

## Developing brain gain policies in the Western Balkans: ALBANIA

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### The brain drain and brain gain phenomena in Albania

Migration and human mobility of high skilled workers (known as brain drain) emerged as an issue alongside the big waves of migratory flows Albania experienced in early 1990s, mid 1990s and at early new century (around 200-2003). It has accompanied the country during the transition period and it still present, despite being at quite different patterns and features from early 1990s.

After the fall of the communist regime the country faced a massive migration of the population to western European countries, but also to United States, Canada and other developed countries in the world. Nearly 25% of the Albanian citizens were estimated to be living abroad<sup>1</sup>. From a country prospective, emigrants, students that finished their studies abroad as well as old Diasporas, are an accumulated human capital that, if properly channeled into the national economy, proves to be much more benefiting than just remittances and flow of a money bonus to their families that support everyday living.

The figures obtained from different studies and surveys conducted on this matter show that more than 50 % of all lecturers or researchers have left the country after the 90s, while 66% of students that carried on PhD studies in Western European countries or US (graduated after 1990s) never returned or after returning decided to emigrate. (Gedeshi, I. 2008)

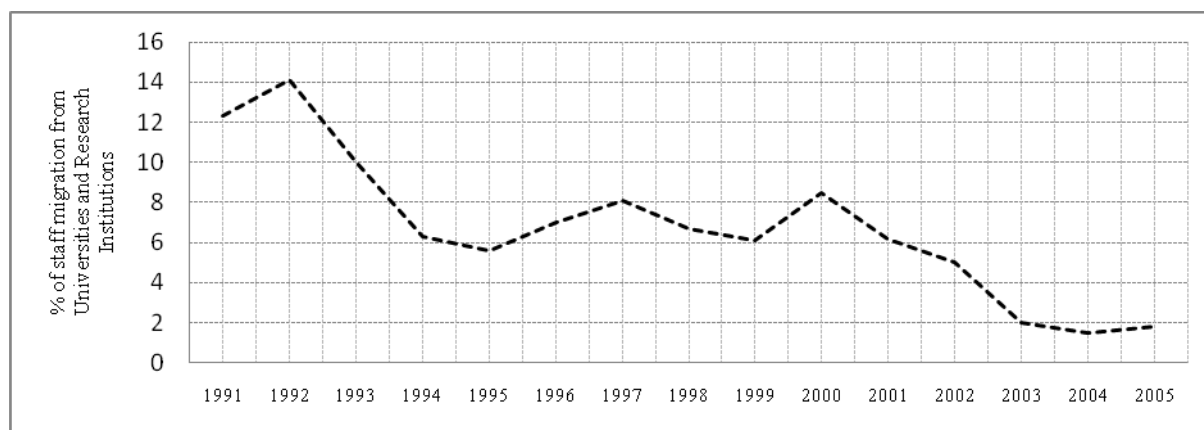
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<sup>1</sup> Gedeshi, I. and Germenji, E., Highly Skilled Migration from Albania: An Assessment of Current Trends and the Ways Ahead, Working Paper T-25, Katholieke Universities Leuven, Belgium, Center for Economic and Social Studies in Tirana, Albania January 2008.

The progressive trend to migrate during early and mid nineties came to a slowdown after 2000. The slowdown was observed in both skilled and unskilled migration, but it was sharper at highly skilled migration. The rate of researchers and lecturers in universities or research institutions that left their job to migrate dropped from 14% of the total staff in 1992 to around 2% in 2005.<sup>2</sup>

However, around 2000 students are leaving the country every year to study abroad<sup>3</sup>, and they have high propensity to migrate after graduations unless good incentives are provided for them to return. The much expected visa free regime with EU might as well increase the propensity to skilled migration, mainly through facilities provided to visit countries and specific institutions and easiness on establishing links and planning a future abroad. The current data on the diploma accreditation process show that around 1000 requests are presented at annual bases to have the diploma awarded abroad equivalent to Albanian qualification framework.<sup>4</sup> This implies that in recent years almost half of those studying abroad are also interested to come back and work in Albania, and that the previous year's propensity to migrate has been reduced by at least 16 percentage points (from 66% surveyed in 2005).

