

# FORUM

DER EUROPÄISCHEN MINDERHEITENREGIONEN OF EUROPEAN MINORITY REGIONS

THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE



**The brain drain  
affects minority  
communities the most.  
Many young people  
leave our communities.  
How can we  
make them return?**

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about migration in itself, the existence of more opportunities and gaining of international experience are all assets, but the challenge is how we attract these highly skilled workers back home, so that their home countries and minority communities would benefit from their much needed knowledge and experience. During 11-12 December 2019 experts, regional and minority leaders as well as decision makers discussed the ways in which minority regions can counter the effects of workforce migration and brain drain in Potsdam, at FUEN's Forum of the European Minority Regions.



**T**he Forum was held in the State Parliament of Brandenburg, where Barbara Richstein, Vice President of the Parliament greeted the participants. „It is a great honour for us to host the Forum of the Regions and the FUEN, an international minority organization with excellent reputation. The theme of the conference, the exodus of intelligent young people is familiar to us, as we also had to deal with this situation after the fall of the Berlin wall” – she said. Mrs. Richstein added that they consider a real asset that the Sorbs and Vends in Lusatia has maintained their identity and culture, and Brandenburg supports this process also with legal acts.

FUEN President and Member of the European Parliament **Loránt Vincze** expressed his gratitude to the Brandenburg State Parliament and the regional government. He noted that the exodus of young, highly skilled work force and labour migration in general have an additional very severe impact on minority communities, as the political weight of a minority community is directly linked to its number, so losing the young, skilled members of the community has severe future consequences on its political representation capital. It also makes the communities more vulnerable, weaker, with less internal resources for recovery and development. He also presented some statistical data: In 2018, there were almost 17 million EU28 movers. Germany (33%) and the UK (20%) absorbed more than half them, while the top countries of origin were Romania, Poland, Italy and Portugal.



<http://tiny.cc/kzqenz>

**Tobias Dünow**, Secretary of State, Ministry of Science, Research and Culture of the State of Brandenburg said that this conference shows that minority policy is by no means something obsolete and folkloric, it is about forming our future.



**David Statnik**, Chairman of Domowina, the Union of Lusatian Sorbs talked about the importance of rural development: “Logic says it makes more sense to make a motorway near Berlin than a rural road near Cottbus, because more people are going to use it. But in fact it makes sense to build rural roads, as they are the way back home.”

**Klaus Freytag**, Lusatia Commissioner of the Prime Minister of Brandenburg welcomed the forum on behalf of the Prime Minister. Minorities are not only a folkloristic value, they are a real economic asset, and added value, for example in doing business with our neighbour countries, he said.



**Kathrin Dannenberg**, Member of Brandenburg State Parliament pointed out that the first law when the Parliament moved to this building was the act on the right of Sorbs and Vends.

**Péter Vida**, Member of the Brandenburg State Parliament praised FUEN, saying that the organisation’s work “gives many minorities a voice, a hope that they will be heard. It is important for us and to all minorities in Europe”.



**A**ccording to the survey of the South Tyrolean Chamber of Commerce, the brain drain of young people moving to Germany and Austria is the biggest single threat to the German-speaking community of South Tyrol. As we learned in the first panel discussion, many minority communities face similar problems. Even though South Tyrol has a positive migration rate, this does not apply to the highly skilled work force: young and educated people leave and move to richer neighbouring countries, as we have learned from the presentation based on the research of **Nina Overhage**.



**Paul Videsott**, Professor at the University of Bolzano/Bozen and head of Südtiroler Volksgruppen Institut said that Italy loses around 200,000 skilled workers a year, and they have the same amount of unqualified workers coming in. Italy now offers tax breaks to any skilled worker who comes to Italy. If a skilled worker with a completed degree decides to settle or resettle in Italy, he or she does not have to pay taxes for 70% of earnings for six years, with more incentives added for families with children and for those who start building a home. This is the biggest incentive in recent years to recruiting colleagues to South Tyrol, Mr. Videsott said. He also named mobility, fast internet and a good childcare system as good motivations.

