

Can Belarus Benefit from its Brain Drain?

Although Belarusians have enjoyed the same rights in hiring, pay and social benefits as Russian citizens since 1996, migration from Belarus to Russia more than tripled since 2010.

According to the traditional view on high-skilled migration or brain drain, the home country bears only negative costs as, after investing in their education, the best workers leave to contribute to the economy of more developed countries.

However, it is often the case that highly qualified workers can better fulfill their potential working abroad, increasing their salary, while sending generous remittances and signaling the home government to create more favourable conditions for people to stay. In the case of Belarus, the increased outflow of high-skilled workers puts at risk the country's future economic and human development, if no adequate mechanism for cross-country collaboration is introduced.

Having learned its lesson, neighbouring Russia has already started investing in higher education reforms to foster a culture of entrepreneurship and build on the potential of the Russian diaspora abroad. Minsk should also create opportunities for educated Belarusians abroad to contribute to the local economy and increase its competitiveness by investing in collaborative research projects, creating joint business initiatives and fostering a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Between East and West

The case of Belarus is particularly interesting due to the country's location between two big job markets: the EU and

Russia. Although EU countries offer higher salaries and a friendlier work environment, for the average Belarusian graduate holding a bachelor's degree it is not that easy to compete with the EU citizens who are prioritised for job opportunities. At the same time, going to Russia does not require the knowledge of a foreign language, a work visa, dealing with border control or any other barrier that could prevent Belarusians from easily flowing to another country.

The attractiveness of Russia's job market has grown dramatically since 2011. While Belarusians have enjoyed equal rights in hiring, pay and other social benefits as Russian citizens since 1996, after the presidential elections of 2010, which marked Lukashenka's fourth consecutive term in power, and along with the corresponding financial crisis of 2011, Belarusian migration to Russia more than tripled.

Migration from Belarus to Russia

| Year | 2005 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|--|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Number of people migrated from Belarus to Russia | 6797 | 5865 | 5517 | 4894 | 10182 | 16564 |
| Source: Federal State Statistics Service of Russia | | | | | | |

From Brain Drain to Brain Exchange

Neither charging people for crossing the border nor hindering the emigration of educated people by other means can promote growth and development. If Belarusians cannot go to the West, they will easily leave for Russia, attracted by its higher salaries and broader range of career opportunities.

In an increasingly globalised world, a small country like Belarus may benefit from adopting policies that transform brain drain into brain exchange. However, the government has to be more flexible, allowing emigrants to contribute to the home country's economy without a change of residence.

The results of the survey of more than 60 Belarusians currently residing in the U.S. show that 97 percent of respondents were willing to engage more actively with Belarus, given the existence of appropriate conditions, such as the introduction of dual citizenship, political liberalisation, and higher standards of living.

The story of Iryna, a 26-year old Belarusian illustrates this point. Having graduated from the prestigious University of Geneva with a master's degree, Iryna spent a few years in Belarus working for a human rights NGO, bringing her skills and knowledge to serve her home country. Today, however, she is considering emigrating to the U.S. She explains, '... in Belarus I do not face the kind of competition that would help me achieve more in my profession. Currently, I have better prospects abroad, but regardless of my residence I want to be involved in short-term research projects with local universities and NGOs in Belarus.'

Policies that Matter

An ambitious Skoltech project, the initiative of the Russian government to reform the national economy, foster entrepreneurship and bring back the best human resources, has been often in the news since the inception of the project in 2011, both for good and bad reasons.

Some criticise the project for reasons ranging from embezzlement of money by corrupt individuals to the stereotype of not being able to make profit in Russia in fair ways. But the program has attracted bright students from Europe, Asia and North America and faculty members, including from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), to work collaboratively on the project.

Furthermore, Skoltech has already attracted Russian researchers and professors who worked abroad to join the project. If the project lives up to expectations, it will

jumpstart a brain exchange between developed countries of the West and Russia.

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Because the annual budget of Belarus is much more modest than that of Russia, Minsk cannot count on signing a multi-year collaboration agreement with a university of the MIT's calibre. However, the government can encourage innovation and entrepreneurship and utilise the resources of talented Belarusians who currently live abroad.

A new strategy of the government should involve maintaining ties with the high-skilled Belarusians who left and provide them with flexible opportunities to contribute to the development and growth of their home country. Such contribution can take a variety of forms, from collaborating on research initiatives to launching businesses in Belarus.

Additionally, the government should build on its successful programmes such as the Belarusian High-Tech Park and introduce policies, such as tax exemption, that will enable entrepreneurs to choose Belarus over Russia or another foreign country.

Such measures will not only allow the country to benefit from the brain drain Belarus has been experiencing in the last decades, but will also attract high-skilled workers from the former Soviet Union, the European Union, and the United States to work for the future of a more prosperous Belarus.

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This article won the first prize among three other articles in a recent [Belarus Digest contest](#) for the best article. □