Figure 1. Brain Drain Phenomena in Universities and Research Institutions in Albania



Source: CESS survey, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Data obtained from the Brain Gain Programme, Council of Ministers, Tirana, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Zeneli, B. Manager of the Brain Gain Programme, Presentation at the Brain Gain Programme, Round Table, Tirana, June 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Data retrieved from the Ministry of Education, Tirana, 2010.

The dropping migration rate of researchers and professors has been strongly influenced by the “restore of the university” and academia social values. The increase of wages in the public sector, including universities, the fast development of the services sector and the increased demand for consultancy services (from the public and private sector) have resulted in a narrowing of the wage differences and in the weakening of the incentives to permanently leave the country. Meanwhile, there has been a noticeable increase in the mobility and exchange programs among university staff and research networks which creates opportunities to benefit from the various academic environments with no need to be displaced permanently.

Nevertheless, research on the brain drain phenomena in Albania has identified several factors that explain the massive migration in Albania. Most of them can be classified as either economic or political reasons. Family networks have shown to be one of the factors that have induced a large share of migratory flows as well.

Despite abiding to the general set of factors that generated massive migratory outflows in Albania, the set of reasons that influenced the decision of highly skilled workers to migrate had also its own specifics. Alongside low income and large wage differences in comparison to destination countries, the very poor career perspective and poor working conditions, political pressure and instability, very weak institutional structure in scientific research, weak R&D in private sector as well as instability of jobs had been key push factors for highly skilled people to migrate. Professional networks have played an important role in highly educated people migration, in comparison to family’s network importance in massive migration.

Figure 2. Main Reasons Causing Highly Skilled Migration (frequency in %)



Source: CESS 2008 Survey.

Brain drain proved to be a phenomena of significant social and economic consequences on the development of the country. The effect of brain drain on the human capital accumulation process, on the economy productivity level and innovation needs further investigation. Testing interesting theoretical debates on the negative or positive effects of brain drain on both human capital accumulation and economic growth have not been explored yet. The policy effect on inducing brain gain from brain drain, and the overall contribution of the government actions are not yet fully assessed.

However, the constant concern for changing the brain drain tendencies to a brain gain has been into the attention of state institutions in Albania. The general perception that the return of emigrants is important for the economic growth of Albania, as they may bring back capital, foreign work experience and new ideas has encouraged the Albanian governments to take measures in order to address the problem. As Albania strives to strengthen its democracy, open up to EU level competitiveness in many sectors and citizens are more free to travel, serious considerations on the impact of the immigration of high skilled citizens on the development of the country must be made.

This report presents a short summary of brain gain strategic and legal framework, main policy actions taken to reduce the negative effect of brain drain by inducing brain gain. The report provides an analysis of the results of different policies in this aspect and strives to discuss the challenges ahead in support of human capital accumulation in an

international environment that is highly competing on attracting highly skilled and innovative minds.

## **Existing legal and Strategic framework on Brain Gain in Albania**

The economic development of the country after 2000, European and regional integration processes and the challenges they brought ahead for both public and private sectors stimulated an upward trend of demand for diversified highly skilled labour, hence an upward trend of wage rate for this segment of the labour supply. These developments on the labour market demand created the very initial conditions for reversing brain drain into gain and gave to policymakers signals that intervention was needed.

There exists theoretical supportive discussions and empirical evidence on the hypothesis that human capital is one of the main growth inducing factor for a country and that there is a positive link between brain gain and human capital accumulation.

