

THE GREAT MIGRATION OF PHYSICIANS FROM ROMANIA - AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH -

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ABSTRACT

The international migration of highly qualified human resources, especially of physicians from Romania is experiencing an ever more alarming growth because of its size and, in particular, of its implications. Adapting to a more and more unpredictable socio-economic environment, the progress achieved in terms of technique and technology, along with the liberalization of the commodities, services and capital markets have generated a lot of new opportunities, as well as new threats for the organizations all over the world. Our research aims at highlighting to what extent the international migration of physicians from Romania can have a strong and severe impact on the prospects of Romania's sustainable economic development. At the end, we formulate a number of proposals, which, in our opinion, could decrease the exodus of physicians to third markets.

KEYWORDS: *brain drain, migration, physicians, retention of highly qualified human resources.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a direct result generated by the Digital Era, we are living in an unpredictable socio-economic environment (State & Toancă, 2016). In order to survive, more and more companies have globalised their strategy, structures, resources and markets, in an attempt to obtain higher economic efficiency (Hitt et al., 2016). The enhanced competition for attracting highly qualified human capital, has prompted governments to adopt special measures in order to attract specialists in fields such as: information and communication technology (IT&C), bio-technology, healthcare, etc. In this conditions, the governmental measures have stimulated the emigration of highly qualified specialists, especially from less developed to more developed economies. Over the last decade, a lot of graduates from Eastern European Countries had a significant inclination towards emigration (Zahra, 2017). This is not a surprising phenomenon if we take into account the limited career opportunities in this region. Consequently, a lot of scientists from Eastern Europe were attracted by the United States, Canada and other Western countries (Dubinski, 2012). It was a phenomenon that encouraged the emigration of many specialists to developed countries. For example, from Romania, over one million residents emigrated between the years 2007 (the year of accession to the European Union - EU) and 2017 (Eurostat, 2017). In 2016 the resident Romanian population numbers went down by 122 thousand people, reaching 19,638 thousand inhabitants. After the negative natural growth, *the second cause of the decrease in the population residing in Romania is represented by the exodus of the human resources to the developed western countries* (Romanian National Statistical Institute, 2017). The demographic aging phenomenon continues to amplify and the gap between the 65 and over year-old population and the young population (0-14) has reached 440,000 people (3,494,000 compared to 3,054,000 people),

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higher by 371,000 people compared to 2016. Practically, during 2016 the aging index went up from 112.1 (2016, January 1) to 114.4 elderly people at 100 young people (2017, January 1). The balance of temporary, long term international migration was negative (-76,208 people). In total, men prevailed both as far as emigration (55.4%) and immigration (53.6%) are concerned (Romanian National Statistical Institute, 2017). According to the data centralized by the *European Forum Alpbach (EFA)*, Romania ranks third in the top of European countries which exported for free highly qualified specialists trained in-country, the first two places being held by Poland and Germany (EFA, 2017). If in other countries the "brain drain" was strongly counterbalanced by immigration, Romania is deeply affected by a net loss of highly qualified human resources (Voicu, 2014). According to the statistics centralized by EFA, between 2003 and 2014, more than 26 thousand highly qualified specialists left Romania in order to work in western states. During the same period, 10,2 thousand people left Hungary, but many specialists came instead, especially from Romania or Slovakia. The lowest specialists' migration rate took place in France which lost only 9,6 thousand people in a decade.

The migration phenomenon was beneficial to the UK, Germany, Belgium, Austria and surprisingly Cyprus (Lima et al., 2016).

It is a sad reality that governments encourage or ignore the free specialists export. Within this context, even from the beginning of our Century the World Bank warned developing countries on the loss of highly trained specialists they would incur soon enough (Sarwar & Lateef, 2016). Practically, the governments of poorer states invest in university education (which is free in many cases, while rich states take advantage of it. As a direct lose, the brain drain reduces considerably the capacity of poor countries to bridge the gap which separates them from the developed ones. Suggesting a possible solution, the World Bank specialists proposed to the states affected by *brain drain* to impose sanctions in the form of financial compensations to be paid by the ones who leave the country after graduation (Shah, 2013). Another possible variant would be to replace the free higher education with a system of scholarships offered by the government to the youth who sign 5-10 years contracts with companies or institutions in their country of origin. We noted that no Romanian government has wanted to tackle this issue and has done something, except for some very pompous declarations of intention.

