

FROM BRAIN DRAIN TO BRAIN GAIN

by Páhl Ruin

Eastern and Central Europe are seeing emigrants returning – Brexit and the pandemic are major reasons. But they are not the only reasons.

Over the last 30 years the opposite trend has been the rule: Former Warsaw Pact countries and countries liberated from Soviet-Russian occupation have seen millions of citizens moving to richer countries in Western Europe or leaving the continent. This development has accelerated for the 10 countries that joined the European Union in 2004 and 2007, since the borders to the rest of the union more or less opened for them once they became members.

Lithuania and Latvia have lost close to 25% of their citizens since 1990; Bulgaria and Romania approximately 20%. In Poland, over two million people have left, primarily to the UK, Germany, France, and Ireland. Of course, over the years, some people have returned, although those leaving have always outnumbered those returning. Until now. The trend for more people to return to their home countries started as a trickle before Brexit and the pandemic – but has grown over the last couple of years.

It is impossible to state the exact number of EU citizens who have left the UK since the referendum – determining the precise number of internal migrants in the EU is a difficult task since registration is not mandatory – but they can probably be counted in hundreds of thousands. Since 2020, many people have left the UK, not primarily because of Brexit, but because of the corona pandemic. So, the big question is: will some of these people who have returned to their former home countries during

the pandemic also remain at home once the pandemic is over?

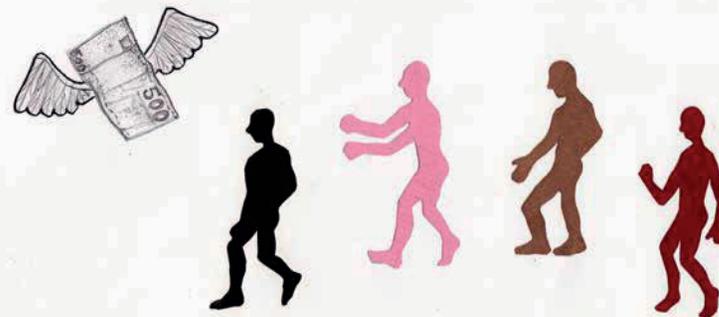
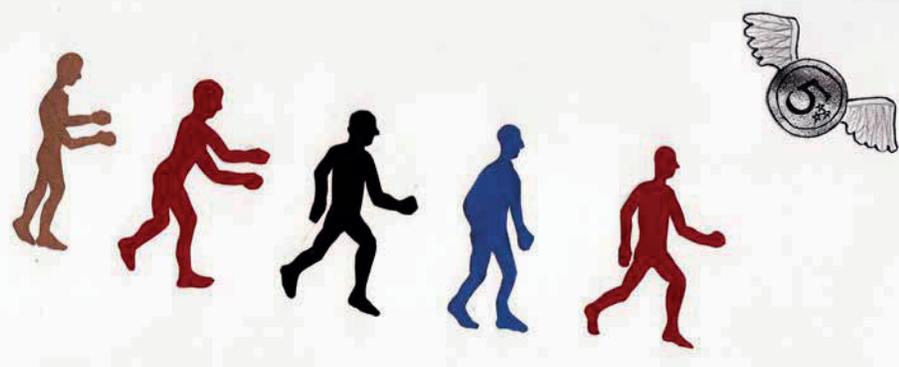
The answer is yes, according to researcher Ognyan Georgiev at the European Council on Foreign Relations. In his report *The Grand Return* from 2020, he examines the case of Bulgaria. Three months into the pandemic, over 500,000 Bulgarians had returned home. It was not possible to calculate the proportion who had lived abroad on a long-term basis, but many of them had. Using Facebook, he and his colleagues were able to contact around 130 people scattered across the country, many of whom had been living abroad for several years. When asked why they had returned home, the most common answer was “I wanted to be with my family and relatives”. The second most common answer was “I lost my job”.

