

The return migration of highly-qualified workers in Bulgaria and in Bosnia and Herzegovina – policies and returnees' responses

Abstract

In this article, two cases of return migration are analysed, revealing the phenomenon in two different contexts (post-socialist Bulgaria and post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina) with a focus on return policies as regards highly-qualified young people. The time period of the analysis covers the last 25 years, starting with the opening of the borders and the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria (in 1989) and the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in 1995). A comparative conclusion follows the analysis of each country, while the article also incorporates the views of a sample of returnees. Both countries have made steps towards the creation and adoption of return policies, and have implemented practical activities to attract the return of highly-qualified young emigrants who are recognised as a resource that can meet demographic and economic challenges. The measures are, perhaps, more advanced in Bosnia and Herzegovina (on paper); in both, it is not the adoption of policies that are driving returnees, but the returnees themselves who are driving such adoption.

Keywords: return migration, return policies, highly-qualified migration, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Bulgarian case

According to a draft of the *National Strategy for Bulgarians Abroad*,¹ a process of the return migration of Bulgarian nationals (including students and graduate students) to Bulgaria has been going on for a while. In the 1992-2001 period, 19 000 Bulgarians returned to the country. Since then, about 20 000 Bulgarian citizens have changed their residency from a foreign country to Bulgaria each year while, in 2006, this number tripled. This data from the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute shows a tendency towards return.

This article aims to analyse how these processes are addressed at government level and what programmes and initiatives are planned to facilitate them, along with the civic initiatives that exist and the opinions and experience of returnees themselves. Two strategic documents mark migration policy in Bulgaria – the *National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration and Integration (2008-2015)*; and the *National Strategy in the Sphere of Migration, Asylum and Integration (2011-2020)*. The aim of the first section of this article is not to provide a thorough analysis of the two documents,

1 The draft of the strategy is available at the website of the Bulgarian Presidency.

but rather to emphasise the aspect of return that both contain, with an accent on the latter as is the current active strategy in Bulgaria.

In both strategies, return is used with the connotation of permanent return. In the first strategy, the following measure is set:

The creation of a programme for the permanent return of persons with Bulgarian citizenship living on the territory of other countries. (National Strategy, 2008-2015: 19)

Emphasis is placed on highly-qualified Bulgarian emigration, aiming to foster optimal opportunities for the return of Bulgarian citizens to Bulgaria. The main activities for implementing the programme are:

- studying the problems that young highly-qualified Bulgarian emigrants face, listed as psychological, social, cultural, economic and other
- attracting young Bulgarian people and business organisations abroad towards direct co-operation with business organisations in Bulgaria
- studying the experience of other institutions of attracting young emigrants to return; etc. (*National Strategy 2008-2011: 19-20*)

Some of the planned activities are reported as having been implemented, but not all the results are available to researchers. The 2008 Annual Report lists implemented activities, such as organising a meeting with Bulgarian students in Madrid entitled *Qualification and realisation* (October 2008); and a roundtable entitled *How to bring emigrants back home?* that took place within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) and organised by *Human Resources* magazine (*National Strategy 2011-2020: 14*).

Just three years after the first strategy on migration in Bulgaria was published, a new one was adopted in which the focus was shifted from integration to security measures. The argument was that Bulgaria is an external EU border and that redefining the strategy was a vital step towards the Schengen Agreement. Thus, the 2011 National Strategy also sets the ambitious aim of attracting back Bulgarian citizens who had left Bulgaria in the last two decades, thus preventing their migration from becoming ‘permanent’:

Migration policy in respect to Bulgarian nationals and people of Bulgarian origin living outside Bulgaria is viewed as a potential resource for overcoming the negative demographic trends in the country. The economic growth in a post-crisis period, combined with the completed reforms in important public sectors and with proactive government measures, is expected to lead to: a tendency for Bulgarian emigrants who left the country in the past 20 years to return home; and the permanent establishment of individuals of Bulgarian origin living outside Bulgaria on Bulgarian territory. (National Strategy 2011-2020: 3)

Important priorities in the ‘proactive’ strategy include:

- attracting highly-qualified Bulgarian *émigré* nationals, as well as foreigners of Bulgarian origin, permanently to establish and settle in the country (*National Strategy 2011-2020: 33*)
- attracting Bulgarian emigrants back to Bulgaria with a view to their permanent return. (*National Strategy 2011-2020: 45*)

The highly-qualified are a factor and an aim because they are dynamic, entrepreneurial and innovative. The institutional vision of ‘permanent settlement’ does not fit their profile, which is associated with freedom and mobility. Thus, the priorities are not only wishful, but they do not adequately reflect the target group they address.

In the 2011 Action Plan, 34 measures are developed and listed in total, two of which are directly related to the themes discussed in this article: Measure 25 looks for the number of people who have emigrated and the reasons for their emigration; while Measure 33 aims at:

Strengthening co-operation with Bulgarian emigrants and their organisations abroad through establishing regular contacts between them and Labour and Social Affairs Offices (of the ML-SP) within Bulgarian embassies abroad, the Employment Agency (EA) and interested firms and corporations on a long-term basis.

