



POLICY BRIEF

Highly-Skilled Return Migrants to the Western Balkans: Should we count (on) them?

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Awareness of the development potential of return migration is increasing across Western Balkan states. Nevertheless, a lot remains to be done in supporting return migrants.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The diaspora sends a considerable amount of remittances to the Western Balkan¹ (WB) countries. The total figure of approximately seven billion EUR a year (Petreski et al, 2017) over the past 15 years has had a largely positive effect on development in the countries of origin. However, understanding of this phenomenon and policies to utilise the development potential of the diaspora are limited to remittance transfers, while investments, transfer of knowledge, tourism and other potential benefits are being largely ignored. In particular, there is a need for a better understanding of the potential of return migration, with return migrants bringing back specific skills and repatriated savings, often used to start a new business upon return². A first step towards designing appropriate policies to attract highly-skilled emigrants to return would be the collection of data about their potential and the obstacles they face.

This Policy Brief examines the return migration of highly skilled people, as well as the inadequacy of policies for mobilisation of their potential for development of their countries of origin. The gaps in institutional support to this group and administrative obstacles are discussed, as well as the important issue of data availability.

¹ A term "Western Balkans" used in this brief encompasses the countries that are members of the WB-MIGNET (Western Balkans Migration Network), namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

² This should not necessarily be considered a positive sign. Some evidence suggests that one of the reasons for the higher propensity towards self-employment among return migrants is the obstacles to paid employment in the labour market.

The profile of the people returning has changed, but proper data on the phenomenon remains scarce and there is still a lack of targeted policy responses.

CURRENT CONTEXT

The countries of the Western Balkans covered in this brief have experienced significant emigration since the 1960s, mainly to Germany, Austria and France, as well as USA. In the 1990s, a decade of transition, wars and collapse of economies, the emigration of highly-educated people further increased. The inflows of refugees from the WB to the EU throughout the 1990s were unprecedented.

According to the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MHRH), the total number of people originating from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) living abroad (including second and third-generation descendants of Bosnian emigrants) is approximately two million people, the equivalent of more than half of the national population currently living in BiH. This puts BiH among the top countries in the world concerning the share of nationals living abroad³.

During the 2000s, migration was mainly for the purposes of labour. By 2010, the Schengen short-stay visa requirement had been lifted for citizens of all WB countries except Kosovo⁴. Between 2010 and 2014, the number of WB nationals seeking asylum across EU Member States (predominately Germany) was relatively high compared to the previous period, but still representing a small share of the overall population in the source countries or the number of asylum seekers from other countries⁵. Most highly-skilled individuals from WB countries seem to have opted for emigration⁶.

Mass emigration has contributed to brain drain, demographic decline and economic stagnation, especially in less developed areas of each WB country, resulting in population ageing, an increase in the number of elderly households, inadequately treated agricultural land and other challenges. For these reasons, the migration and development nexus has become an increasingly important issue for WB countries in recent times. The interaction of emigrants with their countries of origin is the main channel by which emigration can benefit national development. This can be achieved through the transfer of money, knowledge, new ideas and entrepreneurial attitudes between destination and origin countries. In this way, migrants are expected to play a largely positive role in development and to contribute to the modernisation of their countries of origin.

³ The World Bank's estimate of the BiH diaspora is a bit smaller and it calculated the BiH diaspora as a percentage of 44.5% of the BiH resident population - which positions Bosnia and Herzegovina at the 16th place in the world ('Migration and Remittances' Factbook 2016).

⁴ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

⁵ In 2015, Albania was among the top five origin countries of asylum applicants in the EU. The number of Albanian asylum seekers in the EU-28 increased from 16,950 in 2014 to 24,600 in 2017 and peaked at 67,950 in 2015 (European Commission, 'Asylum Statistics', available online). The latest report from the Asylum in Europe Database estimates a total number of asylum seekers from Bosnia and Herzegovina to be 1,438 in 2017. According to UNHCR reports, there were close to 30,000 asylum seekers from Serbia and Kosovo, close to 4,000 from North Macedonia, and 7,500 from Montenegro. Demographic data about asylum seekers from the WB are scarce. Data published by the Pew Research Center shows the demographic characteristics of Albanian asylum seekers who applied in EU countries in 2015. Almost half (46%) belong to the age group 18-34 years old and about 34% were children under the age of 18. Males dominate (61%) and they are mostly young (almost half of them belong to the age group 18-34 years old). This is in full compliance with the Albanian migration model that is male dominated.