On the contrary, the free export of specialists was seen by governments as a perfect solution to equilibrate the balance of payments with the money they send to their relatives who remained in the country. Or as another possible solution for the unemployment, in the absence of programmes to stimulate the creation of workplaces for the highly skilled.

In Table 1 we presents a synoptic situation of the share of foreign nationals in the total population in EU countries.

The data in Table 1 indicates that, at the level of 2016, the proportion of foreign nationals in the total of EU countries was 7.55%. The largest share of foreign nationals was in Luxembourg (47.61%). 8 EU Member States have 11.17 (Germany) and 16.42% (Cyprus) citizens coming from other countries and 19 EU member states have between 0.55% (Poland) and 9.5% (Spain) immigrant citizens. Romania had only 0.58% immigrants. Of course, not the percentage shares are relevant, but the number of the population of each EU member state.

2. GOALS, METHODOLOGY, RESULTS

Our research objective consist to establish the situation of the migration phenomenon of physicians from Romania, and to show some measures which can diminish or even eliminate this scourge.

We used as research techniques *the structured questionnaire and the interview.*

Table 1. Share of foreign nationals in the total population - 2016

	Foreign Nationals (%)	Nationals(%)
Luxembourg	47.61	52.39
Cyprus	16.42	83.58
Austria	15.2	84.8
Estonia	14.52	85.48
Latvia	14.28	85.72
Belgium	11.86	88.14
Ireland	11.81	88.19
Malta	11.8	88.2
Germany	11.17	88.83
Spain	9.5	90.5
Great Britain	9.28	90.72
Denmark	8.44	91.56
Sweden	8.42	91.58
Italy	8.21	91.79
EU	7.55	92.45
Greece	7.52	92.48
France	6.92	93.08
Slovenia	5.54	94.46
Netherlands	5.06	94.94
Czech Republic	4.88	95.12
Finland	4.4	95.6
Portugal	3.86	96.14
Hungary	1.54	98.46
Slovakia	1.28	98.72
Bulgaria	1.12	98.88
Croatia	1.11	98.89
Lithuania	0.71	99.29
Romania	0.58	99.42
Poland	0.55	99.45

Source: Eurostat - Statistical Books - Key Figures in Europe - 2018, October 19

The fact that Romania boasts one of the fastest growing economies in the EU that means 5% according to Eurostat at the end of 2017 (Bayer, 2018) cannot counterbalance the problematic combination between the phenomena of an *aging and decreasing population and the departure abroad of young and skilled workers*, which put enormous pressure on the health and pensions systems. It is very clear that our governors need to understand that *Romania needs a proper strategy to convince highly qualified young people to return home* (McGrath, 2017). The same author noted that as the number of those looking for a better life in the West, especially in Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK increased, Romania began to suffer from the brain drain phenomenon. The effect of the departure of Romanians with higher education and top professional skills is felt very intensively. One of the most relevant example is that of physicians. They have emigrated from Romania to more developed countries in the EU, where they found both better working conditions and wages much higher than in the home country. Since 2007, more than 43 thousand employees in the health sector for the training of whom the Romanian state had spent more than 3.5 billion euro have left. (Voiculescu, 2017). Regarding the

measures taken by the Romanian government to encourage the expats to return, Forbes refers to the programme by which each person who repatriates and intends to start a business in Romania receives grants 50 thousand euro, plus consultancy (Vrînceanu, 2017). In spite of this, the Romanians hesitate to return, also because "*Romania is one of the most corrupt countries in the EU and despite a recent offensive against high level corruption, the people continue to display a deep lack of trust in the government*" (Transparency International, 2018).