Given the very large stock of Albanian emigrants around the world (mainly in European developed countries and US), given the relatively abundant number of students that were each year being graduated abroad, as well as very good professionals and researchers, the potential to benefit by adopting policies to attract highly skilled people from the stock of “drained brain” during all the transition years were acknowledged by the policy makers and actions have been taken. The policy interventions and actions undertaken from 2000 to today start from being sporadic and not coordinated and continue with a national scale program.

The current “Brain Gain” Programme established in 2006 was a central government policy intervention that aimed to increase the supply of highly and diversified skilled labour to support the socio-economic development of the country. The Program was based on a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Albanian Government and UNDP, supported also by other national and international partners<sup>5</sup>. This national initiative followed similar steps done by the “Fellowship Program” of the Open Society

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<sup>5</sup> UNDP – Council of Ministers, A comprehensive program for facilitating greater engagement of the Diaspora in Albania’s socio-economic development, Tirana, 2006.

Foundation (SOROS) in Albania for six years, which supported a number of 150 people (highly educated) working in public administration.

When the Fellowship programme ended in 2004, the GoA approved a Council of Ministers Decision (no.37 dated 28.1.2004) on “Employing Albanian Overseas Graduates in the Civil Service”. Soon after the national strategy on “Encouraging the employment of Albanian graduates from abroad was designed to achieve brain gain (targeting only post graduate students) mainly through three main mechanisms, (i) information, (ii) recruitment and (iii) motivation. As result of its implementation the number of Albanians graduated in western universities that worked in the public administration increased from 4.8% in 2003 in 12.1% in 2004 and 13.8% during the first half of 2005<sup>6</sup>.

The Brain Gain Programme covered a broader spectrum of intervention mechanisms and was not only focused on supporting people that engage in public administration. Its focus was extended to support the higher education system and research activities as well as private businesses. The main activities of the project can be summarized as follows:

- Create a database on researchers, post university graduates engaged in scientific research abroad;
- Invite students, researchers to participate in open seminars and conferences in Albania;
- Facilitate Diaspora Institute activities and promote Diaspora entrepreneurs and investors;
- Create a favourable legal environment to motivate and facilitate the return of highly skilled people and their engagement with public administration.

The Council of Ministers has amended several Decisions and laws between the period 2006-2007 in order to enable and accelerate sustainable returns of individuals from the Diaspora and from the group of students and migrants who have left the country during the last decade of the past century.

Following a proposal made by the Brain Gain Programme with the support of the Department of Public Administration, the legal framework has been modified to

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

accommodate incentives for attracting highly skilled and highly educated people from the stock of Albanian emigrants (being also Diaspora).

Applicants who have completed their post-university studies in western universities and those coming from the Diaspora are entitled to an incentivized treatment in at least three directions: (i) prioritization during the competition for a given vacancy; (ii) financial bonus / reward for having earned a title (Master and higher); (iii) home loan (mortgage) at a low interest rate for those who return to Albania through this Programme.

Brain Gain program has compiled a database with information on Albanian researchers, while the incentive package (as per the above mentioned elements) for academics and researchers has supported 82 researchers and lecturers in higher education institutions.<sup>7</sup> Higher education institutions have also benefited of institutional support, aiming at creating pilot job environments that comforts and attracts researchers and academia to work in Albania such as the University A. Moisiu, in Durres.

The analysis performed on the need of the public administration for highly qualified employees showed that 32 types of civil servant positions could be used to engage returnees (emigrants, diaspora or students). During 2009, 526 civil servants benefited from the supportive package of the brain gain program.<sup>8</sup>

The program has supported Diaspora network as well, creating a network of 450 Albanian researchers that meet at the virtual discussion forum (Alb-Shkenca) and also at annual conferences.