⁶ Uvalic (2005) found that 75% of PhD holders and 81% of master's degree holders left BiH during the war. Dimova and Wolff (2009) reported that 28.6% of emigrants from BiH had tertiary education, while the World Bank Factbook indicates, for example, that 12.7% of emigrants were physicians. Tertiary-educated as a percentage of total emigrants from BiH in OECD countries in 2011 was 14.0%. Tertiary-educated women as a percentage of total women emigrants in OECD countries in 2011 was 14.8% and the number of refugees in 2014 was 21,877. The top destination countries for migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina are Croatia, Serbia, Germany, Austria, the United States, Slovenia and Sweden. The number of North Macedonian migrants abroad was about 534,720 in 2017. About 18% of these live in Germany, followed by the United States (14.3%), Turkey (13.3%), and Italy (11%).

The return of refugees to their pre-conflict residences after 1995 (e.g. Croatian Serbs to Croatia, refugees and internally displaced people in BiH, Kosovars to Kosovo) has been a predominant topic of research related to return migration in the WB region. As the magnitude of this phenomenon decreased over time and new migration trends emerged, the policy challenges more recently have related more to the return of labour migrants from developed countries, mainly from Western Europe and North America. According to the scarce data available, these return migrants are more educated than the average population in their country of origin. In addition to their savings, they also bring specific skills and knowledge acquired abroad, which makes them an important national resource.

Return migration to the WB countries has been a dynamic process, which peaked soon after the end of the armed conflicts (the largest-scale returns were forced return of refugees from the Western Europe to BiH in 1996 and to Kosovo in 2000), as well as in 2009-2013 due to the global economic crisis and increased unemployment in destination countries. According to the joint INSTAT-IOM survey, during this period, around 134,000 migrants returned to Albania⁷. Most recently, in 2016-2018, return migration was related mainly to the voluntary return of asylum seekers from Germany, Austria and some other EU countries. According to data from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), during 2013-2017, around 147,000 Albanian citizens sought asylum in EU countries (primarily in Germany and France) with most of them returning soon after, because their applications were refused.

According to the Montenegrin Census of 2003, 16,976 people returned to Montenegro in the period 1996-2003 and 20.7% (3,516) of them were children below the age of 15, while an additional 7.5% (1,284) were between 15 and 19 years old. 78% of the children under 15 returned to Montenegro from other ex-Yugoslav countries (including Serbia) with only a small share (16.5%) returning from elsewhere. In the age group 15-19, the share of emigrants returning from ex-Yugoslav countries was even higher (90%) while only 6.3% returned from other destination countries.

North Macedonia figures ninth overall and fourth in the Western Balkans in terms of the number of their nationals returned from the EU Member States in 2015-2016, mainly as voluntary return. Between 2006 and 2009, only 84 people returned from EU countries to North Macedonia through IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) Programmes. However, a significant increase of returnees using these programmes has been noted since. In 2016, IOM reported 5,000 Assisted Voluntary Returns to North Macedonia (Zulfu Alili, 2018). The recognition rates of asylum applications on behalf of North Macedonian citizens in Western Europe have been the lowest for all Western Balkan countries, with only 0.8% of asylum seekers granted refugee status, subsidiary protection, or humanitarian protection in 2016⁸. Additionally, the number of return decisions⁹ for North Macedonian citizens increased from 5,700 in 2015 to 6,085 in 2016¹⁰. North Macedonia's return rate (number of returnees compared to the number of emigrants) in 2016 was 127%. The European Commission (2017) in its First Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism for continued implementation of the Readmission Agreement between North Macedonia and the EU, called for "[s]trengthen[ing] border controls in a manner that fully respects' travellers' fundamental rights", and measures designed to increase the socio-economic integration of vulnerable populations residing in the country.

