

From Brain Drain to attraction of valuable talents in the Western Balkans

The migration of able, highly educated individuals from the Western Balkans region, which has been happening since the 1990s is known as “brain drain” and usually concerns the European Union and the United States as final destinations. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, North Macedonia, and Serbia are among the top-ranked countries with the biggest brain-drain in the world, according to the [Global Competitiveness Report](#) released by the World Economic Forum. On the scale of 1 to 7 (1= all talented people leaving the country; 7= all talented people staying in the country), BiH scored 1.76, followed by Croatia (1.88), North Macedonia (2.13) and Serbia (2.31).

Brain Drain is nowadays increasingly recognized in the Western Balkans and on the agenda of numerous gatherings of politicians and businesspersons. Public discourse on brain drain is however often oversimplified: emigration boosts knowledge transfers, remittances, and access to advanced technology, improving stability and long-term development opportunities in the region.

According to [Majlinda Bregu](#), Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC): *“The overall working age population in the Western Balkans has declined by more than 400,000 individuals in the last 5 years. Negative natural growth of the population is not the only contributor to this. **Brain drain is the biggest challenge of this new decade that should dictate/shape the current and future policy agenda of our economies.** Another important concern is the skills mismatch between what the education system equips youth with, and what the labour market requires. Education system should radically change and challenge the conventional thinking that education is about getting knowledge to education with primary economic value”*(Launching of the second phase of RCC’s Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project ([ESAP 2](#)), in Sarajevo in January 2020)

Membership of the EU would not end – and could even exacerbate – this phenomenon. In an interview with ‘Deutsche Welle’, (1) **Commissioner Mariya Gabriel** said, in response to a question on the priorities of her second term in office: *‘**The brain drain is a huge challenge...There is also a brain drain within Europe which is most visible in the home countries of migrating skilled workers, from where young people migrate primarily to Germany or Austria and where there is then a lack of highly-educated young people. A similar phenomenon can be expected to take place in the context of the accession of Western Balkans, as recent surveys in those countries demonstrate.** Later in July 2020, Commissioner Gabriel was questioned by the European Parliament about the Brain Drain and Accession of Western Balkans. Questions raised by the EP aimed at finding out the way the Commission will tackle the brain drain within Europe, particularly from East European countries, and the Commission’s view of the accession of Western Balkan countries.*

*Ms Gabriel answered in written that: “Free movement of people and learning mobility are at the heart of the European project. As part of the EU Skills Agenda, research and peer learning on good practices on movements of skilled labour were carried out(1), underlining that **reducing disparities and stimulating economic convergence within the EU is the main way to mitigate brain drain....** At the national level, growth enhancing structural reforms are key to improve the quality of life and institutions in the countries suffering from large-scale outward mobility. **The EU has reiterated its support to the European perspective of the Western Balkans.** The EU engages with the region in a coordinated governance mirroring the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights , supporting socioeconomic reforms and social rights, for the benefit of all people and contributing to meeting EU requirements. In this context, the EU macro-regional strategies (in particular the EU Strategies for the Danube and the Adriatic and Ionian regions) and the external cooperation programmes play an important role. **The EU is supporting the increased competitiveness of the region’s economies, in particular by supporting research and innovation under Horizon 2020, including through the European Innovation Council pilot and by supporting centres of excellence across the region. The number of participants from Western Balkans in actions supported under Horizon 2020 have doubled since 2014. Research and Innovation are the front-runners in the accession process and the reforms of the education and training in the region through Erasmus+ are also supported. All these measures are contributing to turn brain drain into brain circulation.”***

Paradoxically, the Western Balkans is a region that can become borderless approximately in a decade, which would create up to 250.000 new jobs, and thus tens of billions of Euros would needed to be invested in stopping these processes. The EU should try to understand the implications of emigration for Western Balkans countries, and to promote circular migration as means of maintaining their access to expertise in healthcare, education, and other sectors.

FOCUS ARTICLE

Further interesting considerations on the brain drain aspects are included in the [interview with Lucian Brujan](#), Programme Director International Relations at the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and Speaker of the Berlin Process Joint Science Conference

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