THEY WERE ALSO ASKED whether they intended to migrate again. Many answered yes. However, 10% said no – and 25% were unsure.

“The pandemic will definitely lead to more people moving back to their home countries permanently compared to what we would have seen if there had been no pandemic”, says Ognyan Georgiev in a telephone interview from Sofia.

And it does not really surprise him:

“Put yourself into their situation. You live in the UK, you’ve always been thinking of moving back home one day, but you don’t know when. And then suddenly the move happens due to a reason you couldn’t predict. The dwelling on whether to stay or not is not a decision in your hand, you’re already back. Of course, we will see some of them remaining at home.”



Do your results apply to other countries in Eastern and Central Europe?

“Yes, we have data from other countries showing that they have also experienced a large influx of former emigrants since the pandemic started. What’s happening in Bulgaria is happening everywhere. And a number of these people will not emigrate again.”

Some countries have modernized more than others over the past 10–15 years. Does that affect the number of people wanting to remain after living back home during the pandemic?

“Absolutely. The Baltic countries, for example, have developed more quickly than my home country Bulgaria or also Romania. Some of those answering our survey mention corruption and weak institutions back home as reasons to emigrate again. I would imagine that such hesitation is less common in the Baltic countries.”

OGNYAN GEORGIEV ADMITS that he has a rather small sample of answers from temporary returnees during the pandemic to be able to draw clear conclusions. This uncertainty is also underlined by researcher Liam Patuzzi at the Migration Policy Institute’s European branch. He makes a comparison:

“We have some experience from the economic crisis in 2009–2010 when, for example, many Poles left Ireland and returned home. But almost all of them went back to Ireland after the crisis since the living conditions had not been good enough in Poland”, he says in a telephone interview from Germany.

But this time, he would imagine that a higher percentage of those waiting out the pandemic in their home countries would stay even after the pandemic is over – since people had begun returning in higher numbers already before 2020.

“They started returning because of higher wages and more job opportunities and research has confirmed that finding a good job is by far the only factor behind a decision to return. People also say that it is important how public institutions work, whether they are effective, whether the level of corruption is low. And not least: whether they can return home to good schools, good health care and a rich cultural life.”

Of course, Eastern and Central European countries can fulfil these wishes to varying degrees. This has resulted, for example, in Bulgaria and Romania attracting fewer citizens than the Baltic countries. Lithuania has probably experienced the largest influx of former emigrants – as a proportion of the population – over the last couple of years. Thus, I travelled to Vilnius to look more closely into the issue in one of the countries that has been mostly affected by this latest trend in European migration patterns.

In 2020, for the first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union, more Lithuanians returned to Lithuania than those who had left the country: 20 800 returned, while 15 300 emigrated.

Of course, this trend has not passed unnoticed in a country in which the population decreased from 3.7 million citizens in 1990 to 2.8 million today. The media has been full of stories about the returnees, says Jovita Sadaite, who is the coordinator of a government funded program helping Lithuanians who want to return home.

The program “I choose Lithuania”, which is run by the UN related body IOM (International Organization for Migration), was launched in 2015 – and has become increasingly important.

“Some people questioned whether our role was necessary, but we proved them wrong. In the first year we had 215 consultations; last year we had over 12,000.”

These phone calls and online contacts have skyrocketed as a result of Brexit and the pandemic. The purpose of the program is to provide Lithuanians in the diaspora with the right information at the right time – and ensure that they get all their questions answered in one place. This way they do not need to call one government agency after the other with all their loads of questions. So, what do they ask?

“Many different things: about housing, health care, social security, schools, the job market. Deciding to return home is a big step”.

Do you know of people who moved back temporarily because of the pandemic who are now considering staying for good?

“Yes, I have heard several stories about that sort of thing. The country has changed a lot during the last decade and many hadn’t realized how much.”

“THE PANDEMIC WILL DEFINITELY LEAD TO MORE PEOPLE MOVING BACK TO THEIR HOME COUNTRIES.”



