



CIRCULAR AND RETURN MIGRATIONS
**EXPERIENCES OF ESTONIA,
BULGARIA AND IRELAND**

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Circular and return migrations: a comparative analysis of the experiences of Estonia, Bulgaria and Ireland

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Komparativna analiza je objavljena u okviru projekta *Cirkularne migracije pre depopulacije!* koju sprovode Fondacija za razvoj ekonomske nauke – FREN i Centar za evropske politike – CEP. Projekat se realizuje uz finansijsku pomoć Evropske unije. Za sadržinu ove publikacije isključivo su odgovorni FREN i CEP i ta sadržina ne izražava nužno zvanične stavove Evropske unije.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of migration in Serbia has been approached fatalistically in the last few years, by often presenting information that is not completely accurate in order to create the image that especially the most talented are leaving Serbia. The reality is different: the educational structure of people leaving the country is similar to the level of education of the resident population (Arandarenko, 2022). Nevertheless, the pressure coming from the public was transferred to the decision-makers, which motivated the adoption of the first migration strategy in 2019, which focused almost entirely on ways to prevent population outflow. A little later adopted Economic Migration Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021-2027 softened the tone of the first version of the document, but the measures adopted due to concerns about the so-called “brain drain” phenomenon sought to encourage the return of highly educated individuals to Serbia.

A number of measures with generous tax incentives aimed at attracting highly qualified individuals were adopted even before the adoption of the Strategy. Concern about the “brain drain” also motivated the proposal to exempt qualified individuals from paying the annual income tax, which is normally paid by an insignificant number of 1% of the Serbian population.

Research that was recently published suggests that individuals with lower education leave Serbia more than highly qualified ones, and that the story of the „brain drain” is exaggerated. In the example of the countries of the Western Balkans, which Leitner (2021) observed in the period 2010-2019, showed that all countries recorded net emigration – the number of emigrants was greater than the number of immigrants. However, there are differences in results based on people’s age and level of education. Her results show that evidence of a “brain drain” exists only for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*. On the other hand, there is no outflow in Serbia, but an influx of those with higher education, that is, more of them come to Serbia than leave it. The key drivers of this trend are students, who return to the country after completing their tertiary education abroad. Serbia attracts a significant number of foreign students, of which a large share is from the region, mostly Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the level of education, net emigration exists only among those with secondary education and it is most pronounced among individuals with a diploma of secondary medical school.

Arandarenko (2022) explains the reasons for these flows by the tax and social system in Serbia which, for the last twenty years, has been mainly discriminatory against low-skilled and medium-skilled labor, poor workers, large families, people in rural areas and other vulnerable and underprivileged groups.

In the following, we analyze migration flows in three EU member states: Estonia, Bulgaria and Ireland. The reasons for choosing these three countries, whose experiences in attracting returnees we want to examine, stem from the idea of focusing on countries that are closer to Serbia in terms of income, so it was natural to look for candidates among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. We wanted a country that is similar to Serbia in terms of socio-economic indicators, and that is why the choice fell on Bulgaria, and Estonia was chosen because it is marked as a successful in several areas – digitization of public administration, which could introduce us to some useful solutions in attracting returnees, but also the enviable economic recovery after the 2008 crisis. We chose Ireland because it is a traditionally emigrant country, and we wanted to see if the reasons for return and the state’s measures to attract returnees differ in the case of richer and more developed countries.

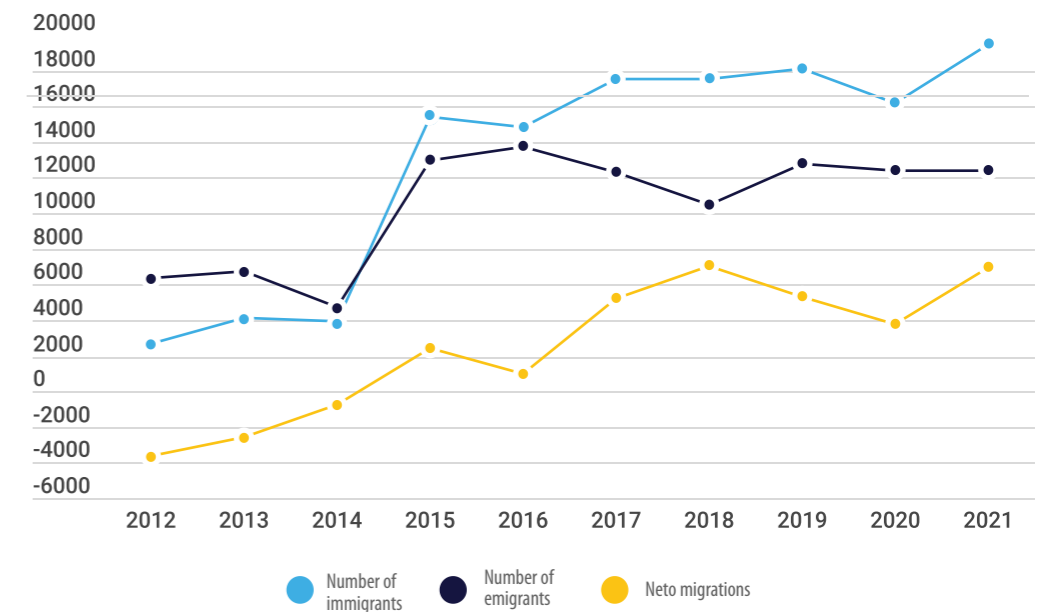
Within each country, we discuss migration trends with reference to the last few decades. Next, we consider the current institutional structure that deals with migratory movements, as well as measures to support returnees.

ESTONIA

OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION AND LEGISLATION

Migration trends

In order to better understand the of migration flows in Estonia, it should be borne in mind that during the last 150 years, three large emigration waves and one large immigration wave have occurred in Estonia (Kumer-Haukanomm et al, 2017). The most significant wave of immigration took place during the Soviet period. The first wave of emigration occurred in the first half of the 19th century and reached its peak in 1918, more precisely at the end of the First World War. In this period, the so-called “Eastern Diaspora” was formed, and the largest number of emigrants moved to different parts of Russia, Lithuania, Abkhazia and Crimea. In the second wave of emigration, which took place during the Second World War, the “Western Diaspora” was created, and the largest number of emigrants went to Sweden, the United States of America, Canada and Australia. The third wave of migration followed the collapse of the Soviet Union when Estonia gained its independence in 1991, and was further accelerated by Estonia’s inclusion in the European Union and the creation of the “EU Diaspora”. After the economic crisis in 2008, emigration increased and only in 2015 did net migration become positive (Graph 1).

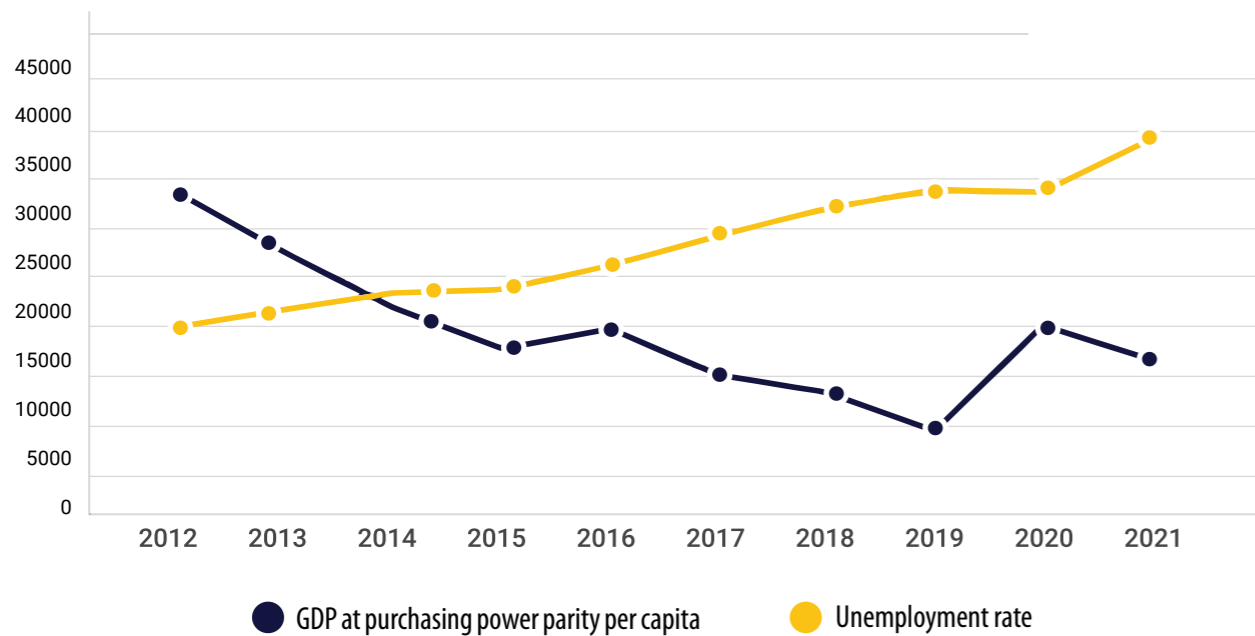


Graph 1 – Trends in the number of immigrants, the number of emigrants and net migration in Estonia from 2012 to 2021

Source: *Statistics Estonia*

Estonia recognized the need to encourage immigration in order to alleviate the poor demographics of the population. The good economic situation and a number of legal regulations of the last few years have contributed to the current situation in which the number of immigrants is greater than the number of emigrants, and even 50% of those who come to Estonia are Estonians or have Estonian origins. Return migrants are between 25 and 45 years old and are mostly families with children. The breakthrough year, in which net migration was positive for the first time, was 2015.¹ With the exception of 2020, in which economic activity declined and the unemployment rate increased significantly, from 4.5% to 7%, over a period of a decade, Estonia recorded very good economic results. Gross domestic product per citizen measured according to purchasing power increased from 25,996 in 2012 to 42,191.5 in 2021, which is even 1.6 times more (Graph 2). In the same period, there was a significant drop in unemployment, from 10% in 2012 to 4.5% in 2019. Even if we take into account the year in which Estonia, like the rest of the world, was affected by the coronavirus, the unemployment rate is also significantly lower compared to the initial observed year.

