
WHAT IS CROATIA DOING TO BRING BACK A LOST GENERATION OF CROATS?

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A conference entitled "Diaspora and Homeland", will be dedicated to them in a few days time, organised by the Centre for the Study of Croatian Emigration, established "with the aim of promoting and developing closer relations between Croats in the homeland and those abroad".

The final release of two strategies for Croatia's demographic revitalisation of emigration by two institutions, the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Welfare, and the Central Office for Croats outside the Republic of Croatia, is also awaiting final publication.

Such great attention paid to expatriate compatriots is quite understandable given the intensity of the emigration from Croatia and the discouraging prospects of the country's demographic future. More visible results, however, will be difficult to achieve with mere symbolic gestures and lifeless strategies.

Like Croatia, many other European countries are also facing the problem of population displacement, and some of them have devised very concrete projects on how to encourage their nationals to return. Countries used to compete in terms of attracting foreign investors, today they are struggling to become attractive to their own people who have left the country.

In search of work, millions of young people from crisis-stricken countries have travelled to richer parts of the EU over the past decade, most often to the UK, Ireland and Germany. Many of them are returning home today because unemployment is no longer such a massive issue today; moreover, it has become a somewhat bigger problem to fill jobs. A very Croatian paradox indeed.

Although many of these new jobs are temporary and underpaid, the governments of Spain, Portugal and Poland believe they can offer their compatriots a good perspective again. In July this year, the Spanish government and the private organisation Volvemos, founded back in 2016 with the intention of bringing back the "lost generation" back to Spain, launched the two-year return, or more precisely "Plan de retorno" pilot program.

It contains fifty measures that make Spain an attractive place for the development of a personal and a professional life. It will be funded by the government with 24 million euros, with logistic support provided by Volvemos.

This national plan, proposed by the Ministry of Employment, Migration and Social Security, in conjunction with ten other ministries, builds on existing grassroots initiatives (Castilla la Mancha) that in many ways encourage the return of Spanish expatriates.

At a recent meeting at the Spanish Cultural Center in Berlin, organised by Volvemos, a senior state official, Agustín Torres, addressed the expatriates. One of the first questions raised by about fifty young expatriates, according to Germany's Spiegel, was "what if we decide to return within the next three weeks?"

According to Volvemos, 10,895 Spanish expatriates want to return home, 527 job offers have been announced, and so far, such a move has managed to bring back 500 Spaniards. That public action seemed to be touching for many expats.

"This is the first time anyone is genuinely interested in expatriates," said scientist Carmen Cañizares. The program is targeted not only at young people, but at different profiles of returnees, regardless of age, education level and social status.

If they want to come back, Plan de Retorno offers a number of incentives, such as streamlined procedures, consulting services, the publication of business opportunities and support for entrepreneurship. The services available to them include Skype consultations, seminars and even financial assistance. A key part of the program is the creation of a one-stop shop for information and documents that people will need in the event they decide to return, help to design their personal careers and connect with Spanish companies.

The measures also include a system of tuition incentives to continue research in Spain, as well as monthly bonuses for self-employed workers to try to encourage entrepreneurship.

The Spanish government expects some 24,000 people to benefit from the program. According to government figures, 2.5 million Spaniards live abroad today, a million more than in 2009. Expectations that many of them could return has also been encouraged by the 2018 data, when 83,728 Spaniards returned and for the first time since 2008, there were more returning to Spain than leaving it.

Neighbouring Portugal has a similar experience as Spain. A country of about ten million people saw about half a million people, or five percent of the population, leave the country during the time of the crisis. But as of 2017, the number of returnees is also higher than those leaving the country. The Portuguese Government has therefore launched a program that offers start-up financial assistance to returnees of up to 6,500 euros. Those who want to start their own business, in turn, can get an incentive loan.

Among the countries that have engaged more strongly with their emigrants in recent years is Poland, especially after the decision on Brexit in the UK, where nearly one million Poles live, but also because the authorities want vacancies to be filled by their compatriots rather than immigrants from distant countries.

Last March, the Polish Government brought in the Polskie Powroty project, aimed primarily at encouraging Polish scientists to return home and work in higher education institutions and research institutes.

The program should create optimal conditions for their return, including salaries at a normal European level, help with relocation, adaptation to new jobs and the formation of project teams. It is intended for scholars who hold Polish citizenship and a doctorate, and who have worked in research institutions abroad for at least two years. In addition, the aim is to attract Poles born in Eastern countries, and have they have been issued around 10,000 Polish documents so far.

Research shows that personal reasons, quality of life and overall social sentiment are also very important for deciding to return home. Some can no longer endure "empty Sundays" in the cold cities of Northern Europe, some say they miss "balconies full of flowers", and some want to be closer to family for health reasons, but many, in turn, do not want to return.