**Stephan Rohde**, Head of Department for Structural Change of Saxony explained that in his region 30-40 thousand jobs depend on coal mining. He presented their financing program for small community projects made on participatory basis, their plans on higher education, which is appealing not only for young people but also attracts companies looking for qualified workforce to the region, and their commuting, settlement and innovation strategy.



Professor **Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones** from the University of Trinity Saint David, Wales said that brain drain appears even before young people turn 18, this is why her university organizes vocational courses for pupils aged 16-18. Currently, about 562,000 people speak the Welsh language, and through their language revitalization programme the plan is to have one million speakers of the language by 2050. Regarding the topic of migration she pointed out that choosing your first job is also a strategic decision where you contemplate if that area can sustain your future career. She added that language is a social phenomenon and it cannot survive without economic and social value.



**István Horváth**, professor at the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Kolozsvár, talked about the situation of higher education in Hungarian language. In the 1990s the system in Romania was underdeveloped, and Hungary started to offer scholarships and to attract young Hungarians from Romania to study there. As the Hungarian language university education started to develop in Romania, this gradually changed. The tipping point was 2008, when 3263 Romanian citizens studied at universities in Hungary. Since then, their number decreased to 1329, while there are already more than 10,000 studying in Hungarian in Romania. This shows that a good system can lead to a decreasing number of immigrants, said the professor.

**T**he transformation of the current economy to one that is both ecologically and economically sustainable is one of our major challenges and can result in an economic downturn and increased unemployment, but also provides us with opportunities that contribute to economic growth. In the Forum of European Minority Region's second panel, **Rónán Mac Con Iomaire**, Director of Regional, Community & Language Development of Údarásna Gaeltachta presented such solutions of his organization, focusing on the economical development of the small, isolated places where the Irish language is still spoken. Stabilizing economically the communities and looking to create employment linked to the region are their main objectives, and one of their largest projects is a maritime innovation park, which will become a research hub for aquaculture.



**Mikel Irujo Amezaga**, Director for General Foreign Action, Government of Navarra talked about the importance of cross-border collaboration, saying that if only 20% of the existing obstacles were removed, border regions would increase their GDP by 2%.



**Katja Müller** of the Economic region of Lusatia presented the many projects they run to win back the young people who have moved out of the region. One of the main challenges they face is to secure visibility to these opportunities.

**Olivia Schubert**, Vice Chair of the National Self-government of Germans in Hungary, said that being a German in Hungary is a blessing and a curse, as many German companies invest in Hungary and they are looking for German-speakers, but even so many of the Hungarian Germans move to Germany, Austria or South Tyrol.



**C**ross-border commuters contribute to the prosperity of border regions and enhances cross-border trade. Commuting also keeps the European Union together and favours integration and unity, but states take different approaches towards this phenomenon. The panellists of the first panel of the second day of the Forum of the European Minority Regions presented the situation in their homeland.

Moderator **Gösta Toft**, FUEN Vice President talked about the German-Danish border region and the large number of commuters being tremendously supported. In this border region, commuting is more common than emigration or immigration, with 15,000 people crossing the border daily to work. This means billions of Euros, if you look at the numbers – he said.



**Kaisa Kepsu**, Head of Research at Magma Think Tank from Finland studies the migration of the Swedish-speaking community in Finland to Sweden. They are overrepresented in the flow, as 35% of migrants from Finland to Sweden are members of the Swedish-speaking community (they represent 5.3% of the total population). Regarding commuting for work she pointed out that approximately 65,000 Nordic citizens live in one country and work in another, so this model is more common than migration. Despite daily commuting is difficult because of the sea, the Swedish-speaking community is very mobile and more prone to commute. Commuting has to be encouraged, as it is much better than losing the citizens to migration, she pointed out.