Jovita Sadaitė, coordinator of the program "I choose Lithuania".

And she talks from her own experience. Like so many others, she went abroad to study and get an university education. In Denmark she got a degree in Middle Eastern Studies and then worked in the Middle East for several years before returning to Lithuania in 2019.

"Vilnius had become a city like many others in Europe, more multicultural with more bars, restaurants and cafés than before. I felt more at home."

Behind her decision to move back at least temporarily was also a longing for the Lithuanian landscape, the countryside, which is close, even if you live in a large city like Vilnius. Jovita Sadaitė never settled for a long time in one country, which meant that moving back to Lithuania was not such a big step for her as it would have been for someone who had become rooted after several years in another country.

OVER LUNCH IN the old town, I meet a couple of the latter kind, Judita Stanikūnienė and her husband Vytas Stanikūnas. She moved to the UK in 2005 with her daughter and met Vytas there – and the two had a son, Donatas, in 2011. Vytas himself had left Lithuania as early as 1998 as a 20-year-old to join his older brother and to learn English.

"I didn't move because of lack of money, like many others, I rather moved out of curiosity. And I stayed on."

After several different career moves, he ended up as a very successful carpenter and shopfitter with more work than he could manage.

"For many years, returning to Lithuania was never really on the agenda for me".

Judita Stanikūnienė had a very different reason for moving to the UK. After her divorce it was difficult to make ends meet as she had sole responsibility for her daughter Sonata – so she was eventually convinced by her ex-husband to come and join him in Manchester. She was unsuccessful in her attempts to mend the relationship, but she remained anyway since she quickly found a very rewarding job taking care of an old Lithuanian man who had fled to England after the war.



Ruslanas Irzikevicius, editor-in-chief of the Lithuania Tribune.

"I read poems and sang for him in Lithuanian. His wife told me that nobody had improved his mood in such a profound way before".

AFTER DONATAS WAS BORN, Judita Stanikūnienė left the labor market for several years, then started working for a doctor as a receptionist and administrator. She then began studying to become a naturopathic nutrition therapist. Unlike her husband, she nurtured a dream to one day return to Lithuania.

"I always felt that one day I would return. But it's not so easy to take that step when you're rooted with children in school and have become part of a local community".

Every year they have returned to Lithuania and, in 2017, they bought a piece of land near Birštonas some 80 kilometers from Vilnius. The aim was not to move back and settle there, but the idea of returning had taken root. And the main reason was Brexit.

"After the referendum I started to get nasty looks, both at school and when I met patients", she says. "It made me feel unwelcome."

Vytas also got nasty looks and comments and it affected both of them. Vytas got upset:

"I've been paying taxes in the UK for 23 years; I've not been on benefits for a single day. I have obeyed all the laws and rules – and now they treat me like this."

There was never really a risk that they would not be allowed to stay, since they had lived in the country for more than five years. But when the UK eventually left the EU on the first of January this year, they started to see the everyday difficulties with Brexit.

Judita Stanikūnienė:

"It became difficult to send packages to Lithuania because of customs clearance; the car needed additional insurance if we drove in the EU countries and there were new rules for entering with our dog. This all added to our decision to leave."

Her employer begged her to stay. One of Vytas Stanikūnas' cli-

"FOR MANY YEARS, RETURNING TO LITHUANIA WAS NEVER REALLY ON THE AGENDA FOR ME."



Vytas Stanikūnas and Judita Stanikūnienė met in the UK.

ents threatened to hide his passport – but in April they put their house on the market and in July they landed in the Lithuanian capital. Judita Stanikūnienė was born and brought up in the old town of Vilnius, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a place that she loves. After lunch we walk over to the house where she was raised. In the backyard she recognizes a neighbor from her youth. They start talking and laughing and when I ask what the old woman thinks of Judita returning to the country – she raises her thumb and gives all of us a big smile.