⁷ INSTAT and IOM, Return Migration and Reintegration in Albania. Tirana: INSTAT/IOM, 2014.

⁸ European Commission, 2017; European Asylum Support Office, 2015.

⁹ Although, it should be noted that the issuing of a return decision does not necessarily mean that the person actually returned.

¹⁰ European Commission 2017: 3



Current policy documents do not sufficiently address highly skilled returnees and their specific needs.

Analysing the **educational level of return migrants**, the data indicate that the share of very highly educated (above university level) individuals among North Macedonian migrants is much higher than the corresponding share of individuals among non-migrants¹¹ and highly-educated emigrants are more likely to return than low-educated emigrants¹². A significant number of return migrants obtained additional qualifications while abroad; 55% obtained a job-related qualification, 4% a secondary education level and 30% attained a university degree. Nevertheless, Janeska et al. (2016) argue that the share of highly educated returnees in North Macedonia is small and occasional, involving frequent re-emigration. Hence, the transfer of know-how and technology remains rather limited. The statistical evidence on return migration in the country is scarce, particularly concerning voluntary returns. When and under which conditions do migrants decide to return, and what measures can countries put in place for social and professional reintegration?

POLICY OPTIONS

Theories on return migration emphasise that the development impact of return migrants will depend to a large extent on whether the policies in the country of origin provide for a favourable return environment. Despite the significant brain drain experienced by the WB countries and the importance of increasing the return of highly skilled emigrants, there are no targeted reintegration policies in place yet. The various ad-hoc initiatives¹³ implemented to date were part of projects funded and implemented by international donors and organisations, with state institutions usually playing only a minor role.

The **national policies of WB states** dealing with this issue still tend to focus mainly on the readmission and reintegration of asylum seekers whose application was refused and emigrants who had irregular status in the destination country, whereas highly skilled emigrants are only addressed indirectly, through a number of recent strategic documents.

The 'Strategy on the Reintegration of Returned Albanian citizens, 2010-2015'¹⁴ and its Action Plan, adopted in 2010, represent the legal basis for policies aiming at the reintegration of forced or voluntary returnees. Both documents were adopted as part of the visa liberalisation process with the EU. The strategy points out the need for collaboration of the public structures and civil society for full (cultural, economic and social) integration of return migrants. It also envisaged the provision of specific services for certain vulnerable groups, including people of Roma ethnicity. Although the reference period of the Reintegration Strategy has ended, its spirit is still reflected in various laws and guidelines. The new Migration Strategy, currently under preparation, will most probably also include the issues of return and reintegration.

In BiH, the implementation of the "Strategy for the Reception and Integration of the BiH Nationals who Returned under Readmission Agreements" remains only partial. Moreover, it did not translate into the design of complementary policies addressing the various challenges outlined by the Strategy (e.g. on reducing reintegration obstacles; ensuring the provision of accommodation and the issuance of documents; improving access to the labour market and to education). The most vulnerable returnees identified in the Strategy include Roma people, people with disabilities, infectious, contagious and chronic diseases or psychological issues, as well as children in general, and children without parental care.

¹¹ GDN, 2010, p.11

¹² GDN, 2009

¹³ These initiatives include the "Brain +" programme implemented by WUS, the "TOKTEN" program implemented by UNDP, and the "TRQ" program implemented by IOM.

¹⁴ Government of Albania, Strategy on the Reintegration of Returned Albanian citizens, 2010-2015. Tirana, July 2010.

While North Macedonia has equally issued strategic documents on return and reintegration, they are rarely implemented or remain uncoordinated (Bornarova and Janeska, 2012; Zeneli et al., 2013; Janeska et al., 2016). The three respective documents are the Reintegration Programme, the Law on Primary Education, and the National Action Plan (NAP) for Education (2016-2020) corresponding to the Strategy for Roma People in the Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020¹⁵. While return migrants constitute only a small part in the Law on Primary Education and the NAP for Education (see Section 2.2.4), the Reintegration Programme contains a range of measures related to personal identification documents, housing, healthcare and education.