¹ [Statistics Estonia](#)



Graph 2 – GDP at purchasing power parity per capita and unemployment rate in Estonia from 2012 to 2021

Source: World Bank

According to the latest available data from 2013, the educational structure of return migrants aged 25 to 35 is better compared to all emigrants, as there are more highly educated among them (21.5% versus 13.5% among all migrants) (Massap et al, 2014).

Legislation

Within the Ministry of Culture, the Cultural Diversity Department has been managing population integration since 2009. The main goal of this department is to create conditions for the development of the cultural life of ethnic minorities and migrants living in Estonia, as well as to support their integration into society. The Ministry of Culture is also in charge of designing and implementing integration strategies and development plans. In addition, the Ministry of Culture is the representative of Estonia within the European Network on Integration.

Regardless of the fact that one institution is directly responsible for this issue, the issue of integration in Estonia is considered a wider social problem that relates to many aspects of life, so that other ministries and government bodies, such as the Integration Foundation, closely cooperate with the Ministry of Culture regarding these issues.

The Foundation for Integration makes policies and implements practical programs aimed at better integration of return migrants in Estonia. The Republic of Estonia founded the Foundation for Integration, and its founding rights were realized by the Ministry of Culture.²

In order to encourage the inclusion of migrants, both ethnic Estonians and return migrants, as well as migrants coming from other countries, as well as circular migrants, Estonia has so far developed four integration strategies. These integration strategies were developed under the name of the *Compatriots Program* and have been developed since 2004. The last strategy was adopted for the period 2021–2030. (Jacobson, 2017). The last program or strategy – *Cohesive Estonia 2021–2030*, is the result of the joint work of the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The goal of this program is to create a basis for the development of integration in the coming years.

In the field of integration policy, there were several strategic documents that were unified in the framework of the “Cohesive Estonia” strategy from 2021. Until 2020, the “Integration of Estonia 2020” strategy was in force, which was aimed at the adaptation of new immigrants. It was implemented through the National Defense Development Plan 2015–2020, the development of civil society was directed through the Civil Society Development Plan 2015–2020 and the Compatriots Programme 2014–2020, which played a significant role in drawing attention to the topic of global Estonia. The “Cohesive Estonia” strategy has found common grounds between all these topics, and contributes to the achievement of the general goal and strategic goals of the “Estonia 2035” strategy.³

The part of the *Cohesive Estonia* strategy that is most significant from the point of view of circular migration and return migration is the part called “*Global Estonia*”, which aims to help the development and preservation of Estonian identity among Estonians living abroad, as well as to provide support to return and circular migrants by return to the country, to enable them to actively participate in social and cultural life. Within this part of the strategy, attention is paid to providing support to all those who are trying to present Estonia to the world in a good light.

² Integration foundation

³ European Migration Networks

In addition to this segment, the strategy of *Cohesive Estonia* deals with the following issues:⁴

- ◆ building Estonia as a cohesive and stable community (Estonia Supporting Adaptation and Integration);
- ◆ fairer participation of citizens in civil society organizations and decision-making within the community (Community Estonia);
- ◆ providing quality population data in order to support progress in the efficiency of administrative work and other services needed by citizens (Smart population Index).

It is estimated that about 200,000 people of Estonian origin live outside the country, which is about 15% of the total population. They had a significant contribution in the reconstruction of the country after gaining independence due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and they continue to do so. Therefore, state activities aimed at creating and preserving stronger ties with Estonians outside the borders of Estonia are one of the state’s priorities. These ties are strengthened by greater cultural involvement, language preservation in communities outside Estonia, and providing various forms of assistance, both to Estonians living abroad and to Estonians returning to the country.

The main goal of the Global Estonia area within the “Cohesive Estonia 2030” strategy is to preserve the Estonian identity among Estonians living outside the country, to create a sense of unity among Estonians outside and inside Estonia, as well as to enable Estonians who return to the country to feel welcome and desirable. In addition, the goal is to preserve the image of Estonia in the world.

Within the strategy, 3 basic indicators are used to monitor results in this area:⁵

- ◆ Feeling of unity with Estonia (the goal is to increase from 84% to 90%);
- ◆ Satisfaction of return migrants with the adaptation process in Estonia (Estonians from 90% to 94% and other nationalities from 82% to 90%);
- ◆ Interest in social participation of Estonians living abroad (from 76% to 85%).

This area of the “Cohesive Estonia 2030” strategy deals with, among others, the following issues:⁶

- ◆ How to encourage and support the return of Estonians to the country and its various regions, as well as how to help them adapt and reintegrate in Estonia?
- ◆ How to include all Estonians in the development of Estonian society?
- ◆ How to define clearer roles at the national, local and community level and enable cooperation with communities abroad at these levels?
- ◆ How to strengthen the ties that Estonians abroad, especially children and young people, have with Estonia, its culture and language?

Estonia is aware of the fact that diaspora communities are very dif-

⁴ Cohesive Estonia Strategy 2021-2030

⁵ Cohesive Estonia Strategy 2021-2030

⁶ Cohesive Estonia Strategy 2021-2030

ferent from each other in terms of size, opportunities and other criteria, so their needs and expectations from the state differ, which is why Estonia takes this into account. At the same time, it is known that the largest communities are in Finland, Russia, Great Britain, Germany, Sweden and North America (Kumer-Haukanomm, 2017). Also, they are aware of the fact that many of the information needed by people in the diaspora are not available or are not easy to access, which is why the Estonian government is trying to, through digitization, provide better access to information for those who are outside the country.

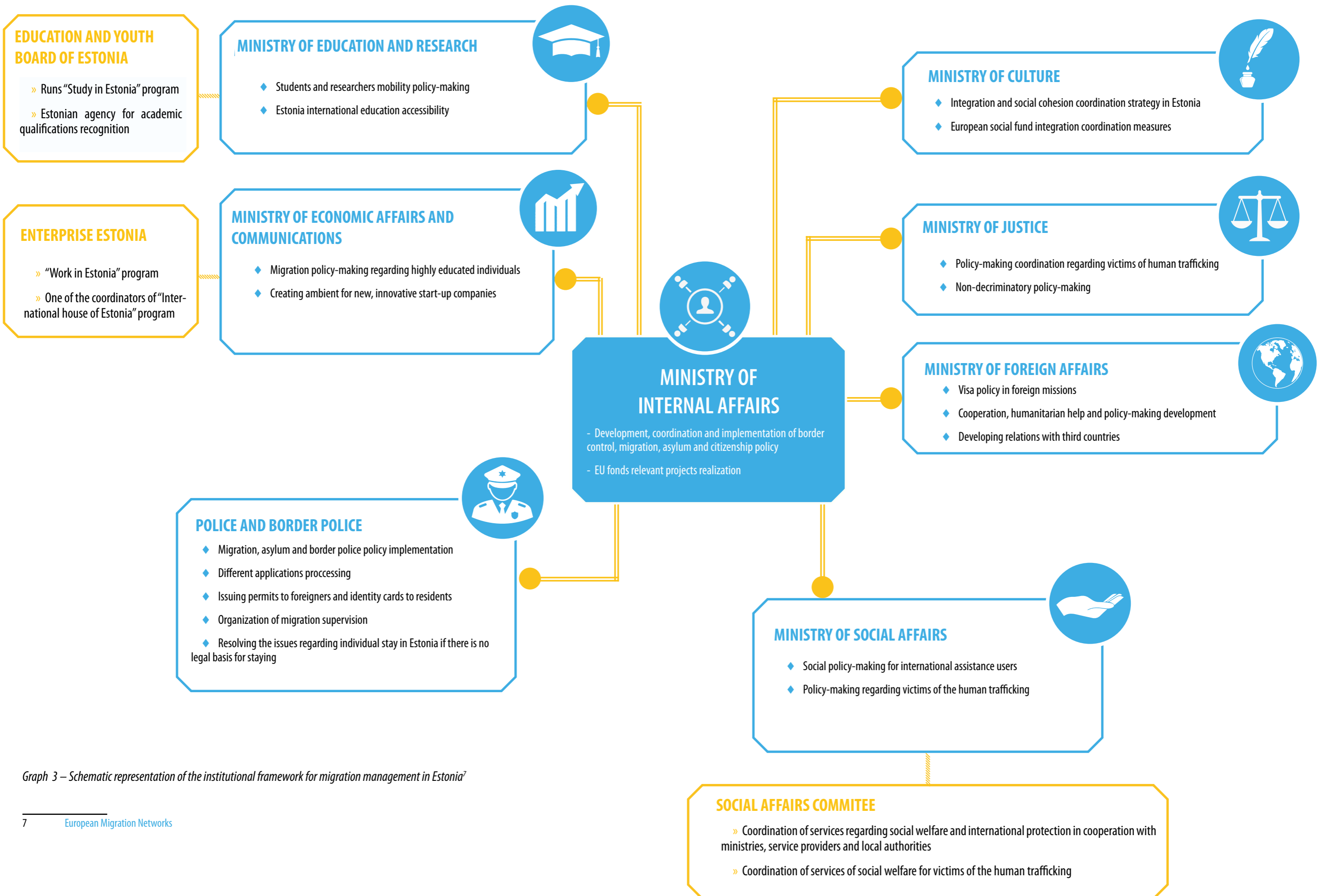
Apart from the fact that Estonia managed to improve the economic situation in the country and establish itself as the digital economy of Europe, offering a large number of e-services to its citizens and those who want to become one, Estonia also implements a number of measures aimed at encouraging return and/or circular migrations. Although return and circular migrations have intensified in the last few years, the strategy also points out that there are not enough services available to return migrants, which aim to facilitate their adjustment, and that these services are not systematic enough. Due to increasing return migrations, the need for these services is increasingly intense. Within the strategy, it is also emphasized that when returning to the country, different family members return, and that the services provided should be adapted to the needs of different demographic groups.

