

## **Bosnia: Brain Drain Gathers Pace**

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The exodus of young and talented people may seriously undermine the country's development.

Just like Gerard Depardieu in the Hollywood movie "Green Card", a 30-year old Bosnian entered into a marriage of convenience with his cousin's girlfriend - an American girl - just to get legal entry to the United States. Early this month, he received his visa and left Bosnia-Herzegovina - probably for good.

"I just do not know what to do in Bosnia any more. I tried everything," the man told IWPR before he left, speaking on condition of anonymity. An economics graduate from Sarajevo University, he could only find work as a security guard.

Thousands of school leavers and university graduates can't find decent jobs and are rapidly becoming disillusioned with the failure of their political leaders to improve their prospects.

According to research conducted two years ago by the United Nations Development Program, UNDP, some 62 per cent of young Bosnians - who make up about a quarter of the population - would leave their country if given the chance.

The UNDP Human Development Report 2002 estimates that at least 92,000 youngsters left between January 1996 and the end-March 2001, with tens of thousands currently waiting for emigration visas.

"This haemorrhage of the young and talented poses perhaps the greatest long-term threat to this country," Bosnia's top international mediator, High Representative Paddy Ashdown recently warned.

"I can feel that young people are exhausted and disappointed," said Valida Repovac, 25, a Liberal Party activist who works in the ministry for European integration. But, unlike many other young Bosnians, she earns enough to support herself and has no desire to leave.

Though the brain drain pre-dates the war, numbers have swollen in the aftermath of the conflict. A number of factors have contributed to the trend.

There's not enough trade and technical education at secondary school level for those who are not cut out for university life. At all of Bosnia's seven universities, there is still no system of clinical or pre-professional education. To make the situation even worse, none of the former offer internationally-recognised degrees.

Once out of the education system, even well qualified students struggle to find good jobs. Banja Luka University law student Dragan Vujanic, 23, runs a new campus counselling information centre, funded by city and international donors. The centre recently started a job bank to connect students to jobs and internships in fields like law, economics, and information technology. Vujanic told IWPR the project is to focus on "brain gain" instead of "brain drain".

Some of those who can't find decent employment simply choose not to work. You can find them hanging out all day in the country's ubiquitous coffee bars. "The problem with my generation is that they feel it's better to do nothing than clean someone's floor, " said Sasa Madacki, 30, head of information research at

Disillusionment with education and the job market leaves youngsters with a pretty jaundiced view of politicians and some feel they're irrelevant because of the overpowering role of the international community in Bosnia. According to the local youth NGO, Youth Information Agency, OIA, most eligible youngsters don't vote.

Alexandra Strbac, 28, a psychology student working with the Banja Luka-based youth NGO Zdravo Daste and the Kastel youth house, encourages Bosnian youth to participate in elections, though she admits not voting herself in absence of clear options. She said that with local political parties "you still don't know what they are offering", and prefers channelling her energy into community activism.

"The future is depressing, it's true. But I hope it will get better," Dragan Vujanic said. "It's now up to young people to establish a new system with their own ideas."

In one hopeful development, a number of young Bosnians who left over the past decade are trickling back. Their job prospects are sometimes better, especially with international organisations, as they often speak foreign languages and have been educated abroad.

In an attempt to address the brain drain, the OIA has submitted a six-point plan to the newly elected authorities, including a request for the establishment of government executive bodies for youth. They have set a six-month deadline, after which they plan to mount street demonstrations if no action has been taken.

"Young people sometimes do not know or don't want to know that there are organisations like us geared to trying to make their lives better," OIA spokesperson Merima Zuko said. "The easiest thing is to go in the front of some embassy and ask for a visa that will take you somewhere else!"

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