This measure is targeted on their:

Gradual return to Bulgaria and on the compensation of the deficit in qualified labour specialists in the country.

The trends continued in the next years following the outlining of the Strategy; while the activation of a policy towards highly-qualified emigrants, aiming at the return and professional realisation of returnees to the country, is one of the priorities that remain in Bulgaria’s migration policy. One of the measures to achieve this is the development and adoption of a National Strategy towards Bulgarians abroad focused on the building of complete, complex, long-term and integrated policies regarding Bulgarians and Bulgarian communities abroad, with a deadline of June 2013 under the competence of SABA as the responsible institution (*Action Plan 2013: 16-17*).

Several sub-periods can be distinguished:

- the first ten years are characterised by no dynamic actions; at that time, the state was mainly observing the phenomenon of emigration and, more specifically, the ‘brain drain’
- 2000 was a peak for several key events
- in the period between 2000 and 2013, an intensification of the events is seen, as well as some attempts towards co-operation with the diaspora and attracting back highly-qualified experts who emigrated after 1989. This tendency is visible up to 2012 – a peak year for the institutional debate on attracting the diaspora and the highly-qualified in particular.

Table 1 – Return policy milestones in Bulgaria

1993	An Agency for Bulgarians Abroad is established; this became the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad (SABA) in 2000
2000	The campaign <i>Bulgarian Easter</i> ² started during the government of Ivan Kostov The Law on Bulgarians Abroad is adopted
2001-2004	The government of NDSV and DPS sought to attract the return of highly-qualified Bulgarians living abroad to senior ministerial positions; a period associated with ‘the return of the King’ and ‘the return of the yuppies’
2008	The report on <i>Bulgarians Around the World and State Policy National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration and Integration (2008-2015)</i>
July 2009- February 2011	Minister without Portfolio for Bulgarians Abroad
2011	<i>National Strategy in the Sphere of Migration, Asylum and Integration (2011-2020)</i>
November 2011	Draft Law on Bulgarians and Bulgarian Communities Abroad, State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad (SABA)
18 June 2012	Council of the President (Council for Culture, Spiritual Development and National Identity) sets a framework for the <i>National Strategy for Bulgarians Abroad</i>
7-8 November 2012	Conference in Brussels on <i>Policies towards Bulgarians Abroad</i>
21 December 2013	First working meeting of the <i>National Council for Bulgarians Living Abroad</i>

- 2 “The government of former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov was the first to attempt attracting the interest and expertise of young Bulgarian emigrants, organising an event entitled *Bulgarian Easter*. Ironically, just a year later, some of those invited to the event, such as financial brokers from London, became the main reason why Kostov’s party suffered major losses in the elections of June 2001. Eugenia Markova writes: ‘This election presented a very interesting situation: the winner was a party formed at the last minute and led by the former king (who became Prime Minister following the elections). Among the party’s candidates were Bulgarian emigrant professionals – including prominent participants in the recent Bulgarian government initiative to attract highly-skilled migrants to Bulgaria – who put on hold their careers in the west to participate in Bulgarian politics. They formed the first government comprised mainly of returned professionals.’ (Markova, 2010: 223).

Table 2 – Attracting the highly-qualified in Bulgaria – activities

Activity	Example	Responsible institution
Forums	<i>Bulgarian Easter</i> <i>Professional Realisation in the Fatherland</i> (2002) <i>A Career in Bulgaria. Why not?</i> (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014)	Council of Ministers State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad (SABA) NGOs (Tuk-Tam, Back2BG, Identity for Bulgaria)
Programmes	<i>Bulgarian Dream</i>	State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad; Ministry of Economy
Training	For 12 years at SABA <i>State Administration as a whole since 2012</i>	SABA Council of Ministers
Labour and Information Fairs	Germany, Spain, United Kingdom	Labour and Social Affairs Offices, MLSP SABA
Studies	<i>Study of Attitudes</i> <i>Study of Needs</i>	SABA
Dialogue	Council of the Presidency Conference in Brussels	Presidency

Source: Ivanova (2015)

According to experts working in the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad, the message of the Agency towards young ex-pat Bulgarians should have a tone of:

Inclusion, rather than sounding like ‘Come back to Bulgaria and find a job here.’ Inclusion, which is equal to ‘work there’, as well as ‘Possible career in his/her own country’; there are subjects that are not covered here and no option to realise them; while young people that are realising them in western Europe and the United States can contribute by lobbying for investment. That’s life – it could not be imposed on a young person – there must be freedom. A professional career at home is just one of the options. (Expert interview, 2012)

Another expert explains the interests of young people in the following way:

The interest of young people is dynamic and pragmatic; they seek direct contact with employers and other forms of contact and information.