The main policies defined within the “Cohesive Estonia” strategy are:

- ◆ Promotion and preservation of Estonian identity abroad:
 - » developing a common information field;
 - » preservation and promotion of Estonian culture abroad;
 - » expansion and diversification for studying and training abroad;
 - » preservation of Estonian intellectual and material cultural heritage.
- ◆ Support for the return of Estonians and their adaptation to life in Estonia:
 - » provision of services that support the return of Estonians, their development and progress in the country;
 - » summarizing knowledge and information about the diaspora, returning migrants and raising community awareness;
 - » stronger involvement of local institutions and strengthening of their capacities in working with target groups and providing necessary services to returning migrants.
- ◆ Involving Estonian communities around the world in community development and social life, promoting cooperation and providing high-quality services:
 - » provision of high-quality consular services in foreign missions and the growing role of foreign missions in involving Estonians living abroad;
 - » inclusion of more young people of Estonian origin living abroad;
 - » contribution to the internationalization of Estonian culture;
 - » encouraging and supporting civil initiatives and popular diplomacy.

These policies are under the jurisdiction of the following institutions:

- » Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA);



Graph 3 – Schematic representation of the institutional framework for migration management in Estonia⁷

⁷ European Migration Networks

- » to Ministry of Interior (MOI);
- » to Ministry of Education and Research (MOER);
- » to Ministry of Culture (MOC).

Returnees supporting measures

Almost all measures implemented in Estonia, which aim to encourage the return of Estonians to the country, are implemented by state institutions. Considering that there is a wide range of measures, there is not too much space for the work of the non-governmental sector in this area, and civil society organizations mostly focus on immigrants who come from foreign countries.

The most significant is the assistance provided in accordance with the regulation proposed by the Estonian Foundation Integration. This Regulation⁸ establishes the conditions and procedure for supporting the settlement of Estonian citizens and ethnic Estonians and their descendants. Its main purpose is to attract Estonians living abroad again. Support includes basic and additional support.

1. Basic support
 - a. creation of living conditions for returnees;
 - b. faster integration into society and adaptation.
2. Additional support
 - a. creating conditions for the life of minors;
 - b. covering transport and relocation costs.

The amount of financial support varies and its maximum is €640. The conditions for receiving financial aid are: staying abroad for seven years, presence of minor children in the family, age up to 40 years, a doctor's degree or presence of disability.

Currently, most of the programs implemented in Estonia are in the field of education. Namely, Estonia gives its citizens and people of Estonian origin the opportunity to study or continue to study according to the curriculum used by schools in Estonia. In this way, children do not lag behind the program if their parents decide to return to the country. Advances in technology and a high degree of digitization in Estonia have made this possible. The government also supports the organization of Sunday schools, which include extracurricular activities for children abroad, and organizes language camps for children and young people of Estonian origin who were born abroad.

It is interesting to note that the “*Talents, come home*” program, a return migration initiative introduced in 2010 with the support of the Estonian president, failed because it was considered that the invitation did not apply to all Estonians who left the country (Ieva, 2019). Namely, the lower qualified (masters, cleaners, bus drivers) felt insulted because the word “talent” was used, so they wondered if the initiative

applied to them. In that period, immediately after the economic crisis of 2008, despite all the efforts of the government, the incentive to return to the country was low considering that the average salary in Estonia was up to three times lower compared to some other European countries.

When the general working and living conditions in the country improved, Estonia managed to attract a larger number of circular and return migrants. An example of this is the migration relations between Estonia and Finland, the most common destinations for Estonian emigrants. Namely, more than 50.000 Estonians immigrated to Finland in the long or short term. However, although the trend of emigration has been strong, changes have been taking place in recent years. In 2017, there was a turning point, when the trend of Estonians returning from Finland resulted in a larger number of immigrants from Finland than emigrants to Finland, while the trend of returning from Finland started in 2014.⁹ Wages have started to increase and catch up with those in Finland because the rate of economic growth in Estonia is higher than in the rest of the European Union. In addition, employment rates are higher in Estonia than in Finland, and there are fewer young people in the labor market, which puts return migrants in a better position.

One of the significant programs aimed at the most educated population groups is the Program Activities implemented by the Estonian Research Council in accordance with Regulation no. 481 of the Minister of Education and Research of December 30, 2015. This Regulation establishes the conditions for providing grants within the framework of “*Internationalization of research and support for mobility and the next generation program*” or *Mobilitas Pluss*. The program supports the return to Estonia of researchers who have worked outside Estonia for at least two years. A prerequisite is postdoctoral research completed abroad or research conducted at least at the same level. The five calls for proposals aim to bring around 60 researchers to Estonia.

The program aims to:¹⁰

- ◆ improve the international visibility of research, business and higher education and increase the attractiveness of Estonia as a destination country for studies and research;
- ◆ strengthens the international competitiveness of researchers and research organizations, including companies;
- ◆ support opportunities for research institutions and companies to cooperate with transnational research organizations and networks;
- ◆ expand international cooperation and professional development opportunities for the state, research and development institutions, higher education institutions, companies, students and academic staff by improving cross-sectoral and international mobility and cooperation.

One of the few civil society organizations that deals with the issue of return and circular migration, and in an indirect way, is the *Estonian Worldwide Youth Network*, founded as part of the ESTO 2019 project to enable the connection of young people in Estonia and those who have Estonian ancestry all over the world. ESTO connects young Estonians all over the world, both online and at events and fairs it organizes in countries where there is a significant Estonian diaspora.

9 Return encouraging measures
10 *Mobilitas Pluss*

EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW

Marie-Liis Jakobson, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Management, Law and Society, Tallinn University

Unlike other Central and Eastern European countries, Estonia has a high rate of return migration. Of the total number of Estonians living abroad, almost half reside in Finland, by, for example, working in Finland for 10 days and then spending four days in Estonia. Basically, they circulate. Individuals with a medium and lower level of education in Finland are most often employed in the service and construction sectors. They go there because of higher earnings and proximity. However, in recent years, for the first time, a positive net migration rate has been recorded, because due to less supply of labor and wages in Estonia have increased so that people are returning. A large number of people left Estonia after the economic crisis in 2008, but they return as the economic situation improves. It is also interesting that among the motives for going abroad is not always the provision of basic existence, but there are also those who want to buy a second car or renovate a house.

The most important reasons for leaving are economic, but also studying, as well as emotional –90% of migrants who go to Italy are women who go there to find a partner.

The populist, radical right party recently tried to introduce an agency that would deal with the return of people who went abroad, but the idea was not realized.

Young people who return to Estonia directly after the education process encounter problems on the labor market, talk about insufficient social capital, i.e. the phenomenon that jobs are obtained through connections, while they do not have such contacts. Babysitting services and preschools are not widely available, although for example they have paid maternity leave for 16 months after the birth of a child. Loans for an apartment are not favorable, so these are the main obstacles for the younger population who decide to return. “*Talents, come home*” was a program about fifteen years ago, but it was not very successful. Whatever the government does, if individuals are not motivated to return themselves, and the favorable economic situation is what attracts them the most, then government initiatives have little effect.

E-services, such as the *One stop shop*, can make life easier for returnees. On that portal, requests for various benefits and services offered by the state are submitted. Within the Integration foundation, there are counseling services for partners who are foreigners. The advantage of such services is that they allow returnees to connect with people who have returned to Estonia before. It's a type of support group. The state also offers programs for children who can follow the program remotely so that they do not lag behind other children when they want to return and rejoin the Estonian school system.

The role of non-governmental organizations in providing support to returnees is not great.

Social media plays a role in connecting people who have left and come back (there's an app for that).

