

Giving and receiving: effects of labour emigration on the Bulgarian labour market

Plamen Dimitrov of the Bulgarian trade union confederation, CITUB, assesses the pros and cons of migration by Bulgarian workers to Western Europe. He argues that the negative impact on labour markets in host countries is exaggerated, and is in any case far outweighed by the benefits they receive from tax revenues and the skills these workers bring – often to the detriment of Bulgaria itself.

With the ending of all restrictions on migrants seeking work in other EU countries, the labour market in Bulgaria has finally become part of a common European labour market and labour migration is now an integral part of the implementation of the right of free movement of persons. The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) has carefully analyzed the possible positive and negative effects of the abolition of restrictions on access to the labour market in the EU for Bulgarian citizens.

In our opinion the expectation of large immigrant flows of job seekers in economically developed western and northern parts of the Union are unfounded. Moreover the experience of Germany and the United Kingdom shows that the contributions paid by Bulgarian migrant workers into the tax and social solidarity systems in the receiving countries are much greater than the benefits which they receive from them.



Plamen Dimitrov: western Europe benefits from Bulgarian workers (photo courtesy of novinite.com)

The full opening of labour markets does not imply extending social emigration (as there is now a problem in some European countries) and increasing labour mobility. In this sense Bulgaria is facing the threat of a leakage of skilled workers and the main reason for this is the big difference in pay and lack of opportunities for full realization in the Bulgarian labour market. The differences in nominal pay between Bulgaria and Western European countries is up to ten times; however, if we take into account the differences in price levels by purchasing power parity, they are limited to about four times.

In Bulgaria there are, for example, acute shortages of medical personnel. Almost 50% of nurses have left the country or the profession in the last 20 years. Following accession to the EU about 1200 nurses emigrate each year. About 20% of doctors have declared their intention to emigrate.

Only 5% of doctors and 4% of the nurses in the country are under the age of 30 years. Around 20% of physicians in this country are older than 60 years, and 48% are between 46 and 60 years. When these people go, pension cadres in the health care system will reach a critically low level.

Much of Bulgaria's doctors are oriented to western European labour markets because of better pay and better working conditions. Bulgarian doctors prefer to immigrate to the United Kingdom (42%), Germany (25%) and France (8.9%). There is a tendency for them to leave the country during their student days. Of the doctors who go abroad, 78% are young.

The situation is similar with technical specialists, particularly IT-specialists, however, there is no deficit in terms of workers' occupations requiring a high level of qualifications – for example welders. This is a significant loss to the country. The Bulgarian state has invested significant

resources in their training and qualification, and at the same time there are no adequate policies to keep them on the Bulgarian market. This is a big loss to the country.

On the one hand, the labour migration leads to the appearance of gaps in certain professions of the workforce in Bulgaria but, on the other, we should not ignore the positive effects in the long run which can be expected. Free functioning of labour markets will undoubtedly contribute to a rapid increase of the labour cost in Bulgaria and this cohesion effect is of great importance as it is for all Member States. This is more important for the development of the EU and far outweighs some negative short-term consequences associated with transition, which are usually exaggerated for purely populist and internal political purposes. The equal treatment of all workers in the EU in compliance with the four fundamental principles of the Treaty for functioning of the EU is a prerequisite for its successful future. All other restrictions lead to disintegration.

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