The Government of North Macedonia has established programmes for recognition and promotion of talents such as scholarships for undergraduate, graduate and doctoral studies of North Macedonian citizens abroad, under the condition of scholarship grantees returning to the country after completion of their studies. However, these return migrants in North Macedonia need proper integration into the public administration institutions in order to maximise their contribution to the country (Janeska et al., 2016). There is also a Strategy for Reintegration of Persons Returned on the basis of the Readmission Agreement for the period of 2016-2020, with the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy. The main goal of this Strategy is to create the preconditions for adequate access to the process of return and reintegration at all levels through further strengthening of the institutional framework, efficient process of assistance, education and a system for monitoring the Strategy and realisation of the Action Plan for its implementation, which is still ongoing.

In short, the analysis of all the available strategic documents in WB reveal that they neither identify highly-skilled return migrants as a group of particular interest, nor are they properly designed and implemented. Moreover, these documents are not well translated into appropriate policies targeting highly-skilled return migrants and addressing their specific needs.

Despite the general awareness of the development potential of highly skilled return migrants, the available evidence identifies considerable **obstacles to return** of highly skilled people and very low absorptive capacity of the WB economies for such a knowledge transfer. For example, Barnes and Oruc (2012) reported that of those return migrants surveyed in BiH (by 2011), only one third found a job upon their return. In addition, for those who re-emigrated the main reason was the lack of employment opportunities in BiH. Cosic and Ovcina (2014) found that return migrants (and those interested in return) usually face additional obstacles in accessing employment in the public service.

The obstacles can be divided into three main groups. First are the obstacles before return, related to the **lack of information** about administrative procedures to be completed in order to obtain personal documents, transfer social benefits and/or pension entitlements, and about job opportunities. Members of the diaspora are faced with difficulties in accessing information about positions available, as well as in fulfilling administrative eligibility criteria (Cosic and Ovcina 2014). The collection of the various documents needed for a job application, obtaining stamps on their copies by a local administration and their submission, are tasks often impossible to complete in time and an obstacle that prevents many interested emigrants from returning to BiH. Still, some emigrants decided to return even without clear job prospects, but experienced a long period of unemployment, which is surprising given

¹⁵ Vlada na Republika [Severna] Makedonija 2010; Služben vesnik na Republika [Severna] Makedonija 2008b; Ministerstvo za trud i socijalna politika 2016b; see also Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 2014.



their specific skills and postgraduate degrees from prestigious universities. Upon return, they were confronted with numerous obstacles to labour market integration, including mobbing, underemployment, and unfavourable employment contract arrangements. The lack of social networks also plays an important role.

The second set of obstacles is related to the **lack of targeted services for return migrants**. This population is in need of various social services, yet return migrants face obstacles in accessing them. Particularly people whose asylum application has been refused, and who have often sold all their properties in order to finance their emigration, need immediate housing support upon their return. Most return migrants do not receive public support for their reintegration into the labour market or for starting a business. There are neither active labour market programmes targeting return migrants, nor support or subsidies for entrepreneurship.

Moreover, further education and proper instruction on current laws on social security should be provided to employees of public employment services. No employment programmes targeting return migrants have been implemented to date. Access to health care for returned migrants is hampered by administrative barriers, lack of funds, the inaccessibility of registration at employment services and the lack of information on the possibility of obtaining health insurance. As health insurance status is usually obtained under the condition of employment or education, return migrants usually remain without health insurance. Finally, return migrants also face obstacles for reintegration to the education system in BiH. Education completed abroad is usually not recognised, which is why children regularly have to repeat a school year, albeit successfully passing it while abroad.

The third set of obstacles arises from the **lack of data and information about returnees**. Governments are neither investing enough to track this group while they are abroad, nor upon their return back home (Zulfiu Alili, 2018). There are no exact figures available on the overall number of returnees to the WB, nor on highly skilled return migrants in particular. Different factors affect the quality of the available data, particularly when it comes to administrative sources, above all the fact that migrants are neither legally obliged to register their departure nor their return. Usually, neither deportees under Readmission Agreements nor those under assisted voluntary return (AVR) programmes are registered properly by the country of origin.