Kaire Cocker, Head of Compatriots Service, Estonian Government Integration Foundation

When, three years ago, a large number of people began to return to the country, the state realized that they needed help and support. *Integration foundation* provides a number of services, including psychological coun-

seling, participation in support groups where they can hear other people's experiences. Basically, the main thing is the individual's decision to return. The state cannot encourage them in any way.

Talents, come home program, which they introduced in 2010, had a negative response because some people questioned whether they could be considered talents, who exactly the state was thinking of. In the end, the program benefited only about twenty people out of two hundred thousand, estimated to live abroad.

As a state institution, they try to publicize the existence of their services in various ways, although some surveys have shown that many people claim that they do not know about their existence. However, she believes that whoever needs it, that is, who really wants to return to Estonia, will find them. They offer services via email, Skype or live.

Once a year, they visit local governments to explain to them exactly what they are doing. On that occasion, they provide trainings, distribute materials and brochures.

People who contact them are mostly interested in finding a job, housing and enrolling their children in school or kindergarten. Sometimes they just need to talk to someone who has gone through similar experiences – that is why they offer group counseling.

Every year, around seven thousand people, aged between 25 and 45, return to the country. They give money to some, if they need it to come to Estonia.

Currently, it is easy to find a job in the country, and salaries have almost equaled those in Finland, which is the main destination for their workers. People go to Finland primarily for employment, and she believes that they never fully integrate there, so they want to return home.

The reasons for leaving are economic, and the reasons for returning are emotional.

Electronic services are of no help to them, because in order to use them, they need to have an ID card with two codes, which they usually do not have.

The state offers summer camps, language courses, grants for events in the diaspora, all with the aim of maintaining ties with the motherland. It is estimated that there are about 200.000 of them abroad, and the state believes that they are an asset for the country and that they should be taken care of. They maintain contact with them through the embassies. For those who went to Finland, it is easier because there is a common registration system that both countries implement jointly. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs wants to create a national register of residential addresses, so that it is easier to track the movement of people.

- It is important for them to promote the concept that leaving the country and returning is a great thing and a good experience, that returning does not mean failure, and people are precisely afraid if the environment would see them that way.
- At one point they wanted to stop advertising going abroad, say, for medical staff, but then they realized that wasn't the way to keep people.
- Non-governmental organizations are not active, they deal more with the migration of residents from third countries who come to Estonia.

8 Conditions and procedures for payment of financial support for returnees

BULGARIA

OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION AND LEGISLATION

Migration trends

Bulgaria has faced very high emigration rates for the past three decades, which, together with a very low birth rate and low immigration rates, have posed a serious challenge to the country and put it in an unenviable position in terms of its labor market and potential for future progress. The migrant crisis of 2015 did not leave lasting consequences on the population structure because Bulgaria was only a stopover for migrants trying to reach Western Europe from the Middle East. However, although a small number of them remained in the country, the stigma and negative attitude towards immigration in Bulgaria is increasing, despite the fact that the integration of migrants is relatively good and most of them are either employed or have their own business.

Modern migration trends in Bulgaria can be observed through five main eras (Krasteva, 2019):

Communist period: the period after the Second World War until 1989 – in this period, very strong control of both immigration and emigration was carried out, emigrants were deprived of the right to return to the country and were placed in a negative context, and immigration was almost impossible, with a few exceptions, which referred, above all, to residents of the Soviet Union and students from the countries of the so-called Third World.

The post-communist period: from 1990 to the early 2010s – a period of mass emigration that followed the transformation from a closed to an open society. Migration movements were stimulated by changes in the market and globalization. In this period, more women than men emigrated.

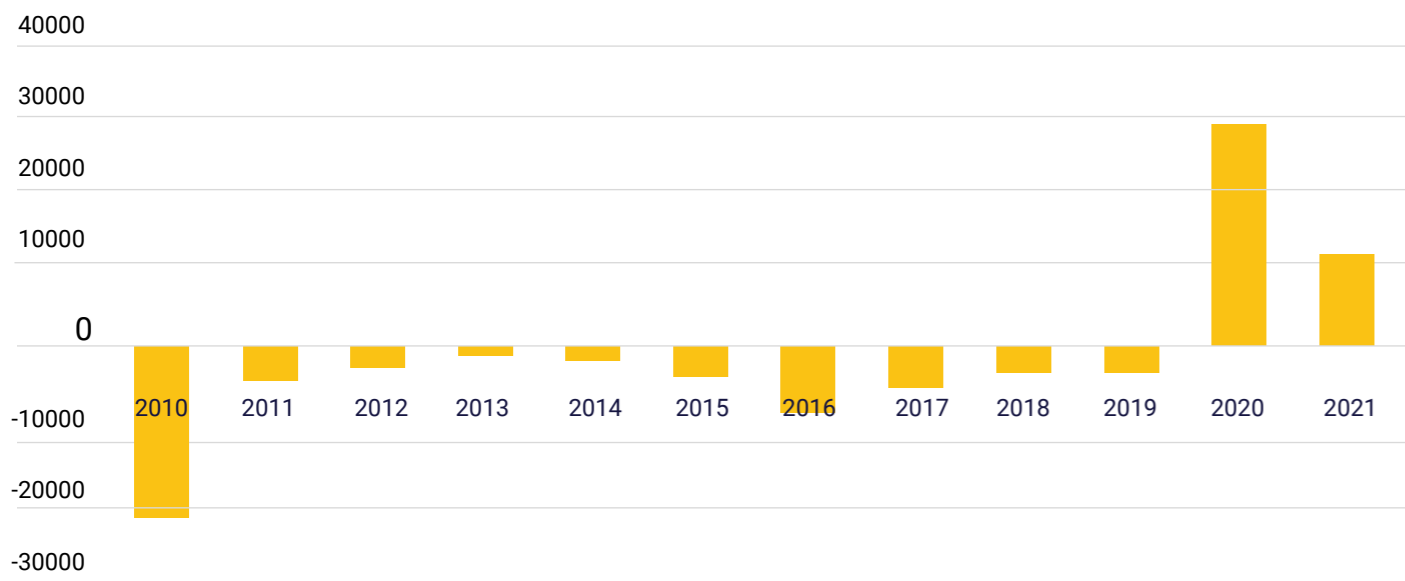
European period: from the mid-2010s to the beginning of the migrant crisis – EU accession gave Bulgarian residents the possibility of visa-free travel to 150 countries in the world in 2007, as well as inclusion in the European Union labor market in 2014. During this period, the most motivated migrants, who left the country even earlier, started to legalize their status. New migrants moved to other European Union countries as citizens of the European Union. On the other hand, during this period there was also an influx of population, because a certain number of Bulgarians decided to return to the country due to a better situation and greater expectations after joining the European Union, but residents from the surrounding countries applied for Bulgarian citizenship in large numbers. From the moment of inclusion in the common labor market of the European Union, a higher percentage of emigrants are men.

The period of the migrant/refugee crisis: 2014–2016 – Bulgaria was on the Balkan route, and in the political discourse the crisis was seen not as humanitarian but as security, which greatly influenced the population's attitudes towards immigrants.

Graph 4 shows that after an initially very low migration balance, when it amounted to 24.190, net migration was relatively stable and that the differences between the number of immigrants and the number of emigrants decreased until 2013, when this difference reached a minimum and when only 1108 more migrants left the country than entered it. Since 2010 was a post-crisis year, it can be assumed that such a large difference between the number of immigrants and the number of emigrants is the result of a large number of people leaving the country due to economic reasons, and the reduction came as the effects of the crisis began to be felt less and less. In Bulgaria, the period of economic crisis coincided with the date of accession to the European Union, so that these two factors increased the number of departures from the country. After the re-growth of the number of emigrants in relation to the number of immigrants in the period of the migrant crisis, there follows a decrease that lasted until 2020, when the number of immigrants was greater than the number of emigrants for the first time in ten years.

During 2020, the largest number of returnees were persons with Bulgarian citizenship who, due to the uncertain situation that came with the coronavirus pandemic, decided to return to the country. The trend of the return of Bulgarian citizens to Bulgaria continued in 2021, but to a slightly lesser extent. There is still no information on whether the individuals who returned to Bulgaria during the pandemic stayed there and what their further intentions are in terms of staying in the country or going abroad.¹¹

11 National statistical institute, Bulgaria



Graph 4 – Net migration in Bulgaria from 2010 to 2021

Source: National statistical institute, Bulgaria

A certain progress in terms of migration trends is visible (even if 2020 and 2021 are excluded), because, in addition to reducing the difference between the number of immigrants and the number of emigrants, the number of persons with Bulgarian citizenship returning to the country is increasing from year to year, that is, the number of return migrants is gradually increasing. The number of return migrants increased from 4.964 to 23.555 from 2014 to 2019, that is, in the period of half a decade.¹² Among the returnees in the last decade, there were more men than women. In terms of education level, the share of returnees with higher education among individuals aged 25–64 in 2014 was 23%, which is slightly below the 30% in Estonia (Garrote-Sanchez, 2021).