Our research also took into account the increasing interest in higher medical education, a fact also reflected in the statistical data in Table 2:

Table 2. The situation of physicians graduates in European countries

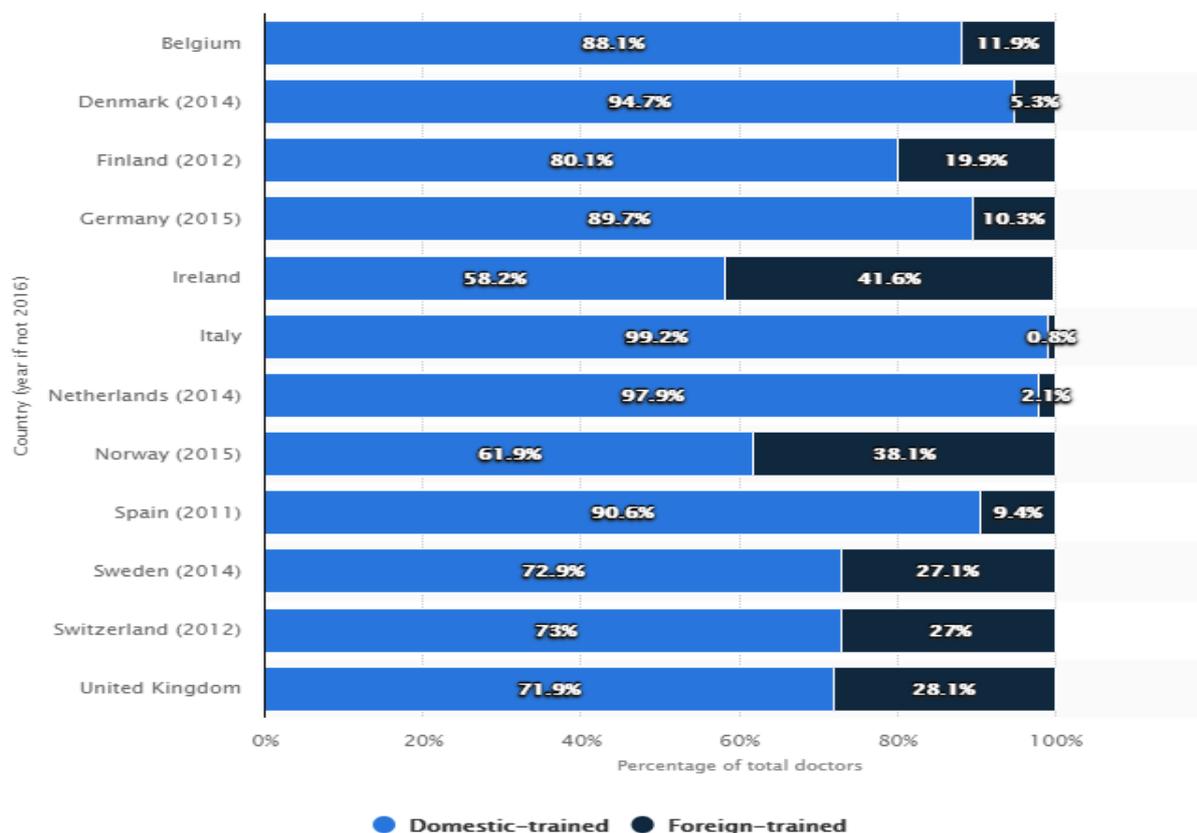
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Germany	8974	8896	8870	8724	9574	9857	10069	9894	9572	-
United Kingdom	4641	4805	5176	5576	6208	6873	7040	7102	7233	7183
Italy	7282	6615	6415	6143	6816	6796	6682	6732	6699	-
Turkey	4380	4487	4494	4532	4899	4872	4753	5087	5138	-
Spain	4009	4211	4064	3951	3841	3922	3882	3874	4017	
Poland	2509	2605	2349	2308	2550	2727	2788	3081	3349	-
ROMANIA	3268	3372	3195	2920	2745	2542	2774	2900	3031	-
Netherlands	1654	1705	1756	1842	2019	2022	2075	2276	2429	-
Czech Republic	1007	1019	1069	1041	1108	1163	1319	1458	1460	-
Portugal	603	694	736	812	1029	1101	1126	1262	1287	-
Hungary	975	1124	1151	1069	1005	960	923	1040	1148	-
Belgium	1193	835	763	681	732	758	851	980	1125	-
Denmark	711	773	818	858	875	808	841	907	937	-
Switzerland	625	675	622	594	612	667	729	813	744	-
Ireland	608	638	594	641	726	673	722	785	738	
Finland	448	345	337	395	367	546	500	603	621	790
Bulgaria	605	542	469	426	455	580	503	597	602	-
Norway	462	465	467	461	497	496	516	551	568	-
Lithuania	264	245	216	259	264	322	395	391	407	-
Latvia	104	85	94	124	111	140	161	179	232	234
Slovenia	163	152	162	128	129	174	162	229	206	-
Estonia	103	97	106	128	106	112	120	149	125	-
Malta	37	48	48	60	60	50	61	59	71	77
Iceland	30	35	44	40	36	49	37	44	44	-
Liechtenstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-
Greece	-	-	1472	1635	1599	-	-	-	-	-
France	3828	3562	3441	3354	3843	-	-	-	-	-
Croatia	410	483	428	451	467	472	-	-	-	-
Luxembourg	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Austria	1599	1732	1693	1604	1976	1968	1906	1673	-	-
Slovakia	573	570	557	509	535	487	460	-	-	-
Sweden	838	798	804	910	932	946	993	802	-	-
Macedonia	156	232	165	186	172	255	204	202		
TOTAL	-	-	52575	52362	56288	-	-	-	-	-

