

# **Brain Drain from the European Periphery in the Digital Era**

*Panteion University Team*

### ***Analysis from a methodological and interdisciplinary point of view***

This report synthesizes different papers/reports on brain drain in Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and N. Macedonia. It begins with some general comments on brain drain, including some problematizing and critical points on the notion and then, based on each research team's contribution, it presents the specifics of each country. Nevertheless, the text also attempts to synthesize and reflect on the main issues concerning each country in order to suggest policies that may be relevant in those different contexts. Some of the main topics that concern this report relate to the divisions between mind/body in relation to work as well as the dichotomies between immaterial and material production.

Our report suggests that spatial and temporal relations are being reconfigured as people and companies move in the context of digitalization and automation of labour. One needs to take these changing conditions into account in researching "brain drain" and "automation of labour" in the context of growing digitalization. Yet, older questions about gender and ethnic relations are still relevant while they may take new shapes.

The term "brain drain" was invented by post-WWII policymakers in Britain worried about the most talented British scientists emigrating to Canada and the United States for higher incomes and more opportunities. It is a component of global capitalism and more specifically the long-unfolding process of deindustrialization and a shift of labor into services.

Gradually, and especially since the 1990s, "brain drain" came to mean labor mobility of skilled workers who seek better employment opportunities than those in their countries of origin. As such, this kind of mobility described migratory trajectories from poorer to richer countries. The phrase underlines that the place of departure is drained from skilled workers. In its daily usage, especially in the media, it often implies that skilled, "educated" and "talented" workers are leaving the country.

Moreover, “brain drain” is coterminous with various forms of precarity. In the digital economy era, the organization of labor is no longer restricted by borders, enabling new forms of mobility of labor, remote work, capital, and production. Underlying this condition of “drainage” contains commonly expressed worries about various sectors such as health care, education, research, and nowadays the information and communication technologies sector, especially Artificial Intelligence. Indeed, more skilled workers in each industry are leaving their countries to get better employment opportunities in richer countries. Such mobilities reproduce transnational economic hierarchies which are intertwined with power relations. The studies from each country in this project (Bulgaria, Greece, N. Macedonia, Serbia) point to different aspects and qualities of these unequal mobilities, as presented in the next section.

The term “brain drain”, is based on dichotomical views of “the mind” and “the body”, which, in its turn, reproduces other types of inequalities among types of employment. While the notion underlines the “brain”, it implies that “manual” work is less important and as such, migration of those working in the so-called “manual” positions is not underlined as equally affecting the local economies. This division is also based on class imaginaries, given that the “brain” jobs are often associated with the middle classes while the “manual” jobs are associated with the working classes. However, critical anthropological views on work and labor have underlined that the body/mind division relies on ethnocentric Western dichotomies that reproduce ideas about labor as “skilled”/“unskilled”, “manual”/“nonmanual” and rely, to a large extent on existing constructions and hierarchies within the workforce. Following this line, one wonders whether “brain drain” is not only pointing to mobility as detrimental to local economies but also contributes to the silences and invisibilities of different types of work and workers.

The division between mind and body is dominant in the Western imaginary and was intensified by the computerization and digitization of several, if not all, sectors of the economy. Industrial technologies tend to identify with the body, as

substitutions or extensions of the body, while information technologies tend to identify with the mind, as substitutions or extensions of mental qualities (intelligence, memory, etc). People tend to perceive information as disembodied, the cloud as an ethereal technology, however, information technologies demand material infrastructures such as cables, data centers, and hardware. Specifically, in the case of AI, employees in the sector of developing AI models are regarded as valuable (and a significant portion of brain drain), while the manual laborers (from the people who work in the construction of data centers, manual data annotation, the sector of power and energy) are usually invisible.

Taxonomies and processes of skilling and deskilling about digital labor are related to class, gender, and ethnic characteristics which, in turn, may inform different global class inequalities. For example, remote workers who work online are conventionally characterized by the media as digital nomads. Greece has been a hotspot since 2020 and the pandemic. Those are mostly considered skilled workers in various sectors of software programming and services and may work from anywhere in the globe. They often move mainly from Western and Northern countries to Southern and Eastern countries, forming not only a growing number of mobile employees globally but also a significant community of consumers who affect housing markets. Those relatively well-paid workers may live side by side with less privileged workers, such as those who work remotely, yet they are not allowed to cross borders, according to the companies. This is the case with several call centers and online service companies operating in Greece and other countries in the region.

Therefore, in responding to one of the questions of this research project, about how the automation of labor may affect the countries of the Balkan region, one might suggest that the digitalization and the automation of labor may intensify changes in multidirectional ways. One of the current conditions suggests that old global (and colonial) hierarchies and inequalities seem to be reproduced by such labor practices. Those seem to be also informed by different forms of freedom and mobility restrictions, similar to those in the past decades.

Gender categories, the division between center and periphery, skilled and non-skilled, non-manual and manual seem to be reproduced in the current context.

Taxonomies and processes of skilling and deskilling about digital labor are also related to class, gender, and ethnic characteristics which, in turn, may inform different global class inequalities. For example, many remote workers who can work online are conventionally characterized by the media as digital nomads. Greece has been a hotspot since 2020 and the pandemic. Those are mostly considered skilled workers in various sectors of software programming and services and may work from anywhere in the globe. They often move mainly from Western and Northern countries to Southern and Eastern countries, forming not only a growing number of mobile employees globally but also a significant community of consumers who affect housing markets. Those relatively well-paid workers may live side by side with less privileged workers, such as those who work remotely, yet they are not allowed to cross borders, according to the companies. This is the case with several call centers and online service companies operating in Greece and other countries in the region.

Therefore, in responding to one of the questions of this report, about how the automation of labor may affect the countries of the Balkan region, one might suggest that the digitalization and the automation of labor may intensify changes in multidirectional ways. One of the current conditions suggests that old global (and colonial) hierarchies and inequalities seem to be reproduced by such labor practices. Those seem to be also informed by different forms of freedom and mobility restrictions, similar to those in the past decades.