An increased number of immigrants and an increased number of emigrants may be a sign that the number of circular migrants is increasing. A rather high percentage of circular migrants is also confirmed by data from the RMSSEM survey from 2017. Namely, 60% of all respondents (return migrants) pointed out that they plan to stay in Bulgaria permanently, about 12% of them to leave the country again, but this time permanently. The remaining 28% of the respondents are individuals who have returned, but intend to live and work outside the country again for a certain period – that is, 28% of return migrants are circular migrants, that is, they intend to be (Misheva, 2021).

The countries from which the largest number of emigrants return are Germany, from which a total of about 25% of return migrants return, the United Kingdom from which a little less than 20% of them re-emigrate, Greece with about 13% of return migrants, Spain with about 9% and Italy from which about 8% of all return migrants in Bulgaria return.

Return migrations in Bulgaria have a positive effect on the position of these persons on the labor market. Namely, the percentage of people who started their own business increased three times among return migrants, while the number of self-employed persons increased by about two times. Due to the life cycle, the number of retired people is increasing significantly (Krasteva, 2019).

As the most common reasons for returning to the country, respondents cited the desire to be with family and close people, as many as 80% of them. For 40% of return migrants, another very significant reason for returning to Bulgaria is the impossibility of finding a job and professional fulfillment in the country they immigrated to (Bakalova et al, 2018). Although economic factors are also of great importance, emotional factors are far more significant. Namely, people most often emigrate for economic reasons, but return for emotional reasons.

12 National statistical institute, Bulgaria

Legislation

The body dealing with issues of migration and migration policies is the National Council on Migration Policy, established in accordance with the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration, Asylum and Integration (2011–2020). This body is chaired by the Minister of Interior. The ministries involved in the work of this body are:¹³

- ◆ Ministry of Labor and Social Policy;
- ◆ Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- ◆ Ministry of Interior;
- ◆ Ministry of Justice.

This structure is in line with the need to approach the problem in an interdisciplinary manner – that professions and representatives from different ministries contribute. In addition, there are government agencies that deal with these issues, such as the National Security Agency and the Refugee Agency.

The National Council on Labor Migration and Labor Mobility carries out activities aimed at implementing policies in the field of labor migration and labor mobility in connection with the employment of Bulgarian citizens abroad and motivating them to return to the country and seek employment in Bulgaria.

The following shows the organizational structure of the institutions dealing with migration issues in Bulgaria.

Migration policies and legal documents related to migration are conditioned by international regulations, as well as European Union documents, with which it is necessary to harmonize policies, considering Bulgaria’s membership in the European Union. The migration policy of Bulgaria is therefore coordinated and synchronized with the common migration policy of the European Union, which guarantees the freedom of movement of people and labor.

One of the more significant legal documents in the context of circular migration is the Law on Bulgarians living outside the Republic of Bulgaria (SG No. 30/11/04/2000). In accordance with this law, the state undertakes to provide assistance to persons of Bulgarian origin or citizenship in creating favorable conditions for life outside the country. Accordingly, one of the goals of this Law is to preserve the Bulgarian identity through the organization of cultural events, language courses and the like. In this way, their relationship with the motherland is maintained and preserved and potentially encourages a change in their status from emigrant to circular or return migrant. This Law also mandates that Bulgaria should provide assistance to persons of Bulgarian origin, who do not have Bulgarian citizenship, to return to Bulgaria through easier obtaining of a residence permit (Zareva, 2018).

Another important Law in the context of circular migration is the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship (SG, No. 126/1998), which regulates the conditions for obtaining, revocation and renewal of citizenship. The law makes it easier for people of Bulgarian origin to obtain Bulgarian citizenship, and allows dual citizenship for its citizens.

Also, the Act on Migration and Labor Mobility mandates the facilitation of access to the labor market for persons of Bulgarian origin, while

13 The Organisation of Asylum and Migration Policies, Bulgaria

the Law on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications regulates the conditions for the recognition of professional qualifications acquired in the countries of the European Union or in a third country, which facilitates the return of persons who professionally trained abroad.

In the last 15 years, the issue of migration has also been regulated by special strategies.

The National Strategy for Migration and Integration (2008–2015), as the first strategic goal, states the attraction of persons with Bulgarian citizenship living abroad and persons with foreign citizenship but Bulgarian origin to permanently return to the country. The strategic goal defined in this way ignores circular migrants as an important group of migrants in the current conditions of life at the global level. The Strategy states that a return program should be developed.

In order to harmonize with the migration policy of the European Union, this Strategy has been replaced by the Strategy for Migration, Asylum and Integration (2011–2020), whose focus has shifted to protecting the borders of the European Union and stopping illegal migration. Two of the 12 priorities within the Strategy dealt with the return of migrants of Bulgarian origin. The first is direct – attracting highly qualified Bulgarian citizens-emigrants and persons of Bulgarian origin to permanently return to the country, while the second is related to the issue of return migration only indirectly and refers to integration and creation of inclusive conditions.

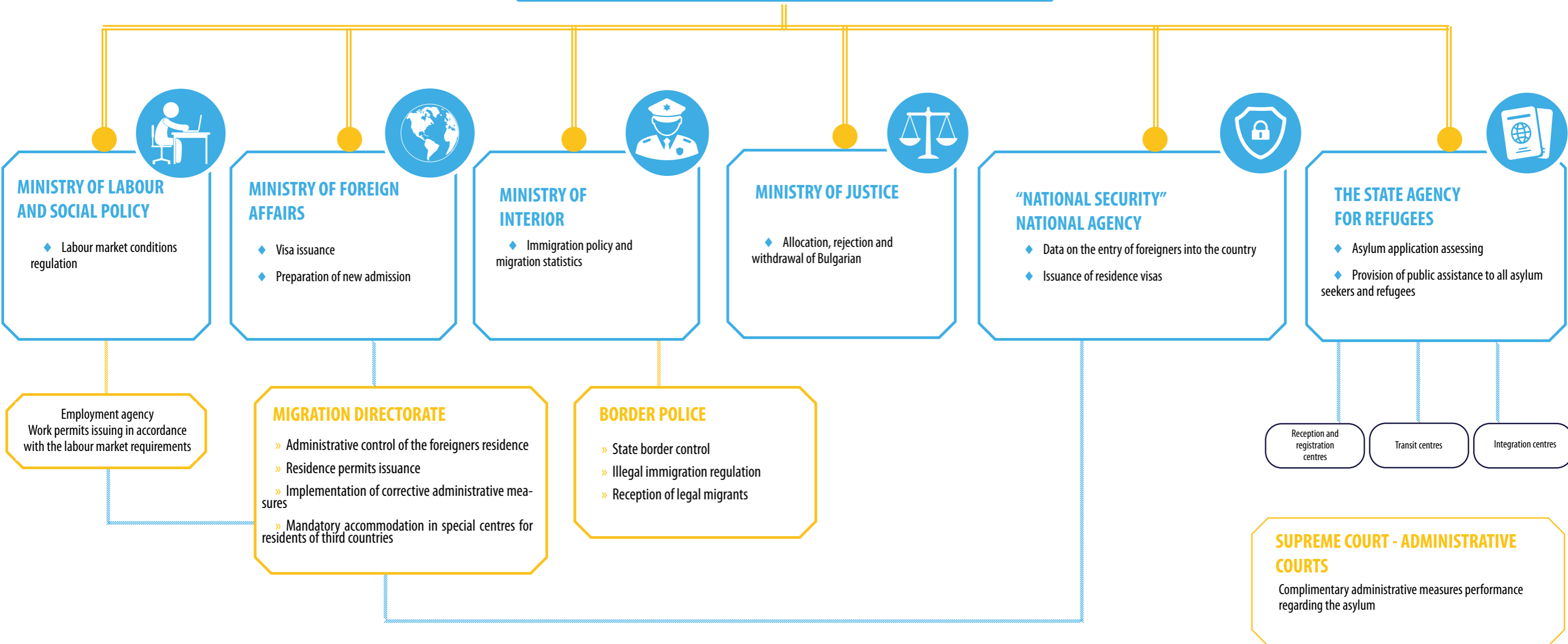
Although the aforementioned strategies were adopted, their implementation was not at a satisfactory level, and above all, the accompanying action plans were not adopted. An action plan was adopted for 2018, but many of the measures foreseen in this plan remained unfulfilled.

National Strategy on Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2025 was adopted as a new national strategic document in the field of migration management. The term “integration” is not included in the title as was the case with previous strategies.¹⁴ This Strategy omits the issue of return migration in the sense in which previous strategic documents dealt with that issue and mostly deals with the refugee crisis, on the one hand, and the impact of the pandemic on migration, on the other. It points out that there is a certain degree of interdependence between the labor markets of the European Union countries, that is, the dependence on circular migrants, which was shown through the lack of labor in agriculture in Western European countries during the first year of the pandemic.