Source: (Eurostat - Statistical Books - Key Figures in Europe - 2017, September 30)

It is very interesting that Romania is the 6th or maximum the 7th between the EU member countries regarding the number of physicians graduates from 2006 to 2015. Generally, each of the cited years other developed EU member countries (Sweden, Austria, Norway, Denmark, etc.) had a very small number (under one thousand) of physicians graduates (except Austria - around 1.6 - 1.9 thousands graduates per year). Romania is therefore one of the top countries in the EU in terms of the number of graduates of medical universities. And also in Romania immediately after the graduation of the university the greatest chance of employment (more than 90%) are for the medical graduates. At the opposite pole there are socio-human sciences graduates.

In another hand we analysed information about the *domestic-* and *foreign-trained* of total physicians in some EU countries (see Table 3):

Table 33 Domestic-trained and foreign-trained physicians in some EU countries (year if not 2016)



Source: Eurostat - Statistical Books - Key Figures in Europe - 2018, October 19

Data presented in Table 3 shows that only in few countries there are around 90% domestic-trained citizens (Germany - 89.7% and Belgium - 88.1%) and only four countries exceeding 90 percentage points of domestic-trained citizens (Italy - 99.2%, Netherlands - 97.9%, Denmark - 94.7%, and Spain - 90.6%).

Our scientific research (held between June and September 2018) consisted in *drawing up and distributing a questionnaire containing 20 questions*, which was answered by 992 physicians from Romania and the *diaspora*.

The answers to this questionnaire have revealed *the following main conclusions*:

1. *Most respondents are male* (572 people, i.e. 57.66% of the total). The age of most of the total respondents falling into the "30 - 40 years old" interval (826 people, i.e. 83.27% of the total);

2. *Most respondents are medical staff with high education* (physicians: 630, representing 63.51% of the total), the other 362 people (26.49% of the total) being medical assistants. The majority of the respondents (784 people, i.e. 79.03% of the total) work in Romania. Only 546 of the respondents are married (55.04% of the total);

3. *For the question ("Why would you leave/have you left Romania?"), most of them (778, meaning 78.43% of the respondents) chose the answer "Because of the salary".* 114 people (11.49%) chose the option "Because of the working conditions", which, in our opinion, is surprisingly serious. Another 100 people (10.08% of the total) chose the option "Other causes" (mentioned as being, mostly: *lack of viable professional development, the precarious and unpredictable environment, a perceived lack of respect of society towards medical doctors, etc.*);

