interviews.....	53
Appendix 4. Non-exclusive licence.....	54

## **ABSTRACT**

Expatriates are valuable employees for multinational companies in transfer of company culture, knowledge, expertise, and technologies. During international assignments expatriates strengthen their managerial capabilities, build their interpersonal, leadership and networking skills, and gain market-specific knowledge. Successful repatriation – a final phase of expatriation - can result in effective use of international experience and increase the efficiency of the home organization. However, the problem is that up to half of the repatriates leave their companies within one year after return causing loss in knowledge, skills, network, and money.

According to the qualitative study with 13 repatriates from Baltic countries it was found that expatriation is a valuable experience that is beneficial for employee, their family, and the company. Yet, there are a number of challenges upon returning to the home country. Repatriates encounter career derailment since they are not offered work opportunities that match their previous experience and aptitude. Their family members face reverse cultural shock and children may have difficulties with adjusting back to local school system. Accompanying spouses may experience career stagnation due to having been away from the job market. Long-time repatriates and their family members encounter difficulties related to their identity and sense of belonging.

Unfortunately, many companies lack good repatriation programs. Companies should do more to support their overseas employees to ensure successful repatriation. The assistance could include assigning a mentor from the home organization, job guarantee, career planning, creating clear expectation about the role upon return, overseeing the opportunities for horizontal career development, financial support for the housing expenses, support with finding school for children and career planning and mentoring for the accompanying spouse.

Keywords: expatriates, repatriates, international assignments, reverse cultural shock, employee retention

## **Glossary**

IHRM	International Human Resource Management
MNC	Multinational Corporation
IA	International Assignment
HQ	Headquarter
HCO	Host Country Organization
HMCO	Home Country Organization
AE	Assigned Expatriate
SIE	Self-Initiated Expatriate
OCS	Objective Career Success
SCS	Subjective Career Success
DCC	Dual Career Couples

## INTRODUCTION

International human resource management (IHRM) is important component of multinational corporations (MNCs) and international assignments (IAs) are a daily practice for MNCs in managing their global operations (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Companies can achieve competitive advantage by hiring culturally intelligent and internationally experienced employees (Meuer *et al*, 2019). Empirical studies emphasize the notable benefit of expatriates who have ability to transfer knowledge, skills, and technologies to the host country organizations (Meuer *et al*, 2019).

Expatriates are valuable employees for MNCs as they can give competitive advantage through experience and knowledge sharing perspective (Kimber 2019, Davis *et al*. 2018; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021, Huang *et al*, 2005). Studies show that expatriation is a highly enriching experience that enables employees to acquire new and valuable knowledge (Sanchez-Vidal *et al*, 2018). Oddou, Szkudlarek, Osland, Deller, Blakeney, & Furuya (2013) state that acquired knowledge and experiences during the IA generate notable personal growth. Majority of employees have the opinion that international assignment is beneficial to their careers and organizations (Kraimer *et al*, 2009; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021).

Employees assigned to work in foreign subsidiaries are expected to deliver high results and execute challenging tasks, such as establishing, managing, and coordinating new business operations, expanding business to new market(s), spreading corporate culture, broadening business network, and transferring technology, skills and knowledge (Huang *et al*, 2005; Chiang *et al*, 2018). International assignments are not only demanding professionally, but also personally (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021).

A sizable amount of administrative and financial resources is spent on expatriation (Kimber 2019, Vidal *et al*, 2007; Nowak & Linder 2016), yet benefits of the assignment are difficult to foresee (Nowak & Linder 2016). Companies provide costly compensation packages, that can be three to five times higher than for the domestic employees (Malik *et al*, 2020, Nery-Kjerfve & McLean,

2012). In addition to salary payments there are number of extra expenses: relocation and housing costs, travelling expenses, international school tuition fees, medical expenses, membership fees, and extra holidays (Vidal *et al*, 2007). Researchers have tried to develop formulas to help companies to calculate the return on investment from expatriation, so called expatriate return on investment (eROI) (Nowak & Linder 2016). Nowak & Linder (2016) claim that without estimating the associated costs, it is not possible to determine whether the returns exceed the investment. This thesis is not intending to go deep in calculating the monetary value of the international assignments, although it must be mentioned that such formulas are being developed.

The international assignment process can be divided into three stages: the pre-departure stage, the phase during the assignment and the repatriation phase (Nowak & Linder 2016). There is considerable amount of research on pre-departure and expatriation phase of Expatriate Management Cycle (EMC) while less attention has been turned to subsequent phase, repatriation (Kimber 2019, Kierner 2018, Chiang *et al*, 2018, Ellis *et al*, 2020, Malik *et al*, 2020; Kraimer *et al*, 2009). Repatriation and repatriate retention are relatively new research subjects that have come to scientific literature in the past decade (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Possibly this one-sidedness in the studies is because returning home is usually seen as less complicated process since one turns back to his/her own cultural environment (Malik *et al*, 2020; Chiang *et al*, 2018).

Scholars agree that both, expatriation and repatriation processes are stressful for employee (James 2021; Malik *et al*, 2020). Kumar, Aslam and Aslam (2022) and Nery-Kjerfve and McLean (2012) even argue that repatriation is the most difficult phase of the international assignment for expatriates, and it can cause great level of anxiety and stress. Organizations are not realizing that repatriation stage is the most crucial in the expatriation process (Kumar *et al*, 2022, Malik *et al*, 2020). Reverse culture shock that occurs upon returning to home country can cause stress and have negative effect on work satisfaction (Mello *et al*, 2022, Kumar *et al*, 2022). Repatriates expect their home country organization (HMCO) to appraise their international experience and anticipate that HMCO employs it for their professional and personal growth (Kumar *et al*, 2022). Successful repatriation process can lead to efficient utilizing of overseas experience and improving the productivity of the home organization (Kumar *et al*, 2022, Malik *et al*, 2020).

Expatriates tend to have more demanding jobs due to broader or higher-level responsibility and higher degree of autonomy than domestic employees (Mello *et al*, 2022). For that reason, it is natural to expect a career promotion upon returning to HMCO (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021).

Nevertheless, reality is often different, and many repatriates must accept positions that have lower hierarchical value and responsibility compared to what they had before IA (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021, Kimber, 2019). Breitenmoser & Bader call this phenomena „repatriate career derailment“ in their recent research (2021).

To maximize effect of international assignments and develop competitive edge, it is important to manage the repatriation process effectively (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Failed repatriation can cause struggling with re-adjustment, difficulties with employee satisfaction and feelings of distancing and isolation from (former) colleagues (Chiang *et al*, 2018; James 2021). Unsuccessful repatriation may therefore cause competitive risks since repatriates might accept job offers from competitor companies after their return (Malik *et al*, 2020, Chiang *et al*, 2018, Kraimer, *et al*, 2012). Unsuccessful repatriation is seen as a lost investment not only in money, but also in skills, knowledge and networks that repatriate has acquired and developed during the IA (Malik *et al*, 2020, Kraimer, *et al*, 2012). Scholars suggest that one criteria to measure expatriate success is the company’s ability to retain the returned assignee and go through a process of a successful knowledge transfer (Kimber, 2019).

This thesis takes a deeper look into international assignments’ final phase - phase that comes upon returning to HMCO – repatriation. Expatriates who have gained significant amount on new skills and knowledge could be a great source for the further success of the company. Anyhow, the problem is that they often leave their organizations causing great loss both in knowledge and money for the companies. This thesis identifies the unique experience that expatriates gain through the IA and takes a deeper look into reasons why repatriates intend to stay or leave their companies. Moreover, the author will develop a guideline for the companies to support their repatriates. Through the empirical study the author is aiming to find answers to following research questions:

1. What are the main benefits of the IA and how these affect the professional development of a repatriates?
2. What are the challenges repatriates and their family members encounter when they return to their home countries?
3. How can companies best support their returning international assignees?

The first chapter of the thesis provides literature review and theoretical background on the repatriate research. The second chapter opens the empirical research methodology and sample selection principles. In the third chapter the results from the qualitative research are analyzed. The



data is collected through semi-structured interviews from 13 Baltic repatriates who spent at least two years overseas with their families. Analyses includes author's interpretation of the interviews and direct quotes. Through the research analyses direct connection with theory are drawn and as a result of the thesis, guidelines for the MNC's are proposed to support their international assignees in successful repatriation.

In being the first known study of this type, the author believes that current study benefits to multicultural organizations in Baltic region who intend to assign their employees to work in subsidiaries in foreign countries. Theoretical research combined with insights from the conducted interviews provide new and valuable information that could be utilized in preparation on sending employees on international assignments. As there are number of multicultural companies with Baltic origin that keep on expanding, knowledge from current Master thesis is beneficial in their growth and therefore valuable to the development of the regional economy.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to express her high appreciation to all the interviewees whose valuable experience formed the outcome of this thesis. She would also like to thank her colleagues Siiri Sutt, Ilona Baumanė-Vītoliņa and Aiga Arste for showing the enthusiasm and sharing ideas, and her family for the continuous support. A very special gratitude goes to author's fellow student Eneken Lūis whose high working habits and enthusiasm helped to maintain the motivation throughout the writing process. Lastly, the author would like to share the sincere gratitude to her supervisor Kristjan Jasinski for valuable encouragement and guidance.

# 1. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical part of the thesis gives literature overview of the repatriation research. First subchapters open both, expatriation and repatriation processes and examine the main challenges that repatriates face when they terminate their assignments abroad and return to their home countries. Focus is put on employee and family adjustment, skills development and knowledge transfer and further repatriate career development.

## 1.1. Expatriation

Expatriation is commonly defined as an organizational level decision to transfer knowledge from headquarter (HQ) to subsidiary by appointing managers or employees abroad to work in a different country (Baruch, Altman 2002). Expatriates are employees "who are sent overseas on a temporary basis to complete a time-based task or accomplish an organizational goal" (Harrison *et al*, 2004). Phase of moving abroad is expatriation and phase of returning home is repatriation (Chiang *et al*, 2018). According to researchers expatriates are either assigned or self-initiated. Assigned expatriates (AEs) are sent abroad by their employers and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) relocate to another country of their choice to seek a job or try an entrepreneurial venture (Meuer *et al*, 2019). AEs usually accept the job in within the same organization, in the subsidiary abroad, and their motivation is often driven by organizational and individual growth (Suutari *et al*, 2018). AEs are assigned by host firm, and they do not initiate an international assignment or the destination themselves (Meuer *et al*, 2019). This may lead AEs having difficulties establishing links to local communities (Meuer *et al*, 2019). In this thesis focus is on assigned (corporate-sponsored) expatriates and repatriates. Keeping in mind that expatriation is only temporary and will lead to repatriation it is important to be updated with the progress and changes in the HMCO. From a social capital theory (SCT) perspective expatriates tend to be vulnerable to losing their social networks and contacts with the parent company (Lauring & Selmer 2010).

As can be seen on Figure 1 assigned expatriation can be divided into several categories depending on the length: international business travel, flexpatriation, short-term expatriation and expatriation.

International business travel and flexpatriation do not cause same kind of career development and readjustment challenges due to their shorter duration, *ad hoc* nature, and lower possibility of having accompanying family members (Chiang *et al*, 2018). Assigned repatriation (corporate repatriation) refers to “returning employees who were sent overseas by their employing organizations on either a short- (e.g. 3–12 months) or long-term (e.g. over 12 months) basis who are expected to complete a time-based task or accomplish an organizational goal” (Chiang *et al*, 2018). Current master thesis focuses on assigned / corporate expatriation with duration of at least 12 months.