14 National strategy on migration of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2025



**COUNCIL OF MINISTERS
NATIONAL COUNCIL ON MIGRATION POLICY**



Graph 5 – Schematic representation of the organizational framework for migration management in Bulgaria

Returnees supporting measures

In order to encourage circular migration, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy opened centers for labor and social issues at embassies in many European cities – Berlin, London, Madrid, Athens, Nicosia, Dublin, Vienna, Bern. In the following period, it is planned to open these agencies in Helsinki and Paris, as well as in other countries outside the European Union. These agencies organize job fairs abroad for jobs in Bulgaria. Positive effects were achieved, as persons of Bulgarian origin abroad and citizens of Bulgaria were much better informed about their rights, as well as about employment opportunities.¹⁵

The platform that is the result of the initiative of a group of citizens in partnership with private companies and municipalities, *Bulgaria Wants You*¹⁶, launched the *DNA Card – return ticket* project which targets people with Bulgarian citizenship abroad who want to return to Bulgaria. From June 1, Bulgaria wants you will offer special job ads, according to which new employees will receive a registration bonus, in addition to a salary of at least BGN 10,000.¹⁷ This bonus will be paid directly by the employer (some of the partner companies) to the job candidate who is highly desirable for the company, only after concluding the employment contract – when he returns to work in Bulgaria. The program is aimed at certain jobs that the company is ready to offer to qualified experts who would share with them the significant experience gained abroad.

15 Ministry of labor and social policy

16 Bulgaria wants you portal

17 Approximately 5.100,00 EUR

EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW

Dr. Mihaela Mihailova Misheva, Department of Economic Sociology at the University of World and National Economy

There is no specific state strategy in Bulgaria for Bulgarians who want to return to the country. The existing strategy covers illegal migrants and those Bulgarians living in so-called historical areas.

According to the results of her research, the reasons for returning are mainly nostalgia, connections with friends and family. But when they return to Bulgaria, the biggest problem for them is that they cannot find a job, often their savings have already been spent. The state does not have any special measures and mechanisms to help them when they return to the country. Non-governmental organizations (for example Tuk Tam) are mostly present there. This is one of the reasons why they become circular migrants because they constantly go abroad for work, especially seasonal workers like those who go to work in Greece, and there are also those employed in the IT industry who go to Bucharest during the working week and are in Sofia for the weekend.

Generally, there are policies and measures, but they only remain a dead letter on paper (*paper policy*).

During the coronavirus crisis, many had to return to the country, and there is no information about what happened to them afterwards, whether they stayed in Bulgaria or not.

Lili Merdzanova, communications expert, non-governmental organization Tuk-Tam

Her organization works with Bulgarians abroad and tries to connect them, primarily through an online platform. In her opinion, it is not important where Bulgarians live, it is important that they are connected and have ways to communicate with each other and help each other, wherever they are.

They collected money for scholarships for students who want to study abroad and upon their return will have the obligation to stay in Bulgaria for three years.

They also have a mentoring program to help each other. They also conducted online campaigns related to raising awareness about why it is important to vote in elections.

She is not aware of any state initiatives that help returnees, but they were recently included in focus groups that the government launched with the intention of passing a law for Bulgarians living abroad. The intention is also to create a platform for reporting residence when people go abroad.

Returnees are most concerned about the quality of life in the country, the quality of education, that they can find a good job where advancement is possible and a good salary. In the last ten years, which she spent abroad before returning to Bulgaria in 2020, a lot has changed in the country, a lot of international companies have come, and she

believes that for those who return to the country, work can be found in the private sector.

The Bulgaria wants you platform contains a salary calculator that can be used to calculate how much the current salary in Bulgaria corresponds to, for example, the current salary in England.

Dr. Zvezda Vankova, Faculty of Law, University of Lund

Most government measures are only dead letter. In the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, there was a person who dealt with the subject of migration and Dr. Vankova believes that the policies and measures were, for the most part, a reflection of his initiative and enthusiasm. But that person recently passed away and it is not sure who is dealing with it now and if anyone, considering the turbulent political situation in the country for some time (frequent changes of governments). Her impression is that the state does not do much and that non-governmental organizations play a more important role. Cultural events and language courses are what the state finances. There is no organized state support outside of these few measures for people who want to return to the country, as well as budget funds allocated for some additional measures. Additionally, there are many legal obstacles for those who wish to return. For example, some doctors wanted to return to Bulgaria to help their country, but then the question of regulating their seniority arose. Practical questions arose: where do they pay taxes, contributions. Labor relations issues remain complicated even when workers move between EU member states. They cannot be solved through a legislative framework that only refers to migration.

She believes that, until some things change in Bulgaria, first of all quality public services (education, healthcare) and until the entire socio-economic and political situation changes for the better, a significant number of people will not return to the country.

IRELAND

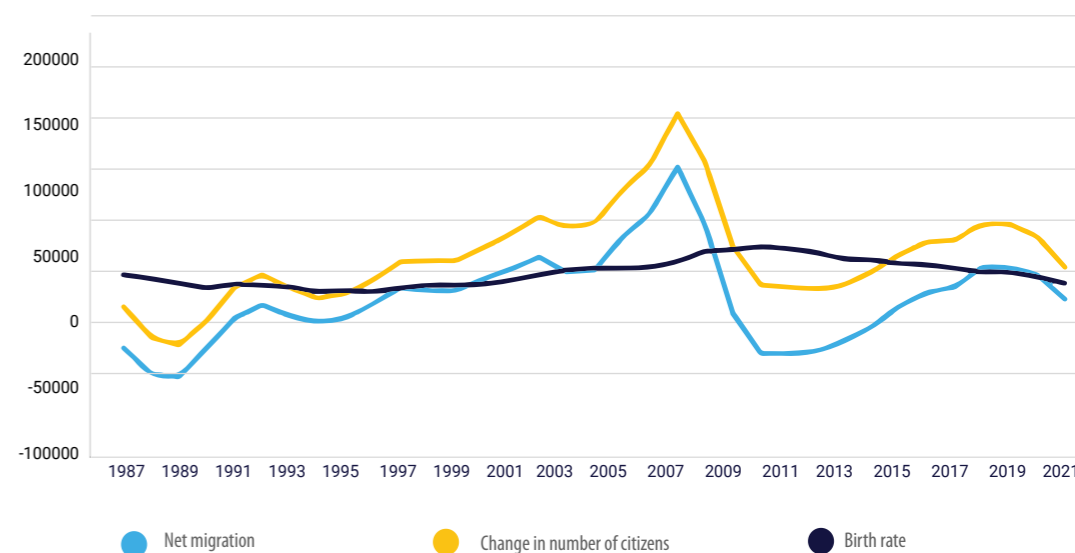
OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION AND LEGISLATION

Migration trends

The roots of Irish emigration date back to the 18th century, so the Irish diaspora, formed in the countries to which the Irish traditionally emigrate, is huge and deeply rooted. If we look at the narrower definition, according to which only people with Irish citizenship are considered the diaspora, it numbers about 3 million people. However, if a broader definition is considered, the Irish diaspora numbers as many as 100 million people, which is about 20 times more than the current population of the country. The Irish diaspora is the largest in the USA (33 million), followed by Great Britain (15 million Irish), as well as in Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Vankova, 2020).

It was the departure of Irish people abroad that was decisive for the significant decline in the number of inhabitants that lasted until the 60s of the 20th century, and the slowdown of outgoing migration and the turn towards positive net migration happened only thirty years later. The number of inhabitants decreased from the beginning of the 1800s until 1961, when a minimum of only 2.8 million inhabitants was reached. It is estimated that in the period from 1801 to 1921, about 8 million people left Ireland (Vankova, 2020). Since 1961, the population has been increasing, and last year Ireland reached the figure of 5 million inhabitants for the first time since the mid-1800s. This dynamic of the number of inhabitants is partly a consequence of the positive rate of natural increase, which is not the case with a large number of countries in Europe, but also of positive net migration.