4. Among the *professional priorities for the next 20-30 years*, obviously taking into account the average age (31 - 40 years) of most of the respondents (826 people), are the following: 586 people (59.07% of the total) have chosen the "personal development" variant; 296 people (29.84% of the total) have chosen the answer "better working conditions"; 110 of the participants in the study (11.09% of the total) have chosen the variant "fulfilment in a professionally superior environment than the one in Romania";

5. There were *interesting reactions to the questions referring to the salaries and income in Romania in general*. Thus, *none of the 784 respondents declared himself/herself satisfied with the salary received in Romania but when it came to the question (with anonymous answers obviously) "Do you accept to receive undeserved benefits?"*, there was total honesty on the part of the respondents: 736 (93.88% of the total number who carry out their activity in Romania) gave an affirmative answer. There is no wonder that although many of those who work in the healthcare system complain about the low salaries, there are medical doctors and medical assistants (especially specializing in *Surgery and Neurology*) whose average monthly income (in lei equivalent) is of approximately 10000 and around 2800 euro respectively, which is normally much above the salaries in developed European countries;

6. *Another interesting aspect is the fact that none of the 208 respondents who work outside the country would come back to Romania*, although many statistics maintain that a raise in salaries in Romania would generate the repatriation of a significant number of medical staff. Within this context there are even governmental promises offering each repatriated person a 45 thousand euro allowance (the promises increased from 25 thousand euro in 2009). In our opinion, such aspects are mainly related to electoral publicity and political marketing;

7. *According to the respondents, the priorities which should be first solved at national level are: (a) the money issue; (b) creating some specialized excellence centers (hospitals); (c) adopting long term strategies, which should offer more predictability and implicitly, more stability to the medical system; (d) eliminating the interference of the political in the economic life in general and in the healthcare system in particular. In this sense, although in 27 years there were 30 ministers of health, the reform of the health system is a theoretical wish. If a real reform took place in the healthcare system, many of those who are at the top of the system and its subunits would lose their privileges, which is unacceptable for many;*

8. *Introduction of financial order and discipline*. The majority of our medical doctors professionally they are very good. However, hospital management is extremely poor and in most cases the decisions are of a strictly subjective nature.

The results of our study have also revealed an aspect with a deep dramatic significance for Romania: statistically, *nine Romanians leave their country every hour* (Bulai, 2017). This means that annually, Romania is deserted by almost 79,000 inhabitants, the equivalent of the population of an average-sized town. Those who leave Romania do it in the hope of managing to save money and then come back. Besides the demographic aspects, maybe the most negative reality is the fact that Romania is also losing its investment in the training of human resources, especially that those who are building their future in other countries belong to the category of university graduates. Furthermore, Romania

loses annually over 1 billion euro because of the lack of this workforce. The main reason why young people below 25 are leaving the country is that they are graduates of faculties/ specializations with profiles that do not ensure them work places or for which there are very few jobs available on the labour market. In the medical doctors' case, they emigrate in bigger and bigger numbers, while the interest in medical schools has soared. This is not because they want to practice medicine in Romania, where the salaries and social recognition are considered to be deeply demotivating. Of the 9 Romanians who decide to leave their country every hour, two thirds, meaning 6 people, are medical doctors (Bulai, 2017). From this we can conclude that we invest in training doctors for richer countries, which is *a priori* a nonsense. Therefore, the population of Romania is decreasing at a rapid pace. Only in January 2017, our country lost 13,700 inhabitants (Tudorel, 2017). According to official statistics, at the beginning of 2016, Romania was on the seventh place in the EU population wise: our country's 19.760 million inhabitants accounted for 3.9 per cent of the EU population. Ahead of us were Germany with 16,1% of the EU population; France: 13.1%; UK: 12.8%; Italy: 11.9%; Spain: with 9.1%; Poland: 7.4% (Eurostat, 2017). Unfortunately, it is almost sure that Romania will lose this place; the specialists estimate that during the next 30 years, our country's population will experience a dramatic fall and will not come above 14-15 million inhabitants. More than this, the specialists from the Romanian Statistical National Institute (RSNI) are warning that, in case the politicians do not become actively involved in developing coherent demographic policies, the Romanian people is running the risk of disappearing.