### ***Study focusing on brain drain in/from Greece***

Specifically, about the brain drain process the team based in Greece has presented Lois Labrianidis' and his colleague's texts:

- The concept of “brain drain” is analyzed as an aspect of international skilled migration within a globalized economic system.

Focusing on brain drain from southeastern Europe and specifically from Greece, the authors of these articles investigate to what extent highly skilled Greek migrants are attracted by global cities.

Brain drain concerns international skilled migration within the globalized economic system, in a digital economy era.

Drawing on a new dataset that includes all the Greek Ph.D. holders and a list of global cities made based on the latest reports (2020) on Global city indexes, the authors find that highly skilled Greek migrants are attracted more to cities that are indexed as global than to cities that are not indexed as global.

- Global cities / skilled migration, skilled labor force

They argue that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between skilled migrants and global cities to the extent that global cities create a favorable socio-economic environment that attracts highly skilled migrants. Saskia Sassen (1991) argued that the global economy is governed by Global Cities, cities wherein banking, capital, and high-tech production are concentrated.

These advanced services and high-tech production tasks require a highly educated and skilled labor force. In that sense, high demand for skilled labor constitutes a special feature of global city labor markets (Castells, 2000).

Skilled migration is a key process in global city formation, reflecting the role of these cities as nodes and hubs for the global economy.

- Global Disparities and Hierarchies

The globalization of the economy has strengthened the tendency of human capital to be concentrated in urban areas. At the same time, it has enhanced global

disparities and hierarchies related to the production and dissemination of economies of knowledge, export activities, and entrepreneurial performance.

This situation exacerbates the developmental gap between global cities and home countries/cities, thus further increasing regional inequalities as well as inequalities between the global South and the global North.

In the context of the debt crisis, recession, austerity, and their sociopolitical consequences, Greece has been experiencing a major wave of outmigration. A large part of the outflow comprises young graduates, thus raising concerns about the negative impact of the ongoing brain drain on the country's economy and society. The crisis-driven emigration of professionals that accounts for approximately two-thirds of the outflow has turned Greece into a major exporter of highly skilled labor to the countries of Northern Europe, thus replicating older 'core-periphery' relations within the EU.

Most of them emigrate because they feel they lack any prospects in their home country and due to their overall disappointment in the socioeconomic situation in Greece. They use the right of freedom of movement, seeking a better future in other countries in the European Union. A paradox: most of them blame the policies and institutions of these countries of destination for the socioeconomic condition their country currently finds itself in due to the extreme austerity policies imposed by the Troika.

- History

In the past few years, in times of crisis and austerity politics, the ongoing brain drain has acquired alarming proportions. Of course, the structural preconditions of the so-called brain drain predate the crisis. In historical terms, it is a phenomenon that can be primarily attributed to the low demand for highly skilled work in the Greek labor market. Yet it is only now that the brain drain has reached

critical proportions, raising concerns about the prospects of recovery of a country becoming increasingly deprived of its young, educated workforce.

- Policy recommendations

In the current circumstances focusing on a repatriation policy will not succeed, since return to Greece in the short term is not something most emigrants are planning or indeed dreaming of. There is a new initiative, begun in 2023, Rebrain Greece with the basic aspiration to repatriate brain drainers, but until now only 150 people have registered for repatriation.

Instead, the focus should be on helping to develop means of cooperation that could lead to the development of viable and sustained transnational ties between them and the Greek society and economy.

Policy measures in the process of altering the mode of economic development of the country and steering the economy towards the production of products and services with a higher knowledge content.

### ***Study on brain drain in/from N. Macedonia***

North Macedonia has seen a troubling decline in tertiary education enrollment, particularly marked in the 2020/2021 academic year. However, recent data suggests slight improvements in 2022/2023. Concerns arise from proposed government plans to limit enrollments to create a balanced workforce, ignoring the EU's focus on an innovation-based economy. This approach fails to recognize the need to nurture students' entrepreneurial and IT skills.

Despite high student interest in studying abroad, particularly in Slovenia, where enrollments have surpassed those at North Macedonia's State University of Skopje, the government has viewed this brain drain as a personal choice rather than a systemic issue. The current education law, adopted in 2018, centralizes



control and undermines academic autonomy, echoing past governance failures linked to “state capture” under former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski.

The lack of genuine democratic reform since 2017 is evident in higher education policies that superficially align with EU standards while undermining the Bologna Process. The absence of true academic autonomy hampers North Macedonia’s potential to integrate with European higher education and foster innovation.

To address these challenges, urgent reforms are necessary, as the study underlines. This includes decentralizing academic recognition processes, enhancing institutional autonomy, and promoting a quality-driven education system aligned with European standards. True academic freedom and collaboration with European experts are vital for improving the educational landscape, reversing brain drain, and ensuring North Macedonia's competitiveness in the future.

### ***Study on brain drain in/from Serbia***

The brain drain phenomenon in Serbia, which has been intensifying since the 1990s, poses significant economic, social, and political challenges. This exodus of professionals, particularly the youth, has led to critical labor shortages and has stunted the country's development and innovation.

Key factors driving this brain drain include high youth unemployment, economic instability, and a lack of career opportunities, prompting educated individuals to seek better prospects abroad. Serbia has one of the highest youth unemployment rates globally and struggles to attract and retain talent, which exacerbates its demographic and economic issues.

The historical context includes the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which catalyzed migration patterns. Ongoing socio-political instability, corruption, and a misaligned education system have further fueled dissatisfaction among young professionals. The loss of skilled individuals not only depletes Serbia's intellectual

resources but also weakens civil society and democratic engagement, as educated citizens tend to be more politically active.