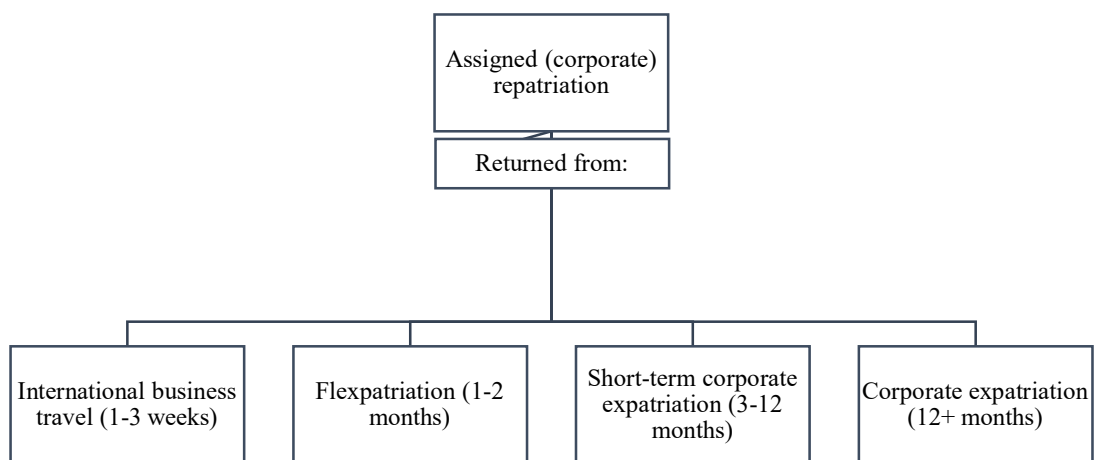


Figure 1. Types of assigned repatriation. Constructed by author based on sample by Chiang *et al*, 2018.

From gender point of view majority of expatriates are male (Bader *et al*, 2018). However, the gender trend is gradually towards more female expatriates (Brookfield Relocation Services, 2016). Bader, Stoermer, Bader and Schuster (2018) have researched the reasons behind gender inequality and seen that reasons for Western companies not to assign female employees to IA’s are often related to cultural factors of the host country. The reason can vary from marginalization in the workplaces in Middle East, Africa and Asia to countries with sexism in the companies (India and China) to more extreme countries such as Saudi Arabia where women until recently were forbidden from several roles in society (Bader *et al*, 2018).

According to Kanstrén and Mäkelä (2022) majority of long-term corporate expatriates relocate their partners/spouses and family members abroad. It is argued that international assignment is

even more challenging for the accompanying family members and partners than on employee himself/herself since the employee will have familiar business network and organization to rely on, but for the accompanying family members everything is unknown (Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2022). Most of the partners quit their jobs to support their spouse's/partner's expatriate career (Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2022). Therefore, relocating abroad causes a considerable adjustment in an expatriate partner's personal and professional life (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012, Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2022). Accompanying partners and family members are experiencing short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term influences on subjective well-being (SWB) that might include increased feelings of insecurity and unfamiliarity, changes in the employment situation, changes in family dynamics and social networks (Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2022). Companies should invest in the partners'/spouse's preparation for expatriation and repatriation phases, given the correlation between spousal happiness and the expatriate's ability to adapt to HCO and upon repatriation to HMCO (Tan *et al*, 2020). It has been noted that the expatriate's partner has a crucial role in providing support during the IA (Kierner 2018, Luring and Selmer 2010). Luring and Selmer (2010) conducted a study with Danish expatriate female spouses in Saudi Arabia and found several positive aspects related to the success of the IA. They found that spouses could carry an important role of relationship building behind the husbands' international career. To increase their husbands' career opportunities, wives used a variety of social strategies, such as social interactions during community events, building social networks with influential people, meeting spouses of subsidiary superiors, their husbands' superiors, headquarter guests. Overall, Luring and Selmer found that spouses who are well-adjusted to the host country's culture have positive impact on expatriates not only during the international assignment, but also during repatriation phase and further career development (Luring and Selmer 2010). The motivation, retention, and successful completion of assignments by expatriates may therefore be explained by an understanding of the dynamics of changes associated with spousal behaviors, as these feelings could possibly have influence on the other family members (Kierner 2018).

The role of accompanying children should not be undervalued in the expatriate and repatriate studies. Since children typically pick up new languages and knowledge more quickly than adults, they can play a role of sociocultural mediators between their families and the local people (Tan *et al*, 2020). The concept of Third Culture Kids (TCK) was introduced by John and Ruth Hill Useem in 1960's. Observing American expatriates working in India they discovered that children in those families developed a third culture that was a blend of their first culture (culture of home country) and their second culture (culture of the host country) (Kwon 2019). According to Pollock and Van

Reken (2009) “a Third Culture Kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her development years outside the parent’s culture. The TCK builds relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background.” (Pollock and Van Reken, 2009).

## **1.2. Main challenges with repatriation**

Repatriation is defined as "a transition from a foreign country to one’s home country after living overseas for a significant period" (Kulkarni *et al*, 2010) or "the final phase of expatriation that occurs when international assignees return to the home country" (Kraimer *et al*, 2009). Scholars have defined repatriates as employees who "return from overseas employment" (Herman & Tetrick, 2009) or “complete the international assignment and move to a subsequent position, either at the individual’s home unit or another MNC unit” (Reiche, 2012). According to Meuer *et al*, (2019) repatriation can either be planned or unplanned. Unplanned repatriation may have negative impact for companies. There are direct costs of replacing the employee and indirect costs due to damaged reputation and difficulties to attract new talented employees (Meuer *et al*, 2019). Therefore, it is important to support the overseas employee during the IA to avoid premature repatriation and loss of investment.

When returning from the international assignments, repatriates may experience difficulties adjusting to their home organizations. During the process of adjusting back to home culture, repatriates must return to their original behavior, which requires double the effort compared to what they experience during their adaptation to the host culture (Malik *et al*, 2020). Challenge is that not only they have changed, but their previous company has also gone through a number of changes: internal structures and policies have changed, former colleagues have been promoted or left the company, new technologies have been implemented, number of changes in client-, supplier- and partner pool have been made (Malik *et al*, 2020). Kimber (2019) states that one natural outcome of expatriates' stay overseas is weakened relationships with colleagues in HMCO since less attention is paid to the changes and advancements in the home country. A shift in commitment from the home environment to the host country environment may cause links to individuals and activities in their home organization to fade. Because of the decrease in employment embeddedness, repatriates are less likely to stay with their home company after

repatriation. Therefore, retention of employees who have completed international assignments continues to be a challenge for MNCs (Kimber, 2019, Kraimer *et al*, 2009). Often, it takes repatriation to fully realize the breakdown or loss of connections to one's home country (Kimber, 2019). Longer-term assignments may break or change the old relationships completely as home-based friends and acquaintances find it difficult to relate to the expatriate's experiences and changed identity (Kimber, 2019, Kierner & Suutari 2018). It is found that expatriate personal traits and behaviors have effect on both, expatriation and repatriation processes (James 2021; Huang *et al*, 2005). International assignees who engaged proactive behavior, such as gathering information and implement positive framing towards the career transition, experience higher satisfaction on their repatriation process (James 2021). Turnover rates among repatriates are higher than other employees (Malik *et al*, 2020), 20 to 50 percent of repatriates leave their jobs within one year after the end of IA (Ren 2013; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012).

### **1.3. Organizational support and knowledge transfer to HMCO**

Supportive human resource management through the whole cycle of EMC improves employee retention and helps repatriates handle the returning process and increase work motivation (Malik *et al*, 2020, Chiang *et al*, 2018). Nevertheless, many repatriates feel that home organization could do more to help them to handle the stress and difficulties of repatriation process. Majority of MNCs do offer help with physical relocation but fail to offer other types of support (Chiang *et al*, 2018). Repatriates' intentions to share their accumulated knowledge and new skills and contribute to growth of their HMCO often fail because of insufficient organizational support. Due to such knowledge withholding MNC are unsuccessful in utilizing the expatriation investment (Kumar *et al*, 2022). Kraimer, Shaffer and Bolino (2009) bring out ethics aspect from organizations side - companies are not always keeping what they have promised prior the international assignments. Inability to keep explicit and implicit promises of career advancement and benefits after the assignment can be source of great disappointment and frustration (Kraimer *et al*, 2009).

Repatriates might not only experience the reverse cultural shock from their home country environment, but also find that their HMCO organizational climate has changed during their absence. New colleagues, changes in organizational hierarchy, working methods and technologies can be source of stress (Eren Akkan and Akkan, 2020). Upon returning to the HMCO repatriates need to re-establish the social networks (Malik *et al*, 2020). James (2021) argues that one challenge

that repatriates can face is negative attitudes and behaviors of co-workers of the home country organizations. Co-workers might perceive threatened by the knowledge and experience that the repatriate colleague has gained during the IA and feel that their status is endangered (James 2021, Kumar *et al*, 2022). Therefore, repatriates who receive organizational and co-worker support are more likely willing to share their knowledge with the organization (Kumat *et al*, 2022). When repatriates receive support and resources from their organization and co-workers, their psychological capital (PsyCap) - individuals' positive psychological state of development - is higher (James 2021).

There are several HR practices that could be beneficial for repatriates:

- mentoring;
- career management;
- network access possibilities from abroad;
- access to online resources and new technologies;
- promotion opportunities;
- global executive coaching;
- in-country training and consulting;
- practices to utilize repatriate knowledge (Chiang *et al*, 2018).

Breitenmoser & Bader (2021) outline that well-organized organizational support can make employee feel more appreciated and reduce the negative impact of career derailment. It can therefore reduce the risk of repatriate turnover (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021).

One of the main competitive advantages for multicultural corporation is the ability to acquire and utilize international knowledge (Kumar *et al*, 2022). The knowledge that repatriates can transfer from the host country organization (HCO) to home country organization (HMCO) has significant value (Kumar *et al*, 2022; James 2021). In IHRM expatriation is considered as highly enriching experience that creates high value knowledge both, to the employee and the company. There are five categories of knowledge acquired during expatriation: market-specific knowledge, personal skills, management skills, networking skills and general management capacity (Sanchez-Vidal *et al*, 2018).

	Skills	
1.	Market-specific knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• knowledge about the political, social and economic environment the subsidiary is located in;</li> <li>• skills of conducting business in the foreign country;</li> <li>• the differences between home and local cultures and customs;</li> <li>• awareness of the global market growth potential;</li> <li>• ability to examine and understand the current trends and market conditions;</li> <li>• knowhow and ability to match the international standards;</li> </ul>
2.	Personal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• broader mindset;</li> <li>• intercultural competence;</li> <li>• greater tolerance;</li> <li>• openness;</li> <li>• increased self-assurance;</li> <li>• higher levels of flexibility;</li> </ul>
3.	Job-related skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding of new technologies and methods;</li> <li>• broader variety of tasks creates greater general understanding of company's business in wider spectrum;</li> </ul>
4.	Networking skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sharing experience;</li> <li>• physical proximity;</li> <li>• extended face-to-face interaction;</li> </ul>
5.	General management capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increased understanding of the organization's global business model;</li> <li>• deeper understanding of the business processes;</li> <li>• ability to comprehend the company as a whole as a prerequisite for potential future top-management roles.</li> </ul>

Table 1. Skills and knowledge gained during the IA, based on Sanchez-Vidal *et al*, 2018.

As shown on the table, IA allows employees to acquire great amount of knowledge and behavioral skills that would be difficult to develop in one's own culture and HMCO. This knowledge and skills have high potential value for both, to their companies and for employees for improving their disseminative capacity (Sanchez-Vidal *et al*, 2018, Oddou *et al*, 2013). Expatriates can acquire, create and transfer the knowledge both during the expatriation and repatriation phase (Oddou *et*



*al*, 2013). The process of transferring the knowledge from host country organization (HCO) to home country organization (HMCO) is known as repatriate knowledge transfer or reverse knowledge transfer (Kumar *et al*, 2022).