"We were thinking of settling here in Vilnius", she says after we left the house and took some pictures in the street of her childhood, "but the countryside attracted us more. It is a different quality of life that we are looking for. We want to find a slower pace than in Manchester, being close to nature".

However, they are not naïve about moving back. Of course, they heard the voices over the years from those who think that the emigrants were traitors who fled Lithuania in hard times instead of staying and helping to build the newly independent country. These sentiments have not been very well grounded, particularly after the financial crisis of 2008–2009 when jobs in Lithuania became so scarce that emigration helped the country to avoid much higher levels of unemployment.

SO, WHAT ARE the sentiments towards returning emigrants today? On the government program for returnees, they recently carried out a survey asking around one thousand Lithuanians: "Considering all the pluses and minuses, how do you see the returning migrants on a scale where 1 is 'very negatively' and 10 is 'very positively'?" The average of all answers was 6.5.

"It means that many people still have rather negative feelings, which makes me a bit worried", says Jovita Sadaitė. "If we want more citizens to return, we have to give them a good welcome. This negative attitude is one of the reasons more people don't return".

One of the Lithuanians who has been working the hardest to change people's attitudes to emigrants – and to make returning to the country easier – is the conservative parliamentarian Dalia Asanavičiūtė. For several years she lived in London and was the head of the Lithuanian community in the UK. Last year she



Aušra Kukeikaitė, Executive Director, Global Lithuanian Leaders.

returned home for a reason she won't share with anyone else in the country – she was elected to parliament (the Seimas). It was the first time in the history of the country that someone from the diaspora was offered a place in the Seimas.

"I'm so glad that we now have a voice where the decisions are made", she says when I catch her for a short interview in Parliament between meetings.

What do you say to those who claim that you let the country down by leaving?

"I left for financial reasons. I was a single mother with two kids. I received no support in Lithuania while I was working, studying and being a mom at the same time. I left to make a living; I didn't let my country down."

DURING THE ELECTION campaign, she stressed how she and many other emigrants have supported Lithuania in many ways while living abroad.

"We have collected money for hospitals and for children in need. We have supported companies that provide cheap food to the elderly. During the pandemic we have sent home face masks and plastic shields. And many have sent money home to their relatives. We really think of those in need back home!"

Changing the attitudes towards returnees is one way of making more people return. Another way is to better prepare the ground for those who have decided to return. And much more can be done here, argues Dalia Asanavičiūtė.

"The main reason why people hesitate to return is their uncertainty about getting a job and therefore we must help them better to find one. We have to make it easier to recognize foreign qualifications such as graduate certificates, for example, in the field of electronics, IT and medicine. I have raised this with the Minister of Education, who is a member of my party."

She argues that many Lithuanian companies do not realize the potential among their countrymen who live abroad and are thinking about returning.

"I've heard so many stories about people in the diaspora showing interest in jobs here, but who are only told by the companies that they are welcome to contact them once they have

moved back. It's absurd! Of course, a decision to employ someone can be taken before a person returns."

Many also hesitate to return because of the language. They are afraid that their kids, who have only spoken Lithuanian at home, will not manage to return and be integrated into the Lithuanian school system. Thus, more must be done to prepare the kids for the return.

"There are at least 100,000 Lithuanian school age children in the diaspora, but fewer than 10,000 go to Saturday and Sunday schools. I have prepared a law to support more of these schools. Hopefully, it will be in place by 2023."

FURTHERMORE, Dalia Asanavičiūtė is one of many who supports the idea of introducing the right to have passports in two countries. Particularly after Brexit it has been a major issue for those entertaining the idea of returning home – their return would be less dramatic if they could have passports from both countries. Lithuania has had a referendum on the topic, but it was cancelled due to the low turnout. A new referendum has been set for 2024.

Dalia Asanavičiūtė would have returned anyway, she says, even if she had not been elected to parliament. Her children have finished school and her parents need her here. She has moved back to a large city – which is typical for the returnees, not only in Lithuania but all over Europe. Not many former inhabitants return to small towns and villages.