The demographic impact is also severe, contributing to an aging population and a shrinking workforce, straining the economy and social services. To combat these challenges, Serbia needs to reform its education system to better align with labor market needs, create job opportunities, and improve living standards. Collaborative efforts with the European Union are also essential to develop sustainable solutions for retaining talent and fostering economic growth.

### ***Study on brain drain in/from Bulgaria***

The text discusses the evolution of the outsourcing industry in Bulgaria, particularly focusing on the call center sector. It is based on Tsvetelina Hristova's study on outsourcing and call centers in Bulgaria.

The author outlines a personal research approach, critical and self-reflexive, combining their own experiences in call centers with interviews and public discourse analysis. The goal is to explore how outsourcing relates to migration patterns, emphasizing the duality of migrants and mobile elites, and the socio-economic implications of these dynamics.

Bulgaria's economic restructuring post-1989 has shifted the workforce from industrial jobs to the service sector. The country offers low wages, a skilled labor force, and a favorable business environment, making it an attractive outsourcing destination, particularly in competition with Asian economies.

Despite efforts to elevate Bulgaria's status as a high-skilled outsourcing hub, challenges remain, particularly in aligning educational outcomes with industry needs. Initiatives are underway to improve the workforce through collaborations between universities and outsourcing companies.

Rather than looking at “brain drain” as a mobility pattern from one place to another, the paper looks at how outsourcing and mobility of companies result in new global and local mobilities.

Several companies have moved to Bulgaria in the last decades, in search of cheap labor, including highly skilled positions. As such, skilled workers in Bulgaria, similarly to other countries, work in outsourcing service companies. The paper describes how in the world of digital labor, old categories of work and mobility are blurred. Skilled workers not only move from their countries but also remain in their countries and work in rather precarious conditions in outsourcing companies.

The paper critically discusses categories such as “lifestyle migration”, and “expatriate”. Rather than reproducing images of high-skilled workers as a middle-class migration, the analysis looks at how new labor and capital mobilities contribute to “de-classing” cognitive workers. Highly skilled educated workers may work in their country or abroad, in service companies, and in precarious positions. The paper further analyses the conditions of flexibility in such types of labor which result not only in precarious conditions but also in workers' frequent change of jobs and countries. This frequent change is described not only as a precarious condition but also, in its complexity, in terms of choice, escaping, and changing.

The text critiques the educational system's inability to produce workers who meet corporate expectations, reflecting broader tensions between corporate needs and traditional educational outputs. Ultimately, the outsourcing industry is framed as a complex interplay of mobility, labor, and economic transformation, reshaping both employment and migration patterns in Bulgaria.

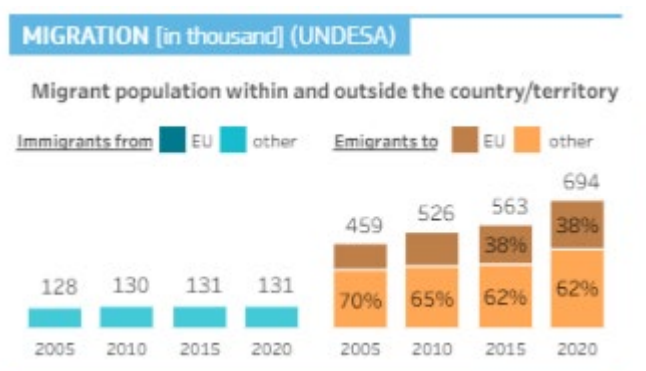
The text offers a critical analysis of call centers as a microcosm of modern labor practices, examining their operational structure, employee experiences, and the broader socio-economic implications.

## National Inputs

### The Issue of Brain-Drain and the Question of Academic Autonomy in North Macedonia

#### The problem at hand

The phenomenon of brain drain in North Macedonia reflects the significant emigration of skilled educated individuals seeking better opportunities abroad, posing a challenge to the country's development and economy. According to the latest data from the European Commission, there are nearly 700.000 Macedonians living abroad.<sup>1</sup>



Map for North Macedonia in "Atlas of migration 2023"

In recent years, North Macedonia has experienced a significant decline in student enrollment rates in tertiary education, reflecting a troubling trend. However, statistical data indicates some improvements during the 2022/2023 school year.<sup>2</sup> One of the lowest points was observed in the 2020/2021 school year, marked by a significant decline.<sup>3</sup> Additionally as for 2025, there are reports of a new "vision" from the executive branch intending to restrict the number of enrollments citing

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Bongiardo, D., Blasco, A., Icardi, R. et al., *Atlas of migration 2023*, Publications Office of the European Union, (2023), available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/17123>, accessed on 14 May 2024.

<sup>2</sup> State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, "Key Indicators from the Field of Education and Science", available at: <https://www.stat.gov.mk/IndikatorITS.aspx?id=5>, accessed on May 3, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> This information was learned at a presentation of the Erasmus+ National Agency of North Macedonia, delivered on 26 May 2021.

the need for a balanced workforce with the reasoning that “someone needs to work too.”<sup>4</sup>

Such policy displays utter oblivion of the fact that the European Union is undertaking a very ambitious strategic investment initiative in Western Balkans, seeking to bring it closer to the EU’s strategy of economic development, which is that of “innovation-based economy.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, what escapes the supposed vision of the top policy makers is the fact that what needs to be nurtured in this country is the students’ and youth’s capacity for innovation, entrepreneurship, and IT competencies. We do not deny the fact that there will always be need of manual labor related vocational training, but ever so decreasingly – numerous studies demonstrate that by 2030 the economy will be mainly automated.<sup>6</sup>

Let us not merely speculate, let us not resort to purely deductive reasoning departing from key EU strategic documents exclusively. Rather, let us look at the defeating reality of student brain-drain in North Macedonia and the self-defeating reality of government’s un-researched, blind-guessing and improvisational reasoning failing to acknowledge the following:

- a) Youth does wish to study, and
- b) It wishes to do so at universities and in countries that are far better academically and administratively equipped while yet remaining in the region.

