



# Europeans migrating abroad – and back

by Marco Funk

Migration has become Europe's main concern following the large influx of refugees fleeing conflict in Syria. But while the focus has been on people coming to Europe, EU citizens are themselves migrating *out* of (and *back* into) the EU. The migratory movements of Europeans demonstrate the existence of opportunities abroad, and lead to the continent losing some of its most highly-skilled citizens. At the same time, more circular, bi-directional migration patterns are emerging, which have the potential to turn traditional 'brain drain' into 'brain exchange'.

## Europeans overseas

Most mobile EU citizens stay within Europe, but growing numbers are also leaving the Union. Non-EU countries are actually the destinations of choice for certain nationalities, particularly in cases where there are linguistic and historical ties, or where a large European diaspora is already present. Some of the countries hardest hit by Europe's sovereign debt crisis have seen particularly large outflows, but employment opportunities, lifestyle options and family ties abroad have also prompted migration from other European economies.

Over half of all Spanish citizens abroad live in the Americas – almost twice as many as in the rest of Europe. Meanwhile, more people emigrated from the EU to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) since 2010 than the other way around – for the first time in 14 years. In 2012, over 180,000 European citizens emigrated to LAC, compared to 119,000 LAC

nationals who came to the EU: this represents a 68% decrease from 2007, when a record number of people migrated from LAC to the EU.

Ireland has also experienced significant emigration in recent years. Between April 2009 and April 2015, 265,000 Irish citizens left their country, amounting to a net loss of 143,000 people. English-speaking countries were the main destinations, in particular the UK, followed by Australia, the US, New Zealand and Canada.

Unlike the waves of low-skilled labour migration in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the current outflow is dominated by highly skilled young people. Large-scale construction projects related to the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics in Brazil have attracted young European engineers and architects eager to jump-start their careers, while rapidly growing economies elsewhere increasingly draw in Europeans frustrated with limited prospects at home.

## Changing patterns

Migratory flows between Germany and Turkey have recently undergone profound change, in a development which may indicate future trends across Europe given the presence of diasporas with links to increasingly prosperous regions of the world. What started with Germany's well-known 'guest worker' programme of the 1960s has become a complex bi-directional, circular migration pattern encompassing Turks and Germans, as well as people with ties to



both countries. These trends are particularly noteworthy in light of the ongoing visa liberalisation process between the EU and Turkey.

In stark contrast to previous waves of migration, flows since the early 2000s have become more temporary and circular in nature, with students, highly skilled workers and retirees moving in both directions for limited durations. The flows themselves have also changed dramatically: while, for decades, migration was primarily directed from Turkey to Germany, more people have left Germany for Turkey than the other way around each year since 2006. Beyond considerations related to identity and culture that may motivate some German Turks to 'return' to Turkey, developments in Turkey over the past decade have made it more attractive as a destination in its own right – also for Germans without Turkish ancestry. Turkey has experienced high growth rates, a substantial increase in GDP per capita and decreasing unemployment, as well as a decrease in poverty and social inequality.

As other countries in Europe's neighbouring areas and beyond develop, European countries hosting their diaspora may find themselves in a position to benefit from similar migratory relationships. Another visa liberalisation candidate with the EU, Ukraine, is one potential example, given its sizable diaspora in Central Europe, particularly in Poland.

The increasing number of opportunities abroad may well encourage the circular migration of more Europeans. At the same time, many developing regions of the world are struggling to achieve sustainable economic growth and political stability, so this kind of circular migration may be erratic, following boom-and-bust cycles that are difficult to predict.

## Europe's worldwide webs

The existence of diaspora communities can also have an impact on domestic priorities. Ireland has one of the largest diaspora populations outside of Europe, and it has recognised the potential economic value of this group. As a result, Ireland has become one of the most proactive countries seeking to strengthen links with its citizens abroad through a wide range of initiatives: the government even appointed a dedicated Minister for Diaspora Affairs in 2014.

Ireland's recent economic recession prompted the establishment of the Global Irish Economic Forum in 2009, which led to the creation of the Global Irish Network, which now includes over 350 senior-level Irish and Irish connected business people in some 40 countries. Ireland has also established initiatives seeking to provide long-term support to its citizens

abroad, including welfare services for vulnerable Irish expatriates.

All of these efforts fit into a broader policy of viewing emigrants not as a permanent or even temporary loss, but rather a resource that can be tapped into and supported through targeted assistance. By maintaining strong links with members of its diaspora, Ireland is able to deepen bilateral relationships with third countries while setting the stage for possible return migration to Ireland. This could benefit the country greatly, particularly in the case of highly skilled Irish citizens that can make use of professional experiences and contacts developed abroad.

## European returnees

At the same time as Europeans are leaving their countries to live and work abroad, some also return. According to an OECD report on return migration, 20-50% of immigrants leave within the first five years of their arrival, depending on the country of destination and time period considered, either to return home or to make a secondary move to a third country.

Nevertheless, only a minority of emigrants return for good. For example, out of almost 107,000 Britons who settled in Australia between 2005 and 2010, just short of 18,000 decided to return to the UK over the same period. Indeed, the loss of highly skilled migrants has increasingly become a concern for European governments, which fear a 'brain drain' of their most talented citizens particularly towards the US, which has attracted large numbers of PhD students. While data on this specific group is scarce, a 2010 study on European Economics PhD graduates from American universities revealed that 64% decided to stay in the US, while 24% returned home and 10% moved to another European country (primarily the UK).

The number of Europeans willing to return will likely decrease as more and more countries around the world achieve higher levels of economic development with more attractive professional opportunities and higher standards of living. However, government efforts to maintain ties with their diasporas and the personal attachment some migrants have to their home countries will also maintain a certain level of return migration. Actively managing and supporting these return flows may prove to be a valuable investment, just as mobility partnerships with countries of destination could allow their citizens to 'fill' the void left by emigrants who do not return.

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