

The impact and importance of return migration in East Central Europe

Gábor LADOS^{1,*}

¹ Faculty of Science and Informatics, Department of Economic and Social Geography, University of Szeged, 6722 Szeged, Egyetem street 2., Szeged, Hungary

* Corresponding author, ladosg@geo.u-szeged.hu

Received on <06-05-2013>, reviewed on <02-06-2013>, accepted on <23-11-2013>

Abstract

Return migration might be a key factor for development in sending regions, especially in East Central Europe. In 2004, the enlargement of the European Union affected a mass labour migration from post-socialist countries towards Western European regions. Among rules of the Union this East-West migration has become more than brain-drain, beside high-skilled migrants, lower skilled ones also leave their country of origin. This paper focused on common characteristics of migrants from East Central European countries. During research I have used results of an online survey among migrants and made interviews with returned Hungarian migrants. Though sending countries make efforts towards re-attracting migrants, without stable macro-factors their return might be uncertain. According to my results, though each country has its own profile, in some cases, especially Hungarian and Polish migrants have common characteristics in terms of motivation of emigration and type of work abroad.

Keywords: *returning migrant, elite migrant, lower skilled migrant, Hungary, motivation, online survey*

Rezumat. Impactul și importanța reîntoarcerii emigranților în Europa Central-Estică

Întoarcerea emigranților ar putea fi un factor-cheie pentru dezvoltare regiunilor, mai ales în Europa Central-estică. În 2004, extinderea Uniunii Europene a determinat o migrație a forței de muncă în masă din țările post-socialiste către regiunile din Europa de Vest. Printre regulile Uniunii această migrație Est-Vest a devenit mai mult decât "un exod al intelectualilor", alături de emigranții cu înaltă calificare, au plecat de asemenea din țara lor de origine și cei mai puțin calificați. Această lucrare s-a concentrat pe caracteristicile comune ale emigranților din țările central-estice europene. În timpul cercetării, am folosit rezultatele unui sondaj on-line în rândul emigranților și am realizat interviuri cu emigranții maghiari reîntorși în țară. Deși țările de origine fac eforturi pentru reatragera emigranților, fără macro-factori stabili, întoarcerea lor ar putea fi incertă. În funcție de rezultatele obținute, deși fiecare țară are propriul profil, în unele cazuri, în special emigranții din Ungaria și Polonia au caracteristici comune în motivarea emigrării și în ceea ce privește tipul de muncă în străinătate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *emigrant reîntors, emigrant elită, emigrant inferior calificat, Ungaria, motivație, sondaj on-line*

Introduction

Migration from East Central Europe within the last decade

Labour migration has significant impact on both sending and host countries in Europe. In terms of the sending countries, the returning migrants might be expected to return with saved financial and social capital, and acquired skills that might be benefitting at the home country (Nyberg-Sorensen et. al., 2003, Klagge et. al., 2007). In terms of the host countries, several researchers claimed that immigration from the post-socialist countries has crucial economic effects in the host country (Blanchflower & Lawton, 2008, Lemos & Portes, 2008). In 2004, joining the European Union brought new chances for post-socialist countries. Labour markets of EU15 had periodically started to open up for migrants from new member states which have intensified the East-West migration within Europe. After the experiences from UK and Ireland, the process has continued, then finally, Austria and Germany has also authorized the free employment status for EU8 (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia) (Nagy, 2010, Benton & Petrovic, 2013). Expansion of migration flows have

permanently increased. As a consequence, the characteristics of emigration from the new member states have changed. Before the enlargement of the European Union, migrants from post-socialist countries had targeted different destination countries, for instance Polish and Hungarians preferred to immigrate to Germany and the USA. After 2004 the situation has changed, other European countries started to become more important, especially United Kingdom receives the largest group of migrants from the post-socialist countries (Benton & Petrovic, 2013, Barcevicus et. al., 2012).