In order to ensure efficient knowledge transfer upon repatriation, it is important that the company establishes a good communication with the employee already during the IA (Sanchez-Vidal *et al*, 2018). It has been found that the main obstacles of knowledge transfer are not the skills and technology, but the willingness – people are often reluctant to share their knowledge. The main reasons could include the fear of losing value and status, the protection of personal competitive advantage, the risk of nourishing ‘knowledge parasites’ or, simply, to avoid spending time on knowledge sharing communication process (Sanchez-Vidal *et al*, 2018). According to expectancy theory employees work harder if they are acknowledged and fairly compensated by their organization. Repatriates are willing to share their international knowledge with their organization if they feel appreciated and awarded (Kumar *et al*, 2022, Sanchez-Vidal *et al*, 2018).

#### **1.4. Repatriate career perspectives**

Career success has been a research topic for decades being not only important from individual but also from organizational point of view (Spurk *et al*, 2019). Career progress of the employees with international assignment experience can be faster compared to nonexpatriate co-workers (Suutari *et al*, 2018). Repatriates who have reached top level of the company and have international experience are more attractive to external job offers (Suutari *et al*, 2018). It could be expected that global job market appraises international work experience higher than domestic market, however absence from one's home country makes onward repatriation adjustment more challenging (Suutari *et al*, 2018). Even though it can be challenging for expats to stay in touch with former colleagues and keep up with developments in HMCO, research has shown that maintaining connections while away is substantially correlated with eventual job success for expatriates (Lauring & Selmer, 2010).

A well-known approach is to divide career success into objective career success (OCS) and subjective career success (SCS) (Spurk *et al*, 2019; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Mello *et al*, 2022). Objective career success is based on external and measurable factors, such as salary raise, career promotion, and employment offers (Spurk *et al*, 2019; Mello *et al*, 2022). On the contrary,

SCS is seen from individual perspective and is focusing on factors that have personal meaning, such as career satisfaction, perceived career success and perceived employability (Mello *et al*, 2022). An indicator to measure SCS is career satisfaction (Spurk *et al*, 2019). Elements of OCS are not only represented by hierarchical perspective (vertical career promotion) but also developments in horizontal scale, such as longer or more flexible vacations, higher job security, development of career competencies (Mello *et al*, 2022). However, scholars argue that due to contradictive results from previous studies more research should be done to understand the repatriates' objective and subjective career success (Mello *et al*, 2022). Compensation is not considered as a relevant indicator of the career development for repatriates since salaries vary significantly depending on location of the IA, type of assignment and corporate compensation policy (Shaffer *et al*, 2012).

In the recent study Breitenmoser & Bader (2021) point out three categories of career advantages for repatriates: promotion, autonomy, and compensation. Firstly, they claim that repatriates expect promotion opportunities since career improvement was one of the main initial drivers already in the phase of accepting the IA (Ren, 2013; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021) Secondly, autonomy is another important aspect for expatriates and repatriates since expatriates usually experience higher level of autonomy during their IA and expect to have it even upon repatriation. Thirdly, repatriates who had higher compensation during their IA's expect the compensation level to remain the same according to study that was based on relative deprivation theory (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021).

Career development is often not a part of repatriation process for the MNC (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Many returning expatriates are placed in lower-level positions in comparison with their experience level and aptitude, causing inevitably lack of motivation and decreased performance (Ren 2013; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Relatively few international assignees get promotion after repatriation. According to the study conducted by Kraimer (2009) only 17% of the respondents had been promoted. Nevertheless, this situation should be analyzed from organizational aspect: with the increasing number of international assignments providing the career advancements on every returned expatriate is not feasible for MNCs (Breitenmoser & Berg, 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand how to retain former expatriates despite the limited possibilities for career advancement.

The majority of MNCs focus on helping returning families with physical relocation and finding their employee a position in the parent company (Kimber, 2019). Table 2 summarizes some well-regarded approaches that home organizations can provide to repatriates.

<b>Mitigate the reverse cultural shock</b>	
Provide debriefing opportunities prior to and upon the termination of IAs to prepare for the changes in the HMC office	Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012
Training sessions by cross-cultural trainer	Malik <i>et al</i> , 2020, Nery-Kjerfve & McLean 2012
Assign a mentor for repatriation phase	Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012
<b>Career planning and job placement</b>	
Provide clear information about the job opportunities in the HMCO	Malik <i>et al</i> , 2020
Include repatriates in planning process of the tasks after repatriation	Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012
Provide promotion upon repatriation	Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012
Discuss possibilities to open new career path	Malik <i>et al</i> , 2020
Offer a written proposal for compensation	Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012
Technology and production training to update the employee with latest trends and new products in the organization	Malik <i>et al</i> , 2020
<b>Family adjustment</b>	
Pre-repatriation training	Kanstrén & Mäkelä 2022, Nery-Kjerfve & McLean 2012
Coaching and mentoring sessions	Kanstrén & Mäkelä 2022

Table 2. Organizational support to repatriates. Table developed by author based on literature.

These general guidelines should be adjusted depending on the age and gender of the repatriate and the type and duration of the IA (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021).

## 1.5. Family adjustment

While there might be routines and guidelines for supporting returning assignees in MNC human resources processes, accompanying family members are rarely supported by employers during the repatriation (Kimber 2019, Kierner & Suutari 2018). Returning expatriate family members face number of stressors upon termination of the IA (Kanstrén & Mäkelä 2022, Malik *et al*, 2020). Negative impacts of the IA for the accompanying spouses could result in marital troubles, potential extended unemployment, personal financial difficulties or other emotional difficulties caused by reverse culture shock. Kanstrén and Mäkelä (2022) have found that accompanying partners and family members do not only feel challenges during the repatriation process, but these stressors affect their lives years after return. Unsuccessful repatriation can jeopardize marital relationships and cause severe effects on partnership. However, some spouses also experience positive impact from the expatriate period: long-term career development, career capital building, and increased emotional closeness between family members are some samples (Kanstrén & Mäkelä 2022). Some expatriate spouses might experience career stagnation upon repatriation while others enjoy well-deserved break from career and develop new career opportunities. Either way, career planning support would be beneficial (Kanstrén & Mäkelä 2022). Kanstrén and Mäkelä's study (2022) indicated that currently expatriate spouses experience lack of support from the organizations. Treating the spouse as a “participating partner” instead of “victim of expatriation” is the only way to successful adjustment (Tan *et al*, 2020). Children in expatriate families might face several challenges during both, expatriation, and repatriation phases: losing their homes and social networks, switching schools, finding new friends, learning foreign languages, feeling uncertain, not feeling like they belong in a given culture, and having identity and role confusions as a result of being raised in different cultures (Sterle *et al*, 2018).

Study conducted by Kimber (2019) brought out a challenge for expatriates to maintain two social relationship circles parallelly during the IA: one in host country and the other in home country. Without maintaining the home country relationships, repatriates can find themselves in social isolation upon return. Besides relationships, it is necessary to be updated with events and news back home not to lose the social context upon returning (Kimber 2019).

Despite the lack of extended empirical research, it is found that couples with dual-career patterns (where both spouses have individual career) face even bigger challenges than couples where only one counterpart is career-oriented (Kierner & Suutari 2018). Dual-career couples (DCCs) would

therefore expect organizations with career development advice for both partners. In the last decade, the number of dual-career couples (DCCs) have increased significantly (Kierner 2018). Since the career adjustments in these relationships are interrelated, it is important to analyze the interplay, attitudes, and behaviors of both counterparts (Kierner 2018). When discussing the motivation of turning back to home country, a study conducted by Kierner (2018) found that primary motivation for expatriates with dual careers is to enable the partner to turn back to his/her professional career path in the home country. This might lead to unplanned repatriation and premature assignment termination or rejecting the contract extension, which in both cases, can cause a loss of investment for the MNC.

## **2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter of the thesis presents the methodological approach used in the current study. The first subsection describes the qualitative research method research method that was applied for this study. The second subchapter describes how the sample was formed, and the third subchapter opens the process of the data analysis.

### **2.1. Research method**

In current study, qualitative research approach was chosen to open the phenomena of expatriation and repatriation in a deeper level. Just like scholars have stated, qualitative approach is adopted in the process of seeking in-depth knowledge from participants about certain phenomena, experience, or combination of experiences (Kallio *et al*, 2016; DeMarrais & Lapan, 2003). Qualitative research allows the existence of multiple subjective perspectives and constructs the knowledge rather than trying to find the reality (Greener & Martelli, 2018, p 25).

Data for the study was collected by interviews and a semi-structured interview type was chosen. Since semi-structured interview is not fully structured, new dimensions and concepts might appear during the interview since interviewee has possibility to further from the direct research question (Greener & Martelli, 2018, p 131). Interview guide was designed based on the findings from the theoretical literature. Prior interviewing the sample, author conducted a test interview with an expatriate whose international assignment was short-term and therefore did not qualify for the sample of current study. Adjustments to the interview guide were implemented after the test interview. Figure 3 is describing the methodological process of the thesis.

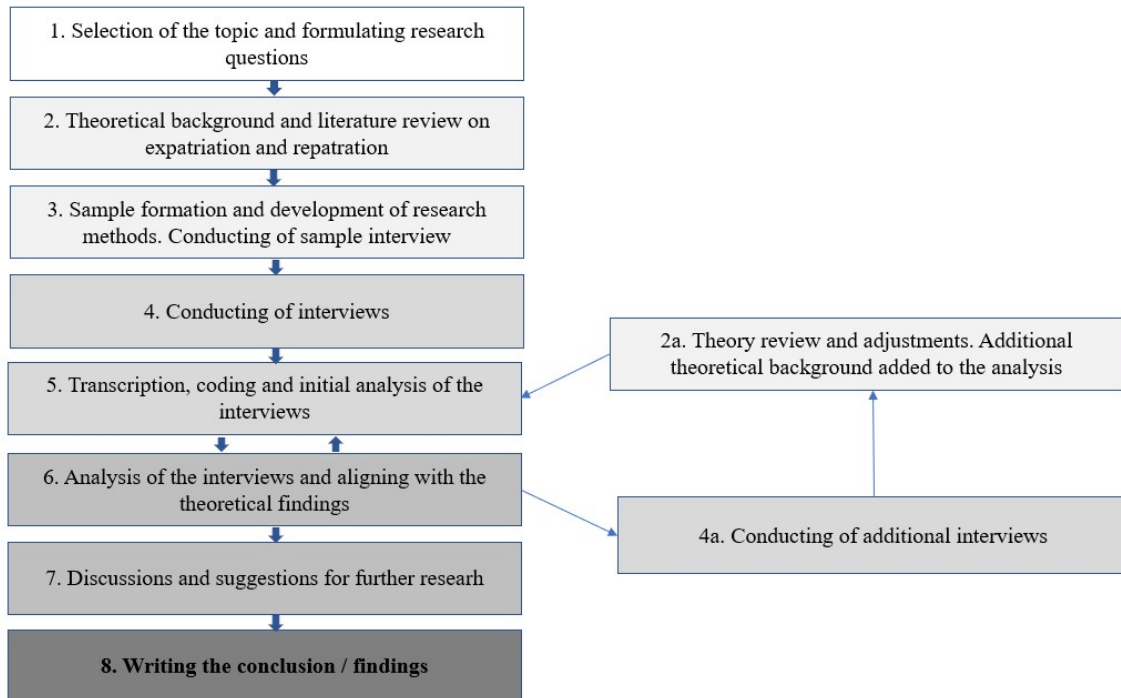


Figure 3. Methodological process of the thesis.