Labour fairs organised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in several years are a key instrument, according to an expert working in the Ministry, and are attended by, on average, between 200 and 400 people per event.

We have already mentioned that the Council of the Presidency has come together around the topic of the problems of establishing a meaningful dialogue and co-operation with Bulgarians all over the world. The aim of the meeting was to establish a level of co-operation with the Bulgarian diaspora on the preparation of a national strategy ex-

PLICITLY targeting Bulgarians living abroad. President Rosen Plevneliev stated in his welcome speech:

I am convinced that the development of a National Strategy for Bulgarians Abroad is an important national priority.

The first step was to set a new approach to work ‘not inside out, but outside in.’ This should result from the Bulgarian diaspora, as stated by the Vice-President:

Participation is fundamental in building the national strategy, the guarantor to democracy. The point is not to make Bulgarians who went and settled around the world return; the point is to communicate, to create opportunities for participation in Bulgaria; thus, those who are mobile, to participate, to work; to build national policies inviting those who have the desire and opportunity to be able to present, to lobby, to work for Bulgaria, while they are abroad.

A shift in the political discourse is observed that differs from the ‘top-down’ approach from the time of the *Bulgarian Easter* to more inclusive ways of talking and involving Bulgarians abroad.

Four concrete steps on mobilising and working with the diaspora were suggested by Professor Anna Krasteva³ during the same Council:

1. to provide an e-citizen platform for the active involvement of Bulgarians abroad in civil and political processes in Bulgaria
2. to provide a platform to connect with Bulgarian researchers from foreign universities, research institutes and research centres
3. to discuss the opportunity for internet voting for Bulgarians abroad
4. to discuss the e-mobilisation of the diaspora as a new phenomenon that deserves a place in traditional and in new media, (Krasteva, 2012)

Another topical initiative at government level that started in the beginning of 2014 was called *Promoting the advantages of investing in Bulgaria*, and was launched by the Bulgarian Investment Agency under the auspices of the Ministry of Economy and Energy. Over several months, it launched information campaigns among Bulgarians abroad, aiming to promote the investment climate and the return of emigrants, as well as attracting Bulgarian students studying abroad back to Bulgaria. The campaign was carried out in the form of meetings of representatives between Bulgarian administrative structures and Bulgarian communities in thirteen different cities around the world (Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Brussels, Madrid, Moscow, Amsterdam, London, Chicago, Boston, New York, Tel Aviv and Istanbul), declaring the intention of conveying the message to Bulgarians abroad that Bulgaria intended to maintain intensive contact with them and to provide the necessary assistance and opportunities for the future realisation of their careers within the country.

Looking at all the initiatives mentioned here, it is visible that there is little consistency in the efforts made and that the results have been rather vague in the form of meetings, presentations and intentions.

3 Director of the Centre for Migration Studies (CERMES) at New Bulgarian University.

Civil initiatives

In the following section, the work and experience of several returnee-initiated organisations will be analysed: Tuk-Tam; Back2BG; the Identity for Bulgaria Foundation; and United Ideas for Bulgaria.

Tuk-Tam (Here and There)⁴ is a community, an association and an initiative seeking to connect Bulgarians who have experienced living and working abroad founded in the spring of 2008. The association creates a social environment for people who have returned to Bulgaria. One of the founders of Tuk-Tam tells of its aims:

In the beginning, we started as a Facebook group as some of us, students from American colleges, returned from abroad after few years there and we became interested in how many of us stayed there, how many have returned, and began to gather within a Facebook group, so we started to meet absolutely informally. It turned out that a certain number of people are always present at our meetings and we said, 'Let's see how many people come, let's structure as an organisation' and then we registered the group as an association. Later, we saw that many people were willing to do some projects. The biggest was 'A career in Bulgaria. Why not?' Our first year saw the first career forum. Social events have become a major factor, because there were people who rang us and said, 'Come on, when will you have an event for people to go out with each other?'

And that is how it started: on the one hand, from our needs because we were back in an environment with no social structure, whereas five years previously we were somewhere else; and, on the other, due to the simple fact that we have many people who have returned and are in the same position. And, as we gathered, the most common question we discussed was 'Why have we returned?' (V. interview, 2012)

The main idea behind the forum 'A Career in Bulgaria. Why not?' was to gather together employers who were interested in hiring people who had graduated abroad and people who had experience of living abroad. The need here is that, while abroad, young people receive very little information, which is filtered through many levels; and, to make an informed decision, it is very important to meet employers' organisations. There are many people who have still not returned but who go to the annual forum⁵ to see what happens in Bulgaria, to become acquainted with others like them, who have returned; to see how they feel; in general, to communicate, to get to know like-minded others.