FUEN Vice President **Angelika Mlinar** talked about the Slovenian minority in Austria, saying that commuting happens in both directions, but the mountains form a natural barrier which makes the process harder. Also, Austria is not a pioneer in this sense, they do not have the attitude of helping commuters. Far too little is done in terms of exchange and communication – she said.



**Walter Bandelj**, President of the Confederation of Slovene Organizations in Italy talked about the use of EU programmes in cross-border collaboration and also mentioned an initiative where two cities from different sides of the border have applied together for the title of European Capital of Culture in 2025.

**Zsolt Horbulák**, professor at Selye János University talked about the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, living in the Southern border region of the country. He pointed out that unemployment rates are higher in this community as in the whole of Slovakia and also higher than in Hungary. In the western part of Hungary is more developed, but commuting is difficult because they are divided by the Danube, with only three bridges to cross the river. In the east both sides of the border are underdeveloped and there is a lack of jobs.



**Y**oung people leaving the minority region to study or work elsewhere and acquire new skills is something positive. But how can we lure them back to the home region in order to benefit from the skills they have acquired abroad or in neighbouring regions? The closing panel of the Forum, moderated by FUEN Executive Director **Éva Péntzes** focused on these questions.



**Rafal Bartek**, Chairman of the Opole Regional Parliament (German minority in Poland, Silesia) said that the immigration of Germans from Poland is not something new, as it also happened during the communism, and also long before Poland became an EU member, because the Germans could apply for German citizenship and the free movement within the EU that came with it. He said that Poland never paid attention to its German community, but the economics have taken over from politics, with many international companies choosing Silesia because there they could find German speakers. Despite the increasing wage level in Poland, the state would have to invest much more in social policy and take employee-friendly measures. Bartek believes that niches need to be found in the regions to counter emigration and that the diversity of minority regions offers great potential. Mr. Bartek addressed an invitation to FUEN to organize the next Forum of the European Minority Regions in Opole.



YEN President **Giuanne Beeli**, part of the romansch community of Switzerland talked about the low possibilities of her moving back home, as the region does not offer good conditions and perspectives regarding her personal development. She said that for young people to move back from urban areas to rural areas, public transport, road networks, broadband internet, think tanks, industry, childcare facilities, tax breaks are needed, and the costs of living and wages also need to be harmonized.



**Madlena Kowar** from the Minority Secretariat in Berlin, member of the Sorb community considers growing up as a bilingual a treasure, and she would like for her child to also receive bilingual education, but this leads the family to a hard choice, as there are no bilingual schools in Berlin, and moving back to Lusatia would mean losing the advantages of living in a big city.



**Lucia Abiuso**, responsible for school and education system in the regional government of Calabria talked about the importance of highlighting the cultural heritage as a way to lure people back to the region.

Scientist **Michael Thomas** of the Brandenburg-Berlin Institute for Studies on Social Sciences reported that after the fall of communism in 1989 more than 3 million citizens left the state of Brandenburg, but since 2014 there has been a positive balance and more people migrate to Brandenburg than emigrate. The large number of young families in particular offers creative social potential for the development of rural structures. The creation of a good infrastructure is of immense importance, as these families are prepared to stay in rural areas for a long time with a corresponding standard of living. There would be many possible solutions against emigration. The region or state must create many spaces with creative possibilities, which are then filled by the people themselves with creative projects.



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In his concluding remarks FUEN Vice President **Bahne Bahnsen** pointed out that the brain drain is a global problem which even New York has to face. The presentations showed us that this is a formidable challenge, but also successful ways of promoting remigration through politics, policies, cross-border collaboration and civil activism, he said. Further, he pointed out that migration from rural to urban areas is something the European Union has to deal with, helping the regions with European structural programmes in this regard.



Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium  
des Innern, für Bau  
und Heimat

aufgrund eines Beschlusses  
des Deutschen Bundestages

Megvalósult  
a Magyar Kormány  
támogatásával



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