Source: Compiled by the author based on model of qualitative research by Bryman and Bell (2015)

## 2.2. Sampling procedure and sample size

The interviews were conducted with 13 repatriates from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (see Appendix 2). Following criteria were adopted when selecting the sample:

- 1) were assigned expatriates;
- 2) with origin from one of the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania);
- 3) considers one of the Baltic countries as his/her homeland;
- 4) the duration of the international assignment 2+ years;
- 5) was sent to IA together with accompanying family member(s);
- 6) have returned to home country and/or home country organization.

The sample consists of assigned repatriates from different industries (manufacturing, IT, FMCG, telecommunications) and with different organizational rank. Most of the interviewees, however, had managerial jobs both, in home country organization and in host country organization and during the interviews several aspects about leadership challenges in host country culture were

raised that could be interesting research topic for further studies. Due to demanding sample selection criteria the purposive sampling was selected. Purposive sampling aims to select participants in a structured way, making sure that those chosen are relevant to the stated research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p 429). Purposive sampling was chosen since there was no publicly available list of potential interviewees and the criteria is very specific. The sample was compiled from using author's personal and professional network and applying search techniques in professional social media platforms. Initial contact with potential interviewees was made by phone or email. General aim of the research and willingness for participation in the interview was asked during the initial contact. Due to the chosen research method, result of the current thesis cannot be generalized to the population.

### **2.3. Method and data analysis**

The interview was based on the interview guide that consisted of 24 questions that were divided into five main categories: expatriate experience, repatriation preparation phase, organizational role and knowledge transfer, family adjustment, further career development and retention. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via online conference calls (MS Teams or Google Meet). Due to different nationalities of the participants, interviews were conducted both, in English and Estonian (see Appendix 2). All interviews are recorded, transcribed, and uploaded in MS Word format in Google Docs. Link to the interview transcriptions is available in Appendix 3. The audio files of the conducted interviews were uploaded and transcribed using transcription applications, such as Trint and Speaker. Interview recording was re-listened 2-3 times and corrections to the transcription were done. The findings from the interviews were organized in Excel table (see Appendix 3) and direct quotes were highlighted in the interviews. During the coding process findings from the interviews were organized in blocks of 1) background and description of the expatriate experience, 2) benefits of the international assignment, 3) challenges upon repatriation and 4) organizational role and support. In data analyzing process theoretical findings were blended with findings from the interviews. Direct quotes from the interviews were used to illustrate the concepts.



### **3. DISCUSSION**

Following chapter will discuss empirical findings from the interviews in relation of theoretical framework that was discussed in Chapter 1. Additionally, some new insights are brought out that appeared during the interviews and were not initially in research focus, but author considers as important for the field of expatriate and repatriate research. As the result of the thesis, a guideline is generated to help the companies in supporting their overseas employees in successful repatriation.

#### **3.1. The motivators for repatriation**

Repatriation process starts already during the international assignment, and it can be either planned or unplanned (Meuer *et al*, 2019). According to the conducted interviews, the a common pre-agreed length of the IA is three years, and this was also mentioned as the initial plan by several interviewees. In some companies it was already determined with the expatriate management system (EMS) that an assignee can have expatriate contract with expatriate benefits up to three years and in case of extending the assignment more than three years local employee contract will be implemented. (INT7): "Normally in our company the standard length of the stay is three years. When it's over three years, they push you to get the local contract. If you want to stay, they don't give you the expat contract anymore." Keeping in mind these regulations, it is easier to understand the job changes of the employees and understand why some expatriates returned home after certain time or accepted the next expatriate contract in another country. In several cases, there was no time limit for the contract and decision to repatriate was affected by changes in personal or professional life. (INT13): "I didn't have any time limit for that assignment, so it was very much up to me and the company how to move forward. After three years there were changes in the company and the changes in the position which I felt was not really in line with how we had become a successful and how we have improved the company. And I simply decided that I would leave." Several interviewees stayed longer than they initially expected. (INT11): "It was not set in my contract, but we agreed that we stay in China maximum three years, no more. But as time went so quickly, we ended up with five and half". There were several cases of re-expatriations where employee accepted next international assignment without returning home between the assignments. The length of the total overseas stay in these cases were high, between 5 to 13 years, and these repatriates encountered later biggest reverse cultural shock.

Figure 2 is illustrating the process of the repatriation.

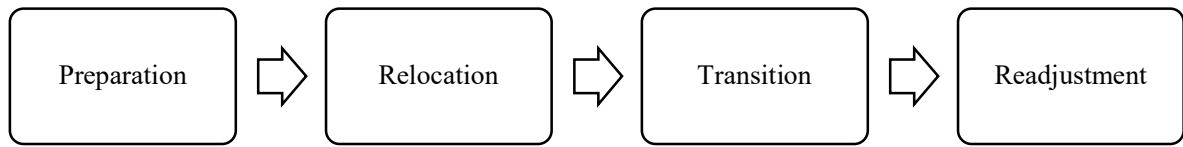


Figure 2. Repatriation process model developed by the author

As seen in Figure 2, repatriation starts already during the assignment with a preparation phase. In most of the interviews it appeared that the initiative was on the employee’s side and starts when he/she informs the company about the decision to move back to home country or shows the interest on moving on to the new assignment to the next location, so called re-expatriation. Those expatriates who knew that they will follow the „standard length“ of the assignment were generally better prepared for the repatriation. However, most of the interviewees did not have clear understanding how long time they will be spending abroad, and reasons of turning back varied significantly. Author has divided the reasons into four categories that are seen in Table 3: Job-related factors, social factors, environmental factors, and other factors.

Table 3. Motivators of returning to home country.

<p><b>Job-related factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed assignment</li> <li>• Changes in managerial hierarchy</li> <li>• Changes in employment legislation</li> <li>• Change in status and pay</li> </ul>	<p><b>Environmental factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pollution</li> <li>• Traffic and commuting</li> <li>• Political changes of the country</li> <li>• Covid19 pandemic</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family adjustment issues</li> <li>• Social network changes</li> <li>• Changes in family relationships</li> <li>• Spouse’s career development</li> <li>• Challenges with children’s education</li> </ul>	<p><b>Other factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longing for structure</li> <li>• Limited managerial development possibilities</li> </ul>

Source: Based on the interviews, constructed by the author.

Job-related factors were describing general organizational changes and role shifts that would most probably have appeared even with no-expatriate assignment. In one case, offering the overseas assignment was the way to retain the talented employee. (INT6): "I had already written my resignation letter, but then my company came with this Chinese offer and I decided to stay." Repatriates mentioned the environmental aspects as one of the triggers to turn back. Air pollution in manufacturing hubs and large cities is in hazardous levels and several interviewees considered this as one aspect why not to prolong the stay abroad. (INT6): "In the evening you are driving in the /Beijing/ city for five hours, constant traffic jam, nose is full of dust." Pollution and long hours spent on commuting were something that people with Baltic origin have difficulties to cope with, probably due to the contrast with our comparably clean living environment and short daily commuting distances. (INT1): "In South Africa if I had to go to a meeting in Johannesburg, I could drive 60 kilometers for 3 hours." Pollution and traffic security were risen as a common problem by many interviewees who lived and commuted in large cities. (INT6): "In Beijing if you want to drive outside the city, you drive two hours and you are still in the city." And simply, longing back to calmer living atmosphere was mentioned. (INT5): "I guess I was longing for a structure and order. Chinese say that Europe is like a big calm museum, I guess I was longing back here, to the museum atmosphere." Personal development was driving factor for many international assignees. (INT2): "After six years in Korea I was curious to move on to the next assignment. I did not plan to turn back to Latvia, I rather wanted to work for a global brand group. I had already done small market, after that I worked with a group of countries and now wanted to go global." According to scholars, most of the long-time expatriates take their families to the assignment, and therefore many aspects are decided in accordance with family wellbeing and adaptation. (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012, Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2022). Children's school changes were mentioned as a common motivation of repatriation, especially for ages where children were about to enter the first grade, high school or university. (INT8): "My child was six and it raised the question whether he will continue in the British school in China or we turn back to Estonia and he starts in the first grade here." Not only children, but also broader family circle was kept in mind – in several cases the need to take care of older generation in the home country. (INT2): "I wanted to move closer to my parents. I am the only child in the family. /.../ I did not feel comfortable when I was in Korea or Hong Kong and I had to rely on someone's help if something happened with them." (INT5): "It was somehow in accordance with a regular life span - my son graduated the high school and was accepted in university in Netherlands, and I also wanted to move closer to my aging parents." In several interviews it was mentioned that one of the aspects of making a decision of returning home was spouse's limited professional development possibility abroad. (INT4): "From my side, there

was a will to continue further, I think I would have loved to stay in the region for another year or two, but my wife wanted to return to Estonia. She just wanted to have an adult life back.“. Female interviewees mentioned becoming pregnant as a decision-making moment for the repatriation. (INT12): "I got pregnant for the second kid, so just naturally kind of solved the challenge."

As mentioned in the literature review of this thesis, scholars agree that international assignments are professionally demanding (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Expatriates are expected to deliver high results and work with broad variety of tasks during their IA's (Huang *et al*, 2005; Chiang *et al*, 2018). During current study, these assumptions were confirmed. Interviewees were sharing their perceptions of long working days and high work intensity that was another aspect of making a decision to return home. (INT8): "I was working from morning till evening. When I started, the revenue was 30 million and we had 300 employees in one factory. And when I left five years later, the revenue had increased to 150 million and we had 1000 employees in two factories", (INT1): "Working day started at seven in the morning and when it was the *go-live* time of the solution we worked 20 hours a day." Not only the work intensity, but also time zone differences were exhausting and made working days very long. (INT13): "The long working hours, meetings and the time difference with your home country is challenging. In China we were 6 hours ahead. If my European colleagues or customers wanted to call me after their lunchtime, it was already six, seven or eight o'clock in the evening in China. And in the early morning, if you need support, there is nobody there because they are sleeping. So, you are more or less by yourself, you simply have to handle the situation yourself." Therefore, several interviewees expressed the tendency for longing for a calmer daily routine and shorter working days, especially when it was combined with changes in their family life, such as children starting school or getting another child in the family.

International assignees are expected to execute complicated tasks and deliver high results, including establishing, managing, growing company's market reach, maintaining corporate control, promoting corporate culture, expanding business network, and transferring technology, skills and knowledge (Huang *et al*, 2005; Chiang *et al*, 2018). Interviewees of the current study described the skills and knowledge that they transferred to host country organization during these intense assignments. (INT6): "Literally, before I arrived, they were working with a sheet of metal and a hammer – doing rather simple and robust work. I came in with very complex electronics and mechanics - the skills I had acquired during my previous working life – I handed over all my knowhow, made my team work and when I left three and half years later, I left fully functioning organization behind." Intense work, and hours spent on commuting between home and office made

the working days long and exhausting. Additionally, interviewees not only experienced long hours on commuting to work, but they also had frequent business trips, either to visiting HQ, HMCO, clients, partners, or suppliers. (INT11): "One year I was looking at my flight statistics with only one airline and it was 120 flights a year. This was insane!", (INT10): "The number of the flights I have taken in my life... I guess by now it is around 1300 or something." To conclude, expatriates in the current study had a wide range of motivators and reasons to turn back to their home countries, including changes in company structure, children's schooling challenging and spouses career perspectives. From the environmental aspect these interviews created a perception that people with Baltic origin are longing for order, proximity, clean nature, and quietness.