To the question 'Why return?' one of the founders of Tuk-Tam replies:

My theory is that there are untapped markets and niches, and these young people are interested in developing them. They saw something abroad and said, 'Hey, it would be really cool to do that here.' People who return and want to work here often encounter difficulties. Many return with the anticipation of something else – higher pay, for example, and then they encounter opportunities which are much lower-paid. But, for example, my friends from the Free Sofia Tour say: 'In the west this exists, and here it doesn't; it's nice to develop something new.' (V. interview, 2012)

4 <http://www.tuk-tam.bg>. As of 15 January 2015, the Tuk-Tam Facebook group has 4 284 members, with the fan page liked by 5 150.

5 The seventh forum took place in 2014.

To the question ‘What can support the reintegration process?’, the answer of one returnee warns:

Information sites, support with establishing contacts; but if it is not properly done, it can even be an obstacle.

One big issue is with the legalisation of diplomas (i.e. having them legally certified as valid – see further below):

It is an extremely difficult process at the moment. I tried, but gave up; it would take me four months and a return to England.

When we talk about what would keep young people in Bulgaria, one of the founders of Tuk-Tam replies:

What would help most are jobs and a social environment which makes people want to stay here.

Another organisation initiated by young returnees is the Identity for Bulgaria Foundation.⁶ If one of the keywords for Tuk-Tam is networking/socialisation, for the Foundation it is establishing a better image for Bulgaria both within the country and abroad. A number of activities are held at personal and networking level, with a focus on defining contemporary national values and creating a common vision and direction for the development of the country.

Back2BG⁷ is part of the Identity for Bulgaria Foundation. This project started in 2007 as an initiative for Bulgarians with education and experience abroad to develop their professional prospects in Bulgaria. It functions as a career site containing job opportunities and advertisements for expert and managerial positions, and generally useful information about the professional development of young people with experience of living abroad.

Another organisation is United Ideas for Bulgaria.⁸ This is the most recent initiative, formed by young Bulgarians with experience of abroad who have the desire of ‘Promoting social engagement and the implementation of civil projects’ as a means of ‘Seeking ways and solutions to the challenges faced by Bulgaria.’ For three years in a row (2012, 2013 and 2014), United Ideas for Bulgaria has organised panel discussions entitled ‘The ideas – what we are.’ Students from Bulgaria and those studying abroad have the opportunity to discuss key issues in the areas of health, the economy, culture, science, education, environment, regional development and social policy. Divided by commissions and interests, they draw up proposals for specific civil projects, some of which have subsequently been implemented.

In summary, the need for organisations for young people with education and experience of living abroad is clearly recognised by returnees themselves. The range of activities is colourful, but three main groups can be distinguished:

6 <http://fibg.org/Nachalo> [last accessed 20 January 2015].

7 <http://back2bg.com/> [last accessed 20 January 2015].

8 <http://oib.bg/> [last accessed 10 January 2014].

1. networking activities (Tuk-Tam, Identity for Bulgaria, Back2BG, United Ideas for Bulgaria)
2. professional development activities (from international organisations in the public sector to innovative niches) (Tuk-Tam, Identity for Bulgaria, Back2BG)
3. activities provoking debate and aiming to resolve civic problems through projects and volunteering (Tuk-Tam, United Ideas for Bulgaria, Identity for Bulgaria).

Challenges of return

The challenges that returnees face range from reverse culture shock, to the collision with reality in terms of finding work to interpersonal relationships. At first glance, reverse culture shock and the collision with reality in finding work may seem like the same experience but, in my opinion and those of my respondents, they are not. Reverse culture shock is connected with difficulties in re-adapting to the culture and values of society; whereas the collision with reality is focused at the professional occupational level.

In the following section, I want to illustrate each of them with a few quotes from my interviewees.

1) Reverse culture shock

I had such a reverse culture shock, I cannot even describe it. I am Bulgarian, I love Bulgaria, but I had forgotten the way of thinking. I have plunged into another culture, other standards, other ways of doing things and it was very hard to adapt to a lot of things, to the thinking of Bulgarians. It is very hard to explain what I mean, but the culture of doing things, this kind of thinking that everyone is waiting for something to happen, for things to change from the outside somehow, without thinking that it depends on all of us for things to get better; that's what we are used to; I don't know... (M., woman, 2012)

2) Collision with reality in finding work

The vacancy was given to another person. [The results of a job interview were not made public]. I was very disappointed because it was connected with my return to Bulgaria. For me, it was important to work initially in the Foreign Ministry, not just in any institution; I have specialised in European integration, European institutions, and I thought that, with my training, I could get a job here exactly where I wanted to work, in policy development, and that I would contribute to this at national level. After this disappointment, I have not searched more there. (A., woman, 2010).

3) Interpersonal relations

This is the worst in Bulgaria. Here, when I return, I should immediately put up something like a shield as I am in a constant struggle in the streets, wherever I am, not only in the institutions. Interpersonal relations are a constant war; while there, they are normal, things are calm (V., woman, 2010).

The vision of returnees

Returnees' strategies for their re-adaptation can be divided into three main categories: work in international companies and/or with foreigners; career development in general; and social networks. The one most extensively spoken among my respondents is the third; while the most sustainable is the second.