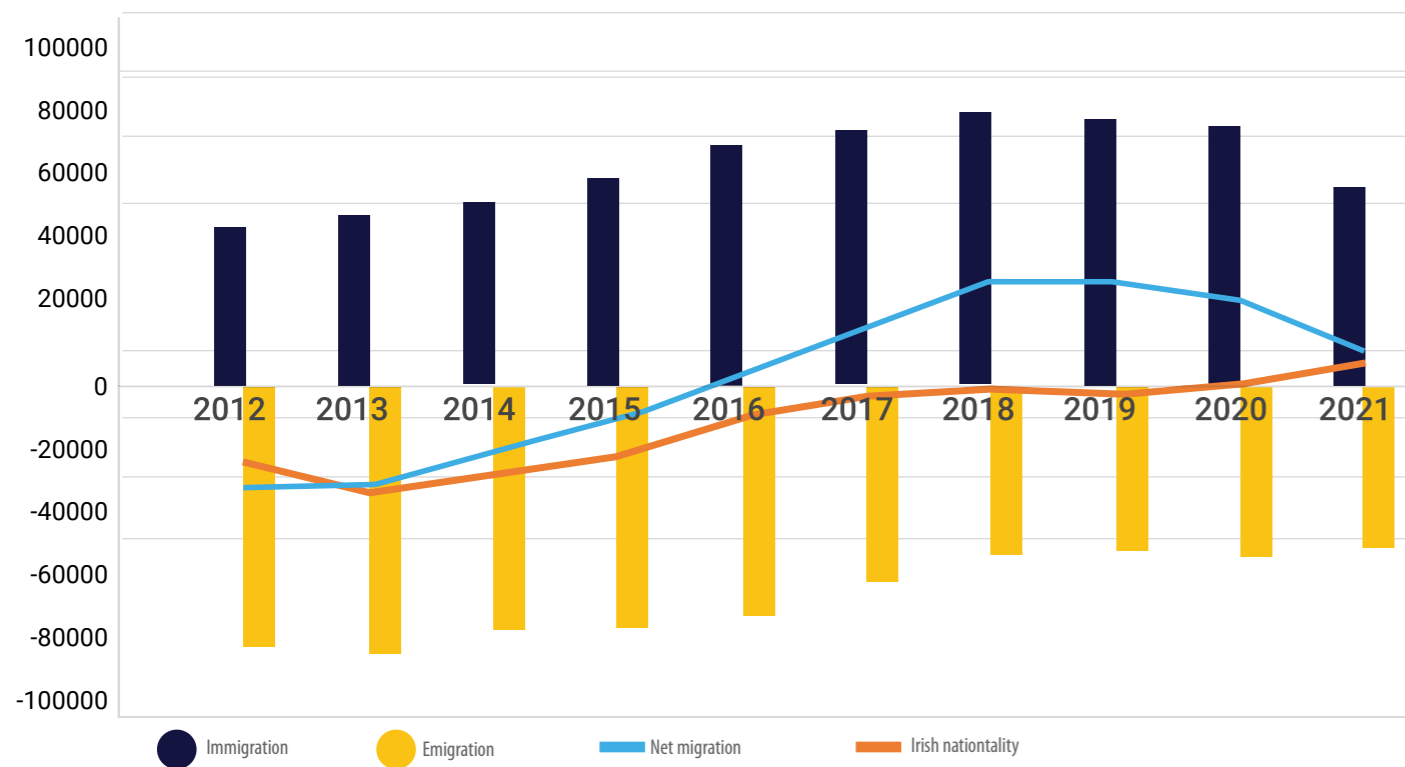
Graph 6 shows the dynamics of population change in Ireland over a period of three decades. As the rate of natural increase is relatively stable (although a slowdown has been noticeable in the last ten years), changes in population largely reflect changes in net migration. Net migration has been positive and increasing since the beginning of the 1990s, reaching its peak in 2007, when 104,800 more people immigrated to Ireland than emigrated from it. This period is marked in the literature as the period of the *Celtic tiger*, when the country achieved enviable economic results with a double-digit GDP growth rate. After that period, net migration began to decline, primarily with the beginning of the world economic crisis in 2008.



Graph 6 – Structure of population change in Ireland from 1987 to 2021

Source: Central statistics office, Ireland

With the recovery of the economy comes the growth of net migration, almost throughout the next decade, but the results were less than expected (Graph 7). At the same time, emigration decreased and stabilized in 2018. After the start of the pandemic in 2020, the immigration rate started to decrease, while the emigration rate remained more or less unchanged. The growth in the number of immigrants in the years after 2013 can also be explained by the large number of Irish people who returned to the country from Great Britain, where a referendum on leaving the European Union was held that year. This was also reflected in the net migration of the Irish population because the difference between the number of Irish immigrants and the number of Irish emigrants is getting smaller and smaller until 2020, so that finally the number of immigrants will exceed the number of emigrants in the first year after the coronavirus.



Graph 7 – Number of immigrants, number of emigrants and net migration from 2012 to 2021

Source: Central statistics office

In the period from 2009 to 2016, there was an increase in the participation of highly educated individuals among emigrants from Ireland, while the participation of those with an intermediate or lower level of education decreased significantly. At the same time, among the returnees there is a higher participation of the highly educated. Namely, according to a survey conducted in 2017, among individuals who lived outside of Ireland for at least a year and then decided to return, 61% of them have a university degree, while around 22% of them have a high school or lower level of education (O’Leary et al, 2016).

Legislation

Until the last decade of the 20th century, the Irish government was hesitant to create concrete initiatives aimed at its diaspora. Certain efforts regarding the return of emigrants were made in the 1950s, but more serious activities began only in 1984. Before the *Emigrant Support Program (ESP)* was established in 1984, the problems of emigrants and their motivation to return to Ireland were dealt with exclusively by the Catholic Church (Hickman, 2020).

Four government departments manage migration in Ireland:

- ◆ Department of Justice;
- ◆ Department of enterprises, trade and employment;
- ◆ Department of children, equality, disability, integration and youth and
- ◆ Department of foreign affairs.

Ireland does not participate in the legislation of the European Union, because in accordance with Title V of the Treaty on Ireland, it exercised its option to participate in the the Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU) and the European Community Regulations (Reception Conditions), which entered into force on 30 June 2018 (European Commission, 2020).

Ireland is also subject to the Dublin Regulation (EU Regulation 604/2013). The European Union Regulations (Dublin System) entered into force on 6 March 2018, further strengthening the Dublin Regulation and repealing earlier regulations from 2014 and 2016 (European Commission, 2020).

The field of migration at the national level is regulated through several laws, including the Illegal Immigrants Act of 2000, as well as the Immigration Act, which was first enacted in 1999 and subsequently amended in 2003 and 2004. Another significant law is the Law on Employment Permits, adopted in 2006, and which indirectly deals with migration.

The Department of Justice works with the Department of Health, the Department of social welfare and the Department of education and other government agencies and offices to implement a migration policy that will ensure that the country’s needs are met in terms of employment, tourism and humanitarian responses to migration.

Since 2014, the position of Minister for Overseas Development Aid and Diaspora has appeared for the first time, but he was appointed within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. His role is reflected, first of all, in presenting the needs of the population in the diaspora to the Government. Within this department is The Irish Abroad Unit, which manages the Support Program for emigrants.

When it comes to current strategic documents that deal with migration issues, primarily in the context of circular and return migrants, the most important strategies are the *Diaspora Strategy*¹⁸ and the *Migrant Integration Strategy*¹⁹.

The strategy uses a broad definition of the diaspora, according to which members of the diaspora are considered to be all persons who have ties to Ireland and Irish culture, whether they are individuals who have emigrated from Ireland, persons who have Irish ancestry but were born abroad or persons which, in a way, nurtures the Irish tradition.²⁰ Broadly understood in this way, the Irish diaspora includes millions of people.

This strategy does a lot to preserve Irish culture and connect Irish people who live in Ireland, but above all those who live around the world, all with the aim of achieving economic and cultural benefits, both for the state and for the diaspora.

The strategy for the integration of migrants deals, to a much greater extent, with the issues of integration of migrants coming from third countries, than with the re-integration of Irish emigrants.

Returnees supporting measures

There are several different measures in Ireland that either directly or indirectly encourage greater circular migration, primarily through creating a more favorable environment for returning to the country and creating a sense of belonging to the country, even when an individual lives abroad, or when he occasionally resides abroad, and occasionally in Ireland.

One of the initiatives of the Irish government, which was first organized in 2013, is The Gathering. The aim of this event was to mobilize the Irish diaspora to return to the country and contribute positively to the development of the national brand.

One of the types of support available to Irish people is aimed at entrepreneurs and businessmen of Irish origin abroad. The Irish Government

seeks to support business associations and networks of Irish businessmen around the world. There are hundreds of associations of Irish businessmen in the world, and some of the most important are located in London, Belfast and New York, and the Irish government provides some of them with both expert and financial assistance (Hickman, 2020).

A key feature of Irish citizenship is that children are automatically granted citizenship when born outside Ireland, as long as at least one parent has Irish citizenship. Consequently, in order to obtain an Irish passport, there is no need to obtain a Certificate of Birth in Ireland, but a foreign Certificate of Birth is sufficient (Hickman, 2020). This is one of a series of measures that facilitate and speed up administrative procedures and thus simplify the process of returning to the country for those who want to return, that is, a measure that allows individuals to become circular migrants. It has been made easier to apply for assistance such as child allowance for people temporarily staying abroad, health and social insurance during their stay in Ireland, and the like.

The most economically vulnerable individuals receive financial assistance upon their return to the country. In order to receive this aid, it is necessary to prove that Ireland is their place of residence again. This assistance is not based on nationality, but is available to all persons who return to Ireland after a certain time, if they meet the so-called “*The Habitual Residency Condition*” (Hickman, 2020). When this condition is met, individuals have the right to receive various types of social benefits, including various forms of pension, assistance for parents and the like.

*Emigrant Support Programme*²¹ platform is a place where all Irish people who intend to return to the country can be informed about everything they need to return (employment, enrollment in school, exchange of driver’s license, finding an apartment, etc.) , as well as about existing support programs. On the site, a lot of information is available in the form of videos explaining administrative procedures. This program was developed by the Government of Ireland.

Among the non-governmental organizations dealing with these issues *The National Youth Council of Ireland*²² stands out. They deal with the usual problems of young people, and to some extent the possibilities for their return to Ireland. In addition, *Crosscare*²³ is an organization that deals with the integration of migrants and the provision of assistance, both to residents of third countries and to Irish people who wish to return to the country. On its website, this organization provides all the necessary information to potential return migrants regarding the rights they have upon returning to the country, as well as the ways they can exercise them. In addition, they provide support in the process of re-integration, the process of finding employment, enrolling children in school and the like.

Living abroad can be an additional source of stress, as can returning to the country and adjusting. *Helplink Mental Health*²⁴ is a charity that provides free online psychological counseling for Irish people living abroad, returnees or circular migrants.