### **3.2. Benefits of the international assignments**

Majority of the interviews showed a diverse range of gains related not only to assignee's professional career development but also to family internationalization, children's education, acquired language skills, health benefits, extended social network, travel and adventure. Similarly, to earlier researchers who emphasize the gain of IA's to employees' personal and professional development (Sanchez-Vidal *et al.*, 2018) interviewees of current study confirm it. Firstly, interviewees perceived the broader mindset they had gained through the long international experience. (INT2): "I am more colorful person, more open, more curious. I don't have prejudice. I know so many people worldwide." (INT6): "This global understanding of the business, socializing with people from various cultures with different communication manners. This global sight - understanding how to do business in China, it is all totally different. And it is valued all the way until today." The global perspective and ability to grasp larger international markets was something that all the interviewees had developed during the IA. (INT3): "We did not see Lithuania as a market, it was more like a cluster in Eastern Europe." (INT13): "You don't have that tunnel vision. You see broader on the problems and understand them in another way. Also, the way how Chinese work is also quite different compared to how Western people work. All methods have their positive and negative approach. It has been good to see and hopefully I have learned the best from what I have seen." Not only own, but also the gains for one's family members, especially children were mentioned. (INT7): "I think it was very useful experience. It opens the horizon /.../ My children are world citizens now /.../ my older one goes to university in Amsterdam." (INT13): "They have been able to see something different. They have a broader mindset, I believe. They also have better understanding of the different people, do things differently and are also accepting

things easier compared to people that have never been outside or families that very seldom or never travel.” Interviewees expressed that living in another culture teaches much more than working with foreign colleagues remotely. (INT12): “Even seeing the differences among the Scandinavians /.../ When I was looking based on the Baltics, it felt like they are all the same, but now after been living in Norway, and working tightly with Swedes and Danes, I have actually realized they are quite different.” One interviewee philosophized around the genuine similarities that people have in common. This statement could be illustrating the global mindset that expatriates develop through spending years in foreign cultures. (INT2): “In the base people are all the same - no matter whether they are Koreans or Georgians or Malaysians or Chinese. The core is the same. And then you have the surface and culture is part of that.”

All the interviewees in the study highly appreciated the international experience. (INT8): “Expatriation is beneficial both, to the expatriate employee and to the company.” All interviewees agreed that IA has been beneficial to their further career development. (INT12): “I guess it goes without saying that this is certainly seen as an advantage. Either you would consider applying for another international company or if you would consider working for a local company. From local company perspective it might be interesting to have people with different backgrounds and even without considering of going into other markets, it is still added value asset.” (INT13): “China is a growing market. It is a country with a strong will to industrialize and be on the front end when it comes to manufacturing and development of products. I believe that it helped me a lot - be able to take part of this international approach and strategy. This country has become one of the world leaders in technology and manufacturing. And being there gave me the benefit to meet a lot of people from different countries, to see different business cultures, different technologies, see how different people do business in a different way.” Interviewees from manufacturing industry saw Asian experience as a significant impact on their later career. (INT7): “They know what I can do. And that is also because of my Chinese experience.” (INT6): “I know that I my value is higher with this Chinese experience.”

According to Sanchez-Vidal, Sanz-Valle & Barba-Aragon (2018) expatriates gain a great amount of knowledge and skills during the IA: market-specific knowledge, personal skills, management skills, networking skills and general management capacity. Current study confirmed that upon return they expect to utilize these broadened skills in further career development. (INT7): “I don't think that many expats after these years of international experience doing things in the global scale are interested to do the same what they were doing before.” Some interviewees in this study were

indeed given a broader responsibility compared to what they had prior and during the IA. When talking about career advancement, the importance of self-initiation in seeing the opportunities and being proactive in creating consciously own career path and seeing the possibilities was emphasized in several interviews. (INT3): „Nothing is given to you for granted, you have to open your mouth and fight for every opportunity“. Interestingly, these interviews were representing repatriates in the field of sales, marketing, and business development. It can be further discussed whether the personal traits of the employees in sales and marketing positions are more self-driven, ambitious, and competitive than among for instance engineers or manufacturing employees.

In many expatriate studies, high monetary cost of international assignments is underlined (Kimber 2019, Vidal *et al*, 2007; Nowak & Linder 2016). Also, most of the interviewees in current study experienced increased socio-economic status during the IA, especially those who were working with so-called expatriate contract. Housing fees, personal driver, international school tuition fees, home trips, relocation support were called as "standard expatriate package" during those interviews. The living standard shift was perceived quite remarkable. (INT6): „Initially I did not understand why they offer me such an expensive apartment in a fancy neighborhood. Me and my wife come from forty square meters apartment from a small Estonian town and suddenly we ended up on hundred and ten square meters in the middle of fancy skyscrapers.“ Since the interviewees' social network consisted mostly of other expatriate employees with similar benefits, these conditions were seen rather as a standard. Anyhow, cost of living can vary significantly between firms. (INT8): "In the same building with us lived expatriates of large international corporations, such as Shell and World Bank. Only their rental expenses could reach ten thousand euros a month". In most of the interviews, anyhow, it was discussed that even though the „standard expatriate package“ could be perceived as considerable benefit, increased living conditions were in accordance with work workload and complexity of the assignments. In accordance with scholars who have found that there is a strong correlation between spousal happiness and expatriate's ability to adapt to host country culture and organization (Tan *et al*, 2020, Kierner 2018) the interviews confirmed that wellbeing of the accompanying spouse has a significant importance. (INT6): „Company knew that if you bring your wife along and if she is not pleased with the living conditions then after a half a year you will be unhappy and after a year you will be leaving the country“. This is the reason why companies are willing invest large amount in expatriate packages to ensure the whole family, not only the employee, is satisfied with life in foreign country.

Interviewees were sharing thoughts of their children's educational path in international schools and cultural adjustment. New language skills are highly appreciated by interviewees, children had possibility to learn foreign languages in the level they could never have learned in their home country. (INT8): "My son's school was in English, so his English and Estonian were in equal level, and from *Ayi* (babysitter) he got also Chinese. I would say that his Chinese was even better than mine. There were times when he was acting like a translator between me and the babysitter". In some interviews repatriates mentioned the challenge with blurred national identities and children's pursuit not to identify them directly to any certain culture. Correlations can be drawn with Third Culture Kids' theory that was developed by John and Ruth Hill Useem already in 1960's (Tan *et al*, 2020). Just like in this theory, interviewees expressed that their children had developed another culture on top of their parents' and the host countries' cultures and were not considering themselves as nationalities of any certain country but identified themselves rather as global citizens. (INT12): „I guess for my daughter the question where is your home is probably quite complicated.“ (INT3): "My daughter has never studied in Lithuania. Her first language is English, second in French, and third Lithuanian, she speaks with me with this London accent. She lives in London, she works for huge banking corporation up there." After graduating high schools many children from expatriate families continue their educational careers in universities abroad and start their careers abroad: London, Amsterdam, Paris, New York. Interviewees experienced that their children have gained a broad cultural understanding, made friends from different countries. (INT12): „All the possibilities that they have got with the education! Comparing the education in the Baltic countries and in international schools - there is a quite gap. So that is an added benefit for going abroad.“ Also, climate change was mentioned as a benefit of moving abroad. (INT13): “The biggest benefit and one of the main reasons why we moved to South China was the weather, because our oldest son had a sickness. Sun and warm temperature were beneficial for him, the sickness disappeared. Thanks to the sunny and warm weather we had during those three years recovered from the sickness and today he is symptom free.”

### **3.3. Challenges upon repatriation**

Despite great benefits of international assignments, there are plenty of difficulties that employees and their families meet when they return home. In accordance with scholars (Kumar *et al*, 2022, Mello *et al*, 2022, Malik *et al*, 2020) current study confirms that repatriation is challenging for the international assignees. All interviewees expressed a great number of gains, but also mentioned



several challenges. (INT2): “It is a fantastic experience, but it comes at the cost.” There were some interviewees who experienced repatriation process even more difficult than the expatriation process. (INT7): “Moving back was even harder than moving abroad.” The reason, though, varied from organizational changes, new uncertain role, to struggle with finding home and school from children.

### **3.3.1. Fitting back to home country organization and career possibilities**

As confirmed by several researchers, repatriates may experience difficulties adjusting back to their home organizations. The impact can come from various factors: their own professional growth and broadened mindset, societal changes, but also changes in home country organization: staff, clients, suppliers, partners, technologies (Malik *et al*, 2020, Kimber, 2019, Kraimer *et al*, 2009). Although MNCs usually have implemented practices for sending employees abroad, they are lacking the policies for returning their international assignees. (INT12): “I also guess the link or connection between the employee and HR is really crucial. When an employee gets to an international assignment this is one aspect. Another aspect is thinking of career path in longer term - what will happen after. And I guess that is probably the weakest chain.” (INT7): “With many people I talk to in big companies they have an issue to bring the people back. Companies invest a lot of money that they would get the international experience. But then when they are back, they become a problem of the local HR organization: what shall we do with this guy?” Possible explanation to this issue was brought out by one of the interviewees. (INT12): “When you return back your place is already occupied by somebody else - if companies are willing to get a good candidate, then usually, they go ahead with a permanent agreement, not contract on a temporary basis. And what affects specifically Baltic countries is that we are having small local organizations. So the possibility to find something similar locally is rather a challenge.” This puts employees who are returning back from managing jobs from another country in the situation where the further career possibilities are limited. Providing promotion for all repatriates is not feasible for the companies (Breitenmoser & Berg, 2017).

Assignees who had spent shorter time (less than 5 years) abroad seemed to experience smoother adjustment back to home country organization. They were more updated about the changes and developments in the organization. In contrast, assignees who had spent longer time (9, 11, 13 years) abroad left the company in the process of repatriation. The reasons vary. One motivation was that since they had been with the company so long time, it was natural to look for a change. Secondly, the organizations had went through significant changes and they did not have any role upon return

in their home organization. Companies could start career planning in early phase and have regular meetings with an employee regarding the future employment plans. (INT7): „If you're really interested in the talent, you need to start the talent planning process way before.“

According to scholars, expatriate knowledge transfer has a great value for the whole MNC and it can give competitive advantage (Kumar *et al*, 2022, Sanchez-Vidal *et al*, 2018). Despite the importance of the knowledge transfer, most of the repatriates in the current study did not describe any structured or systematized knowledge transfer process in their companies upon repatriation. Knowledge transfer was rather seen as a natural part of the job since the video meetings, intranet and emails connect subsidiaries worldwide. (INT4): “It is not like you spend two years in desert and then you come back and share.” The knowledge was important on daily decision making and managing the business processes. Several interviewees described the personal knowledge sharing with the colleagues in informal settings. (INT11): “Metaphorically speaking, my knowledge transfer was more like a chat with colleague behind a glass of beer.” Expatriates who had spent their assignment in China emphasized the value of the knowledge of supply chains and global sourcing that is concentrated in Asian countries. In these processes international assignees were a valuable source of contact and they had gathered in-depth understanding of the specifics of the interpersonal communication in China, such as slow process of relationship building and importance of understanding the power hierarchies. Upon repatriation, one part of knowledge sharing was also to support the other colleagues in considering accepting the IA. In the company where employees need to shift between European countries, HR manager with an IA experience has better possibility and in-depth understanding of the moving processes and can be a role model for other employees in similar assignments. (INT4): “If I can relocate with three kids and wife to Middle East, then /.../ what about going back and forward between Estonia and Germany“. Two other interviews supported the idea of importance of HR manager in MNC to have international experience at some extent as a prerequisite to support the expatriation process better. In some cases, it was described that a returning international assignee transfers knowledge to the person who is taking over the assignment. (INT11): „Luckily, I had a colleague whom I can also call my friend and I can talk to him without any filter. Already before I started working in China, he was sharing me the cultural specifics and managerial challenges, Swedish versus Chinese managerial style. And Estonia is somewhere between them. It eliminated my shock.“ Several interviewees expressed their disappointment with a lack of interest for their experience from their organization and broader social circle around them. (INT7): "They were not so interested. Everyone in the big organization thinks that they do the things right way. They were not open to learning", (INT2): “I

was thinking that I will come back and give people lectures about my experience, and I was thinking to join the social clubs of returned expatriates and all that. But I did not find much interest and I did not find myself there.“ Considering the rarity of the expatriate experiences and importance of the knowledge, a more accurate method of knowledge transfer should be created so that the repatriates can feel like the overseas mission was not a loss for the organization and they could feel that their skills and knowledge are valued.

