

## The Vanishing of Eastern Europe and the Brexit Effect

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Birth rates are declining all across Europe, but in eastern Europe, the demographic shift is at crisis level. A [report by the CIA](#) compares the average annual percentage change in populations, resulting from a surplus (or deficit) of births over deaths and the balance of migrants entering and leaving a country. Most countries with a negative rate are in eastern Europe, with Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Estonia in the bottom ten out of 233 countries. Out of these six countries, [Ukraine](#) is the only one with a predicted population growth in 2025.

### The demographic crisis in the east

The replacement fertility rate in a country is 2.1 to 2.2 children per lifetime. In Europe, only France, the Faroe Islands and Kosovo meet this criterion. At the moment, the average fertility rate in Europe is 1.6. But unlike eastern Europe, western Europe has a positive population growth rate. Longevity and migration are two reasons for this. According to the [United Nations](#), several countries will lose more than 15% of their population until 2050. Apart from Japan, all of them are in eastern and central Europe: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine. Bulgaria and Romania are ranked first.

Aleksander Smolar, president of the Stefan Batory Foundation in Warsaw, explains for [The New York Times](#) that while it would make sense for the eastern European countries to accept more migrants, they never had the need to develop immigration policies, being countries of emigration themselves.

Every hour eight Bulgarians, mostly young and educated, leave the country in search for a 'better future'. Almost every Bulgarian has a friend or a relative living abroad. The demographic crisis in Bulgaria is a catastrophe that seems irreversible, draining the intellectual potential and shrinking the work force. As a result of the demographic crisis, the educational system in the country is facing severe challenges

The minimum monthly teacher's salary of 530 BGN (270 EUR) cannot be a financial stimulus for the young and most talented Bulgarians to become teachers. A desire to have a meaningful job is one thing, but 530 BGN per month can only provide for basic survival. The most talented children of the nation are interested more than just basic survival – they want to use their capabilities to achieve a much higher living standard. It looks as if without bold reforms addressing the root of the problem, the Bulgarian educational system is about to face collapse.

Recently, promises that teachers will receive a 10% salary increase turned into an absurd public debate. 'Nobody has discussed the 10% teacher salary growth with me,' the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov stated for Bulgarian TV. 'If every minister comes up and says: "I want more for defence", another one for the policemen or the firefighters, the third one for the teachers, the fourth for health care, the whole system will collapse. Who doesn't want to give more to the teachers? I would like to double their salary,' Boyko Borisov continued. Nearly 47% of the Bulgarian teachers are past 50. Another 32% are aged between 40 and 49. In just three years, approximately half of them will retire. Will a 10% salary

increase which is still under debate really compensate for this and make the public status of the teaching profession more appealing for the younger generation of teachers? At the time, pedagogy is the least appealing of all university degrees, and it's a degree all teachers must have. The educational system will collapse if half of the teachers retire. There is a desperate need for reforms that will improve the quality of the education and raise the living standard of teachers.

### **Brexit and immigration**

On 23 June, the majority of UK citizens decided that their country should leave the European Union, a decision that shocked the world. One of the main arguments of the Leave camp was that the EU admits too many immigrants. As a Bulgarian who received her university degree in England, I feel devastated about the referendum result and the state of the (Dis)United Kingdom. The Brexit decision will not only affect immigrants in the strict sense of the word, but also all the young talents from all over Europe who want to study in the UK. Being an EU citizen gave me access to one of the best education systems in the world, much better than that of my home country Bulgaria. Students from the EU and British nationals were treated equally. For me, the UK became a second home – the possibility to study at a British university gave me a chance for a better life.

The Leave decision, which was taken predominantly by the older generation will not only affect the young generation in the UK, but also many young people like me, who have not come as 'immigrants' to the UK but are simply looking for better educational opportunities. I love the European Union because it gives me the right to study, live, travel and work anywhere within its borders. In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum it is up to the UK to get rid of its populist charlatans and the labels they stick on people, and acknowledge that freedom of movement is a value to be cherished. Maybe it is (not yet) too late for this insight.