### **EU Brain Gain policies**

It is difficult to draw line of similarities between Albania and EU as to Brain gain/drain situation and policies, while differences stem clear and there should be more efforts by policy makers to adjust the programs aiming at increasing human capital accumulation in line with international policies. "International standards offers" for

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<sup>7</sup> Data retrieved from the Brain Gain Programme, Council of Ministers, Tirana, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Data retrieved from the Department of Public Administration, Tirana, 2010.

highly skilled people are an important factor on the effectiveness of the brain gain inducing policy actions (packages).

The two countries (if we may refer to EU as a compact country as concerning its labor market and human capital stock) do implement “brain gain” inducing policies of different philosophies. While Albania is trying to increase its attractiveness to the Albanian emigrants that are highly qualified, skilled and innovative people to come and work in the public and private sector, EU policies are mainly focusing on attracting those people (from around the world) with strong research and innovative skills, highly skilled that will improve productivity and competitiveness of the EU economy, mainly through research and innovation.

Mobility of skills and knowledge among EU countries itself is high, but the concern on facing brain drain and skills shortage is low, because the knowledge remain within the union or is easily transferred from one regional economy to another<sup>9</sup>. However, the EU is also facing problems with the brain drain of its Scientific and Technology people mainly to USA or Japan. This was also made clear by the Lisbon Strategy which indicated that one of the challenges of the EU is to make it the most competitive area in world.

In 2003, EU launched through the European Commission a series of initiatives contributing to the research and development, which were considered useful instrument to support researchers and attract innovative minds and highly skilled people.

These initiatives included the creation of a European research charter a Code of conduct for requirement of research, the development of a framework for recording and recognizing the professional achievements of researchers throughout their careers, including the identification of tools aimed at increasing the transparency of qualifications and competencies acquired in different settings; the development of a platform for the social dialogue of researchers; the designing of appropriate instruments in order to take into account the necessary evolution of the content of research training and the development of mechanisms to ensure that doctoral candidates have access to

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<sup>9</sup> See: Communication from the commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and social committee and the committee of regions: Migration and development, some concrete orientations, (COM) 2005 390 final, Brussels 1.9.2005.



adequate funding and minimum social security benefits. Part of these initiatives may also be considered the Seventh Framework Programme.

On the other hand, the EU is also devoted to policies which help developing countries to reverse the bad effect of migration in general and the migration of the high skilled workers in particular.

Aware of the serious problems that higher education systems are experiencing in the Western Balkans, highly affected by the brain drain as well, the EU has become a key supporter, mainly through setting up exchange and capacity building programs. The Union supports researchers through a range of programmes such as Tempus (aimed at modernisation of higher education) or the Erasmus Mundus scholarships. Also, the Bologna Process - set up in 1999 to create a unified European Higher Education Area driven by other aspects of the European integration process - has given a boost to education reform in the Balkans.

Recently, various EU-member countries have adopted a directive (in 2005), implementing a "science visa", designed to make it easier for non-EU researchers to get working visas in EU countries.

Albania has been able to benefit only moderately from these programs, mainly due to a short term involvement when compared to other regional countries and lack of capacities. Still the exchange programs and increased mobility of university professors and students or scientific researchers is contributing to improved information and the level of professional satisfaction, resulting in declining drain of the Albanian professoriate and researchers.

### **Key stakeholders in the field of brain gain**

The "Brain Gain" Programme (2006-2010) established under the Council of Ministers serves as a main coordinative body in charge of designing and monitoring the implementation of the brain gain policies in Albania. The programme is lead by the National Coordinator and it is also equipped with an operational team.

The sustainability of the office has not been questioned so far and part of activities carried under the programme will be gradually transferred to the newly established Albanian Agency for Research, Technology and Innovation. The Agency for Research, Technology and Innovation (ARTI) is a public, legal institution under the competences of the Council of Ministers, which started operating in March 2011. ARTI aims to build a modern system of science, strengthen of research and technology and ensure integration of the research activities with the higher education system. ARTI facilitates the exchanging of knowledge, mutual activities and partnership within and outside the country<sup>10</sup>.