### **3.3.2. Difficulties with family adjustment**

Much concern was raised around family's and children's wellbeing during the interviews. Just like stated by Kanstrén and Mäkelä (2022) current study confirmed that most of the long-term international assignees relocate together with their family member(s). (INT10): “I know that some people commute without their families, but in my experience, that's not a long-term solution. Something is kind of breaking, either the person decides not to commute or even worse, person decides to separate from the family.“ The interviews left the impression that most of the decisions around expatriation and repatriation are aligned accordance with family's needs and adjustment. For instance, timing of the relocation was adjusted according to the start of the school year and when choosing a place of living expatriates tended to rent homes that were located near international schools and rather spend the long hours in commuting to work. (INT9): “In New York all children go to school in their local school district. There are two kinds of schools: very good schools and not so good schools. So it is visibly clear which street or district belongs to good school district - rental prices are significantly higher.“ Adjustment back home was significantly harder for families with children in school age. School system adaption is just one part of the problem, the challenges with emotions and leaving friends behind were another serious issue. Children are making deeper social relationships and perceive parting from their peers emotionally difficult. (INT10): “Children took it hard, they left friends behind. It was especially hard for the younger one, older one was already used to frequent moves“. Interviewees with children in school age brought up several difficulties in finding appropriate school to their children. (INT9): “The biggest issue when returning back was where to find a school for children. Since we came in the middle of school year, we were worried who will accept them in the middle of the year?“ The challenge has several aspects: the language skills and difference between international (British / American / IB) and Baltic school system. Children in Baltic countries start school usually at the age of seven, but in international school children start school at age of five or six. Children who started school abroad were expected to repeat the class in local school. (INT9): „My son would have been forced to go back to Estonian kindergarten after finishing the first grade in the US.

Luckily, we got him a place international school in Estonia.” Therefore, several interviewees enrolled their children to international schools in the home country where children had possibility to join the same class as they had been attending abroad and also meet children with similar international backgrounds. (INT13): “The idea was that we might soon move abroad again. That is why we did not see the benefit of putting them into local school where they did not manage with the language. They were used to the international environment. So that is the reason for why we decided to put them into international school.” Financially it is costly since international schools have high tuition fees that companies are not covering the fees after repatriation. As a latter educational step, several children from expatriate families after graduating international school continued their studies in universities abroad: in Netherlands, France, USA, UK etc. (INT12): “If you go on the international assignment it might happen that your kids might just want to move around globally without turning back to their home country.”

The subject of spouse’s career possibilities in the light of repatriation was raised several times during the interviews. (INT10): “Spouse’s professional engagement is probably the most complicated thing during these assignments.” Many accompanying spouses did not have any possibility to be professionally engaged even though they had interest and motivation for that. Sometimes the problem was in language barrier or legislation. (INT13): “In China my wife’s possibilities to work were limited because laws and regulations don't normally allow it. If a person has been sent there, the person's wife or husband doesn't get the work permit. For my wife it was more finding hobbies and finding activities for herself while I was at work.” (INT3): “She was mainly spending time on charity, or just some help for someone. Just to be a little bit busy. She wanted to go and work somewhere but she didn't get any job because in certain places in Geneva you need to speak French.” According to scholars, the success of the IA depends not only professional success of the employee, but his/her family adjustment as well. Unsuccessful repatriation can jeopardize marital relationships and cause severe effects on partnership (Kanstrén & Mäkelä 2022). Couples with dual-career patterns my confront even bigger challenges than couples where only one partner is career-oriented (Kierner & Suutari 2018). In the current study most of the accompanying spouses did not have professional engagement during the expatriation. Interviewees admitted that the accompanying spouses had given up their careers to support their families and the career of their spouse. (INT6): "My wife most probably has sacrificed some of her career to mine". Anyhow, spouses’ roles in managing the family’s social life and adjustment should not be undervalued. (INT10): “She was really kind of holding us all together“, and (INT11): “She took care of our agenda for every weekend. I was busy working, and I had no time for

anything such.” Correlations can be drawn with the study by Lauring and Selmer (2010) that found that spouses could play an important role of relationship building behind the husbands’ international career by developing social networks with influential expatriates and building new connections in community events. Majority of the accompanying spouses were keeping themselves occupied with volunteer activities, international women’s clubs and building up networks for themselves and their families, their professional possibilities were rather limited due to legislation and role expectations to „expatriate wife“.

Keeping up relationships with friends and families in home country was important for the interviewees in the current study. To retain the possibility to come home, some of expatriates had therefore double homes – one in home country and another in host country – so they would have possibility to spend Christmas and summer vacations in the home country and later simplify their repatriation process. Most of interviewees invited family and friends to visit them overseas. (INT4): “We kept close relationships with friends and family, they came over visiting us. I would say that maybe even too often. And all the summers we spent in Estonia.” Interviewees with shorter assignments did not feel being emotionally parted from their families and friends in the home country. In contrast, long-term expatriation can break or damage the old relationships in home country due to changed identity of the repatriate (Kimber, 2019, Kierner & Suutari 2018). (INT2): “These are your old friends and schoolmates, but if you have been away for five or six years, it is very difficult to go back to and be part of that group again.” (INT12): “You have to be ready for the challenges and the kind of feeling that you don't belong anywhere. And the feeling of misfit is actually something you might need to count with wherever you go. Because after having spent too long period outside, you are a bit like misfit in your home country because you might have different feelings, different perspective, different background. And still, you are a misfit when abroad - you are just trying to find the world to belong to but be ready that you might not get the full kind of picture of where to I belong to - that this is kind of where my home is.”

### **3.3.3. Intentions for the future assignments**

Interviewees interests to future international assignments varied in some extent: some of them said that they would not hesitate to another IA while others were more careful. Those interviewees who had been abroad during Covid pandemic are hesitating considering that in Europe restrictions were lighter compared to Asian countries and therefore are hesitating to plan any new assignment before as long as restrictions are still implemented. (INT4): „Since Covid restrictions were lighter in Estonia coming back here felt like a relief“. Repatriates with school aged children felt that it was

much easier to go to assignment without children or with pre-school children and it becomes inevitably harder when own age is higher. (INT13): “The older you get, the more things you need to consider before you accept this kind of challenge again.” It was mentioned that international assignments are more difficult when children are in school age, but it could be considered again when children have grown up. (INT1): “If somebody would come with a very good offer, it would be very difficult to say “no”. I think if the kids were grown up, I would definitely accept it, because you grow so much through these experiences and through those travels.”

Even though, it was generally confirmed by all the interviewees that companies are now cutting down the expenses on expatriate benefit packages and sending less employees on international assignments, interviewees did not see the phenomena of expatriation disappearing. (INT8): “Companies have cultures just like countries. And expatriation is the only effective way for the company for culture transfer. I don’t see any good alternative to that.” Expatriates who had spent their assignment in China, Thailand, Japan or Korea expressed the importance of understanding the cultural and societal specifics of the region. Asian cultures tend to require more deeper personal relationships to do successful business and understand the processes. (INT8): "In China you have to build up the personal relationships. This is not doable over the emails or video calls". (INT13): “I think in order to have a successful business and global companies who want to share ethics, procedures, understanding of company, it is important to have expats, that somebody really represents the company, that is from the home country and knows all rules and knows the way to do things.” Covid pandemic and recent global political tensions have changed the expatriate policies in many MNCs. As a result of that, companies are reducing the number of overseas employees and according to the interviews, this trend was already visible 5-6 years ago. Nevertheless, interviewees tended to believe that the phenomena as such will not disappear, and expatriation is still the best way of transferring the company culture to the subsidiaries. Interviewees from electronics manufacturing sector discussed the current trends of moving more production facilities back to Europe, yet they noted that due to specifics of global component supply chains maintaining the Chinese subsidiaries is inevitable. (INT13): “The last years with Covid and political changes and all the challenges around the components that are not available on the global market. Different regions want to protect their technologies around components and knowhow. It has also made that lot of electronic business have been taken back from Asia to Europe or the US. I think expatriates are not needed in the same amount. At the same time, we see that electronic business is growing heavily. Still, there will be a need for different regions because the technologies that used fossil fuels are changed to innovative technologies. Either it is cars,

electric systems – all these technologies need electronics. The old systems are not good enough anymore. This has made the market demand huge at the moment. So, there will be a need, not as big as before, but still a need for expats.” Due to this, there is always need for expatriates who would efficiently set up and manage the subsidiaries. In Asian countries, the reasons can be purely cultural because their communication style does not allow deliver the negative news in the way we are used to in Western culture. (INT6): "You simply cannot trust them. Chinese people will never tell you things the way they are. Therefore, there is always a need for presence by someone who can decode the situation.”

### **3.4. Repatriate support**

Repatriation is much more complicated than only organizing the expatriate family's physical homecoming. Profiting from the knowledge and expertise of returning employees is a challenge that any multinational corporation should be able to prioritize. Large MNC's usually have expatriate management systems in their HR activities and therefore, repatriate support should be part of these policies. In current study, support varied significantly between companies. In some MNCs there are written guidelines for the expatriate life cycle. (INT8): “We actually have a HR manual with all the written rules.” In contrast, there were companies where HR functions were given to another department and inevitably there were no implemented expatriate management procedures. (INT13): “We did not have any HR department in the headquarter. HR was our finance department.” (INT1): “No, we had no HR department. We were just thrown in to this assignment.” Those employees who had no support from the HR department emphasized importance of self-initiation. (INT3): “You will never get anything from corporate if you do not demand. I was on my own. If I needed something, I came to them and said what I needed. That is interesting, because they also play the game and if there is a budget to spend, they better spend it on themselves.” Anyhow, interviewees in current study appreciated the support from the company and the professional expatriate management from the HR department, especially in the light of repatriation. (INT12): “I guess the link or connections between the HR is really crucial because when an employee gets an international assignment is one aspect and also thinking of career path - what will happen after.” Expatriate management systems might not be feasible for smaller companies, therefore best solution for them would be hiring a relocation firm with necessary experience and knowhow.

To sum up, based on the theoretical findings and outcome of the interviews, the author proposes a guideline for the companies to effectively support their international assignees with an emphasis to successful repatriation and employee retention.

### **Before the international assignment**

- To mitigate reverse culture shock and set realistic expectations for the challenges ahead, discuss the potential difficulties of repatriation already before the assignment.
- Define clear and realistic expectations about the career opportunities after the assignment. It might be sensible to explain that there are limited possibilities for vertical career advancement and openly discuss other career options, such as horizontal career opportunities or opening new business functions.
- Ensure a guaranteed position of similar level upon return in the employee contract.
- It is recommended to have a discussion on possible pension fund options and help with tax planning.
- Assign a mentor for the international assignee – a person who is a bridge between the home country organization and the host country. The mentor should be someone of high rank in the organization and have a good relationship with the assignee. Ideally, the mentor would also have background as an expatriate to ensure a better understanding of the challenges of the IA. The focus of mentorship is to keep the employee updated with the changes in the HMCO and make them feel still part of the HMCO.
- Support the accompanying spouse with career planning advice. In the event of a suitable job opportunity for the spouse in the host country or elsewhere consider supporting the process of work permit application.
- Discuss children's schooling options in longer perspective. For example, if enrolling children to IB /American / British school in the host country, discuss possible schooling options upon return.