The number of students from North Macedonia enrolling in Slovenia this year tops

---

<sup>4</sup> Popovska, A., “In the Future the High school Graduates will be Taking an Academic Exam, not Everyone will be able to Enroll in a University,” available at: <https://www.fakulteti.mk/news/13052022/vo-idnina-maturantite-kje-polagaat-akademski-test-nema-da-mozhe-sekoj-da-se-zapishe-na-fakultet>, accessed on 8 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions: New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, (Brussels, November 2023), available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM\\_2023\\_691\\_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf), accessed on 13 May 2024.

<sup>6</sup> The OECD has estimated that nearly half of all existing jobs are at risk of automation and that 60% of adults do not have basic ICT skills, which are likely to be vital in the future, according to a study released in 2019. Hence, education and social policies have to be adapted quickly in order to be able to respond to the challenges brought on by technological development. A number of scholarly articles put forward a similar claim: Eric Dahlin, Are Robots Stealing Our Jobs? American Sociological Association (2019); Henrik Schwabe and Fulvio Castellaci Automation, workers’ skills and job satisfaction, EconPapers (2020); Michael Segal, How automation is changing work: More robotics and artificial intelligence in the workplace doesn’t have to destroy your job, Nature (November 2018).

the usual number of enrollments at State University of Skopje-UKIM from 10 years ago.<sup>7</sup> Here is a telling illustration: according to an informal data given by the Embassy of Republic of Slovenia in North Macedonia and the Macedonian Student Association in Slovenia (because the Macedonian Ministry for Education and Science and the State Statistical Office do not keep records of studying abroad), in the academic year 2022/2023, 1516 students from North Macedonia have enrolled in Slovenian Universities.<sup>8</sup>

Even last year, this trend was commented by the Minister of Education and Science considers it a “success” and “matter of individual choice,”<sup>9</sup> rendering visible the fact of utter absence of policy vision in a leading policy maker in the area at stake.

In the present, the Macedonian higher education sector operates according to a law adopted in 2018 that is not only hardly any improvement regarding the version of its which sparked mass protests in 2014 and 2015, but rather an act that normalizes, legalizes and deepens the problem of undermined academic autonomy. What it does is cement most of the amendments developed by the administration under the leadership of Nikola Gruevski’s government, rendering the sector fully centralized (under the excessive control of the Ministry and other bodies of the executive branch).

### ***The Premise***

An era of what was termed “state capture” in the EU 2016 country progress report, intended to designate a type of authoritarian or hybrid regime practiced for more than a decade by the executive branch led by Nikola Gruevski, was supposed to be replaced by democratic governance. The kernel of such a democratizing shift

---

<sup>7</sup> Raw in-house data based on interviews with experts from the public sector.

<sup>8</sup> “Slovenija took our students- 20 years ago only 48, while last year 1516 students from Macedonia” [„Словенија ни ги зема студентите-пред 20 години само 48, а лани 1516 студенти од Македонија“] *Fakulteti* (9 october 2023), available at: <https://www.fakulteti.mk/news/09102023/slovenija-ni-gi-zema-studentite---pred-20-godini-samo-48-a-lani-1-516-studenti-od-makedonija>, accessed on 12 May 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Shajjiri: It is not a Failure that 800 Macedonian Students Have Enrolled in Ljubljana [Шаќири: Не е неуспех што 800 македонски студенти се запишале на студии во Љубљана], *Nova Makedonija* (22 May 2022), available at: <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/shajjiri-ne-e-neuspeh-shto-800-makedonski-studenti-se-zapishale-na-studii-vo-ljubljana/>, accessed on 12 May 2024.

would have been the implementation of the “Urgent Reform Priorities” (URP) set by the European Commission (EC) in the summer of 2015. The implication of this set of priorities as a precondition for democratization was that mere change in government does not vouch for the systemic transformation that was required. The last mention of URP appears in the country’s 2020 progress report released by the EC. “State capture” was mentioned in numerous analyses and reports in 2015-2017, and it referred to all sectors of society, placing emphasis on media. Freedom of expression was at the center of these analyses. Academia was relevant for said analyses, in particular for those produced by ISSHS in the wake of the plenums movement. In a great number of founding EU documents,<sup>10</sup> “academic autonomy” as a fundamental value is seen as a matter of “freedom of expression.” In the two years that preceded the adoption of URP, the most massive protests that emerged organically – not by orders or through organization of any political party – were those organized by the student-professor grassroots movement (the plenums) as well as those of the freelancers that included media too.

It is time to revisit the higher education sector as the litmus test of how much “de-capturing of the state” has taken place since 2017. It is important to delve into the question as to the degree in which the legislation and policy practices are only maintaining the façade of being in line with the Bologna Process while in fact subverting and violating the Process itself from within, just as it was the case during the rule of Gruevski’s state capture.

In the protest years, ISSHS published several studies presented at the European Policy Centre in Brussels in December 2015, explaining the “state capture” model of governance using the higher education as key case study (next to several other sectors, including media). Ever since, we never stopped monitoring the process of a supposed democratization regardless of the change in government. Let us reiterate and underscore that in 2018 the newly adopted law on higher education (HE) represented, quite simply, a legalization of the amendments proffered by the

---

<sup>10</sup> Rome Ministerial Communique, EHEA Rome 2020 (19 November 2020), p. 1-2; cf. European Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Heading “Freedoms,” available at: [https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome\\_Ministerial\\_Communique.pdf](https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf), accessed on 14 May 2024.

“captured state” once led by Gruevski. Namely, instead of a democratization of the sector, the level of centralization, in direct opposition to the European Standards and Guidelines, was cemented both when it comes to the autonomy in recognition and equivalence (students’ rights) and in academic excellence (teachers/scientist’ rights). The alleged measures to ensure quality have been completely defeated by the reality of UKIM’s ever lower steady sinking on the global ranking charts in the past several years.<sup>11</sup> The last Bologna implementation report (2020) shows a level of centralization matched only by Turkey and Albania (see the visual below), in addition to the post-soviet Caucasus states.

