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## EASTERN EXODUS:

# There is no dodging the demographic crisis



Zagreb station. Photo from the series “Accession, the great illusion”, by Eloisa d’Orsi for Presseurop/VoxEurop.

Eloisa D’Orsi

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**In parts of Europe, emigration poses a much bigger challenge than immigration. A few decades from now, writes Slavenka Drakulić, Croatia will be a country of old people with nobody left to take care of them. And instead of real solutions, politicians offer nothing but empty promises and patriotic slogans.**

**Slavenka Drakulić** for

Back in December, many were mystified when a Croatian member of the European Parliament became the European Commission’s new Vice President for Democracy and Demography. Croatians were especially surprised. Dubravka Šuica, a former mayor of

Dubrovnik, is not known for contributing to either of the fields for which she is now in charge.

Šuica's appointment seems even more absurd when taking into account that Croatia is one of the EU member states that has been hit hardest by the recent demographic crisis plaguing many countries in Central and Southeast Europe. If she is now trusted with this agenda at a European level, one wonders, she must surely have done something in this field for her own country? But no. It was as if she had never heard about all the young people leaving for Ireland and Germany, about the empty villages in Slavonia, where a house doesn't cost more than a second-hand car, or about the empty schools across the country, with 40 school classes disappearing only in 2019. But surely, she must have known both the official and unofficial statistics, about the low birth rate of 1.4 children per woman and the 200 000 people who have left the country in the last decade?

Perhaps she intends to try to solve this crisis now by placing it at the top of the agenda while Croatia is at the helm of the EU in the first six months of 2020? Unfortunately, there are no signs of this.

In a [recent article](#), journalist and Balkan expert Tim Judah draws attention to some disturbing demographic projections. By 2050, with 22 percent less inhabitants, Croatia will be a poor country of old people with nobody to support them, he predicts. If it is of any consolation, Croatia is not alone in this predicament. Today, over 20 million or about 4 percent of EU inhabitants are from some other member state and that percentage continues to grow. In the next few decades Bulgaria will lose about 39% of its population, followed by Romania with 30% and Poland with 15%. From the countries outside EU, both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia will lose about one third and Albania 18%.

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Depopulation is far from a new phenomenon in this region, from the mass emigration to the US in the early nineteenth century to the gastarbeiter, guest-workers, who in hundreds of thousands left Yugoslavia for Germany and other Western European countries in the late 1960s and 70s, thereby saving the Yugoslav economy. While many never returned, the balance was at the time still kept by a high birth rate. That has now changed and with the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Croatia lost more than 300,000 inhabitants, either as war victims, refugees or emigrants. Finally, the latest migration wave to the West has meant that the population has fallen under 4 million.

However, the new wave of intra-European migration is different from the previous ones. Now, for the first time in history, this part of Europe is experiencing a real brain drain. Previously, those who left were unskilled manual workers, now they are the most qualified: from the infamous "Polish plumbers", who scared France a few years ago, to electricians, technicians and various IT experts. No less than 32 percent of these mobile EU citizens (that is the term used) have university degrees. A ratio like this is unprecedented and meanwhile, Bulgarians and Romanians are almost left without both specialized physicians and nurses. The problem is of such a magnitude that a former Romanian minister actually suggested to legislate against emigration lasting longer than five years.

What's more, today young people don't leave alone but take their family with them; a clear indication of their intention not to come back. Even their motives are different than before: according to various research and surveys, reasons for leaving are no longer exclusively economic, but social as well, such as corruption, injustice and lack of hope for a better future.

While the West compensates for at least some of the lack of work force with immigration, and for example Poland receives many Ukrainians, small countries in the East have a problem. Here, ethno-nationalism prevails and the fear of the vanishing of the nation is strong. For those for whom 1989 also marked the formation of an



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ethnically homogenous state, immigrants from out of Europe are not an option. Instead, the idea to restrict emigration surfaces and the said Romanian minister is in no way alone – about half of the Hungarians and Poles share his wish, note Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev in their recent book *The Light that Failed*.

So far, national strategies are failing because nationalist governments supported by both the Catholic and the Orthodox Church keep appealing to people's patriotism instead of securing those basic needs that would keep young and educated people and families at home, like jobs and housing loans. In the end, it's not that hard to figure out: people would stay if they could see a future for themselves and their children. But this is the last thing that governments deliver. Instead their lies and empty promises feed mistrust in the political elite – which in turn becomes yet another reason to emigrate.

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In the face of falling birth rates, reforms such as those in Finland, where Health and Social Affairs Minister Aino-Kaisa Pekonen [earlier this month announced](#) the introduction of seven months equal paid parental leave for each parent, are bound to be effective. However, they are not realistic for Eastern Europe. In Croatia, the government recently formed a new Ministry for Demography, Social Policy and Youth in order to come to deal with the crisis. But even if such a ministry for once would come up with a set of meaningful initiatives, there will be no money available to implement them.

In this context, the newly appointed Vice President for Democracy and Demography cannot but repeat the empty promises of the past. It will take time before she and the European Commission take notice of the demographic revolution that is underway out there in real Europe.

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