### **During the international assignment**

- Maintain regular communication with the expatriate employee. HR department should ensure the communication between the mentor and the assignee. Have a plan in case there are changes in the organization – ensure the role of the mentor will be assigned to another employee if needed.



- Organize meetings in the home country organization. Plan those meetings with the aim of keeping the international assignee updated with organizational changes and introduce new key people in the company.
- Show interest in the knowledge and skills the expatriate employee is acquiring overseas. Offer possibility to present the learnings in (physical or virtual) trainings and seminars.

### **Upon repatriation**

- Understand the skills and knowledge acquired during the IA and where in the organization these skills could be utilized. Assign repatriates in cross-functional teams and encourage them to share their knowledge. Possible implementation areas could be building new strategies for the overseas markets or designing new international products.
- Consider offering financial support, such as covering living expenses for the first few months. Usually, the returnees do not meet the home loan requirements of the banks and have difficulties applying for a mortgage.
- Establish a repatriate monitoring system to document the adjustment and career path of the returnees. This is a way to determine whether the company is successful in repatriation of the overseas employees.
- Encourage repatriates to share their experience with the future international assignees. Include accompanying spouse in the experience sharing.
- Acknowledge the repatriates in company newsletters, intranet, events.

## CONCLUSION

International assignments are a daily practice for multinational corporations managing their global operations. Employing individuals with international experience and cultural awareness provides a competitive advantage for businesses. Expatriates help their companies by transferring the culture, knowledge, expertise, and technologies between home country and host country organizations. Repatriation is the final phase of expatriation – a phase of returning to home country. Successful repatriation can result in effective use of international experience and increase the efficiency of the home organization. However, the problem is that repatriates often leave their companies causing loss in knowledge, skills, network, and money for the home organization. Therefore, successful repatriation is seen as one of the criteria to measure success of the international assignment. The aim of the thesis was to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the main benefits of the IA and how these affect the professional development of the repatriates?
2. What are the challenges repatriates and their family members encounter when they return to their home countries?
3. How can companies best support their returning international assignees?

In the first part of the thesis, literature review was carried out on the latest expatriation and repatriation research available. Based on the theoretical review the empirical research was formed. Second part of the thesis explains the empirical research methodology and sample selection criteria. Qualitative research was chosen to open the topic and understand the phenomena. Author conducted 13 interviews with Baltic expatriates from various industries who had spent at least two years abroad - geographically all over the world – accompanied by their families. Findings from these interviews are presented in the third part of the thesis.

Both, scientific articles, and author's research confirm that expatriation is a highly enriching experience which is beneficial for the employee and the company. Expatriates strengthen their managerial capabilities, build their interpersonal, leadership and networking skills, and gain new

market-specific knowledge. In the current study most of the interviewees had managerial jobs and developed their leadership skills in culturally demanding societies, such as China, Korea or Oman. These very specific experiences carry high value in industries where business is concentrated in certain locations in the world. Benefits extend not only to assignee's professional development and business-related benefits for the MNC, but also to family's internationalization, children's education, new language skills, health benefits, extended social network, cultural learnings from travel and adventure.

Despite the many benefits of expatriation there is another side of the coin. When returning to their native countries repatriates and their family members may encounter a number of challenges. Ironically, repatriation may be even more complicated than expatriation. In the current study, the duration of the assignment ranged from 2 to 13 years and the perception of the reverse cultural shock was different depending on the length of the expatriation. Short-time (with a duration up to 5 years) assignees tend to cope more successfully with the challenges of the repatriation. On the contrary, long-time expatriates are more likely to leave their employer during or after the process of repatriation and encounter more difficulties related to their identity and sense of belonging.

Professionally, a challenge that repatriates often face is career derailment – the positions offered to them may not adequately match their level of experience or professional aptitude. Employees who were leading overseas subsidiaries would naturally expect the same, or higher, level of responsibility back in their home country. Unfortunately, companies in the Baltic countries are relatively small and therefore, the variety of possible vacant executive level jobs is limited. In addition, their salaries and compensation packages were higher during their international assignment, as a result repatriates might experience a downgrading of both status and pay. Paradoxically, repatriates with international experience are seen as more attractive in the job market and they may be tempted to leave to competitor companies. In the current study approximately half of the interviewees felt that their role upon repatriation was not in accordance with their expectations and therefore left their employees during the phase of repatriation or within a year after return.

As the research was done among the expatriates with accompanying families, there were many issues raised concerning family adjustment. Family members, too, go through reverse cultural shock and find themselves strangers in their own culture. Children may suffer a sense of blurred identity and become so-called Third Culture Kids – not identifying themselves with the home or the host

country's culture but having developed their own unique idea of blended culture. Families with school aged children face difficulties in finding appropriate schooling for their children since their proficiency in their mother tongue has declined and their age level is not in correlation with the local school system. The best solution is to enroll them to a local international school despite high tuition fees that the companies no longer cover.

Accompanying spouses might experience career stagnation with most of them having left their jobs in order to move abroad with their expatriate partners. After the move, spouses often find themselves in the role of homemaker and have limited possibilities to develop their career or earn money. This may lead to marital troubles, extended periods of unemployment, personal financial difficulties, or emotional issues. Scholars have found that accompanying spouses need support to turn the role of "victim of expatriation" into "participating partner" during the international assignments. In the current study, many of the spouses did not have employment and stayed at home with children. Regardless, there were some examples of dual career couples where both partners had the possibility to engage themselves professionally, and it was evident that this was beneficial to their post-repatriation career path.

As a result of this thesis, the author proposes a guideline for companies on how to support their returning international assignees. These recommendations include having a colleague from the home organization mentor them throughout the international assignment, proactive career planning beginning in the early phase prior to repatriation, setting clear expectations about the employee's role upon return, considering opportunities for horizontal career development, providing financial support for housing expenses, offering support with finding appropriate schooling for children and helping to cover tuition fees as well as career planning and mentoring for the accompanying spouse.

The author of this thesis believes that the defined research questions have been answered and that the aim of the thesis has been fulfilled. In being the first known study of this type, the author wishes to have increased the comprehension of the challenges faced by repatriates of Baltic origin. However, due to the nature of qualitative research, these results cannot be generalized. To develop the topic further, the author proposes to focus on specific geographic regions and cultures, for example China or the USA, and try to understand how repatriates adapt their working or leadership styles when back in the home country. Another aspect that is worthy of further research, is the experience of expatriate spouses and their perceptions of the international assignment in the light

of their own careers. As the current research focused specifically on the international assignee, knowledge of the accompanying spouses' experience would help to provide a more holistic understanding of the topic.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

- Altman, Y., & Baruch, Y. (2012). Global self-initiated corporate expatriate careers: a new era in international assignments?. *Personnel Review*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/00483481211200051>
- Bader, B., Stoermer, S., Bader, A. K., & Schuster, T. (2018). Institutional discrimination of women and workplace harassment of female expatriates: Evidence from 25 host countries. *Journal of Global Mobility*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-06-2017-0022>
- Bader, A. K., Bader, B., Froese, F. J., & Sekiguchi, T. (2021). One way or another? An international comparison of expatriate performance management in multinational companies. *Human Resource Management*, 60(5), 737-752.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22065>
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands–resources model: State of the art. *Journal of managerial Psychology*, 22: 309–328.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115>
- Baruch, Y., & Altman, Y. (2002). Expatriation and repatriation in MNCs: A taxonomy. *Human Resource Management*, 41(2), 239-259. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.10034>
- Baruch, Y. (2004). Transforming careers: from linear to multidirectional career paths: organizational and individual perspectives. *Career development international*. Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 58-73.
- Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2015). *Business research methods* (Vol. 4th). Oxford university press.
- Breitenmoser, A., & Bader, A. K. (2021). Retaining repatriates—the role of career derailment upon repatriation and how it can be mitigated. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(7), 1509-1536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2018.1528472>
- Chiang, F. F., van Esch, E., Birtch, T. A., & Shaffer, M. A. (2018). Repatriation: what do we know and where do we go from here. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 29(1), 188-226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2017.1380065>
- Davis, S. A., Fretwell, C. E., & Schraeder, M. (2018). Enhancing Expatriate Success: A Psychological Capital Perspective. *Organization Development Journal*, 36(2).
- DeMarrais, K. B., & Lapan, S. D. (2003). Qualitative interview studies: Learning through experience. In *Foundations for research* (pp. 67-84). Routledge.
- De Ruiter, M., Lub, X., Jansma, E., & Blomme, R. J. (2018). Psychological contract fulfillment and expatriate intrinsic career success: the mediating role of identification with the

- multinational corporation. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 29(8), 1426-1453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2016.1244099>
- Ekman Sundin, O., Huynh, A. (2021). Finding the middle: Swedish leadership adaptation in the Middle Kingdom. Stockholm School of Economics, Bachelor's Thesis in Business and Economics.
- Ellis, D. R., Thorn, K., & Yao, C. (2020). Repatriation of self-initiated expatriates: expectations vs. experiences. *Career Development International*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-09-2019-0228>
- Eren Akkan, B., & Akkan, B. (2020). A „Change“ Perspective of Repatriation: Review and Research Recommendations. *The SAGE Handbook of Contemporary Cross-Cultural Management*, 439.
- Greener, S., & Martelli, J. (2018). An introduction to business research methods.
- Harrison, D. A., Shaffer, M. A., & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, P. (2004). Going places: Roads more and less traveled in research on expatriate experiences. *In Research in personnel and human resources management*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301\(04\)23005-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301(04)23005-5)
- Herman, J. L., & Tetrick, L. E. (2009). Problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping strategies and repatriation adjustment. *Human Resource Management*, 48, 69–88 <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20267>
- Ho, N. T. T., Seet, P. S., & Jones, J. (2016). Understanding re-expatriation intentions among overseas returnees—an emerging economy perspective. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 27(17), 1938-1966. DOI:10.1080/09585192.2015.1088884
- Huang, T. J., Chi, S. C., & Lawler, J. J. (2005). The relationship between expatriates' personality traits and their adjustment to international assignments. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16(9), 1656-1670. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190500239325>
- James, R. (2021). Repatriates' work engagement: Proactive behavior, perceived support, and adjustment. *Journal of Career Development*, 48(5), 686-700. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089484531988610>
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 72(12), 2954-2965.
- Kanstrén, K. (2021). The career transitions of expatriate partners and the effects of transitions on career identities. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(21), 4491-4525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2019.1674356>
- Kanstrén, K., & Mäkelä, L. (2022). Expatriate partners' subjective well-being and related resource losses and gains. *Community, Work & Family*, 25(4), 523-550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2020.1801582>