Nevertheless, the economic recovery in recent years has allowed a greater freedom of choice. When it comes to Croatia, the latest data shows that the intensity of emigration decreased, and 39,515 people left the country last year, compared to 47,000 just one year earlier. The number of immigrants to Croatia increased slightly and amounted to 27,000 last year.

Demographer Ivan Čipin of the Faculty of Economics says that those who have recently left find it much easier to return, and that is much easier than attracting migrants from third countries.

"Old migrants, and second and third generation people will find it difficult to come here because they're already "rooted" in the countries their forefathers went to. It is easiest to achieve results in the case of those who have recently left, the last five to six years," says Čipin.

As Čipin notes, perhaps some answers will be provided by the demographic strategy for the period 2020 to 2030, which was drafted by sixteen experts and initiated by the Ministry of Demography for Family, Youth and Social Welfare. According to information dated in May this year, they have proposed as many as 100 measures and since then it is expected that the competent ministry will submit the final document for public discussion.

When asked at what stage this document was and whether it was addressing expatriate Croats at all, the Ministry offered only a formal answer. They say the document is in the final stages of harmonisation and that the public will be "promptly informed" once the procedures are completed.

They explain that it contains measures aimed at providing support for families with children, from facilitated housing to family reunification, as well as help with the work life of working parents. Specific measures will be directed towards increasing demographic growth and also boost targeted migration trends. They acknowledge that emigration is a significant demographic issue but also an economic challenge, and point out that the strategy "contains measures that will reverse this trend".

"In order to encourage the return of Croatia's emigrants, it's certainly worth mentioning the programs and projects implemented by the Central State Office for Croats outside the Republic of Croatia," they say from the competent ministry.

They state that special quotas for the enrollment of students from Croatian minorities in European countries and for expatriates and their descendants in other countries have been adopted, and in addition to programs for learning Croatian, scholarships have been launched, the procedure for acquiring citizenship has been simplified... Compared to other countries, those devised by the Croatian administration, at least so far, it seems, can hardly be stimulating people to return, unlike with the Spaniards.

Economic analyst Goran Šaravanja believes there is certainly room for the return of Croatian emigrants, it is only a matter of "how skilled we will be in securing conditions for people to return".

Born in Australia as a descendant of the first generation of Croatian emigrants, he came to Croatia twenty years ago. After graduating, he started working in the financial sector in Sydney, and then, with experience and savings under his belt, he wished to see the world. A backup option was the rich, Western European nation of the UK. However, before that, he decided to try his hand in Croatia. "And it worked," as he says.

In addition to having a family in Croatia today, he thinks he was probably lucky because he could easily get a job in Croatia with his professional profile. For the past twenty years he has been chief economist at Zagrebačka banka and Ina, and today he owns his own company, Imelum, which deals with macroeconomic analysis for the region of Southeast Europe.

In addition, the impetus for him to stay was the conviction that Croatia would one day be a member of the EU and NATO, which carries with it risk reduction, accelerates the development of institutions and also the political culture. However, when comparing Spain's decisions with those made by the Croats, it is hard not to notice the stark differences in perspective.

We often lose sight that back in the beginning, Croatia had to create new institutions and decide for the first time in their history about everything, unlike other countries that already had that type of infrastructure. It takes time to build an efficient and ambitious public administration. Therefore, for countries that have not had their "own country", such as Croatia and Slovenia, it means a lot to join NATO and the EU.

However, the impression remains that Croatia is painfully slow to learn and adopt good practices. And Šaravanja acknowledges that the key problem is precisely how Croatia generally approaches problems and how it solves them.

"When motivating people to return, we should see what others are doing and what is applicable to us, given our specificities. The reality is that in Croatia, the private sector is too small, that is, the public sector, public companies, and thus the state's influence on the economy is too great. Only the private sector is able to create more jobs in the long run without which it is difficult to expect a significant return of people," says Šaravanja.

In addition to providing a more prosperous economy that will offer jobs to expatriates, research has shown that Croatia is plagued by some other specifics that politicians desperately need to work on.

A survey conducted by Promocija Plus agency among Croatian expatriates last year, at the request of the Croatian Employers Association (HUP), showed that they were particularly troubled by the situation in Croatian society.

Departure is largely driven by "problems that come from general social and political circumstances", dissatisfaction with the general situation and the socio-political climate in the country. The labour market and social policies only take second place, which are otherwise most commonly thought to be the main causes of emigration, and the third group are of course individual, personal motives which may or may not have anything to do with the state of the country at all.

Make sure to follow our dedicated politics page for more on Croatia's demographic crisis.

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