From the very beginning, the Brain gain programme is operating within a network of state institutions and partners that are frequently involved in the development and implementation of brain gain policies. The network of brain gain stakeholders operates in *three main circles*:

*The first circle* is composed by the state structures in which the most notable for this issue are: the Ministry of Education and Science (the current Minister of Education is at the same time the National Coordinator for the Brain Gain Programme). The Ministry is responsible for several important aspects of the brain gain.

It has a crucial role in the unification and recognition of diplomas and other qualifications obtained from foreign universities and is primarily involved in high education reform process.

*The Department of Public Administration* under the Ministry of Interior is another important partner, being responsible for the recruitment procedures of the returned high qualified people in the public administration in the existing position of the civil servants system and in the establishment of the ad-hoc positions. The Department is supposed to make full transparency of the vacancies in the public administration and at the same time vacancies are posted in the web page of the brain gain program.

There is also a *Diaspora Institute* operates under the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, mainly devoted to the cultivation of the Albanian culture amongst the immigrant community abroad.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information, see the website of ARTI: [www.akti.gov.al](http://www.akti.gov.al).

*The second circle* is the network of international organization and donors. The assistance and contribution of the foreign assistance has been given on various forms, assistance and contribution in terms of financial resources, support in preparation of legal documents, policy papers.

*The third circle* is composed by universities, research centers and NGOs. They have enabled the creation of a tradition in internship of students who studied abroad do practice at companies or private firms.

### **Effects of existing policies and programs in the field of brain gain**

There are different aspects on which the effect of brain gain policies can be viewed and evaluated. This analysis focuses on three main aspects: (i) the question if these policy actions succeeded to make use of brain gain momentum generating a noticeable effect on human capital accumulation in the country, (ii) how sustainable and adjustable to patterns of development have these policies been and (iii) how this policy effectiveness has been influenced by international skilled migration policies and have they been able to adjust in order to increase their efficiency.

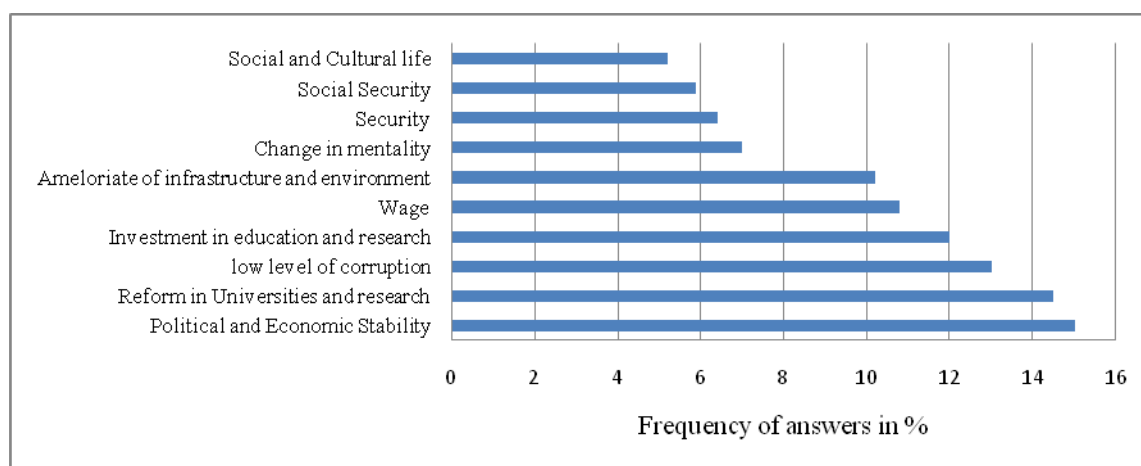
The first initiatives taken after the year 2000 were rather sporadic and their effect on generating brain gain have only indirect weak evidences such the starting point of the declining trend of the propensity to migrate in Albanian professorate. In 2004, with endorsement of the national strategy, reform on civil service and support from donors programs and more focused action to reverse brain drain to brain gain, generated more positive results in terms of reducing propensity of highly skilled emigrants (see figure 1). There is no evidence what has happened with the private sector back at those times but at public administration an increase in the number of those graduated abroad was accounted by statistical information (4.8% in 2003 in 12.1% in 2004 and 13.8% during the first half of 2005<sup>11</sup>).