An United Nations Report reveals that in the *diaspora* there are 3.4 million Romanians, representing 17% of the country's population (Alexe, 2018). This is one of the highest percentages for a country that was not affected by armed conflicts, ranking 18th in a top including countries such as Syria, Moldavia, Puerto Rico, etc. At the same time, RSNI estimates that Romania's population has gone down by 2 million people during the last 10 years as a consequence of emigration (Tudorel, 2017).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The main problems facing Romania in terms of *brain drain* and, generally speaking, its economy, are the following:

1. *a negative rate of natural increase* (in 2016 the decrease in population was of more than 75 thousand people); this percentage is the tragic consequence of the precarious situation of our healthcare system. To make things even clearer, the Romanian *NIS* announced that Romania's population went down daily by 247 people in 2016 (Alexe, 2018);
2. *Romania is on the second place in the world when it comes to the human resources migration.* According to the *UN* statistics, the number of Romanians abroad increased annually by over 7% between 2000 and 2015 (Alexe, 2018). The only country which had a higher migration rate was Syria, for an obvious reason - the civil war that is tormenting that country. The Romanians instead are economic migrants and they have come to have the biggest *diaspora* in the EU, after the UK, Germany and Poland. At the end of 2016, 3.4 million Romanian citizens lived abroad, much over the official estimates of the Romanian authorities. Having started in Romania immediately after the revolution in December 1989, the migration phenomenon increased every year, especially after the accession to the EU offered Romanians unlimited access to work places in Western countries. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of Romanians abroad went up on average by 7.3% per year. *Romania is the country with the highest increase in the migration rate due to economic reasons.* In order to have a clearer image, we mention that the Romanian *diaspora* represents 17% of the total population which remained in the country, while in Poland this accounts for only 11%. We have lost 3.4 million employees because of migration. An estimate of the National Bank of Romania (NBR) indicated that in 2014 the GDP would have been higher by 50 billion euro if the Romanians abroad had worked in the country, in the same sectors in which they are employed abroad. Between 2000 and 2016, the Romanians in the *diaspora* sent 60 billion euro home, but after 2008 the amounts

started to gradually go down. The reasons are related, on the one hand, to the crisis which hit the EU after that year and on the other hand to the fact that the Romanians abroad started to bring their families in the countries they had moved to and had no more reasons to send money home (Alexe, 2018);

3. *the phenomenon of the medical doctors' migration has reached most alarming levels, with Romania losing more than 43 thousand of them in only 10 years, while the investment made to train them amounted to more than 3.5 billion euro. Practically, this amount is not an investment, but an irrecoverable loss.* On the other hand, paradoxically, the Romanian government has recently signed a contract with the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)* worth 75 thousand euro, the aim of which is to carry out a study regarding the Romanian communities (including the most important reasons of the emigration and the factors which could trigger the return to their country of origin);

4. *the phenomenon of the medical doctors' migration is doubled by that of the considerable diminishing of the number of highly qualified human resources in healthcare.* The low income level, the very poor working conditions, the acute lack of high-performance equipment, the limited professional development opportunities, plus the system's "negative rate of increase": every year, 3,000 medical doctors join the Romanian healthcare system, but 3,500 leave it as a consequence of retirement, death and especially migration (Alexe, 2018). According to statistics, in 2013 the number of medical human resources who emigrated from Romania equalled the one of medical school graduates: 3,000. Also in 2013, Romania had the lowest number of medical doctors per 100 thousand inhabitants: 130.2, compared to 269.3 per 100 thousand in Denmark, 190.4 per 100 thousand in Germany, 338 per 100 thousand inhabitants in Lithuania, etc. On the other hand, the medical doctors' deficit in Romania at the end of 2016 was of 26.7%, the main causes being not only migration, but also the hospital management incompetence. Incredibly, on top of this there were the lack of concern and/or even the indolence of decision makers.

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