In North Macedonia, the supposed de-capturing of academia never really began, although it was the first point of social dissatisfaction exploding in mass and relentless resistance (2014-2015) which then led to a series of protests, the “colorful revolution” and, finally, change in government.

The potential explosivity of the current level of dissatisfaction is twofold: not only is the autonomy suppressed, not only is the centralization of recognition contributing to building a wall against the potential graduate returnees, but also – there are policies in place that practically create a mass exodus of youth and potential university students. On the other hand, centralization of diploma recognition, the low level of digital integration with the rest of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the absence of any policies that would foster entrepreneurship in innovation, create a deep social, economic and migration related rift within the society and vis-à-vis Europe.

### ***What are the Urgent Needs to Be Addressed?***

State institutions are in pressing need of an expert watchdog monitoring of the alignment of the higher education sector with that of the EU and its standards. Our argument is premised on in-house research informed insights, based on a series

---

<sup>11</sup> To avoid promotion of products, such as the Shanghai ranking, we will quote the free of charge and AI based ranking website, praised by institutions such as MIT, Academic Influence: <https://academicinfluence.com/schools/ss-cyril-methodius-university-skopje>, accessed on 14 May 2024.



of empirical analyses carried out 2017- 2020<sup>12</sup> showing that, since 2008, the institutions of North Macedonia have been merely ticking the boxes while hollowing out the substance of the Bologna Process.

Moreover, in 2014, the “ticking of the boxes” did not provide mere superficial alignment but rather took a U-turn and has ever since been moving further away from the substance (and form) of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) that are the foundation of basic quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the principles and values embedded in the Erasmus Program. In fact, nowadays our system is in utter contradiction with – if not violation of – the goals and values of EHEA and the Erasmus Program: the rhetoric is in place, EU documents adopted, but their transformation into national laws and bylaws yields a closed system hostile to mobility, overly controlled by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) undercutting the autonomy of the academic institutions but also of the Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in the Higher Education. The state of affairs, as presented, we argue, affects both the students and the professors and researchers whose autonomy is gravely curtailed.

Furthermore, according to the new EU accession methodology, North Macedonia is supposed to move forward sectorally not only per negotiations chapters. Higher education (and scientific research) is key in the European vision of a post-pandemic recovery according to which Western Balkans are expected to contribute to the building of a unified digital economy and trade based on – *innovation*.

In other words, this issue is not narrowly specialized and restricted to academia but also affects matters of:

- 1) The EU integration process (sectoral advancement);
- 2) Building an economy aligned with the 2030 strategies of the EU in line with the

---

<sup>12</sup> A vast number of them are direct advocacy papers and informal consultancy studies that are not published and are thus no subject to standard citing.

UN sustainability goals, i.e., an economy that is innovation based and higher education appears at its crux;

3) Students' mobility rendering the sector reclusive toward incoming and returning students and graduates – the procedures of recognition and equivalence are such that they not only do not discourage the phenomenon of brain drain but rather help it metastasize;

4) The autonomy of the HE institutions is undermined and academic insularity of the country is deepened, and, finally;

5) An open, mobile academia could be and often is – such as in the UK but also in Estonia – a form of creative industry. The latter is a dimension utterly absent from any state educational policies and ought to be promoted and developed in terms of a policy vision.

The level of centralization remains as in the 2018 Report on the implementation of Bologna,<sup>13</sup> if not worse (note: there is no data on North Macedonia in the last Report on the implementation of the Bologna Process 2020).<sup>14</sup> Currently, the founding faculty of the biggest and the oldest university in the country (UKIM) does not have accreditation for some of its oldest departments (on different levels, PhD in particular). It lacks the permission of the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MES) to carry out doctoral studies in some key areas. Thus, the Government decides what curricula and on what level will be carried out, infantilizing the most reputable HE institution in the country. The quality assurance and monitoring are carried out *ad hoc* by either MES or the Agency as a supposedly independent body yet founded by the Parliament which, in its turn, just as the judiciary, is in complete capture by the executive branch as per the Priebe Report in 2017 and ISSHS' Context Watch Reports 2016-2020 (government by implication, and as per the terminology of the Bologna progress report of 2018). This is a situation inherited

---

<sup>13</sup>European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, *The European Higher Education Area in 2018*, Ch. 4 "Quality Assurance and Recognition," pp. 127-145., available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/265898>, accessed on 14 May 2024.

<sup>14</sup> European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, *The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Rome: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2020*, available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/756192>, accessed on 14 May 2024.

from the era of the so-called “state capture” but never really remedied.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

For North Macedonia, decentralization of recognition and equivalence as the Erasmus enabled and promoted mobility – via ECTS and its Guide produced by



**Map from the Chapter on Recognition (EHEA: Bologna Process Implementation Report 2018)**

Erasmus – is one of the founding stones of the Bologna Process itself. This includes both: a) endowing HE institutions with the authority to implement the Erasmus Charters they have signed, which oblige them to carry out recognition as per the Erasmus Guidelines and *thus autonomously*, b) rendering ENIC/NARIC center independent from the MES as it is intended to be an independent body in relation to the government (see the cited Bologna implementation reports). The Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (further in the text: Agency) ought to possess full autonomy from the MES and from the blurring of political party and the executive branch (via the parliament) acting in line with its own bylaws instead of passively executing detailed stipulations embedded in the legislation. National Criteria of academic excellence ought to be developed by the Agency, in communication with renowned experts in Europe, abandoning the amateurish reliance on this or that journal database, even more so in these times when Open Access is among the top priorities of the European Strategy for Research and

Innovation “ERA 2030.” A clear distinction between quality ranking and mere legality ought to be understood and acknowledged by the policy makers – thus suppression of academic freedom in the name of “standards” as per the public servants in the government will be overcome. *Low rank brings low reputation of diploma*, and not everyone is after just any diploma (as our 800 students in Ljubljana prove to be the case). The distinction between legality and rank should be reflected in legislation and bylaws such as those of the Agency. Thus, the general prejudice toward the private HE institutions will be hopefully addressed as not all of them are diploma mills. Furthermore, facts about the corruption in many state universities will be revealed as recent studies seem to indicate they too are plagued by corruption and rendered mills themselves. True rather than merely nominal or demagogical autonomy in academia, contradicted by the very substance of the Law of North Macedonia, is the beating heart of quality of education measured through competition and innovation which requires internationality instead of insularity. Analysis of legislation should be carried out by independent policy research organizations in order to extrapolate the contradictions at issue and, in collaboration with the institutions, seek for remedies through tailor made policy solutions.