1) Work in international companies and/or with foreigners

I wanted it to be something international. (M., woman, 2012)

2) Professional realisation

I returned, and the main thing that I can do easily, and I was sure that I could do it, was to teach English so I immediately applied to many language schools. They called me from one of them and that was the second interview I had, and I started the job, because I could no longer stay at home. I rested for two months and was starting to go crazy without a job. In the beginning, everything looked splendid, the money wasn't that bad, but soon I realised that this was a Bulgarian private business that doesn't aim to develop you but to squeeze you as much as possible. So I ran away, I literally ran away. This was my first clash with reality. I worked there exactly one year; I had to leave and, at that time, there were no other options. At that time, there were no vacancies in the Ministry, but there was at the Diplomacy Institute and I just clutched it like a drowning man to a straw, and this was perhaps the most beautiful thing that could have happened to me. (T., woman, 2010)

3) Social networks

Refined integration initiatives – student choir, PhD, projects, nature, arts, creative approach to things and meeting with people. (V., woman, 2012)

At first everyone feels very alone, you have to reintegrate, you feel alone with your experience; all the Bulgarians are here, have been here; when you jump back into a society from which you were away for a long time and you feel lonely, so to say, not because your close ones are not with you, it is just you miss somebody with whom you have a common experience, someone to introduce you back into society, to help you find events, work and other things; that is, it's nothing material, I don't think, more like forums, meetings for establishing contacts, to connect with people. For example, when I came back, I didn't have any connections, I didn't even have acquaintances to tell me, 'Contact this and that person to give you this information'; the contacts to find a good job. I didn't have these contacts and, although many people who come back are qualified, they just do not know where to start, they do not have a network of people to help them integrate faster, to find a job fast and to progress in life. This is a kind of stopper; it is problematic because, when my parents do not have these connections, and I haven't been here to create them, all my more serious contacts are outside, abroad, and the few I have here are not enough to progress in the way I wish; there is such a slowing down. It is so important to have people to give you guidance, this company of friends I have now. Even the job I have at the moment, I got to know about this position from our friends' group; I wouldn't have known about it if it wasn't for that friend of mine, because I had only an outsider's point of view, and perhaps at first sight I would never have paid attention to this possibility, but she explained to me what to expect, what the positive things are and, if it hadn't been for this acquaintance I wouldn't have known about this job. (M., woman, 2012)

Sustainable return or a new stage of migration?

The motives behind repeated migration or a desire to stay are as colourful and complex as those that lay behind the initial migration itself. For the highly-qualified people who I interviewed, a tendency for a second/repeat migration can be observed only if is connected with personal or professional growth:

I would go again only if I have the opportunity to develop from the place I have reached, from there up. (A., woman, 2010)

The determining factor in the choice of remaining in Bulgaria is the creation of a family, which prevails at least when a relationship is at the beginning. For some, a return is intended to be a temporary thing, but it can become a constant:

I came with a return ticket, a bit like on a holiday, to see what was the situation, and then I stayed a bit. I had some very unpleasant experiences in the beginning because of incorrect professional relationships, like how things worked in the old way: depending on connections and less on professionalism. (L. man, 2010)

Those who have found a base and a professional niche sound more convinced:

This is creative work, meaningful work, that I do and I like that we communicate with the Commission at international level, when necessary. Going to Brussels, when there are meetings of the Committee of Solidarity and Management of the Migration Flows. (I. woman, 2010)

The balance between the pros and cons remains delicate, especially when finances are concerned:

I dream of finally getting some satisfaction, not only professionally, but also financially. (I., woman, 2010)

Young, highly-qualified Bulgarians are mobile, adaptable, capable and creative. Yet they go through a period of uncertainty and re-adaptation after extended periods abroad. The reasons are varied but, among the most important ones, one phenomenon that occurs invisibly in all stories is the interruption of the social threads of understanding the generally-accepted, unwritten, rules for functioning in society as well as in the professional field, or simply in answer to the question: ‘How does it work here?’ That’s why networking appears to be a major necessity that people seek to reconstruct for themselves.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

After the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a great number of migrants returned, but many others continue to leave the country, mainly for economic or educational reasons. According to the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees (MHRR), 1.67m Bosnians live abroad. The diaspora is well-educated – 35% of Bosnians in the United States have higher education; in Scandinavian countries, it is 25%. The World Bank estimates that the percentage of emigrants who are highly-qualified is 23.9%,

including 11% of doctors, putting BiH among the leading countries in the emigration of skilled workers.

The need to strengthen links with the diaspora is recognised at government level, but the issue of attracting the highly-qualified diaspora has been put-off as a result of the more pressing problems related to the reconstruction of the country (refugee flows, IDPs, the overall political situation).