Not only brain-drain is standing beyond this process. In the 1990s rather highly skilled labour migrants were involved in the process (Csanády et. al., 2008). Among the rules of the European Union the free movement is allowed for member states, so because of big differences in wages and living conditions, mass of migrants left their country of origin. It might cause both positive and negative effects on sending and receiving countries, too. Within the geographical context, the problem might be the location of sending regions which is highly concentrated in the East Central European countries. Thirteen out of the top fifteen sending European NUTS 2 regions are located in post-socialist

countries (Lang et. al., 2013). In terms of the main characteristics of emigrants, the young and well educated population from the post-socialist countries has a relatively high share among out-migrants. Table 1 shows dataset of the Hungarian Health Insurance suggesting the number of

emigrants who have inactivated their insurance by leaving Hungary. Since the enlargement in 2004, millions of people have moved from East to West which was also supported by the economic and financial crisis started in 2008.

Table 1: Age structure of Hungarian emigrants 2004 - 2012 (OEP KÜLFI System, 2012)

Year	Male and female						Total
	age						
	- 19 year	20 - 24 year	25 - 29 year	30 - 34 year	34 - 40 year	40 - year	
2004	64	384	645	259	95	119	1, 566
2005	650	1, 645	1, 707	850	540	491	5, 883
2006	124	780	1, 224	613	203	289	3, 233
2007	170	1, 172	1, 865	967	385	453	5, 012
2008	241	1, 531	2, 392	1, 477	689	896	7, 226
2009	243	1, 401	2, 178	1, 511	707	1, 074	7, 114
2010	238	1, 675	2, 690	1, 664	917	1, 213	8, 397
2011	330	2, 180	3, 645	2, 669	1, 693	2, 679	13, 196
2012	139	1, 019	1, 983	1, 486	1, 054	1, 709	7, 390

Though it raised the number of emigrants, in parallel it intensively affected the number of returning migrants (Hárs, 2010). The data of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) showed increased migration flows back to the country of origin which also means they are all unemployed returning migrants (Smoliner et. al., 2013). Despite the survey and among the job seekers, they are not the total number of returning migrants. It is a relevant phenomenon, but the question is how sending countries or region might be benefiting from it. This paper focuses on common characteristics of East Central European returning migrants and provides a brief review about the Hungarian ones.

Return with improved skills

Return migration has been the subject of research since the 1960s, though different scientific approaches have been existed. In general, as the definition of an OECD study claims, "returning migrants are people returning to their country of citizenship after have been international migrants in another country abroad" (Dumont & Spielvogel, 2008). Several theories identify it at a micro and macro level, whether it seems as a negative or a positive phenomenon. Cassarino has summarized these theories in his study, and suggested that in spite of several, in sense of homogeneous approaches, return migration might be dealt with in several levels (Cassarino, 2004). First, the migrant is crucial, especially for the motivation of returning. Cerase divided the returning migrants into four groups, a person regarded as the member of a group explains the main characteristics of his or her

return (Cerase, 1974). The success of the return is also very important in order to utilize the newly acquired skills at home and to have effects in the neighbouring areas. A further key factor might be the newly built networks with foreign economic partners.

The returning migrants gain new skills while being in multi-cultural working conditions abroad. They usually have higher language skills than the ones remaining home because they practice foreign language out of their residence. Human and financial gained capital which is brought home might have both individual and developing effects, such as amounts of money invested in the local economy or in the latest technological know-how. As though, the returning migrants are also more flexible towards problems and have widened horizons by experiencing different circumstances in another country. The latter ones could be useful in the everyday life and jobs. When highlighting the impacts of returning migrants, several papers stated pros and cons of the returning. Unfortunately, there are not only positive sides of the returning. Thus people have lower skills when studying a language, or those who are working for firms employing migrants from the same country, do not acquire and improve their foreign language skills. They are motivated mainly by earning more money than the others. Furthermore, returning back to the home country and the lack of relations might be harmful in job seeking. Those who stayed in contact with previous employers have more chances to get a job after their return, though these migrants are usually highly skilled professionals, such as researchers, engineers or doctors. The survey presents that the

unemployment rates are high among the returning migrants, and the reasons for this fact are different. Today, because of the global crisis, job seekers have less chance than they used to have. Returning migrants might be used to higher salary and living conditions abroad so they have to wait for well-paid jobs. However, as the results will show, more than 80% of the migrants return to their home region. Living in a backward region means less opportunity for having a job so returning to this region might lead to the same situation. Last but not least, on the one hand, the success stories can generate more emigration, and on the other hand, "once living and working abroad might lead to another move in the future", one of my interviewees claimed.

