



Policy vacuum in the face of a new wave of emigration from Croatia

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PAUL STUBBS & SINIŠA ZRINŠČAK – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

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Since joining the European Union, Croatia has experienced significant levels of emigration, particularly of people of prime working age, with official statistics significantly underestimating the extent of emigration. Combined with falling birth rates, emigration contributes to overall population decline, shortages of key skills, and an ageing population. Although demographic trends have been a cause of political concern, there have been few policy initiatives. The Government of Croatia could do more to promote circular migration, investing in those professions and geographical areas where propensity to migrate is highest.

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Description

Although statistical evidence is limited, there are suggestions that Croatia has faced a new wave of emigration since joining the European Union on 1 July 2013. Throughout the 1990s and most of the first decade of the 2000s, Croatia was a country of net immigration, mainly of citizens from other parts of the former Yugoslavia. According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS), net migration (the amount by which emigration exceeded immigration) rose from 1,472 in 2009 to 17,945 in 2015 when a total of 29,651 persons emigrated (CBS, 2016). The latest figures (CBS, 2017) suggest that 36,436 people emigrated in 2016, with net migration at 22,451. Most experts and politicians agree that the true figure is probably much higher although different figures are frequently cited in the public domain which are not sourced adequately. Higher figures are usually based on figures from the statistical offices of key emigration countries. For example, between 2014 and 2015, Germany alone had an increase of 34,548 registered foreigners with Croatian citizenship (DStatis, 2016), a figure higher than the Croatian statistics for emigration as a whole (the CBS suggested that some 12,325 Croatian citizens emigrated to Germany). According to Irish statistics, the number of Irish residents born in Croatia increased from 980 in 2011 to 5,202 in 2016 (CSO, 2017), whereas CBS figures show emigration to Ireland in 2015 at

zero. Although figures from foreign statistical offices may slightly overstate the figures (including Croatian passport holders who were not living in Croatia, for example), it is clear that true levels of emigration from Croatia are higher than official statistics suggest, perhaps double or even triple. Without a population census, tighter enforcement of a 2012 Law which requires anyone leaving Croatia for a year or more to cancel their residence permit, or representative survey data, any figures used are no more than an informed guess.

What is clear, however, is that the majority of emigrants are of prime working age. Assuming that the age structure of all those who emigrated is roughly the same as recorded CBS figures suggest, almost 50% of those emigrating were between 20 and 44 years old in 2015. Moreover, a recent study (Župarić-Iljić, 2016) suggests that some 50% of emigrants had completed secondary education and around 8% higher education. There are also concerns that there has been significant emigration of healthcare professionals, with estimates that 525 medical doctors left Croatia between 2013 and 2016, equivalent to the total number of doctors working in Osijek or Rijeka hospitals, two of the biggest in Croatia (Croatian Association of Hospital Physicians, 2017).

Outlook & commentary

At least at the rhetorical level, there is widespread political concern about the high levels of migration out of Croatia which, alongside declining birth rates, contributes to a significant population decline in Croatia and to a rapidly ageing population. The Government's programme for 2016-2020, which includes "demographic renewal" as a priority, has a vague commitment to encouraging young people to stay and those who left to return, as well as including the Croatian diaspora in development policies (Government of Croatia, 2016). There appears to be no new migration strategy following the 2013-2015 period, which in any case focused more on immigration and asylum issues, and on technical, regulatory and security concerns rather more than on the issue of emigration (Government of Croatia, Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2013). Although the levels of post-EU membership emigration are relatively low compared to countries such as Latvia, Poland and Romania, the social impacts of emigration need to be addressed, not least in terms of the danger of

skills shortages and a further widening of regional disparities. The danger of long-term negative repercussions on the labour market, pension, healthcare and education systems of these trends far outweigh the short-term gains in terms of relieving pressure on employment and reducing unemployment.

Recommendations from a European Commission-funded study in 2012 (Meznarić and Stubbs, 2012) remain relevant, including: more timely and accurate data and research; promoting circular migration; promoting a regional approach to migration from neighbouring countries; and investment in migration-loss regions, in young people and in women. Ultimately, the trend can be halted only by a change in structural preconditions rather than protectionist policies, although investment in improved conditions of employment for professions at risk of emigration, including healthcare, R&D and IT sectors would make a difference (Župarić-Iljić, 2016; 26). Promotion of immigration also needs to be on the Croatian political agenda (Božić, 2014).

Further reading

Božić, S. (2014), "Hrvatska migracijska politika: od skice prema strategiji", in V. Puljiz, J. Tica and D. Vidović (eds.), *Migracije i razvoj Hrvatske: podloga za hrvatsku migracijsku strategiju*. Zagreb: Chamber of Commerce; 285 – 300.

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Župarić-Iljić, D. (2016), "Emigration from the Republic of Croatia after the Accession to the European Union". Zagreb: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Web: http://www.fes-croatia.org/fileadmin/user_upload/FES_lseljavanje_web.pdf

Authors

[Paul Stubbs](#) (The Institute of Economics, Zagreb) and [Siniša Zrinščak](#) (University of Zagreb)