



Brain Drain vs. Brain Gain

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In South-East Europe, where Croatia is located, as a consequence of emigration, the number of inhabitants has decreased by 16% compared to the situation in the 1990s.

Croatia is a country of emigration, although historically, there were periods of immigration as well. Behind Romania and Lithuania, according to Eurostat, Croatia is third according to the share of their workforce in foreign countries. However, in the period of the Habsburg Monarchy, many immigrants came to the then Croatia from different parts of the Monarchy. In the period of Yugoslavia, economic and educational immigrants from other Yugoslav republics and countries of South-East Europe prevailed.

Although many experts predicted a smaller impact, the accession of Croatia to the EU, opened new employment opportunities, thus causing many Croats to leave their country in search of a better life. The European Commission estimations say that around 10% of the labour force lives in other EU member state, and even 62% of emigrants are aged between 15 and 34 years. New Croatian emigrants have mostly high-school diploma, but what is concerning is that more and more highly educated people choose to leave the country. At least 10% of Croatian emigrants are doctors, IT experts, engineers, etc., which of course has huge negative consequences on the national economy, i.e. economic and technological development of the country.

Estimations of direct damage, based on investments in the education of persons who emigrated -to more developed EU countries (5 years of higher education) is 446,4 million euro. If the costs of earlier education (primary and secondary) are added to this amount, the costs rise up to a billion euro. According to the data of the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education, an average annual cost for a student, which, besides the education fee, includes the costs of a student standard (accommodation and food subsidized by the state), is 3.720 euro. When we add the costs of vocational training of other emigrants, the total loss of the emigration measured in costs of education is around two billion euro.

Germany has for decades been the main emigration destination for Croatia, and one of the reasons, besides proximity and good immigration policy, is a strong emigration network in that country. According to the data of the German Federal Bureau of Statistics, since Croatian accession to the EU in 2013 until 2017, some 200.000 inhabitants moved to Germany. In recent years, what is more worrying, is the fact that a high number of minors are also moving away, which means that whole families leave the country. Besides Germany, the main emigration destinations are mostly Ireland and Austria.

After the 2008 crisis, the number of Croats who left the country increased again. Similar situation is in Croatian counties - NUTS 3 level (with the exception of the County of Istria and the City of Zagreb, which have a positive migration balance). Varaždin County has also a negative balance, although here it is much lower compared to the counties in the eastern part of Croatia. Despite the fact that Varaždin County shares a direct border with Slovenia, and is at close proximity to Austria and Bayern, and despite the fact that low salaries prevail in Varaždin County, because of the economic sectors (textile,

leather and metal processing), Varaždin County has not registered mass emigration like many eastern counties in Croatia, which proves there are certain reasons for that.

Brain drain

The main question is not only how to keep highly educated people and scientists, but also a lack of vocational professions, like in construction, processing industry, trade, hospitality, etc. As many other European countries, Croatia is facing a loss of doctors and nurses. This is why Varaždin County has recognized this problem and has introduced subvention of housing bank loans, and financing of education and training of doctors (PhD doctorates) and other encouraging measures, in order to motivate them to stay in the country. Encouraging measures and a structured system are crucial for keeping people and enabling their return, regardless of their educational background. And for that, we need a vision.

Role of regions

What can a region do in order to prevent or at least diminish brain drain and emigration of students and pupils can be presented in the case of Varaždin County. As regions and local authorities are the level closest to its citizens, we have an important role to play in order to diminish brain drain.

The fact that we have one of the lowest emigration rates per inhabitant in Croatia is the result of **measures which the County implements in education and health care**. We left a network of schools in rural areas, whereby we also try to prevent depopulation of rural areas, a challenge faced by many European regions. Namely, during my first mandate as a County prefect in 2005, we started with very concrete projects, offering equal opportunities for all students and pupils.

We have achieved that by ensuring infrastructural, social and programme preconditions.

- 32 schools were built or renovated with the help of the public-private partnership model, which enabled **schooling in one shift** so that today 94% of pupils go to school in one shift, which gives them more free time and time for extra-curriculum activities.
- The social competent was fulfilled by **the free transport and free textbooks**, as well as by providing **extended classes, free meals, student loans and scholarship**. We also introduced the project of **free meals for pupils at risk of poverty, who go to schools whose founder and owner is Varaždin County**.
- By having ensured the basic preconditions, we were able to concentrate on **the quality of programmes** and on the **work with highly motivated pupils**. This is why there are 10 centres of excellence in different subjects such as mathematics, physics, entrepreneurship, etc., in which pupils, by working in an inspiring environment, achieve great results. The centres of excellence of Varaždin County became the European Talent Centre in 2019, which is the title provided by the European Council for High Ability founded in 1988 with the aim to develop a network and support for those included in the work with youngsters with high abilities (teachers, researchers, psychologists, parents, highly motivated pupils, etc.). Thereby we became a part of the family, which consist mostly of educational institutions and organisations, where we are the only regional government which is a European Talent Centre. This clearly proves the importance education has for Varaždin County.

All these are examples how regional governments can intervene, in the scope of their competences. Of course, on the other side, a positive investor-friendly atmosphere should be created.

Final remarks

Regional disparities are one of the main causes of brain drain and the emigration of highly skilled workers to other countries/regions. We would like to emphasize again the importance of cohesion policy in reducing these inequalities. As the negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework are underway, a strong, fair renewed Cohesion Policy must be kept in mind.

Cohesion Policy ensures an inclusive and sustainable growth that reduces disparities between EU regions and delivers for the EU and its citizens. An effective cohesion policy will be essential if the EU is to successfully address the challenges confronting Europe today and deliver the results for a greater economic, social and territorial cohesion beyond 2020. This will be necessary to ensure continued growth in all of our Member States.