The significant number of people with refugee status who retained the citizenship of their country of origin and of people with dual citizenships adds to the problem of properly identifying returnees. Border services also do not know whether people entering the country are returnees. Finally, there are no regular surveys that would provide disaggregated data about the skills and other important socio-demographic characteristics of returnees. In Albania, INSTAT provided social-demographic data (age group, gender, education, marital status, employment both in the host country and after return, etc.) for returnees during 2009-2013, but not since then¹⁶.

Several promising initiatives, such as the Brain Gain Programme in Albania and Kosovo, tried to mobilise the development potential of returnees. In Croatia, the Unity through Knowledge Fund (UKF), founded in 2007, seeks to connect scientists and professionals in Croatia with those located abroad in order to enhance international cooperation and the competitiveness of domestic knowledge production. The UKF has specifically targeted the Croatian diaspora.

¹⁶ INSTAT, IOM, Return Migration and Reintegration in Albania. Tirana: INSTAT/IOM, 2014.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings encompassing both countries of origin and destination enable us to better understand the potential of return migration flows and generate findings that are relevant for broader policy-making. This policy-oriented research should be the starting point in mainstreaming return migration into national development plans and other relevant strategic frameworks at national and regional level. Return migration strategies should signal a shift from reactive to more proactive and comprehensive return migration policies in the respective countries. Diaspora and returning emigrants can contribute to national development but governments need to devote more attention to establishing a more enabling environment to empower them to become agents of development. Support to national governments in WB in related policy-making can be provided by international organisations such as the ICMPD.

Lack of information by returnees could be addressed by providing information leaflets at the main entry points (such as airports and main border crossings), which would contain detailed instructions to returned migrants how to obtain their rights upon return, where to find information about job opportunities, how to certify their degrees, what procedures they need to go through if they want to start a business, and similar.

Lack of targeted services should be also addressed. This should include social services, housing, education, healthcare and other services that return migrants need. In particular, **educational** institutions in the Western Balkans should improve their procedures concerning the documentation requested for enrolling returning children upon their return to the country of origin. A more flexible approach, which accepts partial completion of the school year whilst abroad, is recommended. If they are unable to provide documentation of schooling in the country of destination, Ministries of Education should consider testing the children on the curriculum for each grade and establishing procedures to reintegrate them into the appropriate level.

Similar recommendations apply to access to **health care**. The competent state authorities should enhance awareness of return migrants about their rights and the necessary procedures to access the healthcare system. They also need to improve cooperation between the different relevant institutions and administrative bodies. The possibility to establish free clinics at the main destinations of return could also be further explored, not only to better understand health care needs of return migrants, but also to address the difficulties in re-establishing healthcare benefits. Most importantly, such free clinics would help to alleviate general health concerns and provide routine healthcare for returnees.

Returnees, who are in need of various **social services**, face different obstacles in accessing them. In order to adapt the services to their actual needs, a needs assessment of returnees should be carried out, while also raising awareness of return migrants about their rights and the administrative procedures necessary to secure them.

For the **lack of data** and demographic and socio-economic information about return migrants, the collection, quality and management of statistical data about the **needs of highly skilled return migrants** should be improved. Any policy design should be based on high quality data, including comprehensive and comparable statistics on labour migration and mobility. For the regular

Key recommendations relate to the need for improved data, the removing of obstacles to return and improving public services and access to them upon return.

collection and analysis of data on the various aspects of migration, the establishment of a regional “Migration Observatory”, such as the one launched under the Prague Process, is most useful. It should include the monitoring of key migration trends, including an “early warning system” for policy makers, signalling the need for an appropriate policy response in a timely manner. Given its expertise in such activities and knowledge about the region, the ICMPD is well placed to coordinate the implementation of this activity.

In addition, in order to improve policy design for highly skilled return migrants, it is important to conduct a survey on their needs and the challenges they face. A regional survey could be carried out by the ICMPD in cooperation with the Western Balkans Migration Network (WB-MIGNET).

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

For further information please see www.wb-mignet.org

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