## ***Outsourcing Destination Bulgaria: new patterns of labour migration and the rise of call centres in Bulgaria***

I am borrowing the title from a conference focusing on outsourcing and held in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. It was the second such conference, both held in the same year, 2014, and dedicated to bringing together companies and state institutions in an attempt to promote outsourcing as a drive for national and local development. The title of the first conference, held in Sofia, read: *How to Make Bulgaria a Leading Destination in Outsourcing*<sup>15</sup> – a self-explanatory and rather descriptive title that clearly sets the agenda for the event and for further strategic collaborations. Both events were held at luxurious five star hotels, with guests from the ministry of economy and energetics, universities, and local municipalities – this comes to show the growing importance of outsourcing industry on the national level in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI), job creation, and overall effect on the economy.

I will take a look at the development of outsourcing and, in particular, the rise of the call centre industry, in Bulgaria and focus on a few aspects that are important for it. After briefly sketching the history of outsourcing and the state policies and public discourses surrounding its rise, I will turn to the specifics of call-centre labour; and then offer an overview of tendencies in the employment and its relation to migration processes.

The nature of my research methods calls for a rather self-analytical approach, as my observations are drawn largely from my own employment at call-centres in

---

<sup>15</sup>It should be noted that in both cases, as well as throughout the article, 'outsourcing' is only applied to ICT outsourcing. Bulgaria is also known as a country where production is outsourced, e.g. sewing factories. In a recent study done through the Clean Clothes Campaign it became clear that the work conditions in such factories in Bulgaria are worse compared to the ones in Asia, which are traditionally designated and condemned as 'sweatshops'. While there is an obvious link between the outsourcing of menial and non-menial labour, drawn by the same favourable conditions – offering cheap labour and environment welcoming to foreign investment, the two have so far not been analyzed as two instances of the same phenomenon.

Bulgaria. While this naturally allows for an inside look that can hardly be achieved solely through interviews and observations, it poses limits, some of which I only came to realise when I started writing. While there are many examples of researchers analysing their own employment experience (to start with Braverman<sup>16</sup> and get to O Riain<sup>17</sup>, who reflects on his work as a software developer in Ireland), the jump from doing to reflecting (on) does not only involve a process of dissociation, but also much more mundane concerns related to dependencies and obligations imposed by corporative regulations. This is the reason why I have avoided the mention of company names in examples, unless taken from public media. My personal experience was supplemented with interviews and conversations with call-centre workers and representatives of the two unions formed at call-centre companies in Sofia, as well as with following up with the public discourse about call centres in the country.

The goal of this paper is to go beyond the specifics of call-centre work, which have been discussed at length, especially in research on Indian call-centres,<sup>18</sup> and to take a look at how the industry is utilizing geography and mobility in the making of a new type of global division of labour that leads to changes in the patterns of labour migration.

### **Connecting outsourcing and migration**

Conceptualizing migration unavoidably goes along lines of divide and categorization that not only separate, but also rank migration flows on a mixed

---

<sup>16</sup>Braverman, Harry (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital: the degradation of work in the twentieth century*. Monthly Review Press, New York.

<sup>17</sup> O Riain, Sean (2000) Net-Working for a Living: Irish *Software Developers in the Global Workplace*. In: *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World*. By Michael Burawoy, Sean O. Riain, Joseph A. Blum, Sheba George, Zsuzsa Gille, Teresa Gowan, Lynne Haney, Maren Klawiter, Steven H. Lopez, and Millie Thayer. University of California Press: 175-202.

<sup>18</sup>Among the many others, two studies especially relevant to the current publication are the studies of Nadeem and Aneesh: Aneesh, A. (2006) *Virtual Migration: the Programming of Globalization*. Duke University Press; Nadeem, S. 2011, *Dead Ringers: How Outsourcing Is Changing the Way. Indians Understand Themselves*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

geo-socio-moral scale. Illegal and economic migrants constitute the aggregate of an emerging or imagined underclass that is essential in theorizing sovereignty, exploitation, security, and mobilization.<sup>19</sup> The irregular migrant and the poverty migrant are the battleground for re-establishing the borders of the state: its power politics, social engagement, and dimensions of citizenship are all tested and established through these figures. This dualistic figure (the irregular migrant/refugee) also constitutive for the foundations of migration studies that still employ the patronizing integration/policy approach to migration (in NGOs and some research institutions), as well as visions that resist and defy the language of objectification.<sup>20</sup>

On the opposite end, the so-called 'mobile elites' feed into the imagination of a globalizing borderless world, forming a completely distinct conceptual framework – Bauman speaks of the ruptures in the globalized world through the images of the immobilized poor and the hyper-mobile elites.<sup>21</sup> We can see, however, that mobility is a more ubiquitous reality that is experienced not only through migration *per se*, but also through its collateral effects, such as remittances, transnational families, economic and social changes, as well as through the relocation of capital and employment, or changes in social policies founded on the fear of the abusing 'other'. It looks as if different types of migration are held apart in their analysis: asylum seekers and refugees framed in a humanitarian-legal paradigm, irregular migrants seen in the framework of violent? state re-invention; economic migrants viewed through exploiting the fantasy of transnational mobilization; and the mobile elites that are in the basis of the optimistic theory of an open and