Method

During this research I analyzed an online questionnaire survey and made interviews with returned Hungarian migrants. The survey was promoted among migrants from eight Central European countries via media, institutions and online groups of migrants. On the survey each person who has had at least 6 month period of working experience abroad was allowed to take part. Its promotion started at the beginning of 2012 and lasted eight months. During the research, a snow-ball technique was also used to promote the survey between social networks of the migrants. Moreover, I have made twenty-three interviews with returned Hungarian migrants who had worked two to seven years abroad. The period of time abroad might be a key factor when exploring the return migration (Dustmann & Kirchkamp, 2002). King states this is an optimum absence for the migrant who absorbs enough experience and when returning to the home country he can use the newly acquired skills (Cassarino, 2004). I have divided my interviewees into two groups: the so called elite migrants and lower skilled migrants. The first group is formed of highly skilled persons who were practicing their profession abroad, such as researchers, doctors or ICT workers. The latter one is formed of migrants who are lower educated, and even, people who are well educated, but had lower skilled jobs abroad.

East Central European experiences

According to the results from the online survey the Hungarians and Polish returning migrants are the most similar out of the nations from the region. Although in absolute numbers, the Polish and Romanians, even Bulgarians are more similar to each other in terms of mass migration. They might be motivated in different ways. During the research we have targeted potential and returned migrants. The first group is formed of people who left their country and now work abroad, so they were

regarded as potential returning migrants. 71% of the interviewees were potential migrants. The survey is not representative, because country specific datasets do not have enough range. However, the survey might provide a proper analysis to highlight the main characteristics of migrants from East Central Europe.

More than 40% of interviewees come from East Central European countries (N=823). As there was stated, our research proved that the main emigration motives were higher salary, career opportunities and better living conditions in the targeted countries. In terms of salary obtained abroad the study concludes that especially the Polish and the Hungarian migrants work abroad in lower skilled jobs although they have higher education level. Similar to the previous researches, there might be a problem after their return due to the lack of the latest technologies and methods, which would not gain advantage re-integrating them on the labour market at home (Kirdar, 2009, Groizard & Lull, 2007). Referring to the attitude of emigrants, it might be an East Central European characteristic that nearly the half of migrants from this region stay in contact with their home, not only communicating with their relatives or friends, even maintaining a household while being abroad. This phenomenon was discovered to be the strongest among the Hungarian migrants, but it is not public among the Polish migrants. Of course, dealing with profit oriented household keepers, some part of migrants keep in touch in this way with their house, but still the other part has a stable place to go after return. Post-socialist countries have another common factor, exactly the satisfaction after return. Comparing the target and sending them among the East Central European countries, the returning migrants from sending ones found themselves in worse condition in the home country than they used to be abroad. At the end of this list there could be found again the Hungarians and the Polish. It could be because of the different wage levels and the more prestigious consume they used to have in the host countries. Maybe, these results might also reflect the actual macro trends in some cases.

In terms of educational level, according to the survey the primary educated migrants are negligible in the phenomenon of return migration. High skilled migrants such as people with higher education or PhD are the most interested in current migration flows from the post-socialist countries. Additionally, more than half of people have been international migrant who improved the foreign language nearly perfect.

Focusing on return motivations, among East Central Europeans the family is the most important reason in taking the decision to return. The second most important motivation is different between

countries; however, in the case of Hungary and Poland it is less significant. Other well-fare services, such as educational offer, social services, social security or even the culture is more unimportant for migrants. According to Cassarino, the gained social networks are also important in the case of the return migration (Cassarino, 2004). During the online survey we discovered that Hungarians and Polish are less concerned in networking with foreigners than other East Central Europeans (for example Czechs and Slovenians are more interested in it). Building new relations with foreign persons would gain several advantages, for instance for entrepreneurs or in trading, and further, additional potential benefits could be used. In spite of the individual decision, there are some options which help to return.