- Kierner, A. (2018), "Expatriated dual-career partners: hope and disillusionment", *Journal of Global Mobility*, Vol. 6 No. 3/4, pp. 244-257. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-02-2018-0011>
- Kierner, A., & Suutari, V. (2018). Repatriation of international dual-career couples. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 60(6), 885-895. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.21947>
- Kimber, J. A. (2019). Repatriation: a qualitative study of repatriates after returning from China assignments. *Journal of Global Mobility: The Home of Expatriate Management Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-04-2019-0022>
- Kong, L., Ciabuschi, F., & Martín, O. M. (2018). Expatriate managers' relationships and reverse knowledge transfer within emerging market MNCs: The mediating role of subsidiary willingness. *Journal of Business Research*, 93, 216-229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.05.045>
- Kraimer, M. L., Shaffer, M. A., & Bolino, M. C. (2009). The influence of expatriate and repatriate experiences on career advancement and repatriate retention. *Human Resource Management*, 48(1), 27-47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20265>
- Kraimer, M. L., Shaffer, M. A., Harrison, D. A., & Ren, H. (2012). No place like home? An identity strain perspective on repatriate turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(2), 399-420. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2009.0644>
- Kulkarni, M., Lengnick-Hall, M. L., & Valk, R. (2010). Employee perceptions of repatriation in an emerging economy: The Indian experience. *Human Resource Management*, 49(3), 531-548. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20352>
- Kumar, S., Aslam, A., & Aslam, A. (2022). The Effect of Perceived Support on Repatriate Knowledge Transfer in MNCs: The Mediating Role of Repatriate Adjustment. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management*, 17, 215-234. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4979>
- Kwon, J. (2019). Third culture kids: Growing up with mobility and cross-cultural transitions. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 13(2), 113-122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2018.1490718>
- Lauring, J., & Selmer, J. (2010). The supportive expatriate spouse: An ethnographic study of spouse involvement in expatriate careers. *International business review*, 19(1), 59-69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2009.09.006>
- Livermore, D., Van Dyne, L., & Ang, S. (2022). Organizational CQ: Cultural intelligence for 21st-century organizations. *Business Horizons*, 65(5), 671-680. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2021.11.001>
- Mayrhofer, W., Smale, A., Briscoe, J., Dickmann, M., & Parry, E. (2020). Laying the foundations of international careers research. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(3), 327-342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12295>



- Malik, M. S., Farooq, U., & Khalid, F. (2020). Challenges Faced by the Repatriates and their Subsequent Impact on Repatriates' Satisfaction. *Sustainable Business and Society in Emerging Economies*, 2(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.26710/sbsee.v2i1.1178>
- McNulty, Y., & Vance, C. M. (2017). Dynamic global careers: A new conceptualization of expatriate career paths. *Personnel Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-06-2015-0175>
- Mello, R., Suutari, V., & Dickmann, M. (2022). Taking stock of expatriates' career success after international assignments: A review and future research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, 100913. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2022.100913>
- Mello, R., Suutari, V., & Dickmann, M. (2022). How Career Adaptability, Job Fit, and Job Characteristics Impact Expatriates' Career Success. *Academy of Management*, 13308. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2022.13308abstract>
- Meuer, J., Tröster, C., Angstmann, M., Backes-Gellner, U., & Pull, K. (2019). Embeddedness and the repatriation intention of assigned and self-initiated expatriates. *European Management Journal*, 37(6), 784-793. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2019.03.002>
- Nery-Kjerfve, T., & McLean, G. N. (2012). Repatriation of expatriate employees, knowledge transfer, and organizational learning: What do we know?. *European Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 36 No. 6, pp. 614-629. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090591211245512>
- Oddou, G., Szkudlarek, B., Osland, J. S., Deller, J., Blakeney, R., & Furuya, N. (2013). Repatriates as a source of competitive advantage. *Organizational Dynamics*, 42(4), 257-266.
- Pollock, D. C., and Van Reken, R. E. (2009). *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey
- Presbitero, A., & Teng-Calleja, M. (2021). Effective Planning for an Expatriate Career: What Roles Do Career Adaptability and Cultural Intelligence Play?. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 58(3), 119-140. <https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12169>
- Reiche, B. S. (2012). Knowledge benefits of social capital upon repatriation: A longitudinal study of international assignees. *Journal of Management Studies*, 49(6), 1052-1077. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2012.01050.x>
- Ren, H., Bolino, M. C., Shaffer, M. A., & Kraimer, M. L. (2013). The influence of job demands and resources on repatriate career satisfaction: A relative deprivation perspective. *Journal of World Business*, 48(1), 149-159. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2012.06.015>
- Rosenbusch, K., & Cseh, M. (2012). The cross-cultural adjustment process of expatriate families in a multinational organization: A family system theory perspective. *Human Resource Development International*, 15(1), 61-77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2011.646895>
- Sanchez-Vidal, M. E., Sanz-Valle, R., & Barba-Aragon, M. I. (2018). Repatriates and reverse knowledge transfer in MNCs. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 29(10), 1767-1785. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2016.1216876>

- Shaffer, M. A., Kraimer, M. L., Chen, Y. P., & Bolino, M. C. (2012). Choices, challenges, and career consequences of global work experiences: A review and future agenda. *Journal of Management*, 38(4), 1282-1327. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206312441834>
- Sterle, M. F., Fontaine, J. R., De Mol, J., & Verhofstadt, L. L. (2018). Expatriate family adjustment: An overview of empirical evidence on challenges and resources. *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, 1207. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01207>
- Suutari, V., Brewster, C., Mäkelä, L., Dickmann, M., & Tornikoski, C. (2018). The effect of international work experience on the career success of expatriates: A comparison of assigned and self-initiated expatriates. *Human Resource Management*, 57(1), 37-54. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21827>
- Spurk, D., Hirschi, A., & Dries, N. (2019). Antecedents and outcomes of objective versus subjective career success: Competing perspectives and future directions. *Journal of Management*, 45(1), 35-69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206318786563>
- Tan, A., Ntvenski, E. E., Htwe, A., Pasguay, E., & Petit, E. (2020). The role of family in shaping the success of expatriates' international assignments and how MNCs can use HR practices to facilitate adjustment to life in the host country.
- Vidal, M. E. S., Valle, R. S., & Aragón, M. I. B. (2007). Antecedents of repatriates' job satisfaction and its influence on turnover intentions: Evidence from Spanish repatriated managers. *Journal of Business Research*, 60(12), 1272-1281. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2007.05.004>

# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Interview guide

<b>Introduction</b>
Introduction of myself and the aim of the interview. Asking permission to record the interview.
<b>I General questions</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Please introduce yourself. What country do you consider being your home country?</li><li>2. How many years have you been active in the job market?</li><li>3. Where do you work today and what is your role in the current company?</li><li>4. How long time you had been employed by your home country organization before the international assignment?</li></ol>
<b>II Expatriate experience and benefits</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>5. When and where did you go on international assignment? How long time did your international assignment last?</li><li>6. What were the key aspects that made you accept the international assignment proposal?</li><li>7. How do you describe your experience as an expatriate? What were your living conditions, social life, main challenges?</li><li>8. How did you cope with the cultural differences?</li><li>9. What were your responsibilities during the international assignment?</li><li>10. What were the biggest professional challenges and learnings?</li><li>11. How did you keep yourself updated with organizational developments in your home country organization? How often and in what extension did you have contact with your previous manager / colleagues?</li></ol>
<b>III Repatriation preparation phase</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>12. Was your return to home country planned or unplanned? How was the information delivered to you regarding finalizing your assignment?</li><li>13. How was the process of returning to home country organized? Did you receive any mentoring / career planning aid?</li><li>14. How did your accompanying family members cope with returning back to home country? What daily issues did you experience? In your opinion what did they gain from the international experience?</li></ol>
<b>IV Organizational role and knowledge transfer</b>

15. How did you feel when returning to your home country and home country organization?

16. How has your company utilized your expertise and skills that you gathered during your time as an expatriate? Was this process structured and well organized?

**V Career development**

17. What was your role upon returning? Was your responsibility higher or lower compared to the role you had before the international assignment?

18. How was career planning, coaching, or mentoring organized by your company?

19. How do you describe your salary conditions after returning home? Did you receive salary increase?

**VI Repatriate retention**

20. Are you with the same employer with whom you were working before expatriation? If yes, were you considering to change? If no, why did you change your job?

21. How did you experience the way your company handled the repatriation process?

22. What could your company have done to retain you as an employee? (if applicable)

**VII Closing**

23. What were the main benefits from the international assignment for you and your family?

24. Would you go to international assignment again if you had a chance? How would you prepare better this time?

## Appendix 2. Table of interviews

No	Gender	Host country / countries	Accompanying family member(s)	Industry	Position during the IA	Position after the IA	Duration of the IA*	Interview type	Interview language	Interview date
INT 01	Female	Sweden, Namibia, South Africa, UK	Spouse, child born upon return	IT	Sales and Marketing Manager	Operations Manager	5 years	Face-to-face	English	07.11.2022
INT 02	Male	Korea, Hong Kong, Azerbaijan, Georgia	Spouse and 2 children	FMCG	Marketing Director / Country Manager	Left the company	13 years	Online	English	07.11.2022
INT 03	Male	Switzerland, Japan, Slovenia, Spain	Spouse and 1 child	FMCG	Brand & Trade Strategy Director	Left the company	9 years	Online	English	09.11.2022
INT 04	Male	Oman	Spouse and 3 children	IT	Head of HR Middle East and Asia	Lead HRBP	2 years	Online	English	10.11.2022
INT 05	Male	China	Spouse and 1 child	Manufacturing	Senior VP North East Asia	Senior Director	3 years	Online	English	10.11.2022
INT 06	Male	China	Spouse and 2 children	Manufacturing	Technology Transfer Manager	Left the company	3 years	Online	Estonian	10.11.2022
INT 07	Male	China	Spouse and 2 children	Manufacturing	Director of Supply Chain	Regional Head of Supply	4 years	Face-to-face	English	11.11.2022
INT 08	Male	China	Spouse and 2 children	Manufacturing	General Manager	Global Account Director	5 years	Online	Estonian	12.11.2022
INT 09	Male	USA	Spouse and 2 children	IT	Engineering Lead	Engineering Lead	2 years	Face-to-face	Estonian	13.11.2022
INT 10	Male	Georgia, Russia, Ukraine	Spouse and 2 children	FMCG	Managing Director	Left the company	11 years	Online	English	22.11.2022
INT 11	Male	China, Thailand, Sweden	Spouse and 2 children	Manufacturing	Managing Director	VP Sales & Marketing	8 years	Face-to-face	Estonian	02.12.2022
INT 12	Female	Norway, Switzerland	Spouse and 2 children	FMCG	Purchasing Category Manager; Purchasing Director	Head of Retail Sales and Operations	6 years	Online	English	22.12.2022
INT 13	Male	China	Spouse and 2 children	Manufacturing	Managing Director	Left the company	3 years	Face-to-face	English	23.12.2022

\* In some cases, duration is summarized (person has been on international assignment several times)

### **Appendix 3. Transcribed interviews**

Link to the folder with transcribed interviews and coding table:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Ls-A7E1R\\_MnO8ZLwVDTA2s84bFhWCMYL?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Ls-A7E1R_MnO8ZLwVDTA2s84bFhWCMYL?usp=sharing)

## Appendix 4. Non-exclusive licence

### A non-exclusive licence for reproduction and publication of a graduation thesis<sup>1</sup>

I, Mai Peksen

1. Grant Tallinn University of Technology free license (non-exclusive license) for my thesis “Repatriation of Baltic expatriates and their families: challenges and possibilities”, supervised by Kristjan Jasinski

1.1 to be reproduced for the purposes of preservation and electronic publication of the graduation thesis, incl. to be entered in the digital collection of the library of Tallinn University of Technology until expiry of the term of copyright;

1.2 to be published via the web of Tallinn University of Technology, incl. to be entered in the digital collection of the library of Tallinn University of Technology until expiry of the term of copyright.

2. I am aware that the author also retains the rights specified in clause 1 of the non-exclusive license.

3. I confirm that granting the non-exclusive license does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights, the rights arising from the Personal Data Protection Act or rights arising from other legislation.

---

3.01.2023

---

<sup>1</sup> The non-exclusive license is not valid during the validity of access restriction indicated in the student's application for restriction on access to the graduation thesis that has been signed by the school's dean, except in case of the university's right to reproduce the thesis for preservation purposes only. If a graduation thesis is based on the joint creative activity of two or more persons and the co-author(s) has/have not granted, by the set deadline, the student defending his/her graduation thesis consent to reproduce and publish the graduation thesis in compliance with clauses 1.1 and 1.2 of the non-exclusive license, the non-exclusive license shall not be valid for the period