---

<sup>19</sup>The positioning of irregular migrants within policies and migration research is discussed at length in Mezzadra, S. (2010) *The Gaze of Autonomy. Capitalism, Migration and Social Struggles*. <http://www.uninomade.org/the-gaze-of-autonomy-capitalism-migration-and-social-struggles/>. The list of authors analysing the relationship between founding dimensions of the nation-state, such as sovereignty and security, and the illegal migrant/refugee is long, among them Agamben, G. (1995) "We Refugees." *Symposium*. No. 49(2), Summer: 114-119 and Squire, V. (2009) *The exclusionary politics of asylum*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>20</sup>See Papadopoulos, D., N. Stephenson and V. Tsianos (2008) *Escape Routes. Control and Subversion in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Pluto Press, where the authors argue for a new approach to migration, which looks at migration as an autonomous social phenomenon and recognizes its subversive potential.

<sup>21</sup>Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

unified world. While the subject relocating from the Global South to the North-West is easily labelled as 'immigrant', the flow in the opposite direction consists of 'expatriates' – a figure that is reminiscent of the old colonial travellers and their romanticized and/or missionary adventurism.

The mobility of capital and human mobility form interdependency that is at times complementary and at times parallel: while money travel easier and defy boundaries, labour redefines old geographies of human mobility. Think, for example, of the recent rise in Portuguese migration to the former dependencies of Angola and Cape Verde, which re-activates old ties, but also reinvents the relation between the two countries in a dramatically different setting – i.e. Portuguese workers looking for employment<sup>22</sup>, or return migration, where people turn old routes around and exploit deficits produced by migration (e.g. brain drain, lack of skilled labour, demographic downturns).

In this (in)voluntary collaboration between capital and labour, the mobility of companies, namely offshoring employment is not a tendency strictly antagonistic to labour migration. Apart from being susceptible to analysis through the lenses of migration, as brilliantly shown by Aneesh, it is also facilitated by and serving as a catalyst for the physical transnational mobility of work force. This collaborative mobility serves for the establishment of a kind of middle ground of the labour force – the ones that Standing calls the salariat. This stratum can bring the allusion of an emerging new middle class, but it is so soaked in precarity that the traditional middle class bourgeois would shiver in disgust at the comparison. This new stratum embodies mobility resituating itself or, rather, labour reinventing itself *in situ* in migration. As Nadeem shows in his study on Indian call centers, however,

---

<sup>22</sup>One recent example of labour migration to the Global South is the migration of Portuguese to Angola and Cape Verde, which challenges us to re-think migration but also re-establishes old colonial ties in a new way and under different circumstances. The project *Moving South: Analyzing the development potential of the new Portuguese migration to Angola and Cape Verde* is still ongoing and a short description of it can be found here: [http://www.globalstudies.gu.se/digitalAssets/1476/1476825\\_the-new-portuguese-migration-to-angola-and-cape-verde.pdf](http://www.globalstudies.gu.se/digitalAssets/1476/1476825_the-new-portuguese-migration-to-angola-and-cape-verde.pdf).



the new 'middle class' does not appear *ex nihilo* but is in reality a transformed old one – built on the social, cultural, and economic capital of the members of a well educated stratum, dependent on employment.<sup>23</sup> Outsourcing, which in developmental studies stands in opposition to labour migration as an alternative employment option for potential emigrants, is rather a practice that creates niches of an acceptable wage/labour equilibrium digging around the globe and mobilizing workers to follow suit. The feared consequence of outsourcing – i.e. moving jobs abroad, is exactly that – while call centres are relocated to Bulgaria, in no way is call-centre employment reserved for Bulgarians only. Rather, it is situating service work in a zone that allows for lower wages without the danger of real consumerist deprivation that could lead to discontent. The booming virtual work is linked not only to changed migration patterns but also to changes in work practice and the perception of labour.

While outsourcing is typically regarded in terms of mobility of capital and in contrast to labour migration, I will argue for the necessity to place them in the common paradigm of mobility of labour, linking it to larger processes in labour and employment, such as the increased flexibility and precarity of the work force, on one hand, and the increased mobility of businesses and their interlinking to political and social processes, on the other. The increased precarity sweeps into the nature of labour itself through various deregulations, such as the zero-hour contracts, the urge for flexibility, and the loss of the social security characteristic for the times of the “second spirit of capitalism”<sup>24</sup>. What is becoming even more characteristic for the contemporary state of mobility and labour is the change in economic relations on a global scale, which alters the import/export relations through the introduction of outsourcing and offshoring practices. Instead of importing goods or labour, companies move parts of their production and services elsewhere or subcontract other companies to take over them.

---

<sup>23</sup>Nadeem (ibid.)

<sup>24</sup>Which refers to the type of capitalism dominant until the 1970s and characterized by discipline, control, and loyalty, see Boltanski, L., E. Chiapello (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London-New York, Verso.

Looking at outsourcing and self-service, Palm states that:

*The mobility of work involves more than labor flowing to fixed capital or investment capital flowing to discounted labor. More specifically, the mobility of outsourced work does not reside in the workforce, or strictly within capital, but rather in the technological ease with which work can be fractioned into jobs, tasks, duties and obligations, and distributed across the globe.*<sup>25</sup>

The picture of corporate mobility presents an interplay of migration, investment, and a fundamental change in the nature of work that renders it far more mobile and transferable than before. It is however not only tasks that are being more easily transferred geographically; the nature of outsourcing develops jobs with the quality of global universality, meshing up cultures in a kind of corporate hybridity<sup>26</sup> and mimicry that moulds employees and places into mobile, interchangeable subjectivities. The result is the production of geographically conditioned employment zones that exploit preconditions of inequality, mobility, and consumerism. They are delineated by established routes of labour and capital but follow a different pattern and their existence is prompted by the disappearance of the middle stratum of employment.