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<sup>11</sup> UNDP Albania – Council of Ministers, A comprehensive programme for the facilitating greater engagement of the Diaspora in Albania’s socio-economic development, Tirana, 2005.

These initiatives looked like an “isolated island” and they were not combined with other interrelated policies.<sup>12</sup> In general, people asked at that time were reluctant to come back and work for the public administration because there were neither administrative nor legal changes which could facilitate the process of recognition of diplomas, facilitation for loans for houses, low salaries. Furthermore, an uncompetitive environment, an unclear career system and above all, a lack of information on job opportunities dominated.<sup>13</sup> Bureaucratic procedures for the recognition of the diploma from a foreign university were considered a burden for those who decided to return and work in Albania. Sometimes extreme toleration is noticed by the public institutions with regard to the diplomas obtained. As long as policies in inducing brain gain do not tackle the main factors that are important to returnees to settle and work in country they will remain constraint in their positive effect. Such factors include political stability, reforms in universities, research institutions and the education system overall, as well as wages increment.

Figure 3. Factors that would influence the return of academicians and researchers



Source: CES survey, June 2008.

The set up of the Brain Gain Programme in 2006 was as such as to tackle at least three main factors from the set of reasons perceived as important for a highly skilled

<sup>12</sup> Flagler, M., and Shapo, Zh. Nxitja e punësimit të të diplomuarve jashtë shtetit në administratën publike shqiptare (Studim sasior dhe cilesor mbi faktoret qe ndikojnë në nxitjen dhe punësimin e te diplomuarve jashtë shtetit në administratën publike, Tirana, OSFA 2006.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

emigrants to consider its return and employment in the country: It strives to provide stability of jobs in the public administration and improve work environment, it targets universities and research institutions aiming at contributing in their openness to exchange and engagement of professors and researchers from abroad and lastly introduces a package of financial compensation to reduce wage differences.

The strategic approach of the project design, stakeholder engagement as well as government engagement have made it more noticeable in terms of results in inducing brain gain, if compared to other initiatives. A total of 596 public employees' benefited in 2009 from the Brain Gain program, 82 researchers and professors have been returned and engaged in the public universities, a Diaspora network with 450 members is settled and Albanian scientific researchers maintain a network of intensive exchange. Beyond the total figures, there is little evidence and information on the areas of support, evaluation of the efficiency on the procedural adjustment to facilitate brain gain and create those desirable conditions for highly skilled people to contribute to the country's development. The general perception (as stated through different interviews) is that despite actions being implemented, there are still many challenges to ensure the maximization of benefits to country prospective and development of human capital and from the investment of many Albanians in education and professional career.

### **Existing gaps or challenges in the field**

Despite having known a decrease in brain drain in the last years, the Albanian society is far from producing a welcoming working environment and attractive conditions necessary to encourage the brightest minds to live in and contribute to the development of their home country. Although basic living conditions have significantly improved, they may not be enough to serve as incentives for highly qualified and skilled emigrants to return. Thus, effective strategic actions will continue to be needed to foster the current trend of brain gain.

Policies set in place so far suffer different limitations in efficiency and pitfalls. The national program on brain gain constitutes a "quasi stable" structure, but yet not a consolidated institution with clearly attributed powers to aggressively lead the process of mind hunting in the very high international competition on attracting highly skilled and highly educated people.

Secondly, so far brain gain policies have covered the public sector. Hardly any cases of strategic coordination the private sector have been implemented. There are clearly set objectives in this direction, but poor actions. This is regrettable, especially if we consider the significant potential this sector poses in offering a meritocratic and financially competitive environment to highly skilled workers.