According to some research scientists, the majority of public institutions in BiH show almost no interest in having a dialogue and working with the diaspora, highly-qualified workers in particular, other than in their physical return (Ćosić and Mraović, 2011: 37). The only exception is the 'Diaspora' section of MHRR, which is the competent unit responsible for managing policy towards the diaspora. According to these authors, this is the only institution that is trying to raise the issue at the higher political level and raise awareness, working at getting to know people within the diaspora and especially those who are highly-qualified. For example, in 2009 and 2010, two annual reports by were issued by this unit – *Who's Who in the BiH Diaspora?*

The 'Diaspora' unit uses its website to provide information to BiH citizens living abroad. In 2008, it prepared and published a brochure about the BiH diaspora, available on the Ministry website.⁹ The brochure contains guidelines on various rights, procedures on obtaining BiH citizenship, identification documents, tax exemption, pensions insurance and insurance for people with disabilities, the legalisation of foreign diplomas and qualifications, voting outside the country, etc. (*To BiH or not to BiH* 2011: 6).

Young people can take advantage of the summer opportunities offered by the 'Diaspora' unit. Internships are offered to students of Bosnian origin in order to let them learn more about the work of BiH institutions and to improve their knowledge of their native language.

According to Nikolić *et al*, a positive step forward for the 'Diaspora' unit is that its experts have been involved in the preparation of the BiH Development Strategy, giving them the opportunity to voice issues such as the 'brain drain' and to recommend actions for the inclusion of the diaspora in the development of BiH – to use the potential of the diaspora and its expertise in various fields, facilitate the attraction, return and re-integration of professionals, academics and professors from the diaspora, develop programmes for the circular migration of researchers, maintain connections to the highly-qualified diaspora, etc. The Strategy and accompanying Action Plan were prepared in 2008 but had not then, at the point of writing, been adopted (Nikolić *et al*. 2011: 49). The implementation of strategies at state level greatly depends on the commitment of the lower levels of government, such as the Ministry of Education and Science and the universities themselves, because it is at that level that the legislation on relevant issues is actually applied (Stanić, 2010 quoted in: Nikolić *et al*. 2010).

An important document that recognises the problem with the emigration of research scientists is the Strategy for the Development of Science and Research – the only accepted document at public level which states the problem, and yet the 'brain drain' is not a priority for this Strategy and its associated Action Plan (Uvalić, 2005: quoted in: Nikolić *et al*. 2010).

9 <http://www.mhrr.gov.ba/iseljenistvo/Publikacije/?id=915> [last accessed 8 September 2014].

One means of attracting attention at the regional level was the Conference on Migration and Development, organised by MHRR in October 2011 with the participation of 110 representatives of various institutions in the region, aiming at the co-ordination of regional efforts.¹⁰

The main strategic documents highlighting the role of the diaspora are (among others): the BiH Development Strategy; the Migration Strategy; the Social Inclusion Strategy; and the Strategy for Science and Research.

Some of the latest activities of the Ministry include:

- preparation of the draft law on Co-operation with the Diaspora (2009)
- study of the financial contributions of members of the diaspora, including cash transfers (2010-2011)
- publication of a database with information on experts and entrepreneurs within the diaspora
- preparation of annual migration profiles for BiH, focusing in particular on emigration (2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013)
- providing support for BiH knowledge transfer projects, managed by organisations in the diaspora
- preparation of a diaspora business directory
- providing support to the diaspora for networking and information sharing
- project on internships for diaspora students.

Small in size, MHRR's 'Diaspora' unit is, nevertheless, very active but institutional support is very limited, especially for highly-qualified returnees.

Initiatives of international organisations

An example of a programme initiated by the international community, which promotes the active involvement in the post-war reconstruction and development of BiH of those among the highly-qualified diaspora who have expertise, is the Youth Employability and Retention Programme. Within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals, the UNDP, UNICEF, the United Nations Fund for Population, the United Nations Volunteers Fund, the Millennium Development Goals fund and the IOM joined to launch this project in 2009 with the aim of changing the pattern of job search among the young and improving the capacity of employment agencies, with a focus on young job-seekers, throughout BiH. Seventeen youth resource centres for employment were established, ten in FBiH, six in RS and one in the Brčko District.

An especially important factor in this project is that the programme also addresses the diaspora. Indeed, one of its objectives is to improve conditions in the labour market so as to foster a positive effect on the development of young people in their own country.

Local NGO initiatives

The youth NGOs in existence are very similar to those in Bulgaria: they have been initiated by young Bosnian returnees and have similar goals – they seek to address

10 http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/taieux/dyn/taieux-events/detail_en.jsp?EventID=46448 [last accessed 1 October 2014].

different problems of a social and professional nature, provide information and serve as a bridge between the diaspora and the country itself.

‘Our Perspective’ is a young NGO, created recently by two highly-qualified returnees, and is one of the few NGOs trying (with limited support, mainly from international donor organisations) to address some of the problems that young returnees face and to serve as a bridge. On its website there is a long list of resources, containing organisations of Bosnians in various countries of Europe, America, Australia, etc.

‘Academy’ is another NGO that aims to offer support and information, using social networks and web-based services.