18 [Diaspora strategy, 2020](#)

19 [Migrant integration strategy, 2020](#)

20 [Diaspora strategy, 2020](#)

21 [Emigrant Support Programme](#)

22 [National Youth Council of Ireland](#)

23 [Crosscare](#)

24 [Helplink Mental Health](#)



DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER FOR OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT AID AND DIASPORA

- Includes diplomatic and consular affairs overseas network govern by the Department of justice



WORKPLACE RELATIONS COMMISSION

◆ Independent body that regulates rights for employees and perform inspections which is related to compliance with regulations within the area



GARDA NATIONAL IMMIGRATION BUREAU

◆ GNB is responsible for all police activities regarding immigration, such as deportation, border control detention and immigration issues.



DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISES, TRADE AND EMPLOYMENT



DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

◆ ISD is a functional part of the Department of justice and deals with international protection, immigration and citizenship issues.
◆ ISD is a unit that provides information to Irish travelers and process data on travelers outside of EU.



TUSLA

◆ Child and family agency responsible for unaccompanied minors in order to enhance their wellbeing and to give protection to children and family services



DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN, EQUALITY, DISABILITY, INTEGRATION AND YOUTH

◆ Accommodation services within international protection

INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION APPEALS TRIBUNAL

This tribunal is independent agency that makes decisions regarding applications for international protection status, which were considered inadmissible by the International protection office.

COURT DECISIONS

All administrative decisions are supervised by the Supreme court and Court of appeals

LEGAL HELP COUNCIL

Legal help council provides legal help to applicants for international aid and gives advice regarding other immigration issues.

EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW

Irill Glynn, Associate Professor at University College Dublin

After the end of the Celtic Tiger period (between 1995 and the start of the economic crisis in 2008), the middle class left Ireland to maintain their level of living standards. Mostly engineers left, people from the construction sector, which grew especially during the period of economic growth. After the 2008 crisis, it is believed that half of the 200.000 people who came to the country were of non-Irish origin, that is, there were also individuals from Eastern Europe who came to Ireland after their countries joined the European Union in 2004.

Unlike the 1950s, when mostly people with low qualifications left Ireland, in this latest wave after 2008, over 50% of emigrants had a university education. The largest number went to Australia, England and Canada. After 2014, when the economic situation improved a little, not as many people returned as they expected. This can be seen on the basis of the census that is conducted every five years.

Although Ireland is known for the arrival of multinational companies that are attracted by the favorable tax system, in his opinion the Irish are at a loss because they only know English, unlike a Bulgarian, for example, who can cover a part of the Eastern European market in the sales department.

According to his opinion, the main reason for people's return is economic, although there are also emotional reasons. The main obstacle for the return, especially of young people, is the impossibility of getting their own real estate. There is a major housing crisis going on in the form of a large number of homeless people, almost ten thousand of them, apartment rental prices are very high (the supply of apartments is small), and housing loans are also unfavorable. The health system is bad. These are the reasons why young people hesitate to return to the country.

The government's initiative, which began with the establishment of the Ministry for the Diaspora, was motivated by the desire to take money from Irish emigration, to attract money, first of all, for investments. They also supported the organization of several festivals, but that was mostly all.

Unlike Eastern European countries, fertility rates are much higher in Ireland, so the problem of the young population leaving is not as acute as in the East. Plus, Ireland receives more migrants than these countries.

Marie-Claire Mc Aleer, Head of Research and Policy at the National Youth Council of Ireland

The conference they organized in 2015 and the publication that resulted from that event, *Time to go*, attracted a lot of attention from the public and politicians. But four years later, looking at the report of another organization *Return migration*, she saw that the reasons for the departure of young people were the same, that nothing significant had changed.

According to the data, the unemployment rate is currently the lowest among young people, NEET (*not in education, employment nor training*) there are jobs that do not offer the possibility of advancement, and there is also a housing crisis. There is a precariat, so these are all reasons why young people do not return. Teachers cannot live in Dublin because of the high cost of housing.

She thinks that the reasons for returning are dual: economic and emotional.

When asked whether the Irish participate in the platform economy, she states that she has no information, as did the previous interlocutor. They do not know if this increases the opportunities for young people to stay in the country and work for an employer abroad.

The Department of Foreign Affairs supports them and other non-governmental organizations, and she thinks that this is a good approach, because in this way the state is relieved of that part of the work. During the crisis caused by the coronavirus, a number of people wanted to return to the country and the Ministry of Diaspora helped them.

Historically speaking, although migration from Ireland was intense, it was not much talked about in public, it was not a popular topic. *The Global Diaspora Policy* was the first document and the first initiative of its type. The issue of voting rights has become particularly topical, especially in the presidential elections. In 2015, the Irish government published its first version of its diaspora policy, entitled *Global Irish. Irish Diaspora Policy* (Hickman, 2020). The very name of this policy indicates how Ireland sees its country and its people, not as an island of five million people, but as a network and community of five million people in the country, but also another 70 million people around the world who were born in Ireland or have Irish origins. This inclusive way of looking at the population does not create a stigma for emigrants to return to their country because they know that they will feel welcome there. This climate is also suitable for circular migrants.



CONCLUSION

A common characteristic of all three countries selected in this study is exposure to emigration flows over several decades. Bulgaria and Estonia experienced the last major wave of emigration after joining the European Union, as opportunities to find work in the old member states increased. Additionally, all three countries experienced increased migration after the 2008 economic crisis. The experiences of these countries confirm earlier empirical findings that migration is primarily motivated by economic reasons. Data on the socioeconomic profile of returnees are scarce, but certain studies suggest that in Estonia and Ireland, the share of the highly educated in the total number of returnees is higher compared to the total population of emigrants.

All three countries have a legislative framework that supports the return of emigrants, but it is more developed in Estonia and Ireland compared to Bulgaria. In Estonia, the state plays a strong role in creating a support network for returnees, in Ireland it is divided between the governmental and non-governmental sectors, while in Bulgaria the non-governmental sector provides most of the support for those who want to return to the country. However, among the interviewed representatives of the state and the academic community, there is an opinion that the decision to return mostly depends on the general socio-economic situation, and that measures to attract emigrants to return to the country are of limited scope.

In all three countries, there are elements of maintaining cultural ties with the mother country through financial support from the state for holding cultural events and language courses. Estonia, in addition, through digital services, tries to facilitate access to information for those who are thinking about returning to the country, and also offers financial resources for resettlement for those who miss it. It also provides psychological support for returnees, as it happens that the environment characterizes their return as a failure.

Bulgaria has several initiatives that are the result of the activities of the private and non-governmental sector and are mainly oriented to better connecting with Bulgarians abroad and providing information related to finding a job or starting one's own business.

Despite a long tradition of emigration and several times more Irish people living abroad than in Ireland, the government appointed a minister for diaspora affairs for the first time only in 2014. The state offers financial assistance for returnees who are in poor financial condition and an easier procedure for acquiring the rights that residents also have. It strives to make the information needed by returnees to start life in Ireland more easily accessible through portals and events that bring together the diaspora and representatives of government institutions and the private sector. The state also financially supports the work of non-governmental organizations that deal with these issues.

In short, the experiences of the three analyzed countries can be useful for public policy makers and decision makers in Serbia. In particular, the following should be taken into account:

- ◆ Maintaining the connection with the diaspora and emigrants is of key importance for their permanent or temporary return, and therefore intensive work should be done on maintaining and deepening these connections. Within the current Serbian Strategy on Economic Migration, to a certain extent, it is recognized that migration should not be hindered, but that it is necessary to create conditions for the return and circulation of migrants, in order to transfer the social capital acquired abroad. In addition to all practical details, it is necessary to create an appropriate atmosphere in society, which favors circular migration.
- ◆ Considering the life habits of circular migrants, which require flexibility and speed, complicated administrative procedures can represent a great burden and disincentive for returning to the home country. Therefore, simpler administrative procedures, digitization and easier acquisition of citizenship and residence permits should be the focus of measures aimed at encouraging circular migration.
- ◆ Returning to the home country after a long period of years can be stressful and complicated. Help is needed at the very beginning and can be provided through the possibility of connecting with individuals who have gone through a similar experience, free psychological counseling and the like.
- ◆ Key relocation information should be quickly and easily accessible, in one place. In Serbia, most of the information is available on the *Returning Point* website, but it needs to be supplemented (information regarding the enrollment of children in kindergarten, information on the conditions for receiving child allowance, etc.).
- ◆ Given the limited importance of economic factors, financial assistance for return migrants is of limited scope. Creating fair and equal conditions on the labor market can produce much better effects as well as the general improvement of economic conditions in the country. Thus, encouraging circular migrations is fully aligned with other goals that focus on improving economic activity.
- ◆ The flexibility of the education system should be increased. Apart from simplified procedures for the recognition of foreign higher education documents, Serbia also lacks a more developed framework for distance education, primarily at lower levels of education, which is especially important for potential circular and return migrants who have small children.
- ◆ Certain issues of great importance for circular migrants have not yet been resolved, even at the level of the European Union, and above all, it is about the level of regulatory compliance in the field of social and health care and tax payment, and therefore work should be done to find more flexible arrangements in these areas and on deepening cooperation between countries in this regard.

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