Furthermore, where brain gain policies have been applied to positions in the public administration, sometimes have been more of a brain waste than brain gain as qualified persons have been placed in inadequate positions. Financial bonuses offered remain standard and are not differentiated in order to meet the necessities of professionals benefiting from them.

Another factor limiting the impact of brain gain policies is related to the fact the programme has started the process to mobilize and empower research institutions and universities to serve as a determinant pull factor through investment in research, development and innovation, but the start is slow and needs much more serious commitment to be of its optimal scale. Moreover, one of the fields that suffered more from brain drain in Albania was the perspective and development of the higher education and research in the country, and at this stage it has to recover and fully benefit from this policy action in support of brain gain.

Efforts to successfully create a network of Diaspora members who could effectively contribute in distance to the development of the country have not produced the desirable results yet. Again, this is regrettable if we bear in mind the huge portion of bright minds that have decided to live abroad despite some positive developments in the country.

On a general note, Albania lacks a competitive environment and job offers remain limited and not always satisfactory for qualified persons. Any citizen returning to the country still faces non-transparent and non-meritocratic procedures to succeed professionally in the society. Beyond the rhetoric that can be found on websites of the institutions, the truth is that still many elements of the public life remain “too closed” to be able to genuinely appreciate the contribution that people qualified abroad may bring to the country. Overall, these elements go to build a hostile environment for high skilled workers who are often perceived as a threat from the “old generation”.

## Recommendations for developing “brain gain” policies and programmes

On a positive note, due to pull factors present in Albania or other external factors such as minimal chances to be integrated with full rights in the labour market of many western countries, the fact is that Albanian qualified persons are coming back at modest, but continuous pace. Finding instruments to accommodate them and make use of their potential, especially in view of the need to increase capacities and performance of the public administration as we go along with the integration process will be the biggest challenge and opportunity for the country.

In order to minimize frustrations of returnees, especially qualified ones in their attempts to be integrated in the Albanian society, institutions and other actors should proceed with a strategic evaluation and revision of policies. New policies should specifically focus on the maximization of the contribution from highly qualified returnees as a way to enhance the capacities of the administration in order to speed up the integration process.

Furthermore, particular attention should be paid to the developments in the private sector, with which closer cooperation should be developed in order to produce effective results in engaging human capital and in the democratisation of the society.

Besides being the guarantee for a prosperous future of the country, investment on research and innovation should be seen as a pull factor for brain gain. Albania has the luck of having “unintentionally” accumulated a treasure of experts qualified in the best institutions world-wide. This Diaspora could serve a precious source of information and expertise for the development of the country.

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**About the project:**

The project “Developing brain gain policies is coordinated by Grupa 484 Beograd and is being carried out in 5 countries (Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro). The reports produced are the result of both desk interviews with different stakeholders and desk research. This project is financially supported by the Balkan Trust for Democracy.

**About the European Movement Albania:**

European Movement in Albania (EMA) is an independent, non-profit policy research centre founded in February 2007, in response to Albania’s increased efforts at speeding up the process of European Integration. It is a forum for the exchange of views on political, legal, economic and social challenges that Albania is facing in its path towards European Integration. The organisation considers European Integration as largely beneficial to the country’s democratisation and development, but recognizes that in many aspects, the process does not work well. By analyzing different dimensions of the European Integration process, EMA aims to promote new ideas for improving the quality of debate as well as the policy development process. EMA consists of a multi-disciplinary team of researchers as well as external consultants, bringing together people with different backgrounds and professional and research interests. It offers timely, policy analysis and advice on the most pertinent issues, promoting democratic processes of transformation of the country. The contribution provided so far, consists of a combined set of activities with different stakeholders, based on policy analysis, monitoring, information and capacity building dimensions.

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