The government program coordinator Jovita Sadaite confirms this: the large cities in Lithuania are by far the most popular destinations. This means that many of those who left villages don't return to these villages once they decide to return. Jovita gives an example of her own small village close to the Polish border:

"I've heard from my relatives there that the young generation has left. And they're not coming back."

But as always, the picture is not black and white. As we heard, the couple Vytautas Stanikūnas and Judita Stanikūnienė chose to live in the countryside, not in Vilnius. And they are not alone. My friend and journalist colleague Ruslanas Iržikevičius, editor-in-chief of the *Lithuania Tribune*, tells me about his sister who has recently returned from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to their mother's village of Pušalotas – which, according to Wikipedia, has 692 inhabitants.

"And she's bringing her American husband! He has started to work online for his company in the US. So far they seem to be fine."

He tells of yet another relative who has moved back to the village and who has built a new house there.

"You know, these villages and small towns have received a lot of EU money over the years – roads, buildings and parks are in better shape than before. People who return are surprised at the changes."

Of course, there are very few jobs in these villages and towns, but a growing number of people work online or commute to the nearest city.

"I've met many people who have returned to Lithuania and who are fed up with the hectic urban life-style."

The reason why many people left Lithuania – and other countries in Eastern and Central Europe – in the first place was the higher wages in the West. Living abroad still means earning more than in Lithuania, but it is not 4–5 times more like it used to be, closer to 2–3 times more. For the highly skilled, the gap is narrower still – and on top of that the cost of living is generally lower in Eastern Europe. Wages in Vilnius have increased by 10% per year, on average, over the last decade (with interruptions during the pandemic, of course). The increase is not as high in small cities, but Lithuania – and other countries in Eastern Europe – is without doubt closing the gap with countries in Western Europe. This is yet another reason why the migration flows are changing.

Those returning to their home countries in Eastern and Central Europe come from all walks of life. However, surveys and research have shown that people with higher education have been slightly over-represented over the last couple of years. Many of these people also received their education abroad. Ruslanas Iržikevičius welcomes this development. He remembers the major impact his education in Scotland had on him in the late 1990s.

"The eight years I spent in the UK were formative years; they changed me forever. I was brought up in the Soviet system. The years abroad forced me to change, and I am forever grateful for it."

He underlines that the values and norms in Lithuania have changed a lot since the 1990s, but more needs to happen.

"We can still see a lack of tolerance, a lack of openness. I hope more people move abroad; it's good for our country! Go and explore the world; we need that world here once you return!"

I MYSELF LIVED FIVE YEARS in Vilnius (2011–2016) and during this time I often heard such messages from liberal thinkers who had spent time abroad. The late Leonidas Donskis, a well-known philosopher and member of the European Parliament, once told me something important that has stayed in my mind:

"I'm sick of this talk of emigration within the European Union. We should not talk about emigration; we should talk about circulation. People circulate between the countries of the union, learning new things, gaining new experience. This movement of people is positive and should be encouraged."

Back in 2011 I visited a young Lithuanian woman living in Stockholm and I remember how strongly she reacted when I quoted the criticism directed towards her and others emigrating: "Why are they so critical? I'm just doing what everybody was longing to do during the Soviet occupation – to be able to move freely. I'm using my freedom to live where I want to live". When I look her up in the online telephone book, I see that she still lives in Sweden, now in a house instead of an apartment.

She is an example of the problem with philosopher Donskis' ideas of a continuous circulation of people within the EU – some

countries have not seen so many circulating back. Even if there are signs in that direction now, as we have seen, the decade behind us has been worrisome for many countries. In the case of Lithuania, between 2009 and 2019, almost 500,000 people emigrated – while 225,000 immigrated (of which 160,000 were Lithuanian citizens).