Although, there are several existing European return initiatives, quite a few migrants knew about them. Sending countries have already taken efforts to re-attract their emigrants to return, there are different programmes at the national and regional level (Lados & Hegedűs, 2012). There are special target group initiatives, such as the Lendület (Momentum) Programme in Hungary to re-attract the researchers. Also initiatives with general target group could be also found, i.e. 'powroty.gov.pl' Programme, which is an online portal providing suggestions and tools to return to Poland. Saphier and Simonovits had concluded that most of the emigrants are willing to return to their home country, but due to the lack of help they do not undertake it (Saphier & Simonovits, 2004). So why are the mass of return migrants experienced? The answer could be, probably because the action radius of these projects might be another macro level situation which is not enough to return to the home country.

Empirical results from Hungary

For a better understanding the empirical research was used. In some cases it strengthened the previous statements, but it might bring different approaches too. During the research there was also used the snow-balls method to find returned Hungarian migrants to be interviewed. Although, most of them were willing to answer entirely the questions, sometimes the process of providing additional potential interviewee was problematic. The returning migrants seemed to be positive in terms of the whole phenomenon. Whereas, according to the empirical research, in the case of former plans, the interviews suggest that each returned migrant had calculated his or her return and they wanted to come back to their home country after a period of time being abroad. It might be concluded that Hungarians would not be permanent emigrants. After accomplishing their

expected goals, most of them would return. In motivating the emigration, the empirical research has highlighted the conclusions of the online survey. Both groups of returning migrants regard emigration as a temporary period of time. Elite and lower skilled migrants calculate that this experience would lead to benefits in their life. A possible aim for young migrants could be to have enough money to build or to buy a house when returning to the country of origin or "to save enough amount of money" in order to start their life, as one of my interviewees claimed.

In terms of ways to emigrate, the two groups have different manners. Elite migrants usually go abroad via their employer or via one of the relations their institute or employer has. Their foreign employer influences the migrant and vice versa. In spite of that, lower skilled migrants are more heterogeneous. They prefer to find individually jobs abroad or emigrate with oral assurance of work contract, but it is not in any case definite. Though, in many cases there are abuses of potential jobs, significant part of migrants choose this way. They usually have jobs abroad in catering, manufacturing and construction industry. The job profiles also determine the newly acquired skills and experiences that the returning migrants could bring back to the home country. As the literature claims, the return migration does not have positive impacts alone, it might also have negative side (Cassarino, 2004). Although they expect to improve their language skills, the latter mentioned professionals offer less useful work experience that could bring advantages when returning to the labour market of the home country. Furthermore, lower skilled migrants do not actually possess language skills. It could cause isolation from the host society, without basic communication they are not able to have strong friendships with foreigners. Nevertheless, it does not mean they are absolutely disinterested in it. Usually, they get in contact with foreigners, mainly in their workplace, but their improved social network is superficial, hence it would not be a benefit after their return.

As it was previously mentioned, migrants from post-socialist countries are especially interested in lower skilled jobs. Common interest could be developed easily, mainly because of the poorer language knowledge, so a shallow friendship might be improved in the spare time activities. These kinds of friendships may help to integrate in a new society abroad. Generally, these relationships do not last so long and are less important after the return. The fact shows that working abroad for a firm from the home country of emigrants motivates them less as working for a native firm from the host country. As one of my interviewees stated, "It is a comfortable way, there is less stress to learn the language, and

because most of the supervisors are Hungarians, too, while the salary is higher than at home". Regarding the short term plans it is worth working in such a place, as though, it is not necessary to have proper language skills. In East Central European context, the migrants from this part of Europe might be concerned by this fact. Nowadays, millions of Polish and Romanians (Barcevicus et. al., 2012) and thousands of other nationals from the region live abroad within the European Union. Most of these emigrants have lower skilled jobs in contrast with their education level or professionals would suggest (Martin & Radu, 2012). If these emigrants are regarded as potential returning migrants in the future, their newly acquired skills and foreign work experiences will not have the impact as they were expected. Their foreign relationships, however, might be more important not only for themselves, but even for their employer. Receiving profitable skills from abroad and benefit from them after returning show that there are differences in returning motivations among the two groups.