Diaspora initiatives

Interest in co-operation coming from within the diaspora is greater than the level of interest coming from institutions within BiH. This was the 2011 conclusion of Sara Nikolić *et al.* Asked whether they wish to return to BiH, the majority of respondents in this study responded that they wished to stay temporarily in the country, although their overall attitude towards the development of the research and development sector is rather negative, taking into account the administrative obstacles and the recognition of diplomas, but mainly the institutional lack of will to make contact with the diaspora (Nikolić *et al.* 2011: 51). In most cases, respondents say that, when a connection with any institution was initiated, the personal efforts of the emigrants themselves were at the base and, instead of showing a desire to maintain these relations, the institutions at local level even refused support offered from the diaspora. Their respondents evaluate institutional initiatives either as minimal or as completely missing – an opinion expressed by some of the Bulgarian respondents, too.

The type of co-operation offered by respondents in this study was the creation of professional networks both with BiH institutions and at regional level. Other possible forms of co-operation include the organisation of research conferences, distance learning and the organisation of institutional visits.

It should be noted that there are already some successful networks, such as the Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts and Sciences (BHAAAS). Their consolidation in the future could become a factor in attracting the highly-qualified diaspora. BHAAAS is an association of BiH citizens with prestigious titles and positions in the US. The Association unites about 200 Bosnians with PhDs.

The way in which research scientists from the diaspora see their contribution to the development of BiH is by providing space and opportunities for promising young research scientists from BiH in the institutions in which they work, as well as themselves becoming more involved in activities in BiH in the period after their retirement.

Educational initiatives

Some studies argue that even universities show a relatively limited interest in communicating with the diaspora of highly-qualified people (Nikolić *et al.* 2011).

However, there are programmes that, without deliberately working to attract young people from the diaspora, will nevertheless have such an impact. One example is the European Regional Master’s Programme for Human Rights in South-East Europe, as

offered through the Centre for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies of the University of Sarajevo, and especially the same programme offered by the University of Bologna, which started in 2000. There are many young people in the diaspora who have been attracted to the programme and who, after completing it, have remained in the country (see the questionnaire prepared by Ćosić and Mraović, 2011). This programme can serve as an example to other universities; as a trial run for integration which, even though not deliberately sought, has had an impact on young people from the diaspora who were born abroad (second and third generations) as well as attracting young people looking for better education opportunities abroad. Teachers on the programme are renowned speakers from the region, Italy, Bulgaria, USA, Poland, etc.

Even though the above initiatives are several, the inefficiency ascribed by the authors can be explained in the sense of the lack of interconnection and of permanent and effective dialogue between the various actors, as well as the lack of overall vision at national level which, keeping in mind the complex structure of the Bosnian state, may even be impossible due to the lack of political will among the entities. To be effective, there must be a relationship, dialogue and a desire for common action.

When I say overall vision, I do not necessarily state that it has to be initiated by state actors; rather, the Bulgarian case demonstrates that sustainable activities come ‘bottom-up’.

Factors determining the sustainability of the return of highly-qualified workers

According to various studies, there are two main factors that determine whether the return of highly-qualified workers will be only temporary or else will become sustainable:

1. becoming active on the labour market and realising the possibility of continuing professional development
2. the condition of higher education in a country, and how much money is invested in research.

Additionally, one of the main difficulties with most returnees who have graduated abroad is the recognition of their diplomas; as is the already-mentioned reverse culture shock.

1) Integration in the labour market

The overall economic and political situation in BiH is hardly a motivating factor to return to the country. This is very well illustrated, both in research carried out by Bosnian researchers as well as in the results of my questionnaire.

My respondents gave the following answers to the question ‘What are the main challenges for BiH today?’:

- new jobs and the restoration of society
- living together and creating a society without hatred
- having work and a lifestyle that are worthwhile
- work
- corruption, nepotism and cronyism

- overcoming the legacy of war – corruption, nepotism and the total loss of values and laws
- the whole system is deformed
- fighting corruption and nepotism
- emigration
- getting rid of people unfit to run the country
- survival
- quality education and access to an ‘unstratified’ labour market
- achieving political stability
- the 40% level of unemployment and a dysfunctional political system that needs constitutional reform, because the Constitution facilitates blocking the development of BiH
- getting a job.

From a state perspective, there are several employment policies at the level of the entities which target returners, including highly-qualified ones, but these policies have a focus mainly on internally displaced people. Meanwhile, measures in the field of agriculture, crafts, tourism and small- and medium-sized enterprises have a focus on sustainable return and social aspects rather than on development. At the level of the state, about two million marks were spent on such purposes in 2010, followed by another two million in 2011.

In FBiH, aid is given in the form of one-off financial assistance to the employers of returnees (3 000 convertible marks per person) or to self-employed returnees (from 4 000 to 5 000 marks), with the condition that people do not re-register as unemployed for twelve months (Labour and Employment Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2010).