These figures have caused tremendous problems for the country. Companies lack manpower in many areas, particularly engineers and other professions in the construction industry, not to mention health care: the lack of doctors and nurses and other health professionals is immense. In the latest wave of returnees, some doctors have also returned – but not that many. And why is that?

I sent that question to Tadas Kananavicius, a doctor managing a network of Lithuanian doctors in the UK. He replied:

"I know some doctors who moved back. However, contrary to the common impression, there are not that many of them. Medical governance hasn't changed much since Soviet times, which stops many willing doctors from returning. Of course, there are examples when outstanding individuals are moving back and trying to lead the change."

OF COURSE, THIS IS a crucial question for all people who are contemplating moving back home, particularly those with a higher education: how much has my country changed? How open is it to new ideas? On the non-governmental platform *Global Lithuanian Leaders*, connecting talented individuals all over the world, Executive Director Aušra Kukelkaitė is often confronted with such questions. How does she answer?

"It's much better than before, but not good. Human rights are still lacking in many aspects, for example, how we treat people with mental illness or with other kinds of disabilities. And we still have the issue of LBTG rights. Yes, it's become better, but it's depressing to read how the Kaunas authorities are trying to stop the Gay Pride march this coming Saturday."

She shows me the article in which the authorities state that it would be inconvenient to march along the main pedestrian street due to construction work – but basketball fans were allowed to march along the same route recently!

"Surveys show that people still emigrate from Lithuania partly because of its lack of respect for human rights. These attitudes that still remain in our society are also an obstacle when we want to attract more investment from our diaspora."

Furthermore, she hears from people who have left Lithuania or who are thinking about leaving that the work ethic in some Lithuanian companies has to improve.

"People say that they are not treated with respect by their employers, that the hierarchy is still very present. The idea of flat organizations has not spread as much as one would like."

At the same time, she is eager to emphasize how much the country has changed.

"I meet many of those who have returned, and they are often surprised by what they see. They tell me that Lithuania has changed much more than they would have thought; they had a much bleaker picture of the society they had left. They didn't

know what a fertile ground we have for start-ups and other innovative companies."

THE OVERRIDING CHALLENGE for all companies that want to grow, in Lithuania as well as in most other countries in the EU, is the lack of manpower in certain sectors. And here comes yet another challenge for Lithuania, argues Aušra Kukelkaitė:

"If you want to thrive as a country, you have to be more open to foreigners. It's getting better, but many people are still holding onto the idea that the Lithuanian nation would be threatened by too many immigrants. Our history of being close to extinction cannot stop us from developing as a modern nation."

And she adds an important point:

"If we want more Lithuanians to return to our country, we cannot at the same time be skeptical about other immigrants. These two issues are closely connected, not least because many of the returning Lithuanians have foreign spouses."

Ognyan Georgiev, who conducted the study of returning Bulgarians, agrees with her. And he uses a term which has become popular around the world: "the battle for talent".

"It is a new battlefield; you compete with other cities all over Europe to attract the people you need. Of course, the cities of Eastern and Central Europe are part of this battle, even if they don't always realize it."

And poorer regions with smaller towns? Are they totally outside of this battle for talent?

"The big divide in living conditions in Europe today is not primarily between nations: it's between regions. Scarcely populated rural regions in virtually all countries are facing major challenges."

Liam Patuzzi at the Migration Policy Institute is also rather pessimistic. When Eastern and Central European countries now see more returning citizens, it's the cities and rural areas close to the cities that are the winners.

"Depopulated regions are stuck in a vicious circle: people move because of lack of work and services, which leads to more services disappearing when tax revenues decline which, in turn, leads to more people leaving. It's understandable that people returning to their home countries don't choose to live in such regions."

But during the pandemic we have learned to work online. Could this development offer hope to regions that have seen fewer returning citizens? Is it worthwhile for them to tailor campaigns for the diaspora with the message that they can work close to the beautiful countryside?

"It's a possibility; locally tailored strategies could have some effect. But they can't stop the general trend in Europe of the growing differences in living standards between regions." ■

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