As the online survey of Re-Turn project has highlighted, one of the most impressive return motivations is the family within the returning migrants of the post-socialist countries. It might be due to the retired parents, to the takeover of the old family house or property, and even the nuclear family could also take this decision. Examples for the latter statement were found in both groups, when breadwinner decided to return because of his/her child. This exigency has bad feelings about the returning and the returning migrants are less satisfied with their actual position which might affect the returning emigration.

Taking the decision to return to the homeland it could be easier for the elite returning migrants. Such as in the process of applying for a job abroad, the elite returning migrants have contacts with their previous employer at home. Usually, there is a continuous communication between migrant and employer or its institution, so as these emigrants were looking forward for career advancement, they are offered for a new job at their previous workplace. On the other side, lower skilled returning migrants return with less important and profitable work experiences or skills which might not provide them advantage when re-entering the labour market. However, their financial capital could be used for several investments within their neighbourhood and set up a new business being entrepreneur, so in an indirect way they could also be successful.

Summarizing the comparison of the two groups of the returning migrants, it might be concluded that in spite of big differences of host and sending countries, emigration motives are taken to achieve a positive change. The foreign job determines the

utilization of work experience. The elite returning migrants could receive career advancement and return to their previous workplaces, but lower skilled migrants are less motivated to come back home.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is observed that the emigration from East Central European countries is a current, massive and permanent phenomenon which has risen in recent years. It might threaten the sending countries which experience the lack of labour force, especially in special sectors – such as nursing – as a result of mass emigration (Ognyanova et. al., 2012). The global crisis has increased the number of emigrants in recent years, but it also affected the increase of returning migrants. While native population of host countries does not apply for a lower skilled job before the crisis, as a result of the recession, foreign workers were refused. The return migration might have several advantages, but it could be experienced in different ways by the elite and lower skilled migrants.

As the online survey claimed, the family is the major return motivation for East Central Europeans, which was more significant for Polish and Hungarian returning migrants. Though the online questionnaire did not provide detailed information about the family motivation, the analysis of interviews claimed that family is usually experienced in parallel with other motivations, and do not appear as an exclusively one. However, the return could be also influenced by the family – i.e. for the sake of nursing old parents or re-uniting the alone family. In this case, the family is mainly regarded as negative, outer fact; hence the assessment of the return is less satisfying as in the case of other motivations. Nevertheless, interviewees also stated that, in a positive way, family might also appear as an improving factor – i.e. the return is made in order to raise children at home and to provide them native culture.

Furthermore, beside the return motivations, the overall effects of improved characters should be also considered. As a consequence of return, acquired human capital could be also profitable. On the one hand, elite migrants usually improve their skills; learn how to use the latest techniques and equipment and how to train the colleagues. Hence, the newly acquired management skills could provide them assurance to re-integrate on the labour market of the home country. On the other hand, lower skilled returning migrants have less chance to get job advancement after their return, because in this case the foreign work experience, which quite often does not fit the qualification, is less adaptable (Barcevicus et. al., 2012). Even though, there are several initiatives supporting the returning migrants

during their return, the uncertainty of the home country and fear of unemployment could jeopardize the mass return. Nonetheless, except individual reasons to return, the pull factors to stay abroad are considered more attractive for the majority of the potential migrants, such as better living-conditions; higher consumer behaviour, stress-free life and the strength of a new and different culture. Those who have been disappointed in their home country are less motivated to return, even if they reached their targets abroad. However, it should be highlighted that in the case of the returning migrants, the disappointment in the home country is also enhancing to circulate and re-emigrate again.

On the whole, the sending countries could clearly benefit from emigration, especially in the case of the return migration; both human and financial capital might be related to development issues.

Acknowledgements

This research was highly supported by the results of the online survey of Re-Turn project, a CENTRAL-EUROPE financed programme, which applied questionnaires on approximately 1913 potential and returned migrants from 7 East Central European countries in 2012.