In 2010, the government of RS initiated a very similar programme as part of the Development Programme of RS, and with a focus on fulfilling Annex 7 of the Dayton Agreement. This targets returnees, with the aim of developing favourable conditions for the self-employment of returnees, as well as incentives for employers and the economic stability which would underpin the return process. This programme was initially aimed to foster the return of 400 people: 200 self-employed and 200 employees. Unfortunately, there is no data on the effect of this financial instrument (Labour and Employment Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2010).

In 2010, the ambitious Youth Employment and Retention Project was initiated, a project which, as already noted, attempted to combine several components of policies on migration and employment in order to support the employment of young people, to increase the capacity of employment agencies in order to control the ‘brain drain’ and to propose options for the systematic and controlled mobility of the youth population of BiH (UNDP, 2009).

Even though most of their respondents were in work when they completed the questionnaire, all reported that they had difficulties in finding a job (Ćosić and Mraović, 2011). The researchers outline four of the main reasons why people had difficulties finding work: negative selection (88%); nepotism (84%) political party affiliation (76%); and low respect for knowledge (62%) (*op. cit.* p. 44).

Integration in the labour market is a fundamental condition for people's sustainable establishment in the country. Problems that returnees face include – as we can see – corruption, politics and personal nepotism. What distinguishes returning highly-qualified returnees from local ones, however, is that, during the period in which they were abroad, they have lost support networks and must build social connections from scratch. Of course, this very much depends on the type of migration and how long the person has spent abroad. Some have been absent for no more than 2-3 years and may well fall into a situation in which their previous job is waiting for them, but those who grew up abroad and were educated there experience, in most cases, a completely new environment on their return (Ćosić and Mraović, 2011: 44).

2) Condition of investment in higher education and research

In three studies – Ćosić and Mraović (2011), one by the IOM, and mine – people note as a problem the recognition of their diplomas, not only in BiH but also in Bulgaria. The price of the translation of diplomas is (in BiH) between 100 and 1 500 CM and, for some respondents, this is far too high and prevents them from going through this procedure. The study by Ćosić and Mraović (2011) shows that more than 50% of their respondents have started such a procedure but that only three people have completed it.

The legalisation of diplomas has two important dimensions: symbolic – the formal recognition and social status brought by education; and practical – jobs and opportunities for continuing education.

At the level of the state, the institution responsible for recognition – the Centre for Information and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (CIP), established in 2007 – has the primary function of providing information rather than carrying out legalisation, the latter of which occurs at local level.

This is complex, and stems from the requirement for the recognition of diplomas to be carried out according to the education legislation, which is at the level of the cantons in the case of FBiH and at the level of the entity in the case of RS; Brčko District, on the other hand, does not conduct any recognition at all. All the administrative units have their own laws on higher education, and these contain different procedures for recognition (and for nostrification).¹¹ The consequence is that there is a large number of institutions dealing with the same procedure, each in a different way, and that includes twelve ministries of education and at least eight public universities. With the exception of the Canton of Sarajevo, all other administrative units require the person applying for recognition either to live within the territory or have a legal interest in the territory where the procedure takes place (in terms of employment or education). Sarajevo Canton is also the place where people living in Brčko District can apply for the recognition of their diplomas; while it is, in addition, the only canton that accepts documents from across the whole country (Ćosić and Mraović, 2011: 47).

- 11 Nostrification is a procedure that requires a complete overlap of programmes at home and abroad, which makes many of the diplomas extremely difficult to align and requires additional exams; otherwise, diplomas are only partially recognised.

A special case is that of the so-called regulated professions, which require the validation of diplomas through nostrification, in addition to the legal requirements of the country. Occupations that fall into this category in BiH are: medicine; law; architecture; and teaching.

Ćosić and Mraović conclude that BiH is a country that has not realised the potential of its diaspora, with little information on returnees (2011: 48). They propose the development of a sustainable and holistic, strategic framework for returnees; given BiH's future in the EU, the country should be competitive in a knowledge-based society and should work towards the development of education, research and innovation in order to attract highly-qualified human capital. This is so especially since, in Bosnia:

'[The] diaspora is the only form of additional human capital that is highly motivated to cooperate and contribute to the development of BiH. (Ćosić and Mraović, 2011: 47)

Conclusion

At policy level, both countries have made steps towards the creation and adoption of return policies, and both have implemented practical activities to attract highly-qualified young emigrants, who are recognised as a resource that can meet the demographic and economic challenges in the countries, to return. In BiH, the measures are more focused and articulated. Yet, in both countries, it is not the policies that are the main driving force activating the process of return; it is the returnees themselves who are motivating and influencing the formation of meaningful and sustainable initiatives that concern and serve them.

At the level of the returnees, in both BiH and Bulgaria young highly-qualified returnees – who have come back temporarily or with the intention of a longer stay – are agents for development, innovation and creativity.

When speaking of concrete next steps, the legalisation of diplomas is a key issue, observed in both countries; a specific policy aim here would be to find a mechanism which overcomes this challenge.

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