References

- Barcevičius, E., Igliczka, K., Repeckaite, D., & Zvalionyte, D. (2012). Labour mobility within EU: The impact of return migration. Dublin, Eurofound.
- Benton, M., & Petrovic, M. (2013). How free is free movement? Dynamics and drivers of mobility within the European Union. Brussels, MPI Europe.
- Blanchflower, D. G., & Lawton, H. (2008). The impact of the recent expansion of the EU on the UK Labour Market. Bonn, IZA discussion papers, No. 3695.
- Cassarino, J-P. (2004). Theorising return migration. The conceptual approach to return migrants revisited. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 6, 253-279.
- Cerese, F. P. (1974). Expectations and reality: a case study of return migration from the United States to Southern Italy. *International Migration Review*, 8, 245-262.
- Csanády, M., Kmetty, Z., & Kucsera, T. G. (2008). A magyar képzett migráció a rendszerváltás óta. *Hungarian Science*, 5, 603-616.
- Dumont, J-C., & Spielvogel, G. (2008). International migration outlook. Paris, OECD, 162-222.
- Dustmann, C., & Kirchkamp, O. (2002). The optimal duration and activity choice after re-migration. *Journal of Development Economics*, 67, 351-372.
- Groizard, J. L., & Lull, J. (2007). Skilled migration and sending economies. Testing brain draining and brain gain theories. DEA working papers, 35.
- Hárs, Á. (2010). Return migration: The case of Hungary. European job mobility Day, Brussels, 16th November 2010.
- Kirdar, M. (2009). Labour market outcomes, savings accumulation, and return migration. *Labour Economics*, 16, 418-428.
- Klagge, B., Klein-Hitpaß, K., Fihel, A., Kindler, M., Matejko, E., & Okolski, M. (2007). High-skilled return migration and knowledge-based economic development in regional perspective. Conceptual considerations and the example of Poland. Warsaw, *CMR working papers*, No. 19/77.
- Lados, G., & Hegedűs, G. (2012). A re-migráció európai és hazai lehetőségeinek értékelése a munkaerőpiac szempontjából. In: (eds) Nyári, D. *VI. Hungarian Geographical Conference Studybook*, 509-523.
- Lang, T., Kovács, Z., Boros, L., Hegedűs, G., & Lados, G. (2013). Introduction. In: (eds) Lang, T. Return migration in Central Europe: Current trends and an analysis of policies supporting returning migrants. Leibniz, Forum IfL, 21.
- Lemos, S., & Portes, J. (2008). New labour? The impact of migration from Central and Eastern European countries on the UK labour market. IZA discussion papers, No. 3756.
- Martin, R., & Radu, D. (2012). Return migration: The experience of Eastern Europe. *International Migration*, 50, 109-128.
- Nagy, G. (2010). A világgazdaság és a globális munkaerőpiac. In: Mészáros, R.: A globális gazdaság földrajzi dimenziói. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, pp. 229-248.
- Nyberg-Sorensen, N., Hear, N. V., & Engberg-Pedersen, P. (2003). The migration-development nexus: Evidence and policy options. *International Migration*, 40, 49-73.
- Ognyanova, D., Maier, C. B., Wismar, M., Girasek, E., & Busse, R. (2012). Mobility of health professionals pre and post 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements: Evidence from the EU project PROMeTHEUS. *Health Policy*, 108, 122-132.
- Saphier, R., & Simonovits, B. (2004). The findings of Project Retour's pilot study on returnees. [http://www.powershow.com/view1/15519a-MjVjO/The_Findings_of_Project_Retours_Pilot_Study_on_Returnees_Lost_and_Found_Human_Capital_power_point_ppt_presentation – last visit on 27th October 2012].
- Smoliner, S., Förschner, M., Hochgerner, J., & Nová, J. (2013). Comparative report on re-migration trends in Central and Eastern Europe. In: (eds) Lang, T. Return migration in Central Europe: Current trends and an analysis of policies supporting returning migrants. Leibniz, Forum IfL, 21.