### **Development of outsourcing in Bulgaria**

The post-1989 restructuring of the national economy has led to transformations that brought Bulgaria closer to the economic profile of developed countries – with a strong tendency for deindustrialization and a rising share of the service sector.

---

<sup>25</sup> Palm, M. (2006) “Outsourcing, Self-Service and the Telemobility of Work.” *Anthropology of work review* XXVII/2: 1-8.

<sup>26</sup> Palm, *ibid*, although he talks of hybridity in the context of cultural identity and postcolonialism.

The rapid liquidation and subsequent privatization lead to a drop in the share of industrial employment and to unemployment that was virtually suppressed during Communism through the state policy of full employment. The share of industrial employment has in recent years been taken over by employment in construction (due to the booming real estate business of the late 1990s and early 2000s) and in the service sector. In 2013, the services have contributed more than 2/3 of the national GDP (69%) and employed almost 2/3 of the currently active labour force (57.7%). Subsequent parliaments controlled by different political parties have shown their continuous commitment to the expansion of the service sector and to attracting FDI. The overall tendency of opening up the market and attracting foreign direct investment has led to a series of legislative initiatives that aimed at creating a welcoming business climate. In 2008, the corporate tax was decreased from 15% to 10% (which could reach 0% in regions with high unemployment rate) - currently the lowest in EU, and a flat income tax of 10% was introduced the same year (also the lowest one in the EU in terms of accumulated amount and much more beneficial to employees with higher salaries than to the ones in the lowest income spectrum). FDI ranked as premium investments (class A and B) could also benefit from shortened administrative procedures and direct financing of training initiatives to increase the qualification of the workers (as laid down in the Investment Promotion Act). The measures envisioned in this Act include reimbursing companies for the obligatory tax and social security fees paid for newly employed workers for up to one year.

Some of the larger investors approved as class A and B investors in accordance with the Act are representatives of the booming outsourcing industry. ICT outsourcing falls within the domains of three of the national and EU economic priorities – increasing the share of service industry, development of knowledge society, and attracting foreign direct investment and it, thus, receives especially favourable attention from institutions and businesses. The promotion of non-menial and high-skilled labour is one of the incentives of the EU as well, laid down in the Lisbon agenda for the development of knowledge economy, which serves to

direct and reinforce the national economic agendas.

Despite being a relatively new industry in Bulgaria, outsourcing has experienced a major rise in the last few years. In 1999 the only company offering outsourcing services was the Bulgarian All Data Processing with just 10 employees, providing indexing services for Reuters. In comparison, in 2014 the number of companies has swollen to over 20 with more than 20 000 employees supplying various services in accounting, telemarketing, BPO (business process outsourcing); customer service and technical support; IT and design. It is predicted that by 2017 the number will more than double to over 45 000 employees in the industry and will reach 3% of the national GDP. According to data of the ministry of economy and energetics, the outsourcing companies in Bulgaria had made 1 bln BGN turnover in 2013. This makes them an important actor in the economy of the country and a major source of FDI. The growing number of outsourcing companies and employees has a substantial share in the overall economic growth in the country. According to EUROSTAT data, there has been a substantial growth in the GDP per capita in Bulgaria, and, more specifically, in the capital where the bulk of outsourcing companies is located from less than 47% of the average GDP for the Union in 2000 to 105% in 2011.

The seemingly uplifting economic effect of outsourcing has invoked considerable state support that is apparent in the presence of ministry officials at outsourcing conferences but extends beyond that. State institutions started officially advertising the country as a destination for call-centre investments in 2004 and the strategies employed in official advertising with regards to employment, education, and available labour force are worth analysing. While the general economic and social development of the country is targeted to achieving the image of a developed EU country, outsourcing poses a contradiction. On one hand, it corresponds to the strife for more service and knowledge based economy, while on the other, it places Bulgaria in the company of traditional outsourcing countries from Asia. In the area of outsourcing Bulgaria is competing not so much

with other EU countries, but with the booming Asian economies in India, Singapore, China, and Malaysia. In view of this competition Bulgaria's special assets lie in its worst economic positioning in the EU – it offers the secure business environment of an EU country, plus low wages competitive to the ones in Asia<sup>27</sup>, and a relatively high number of labour force proficient in IT or foreign languages. The country has also managed to draw the attention of the outsourcing businesses, recently being ranked 9<sup>th</sup> most attractive outsourcing destination in the world in the A.T. Kearney ranking<sup>28</sup> – the only European country in the top 10.

The advertising of Bulgaria as outsourcing destination exploits its ambiguous geographic and economic positioning through the concept of nearshoring: an alternative of offshoring that draws on outsourcing businesses to regions of geographic proximity. The incentive behind the practice is to combine business security and a more predictable and familiar context with low cost labour. One can easily see this combination embodied in the positioning of Bulgaria in various ratings. Though the aspiration on the Bulgarian side is to offer more high-skilled competition to India and specialize not so much in call centres as in IT software development, the ambition of becoming a “high-end India” is far from becoming reality and ratings show Bulgaria is behind in terms of qualification and skills of its labour (see diagram below).

---

<sup>27</sup>One recent research on textile manufacturing outsourcing concluded that wages in Bulgaria are even lower than the ones in countries traditionally known for sweatshop labour, such as India and China. There are significant differences between textile manufacturing outsourcing and ICT outsourcing and, as mentioned earlier, wages in the ICT outsourcing sector are higher than the average salaries. However, put together with the advertisement for low-wage labour from state and business representatives, this indicates the image of a low-wage heaven within the EU, which is systematically constructed in discourse. The report is available at <http://www.cleanclothes.org/livingwage/tailoredwages/tailored-wage-report-pdf>.

<sup>28</sup>Available at <http://www.atkearney.com/research-studies/global-services-location-index>.

Overall rank	Country	Overall Outsourcing Index	Cost Competitiveness Index	Resources & Skills index	Business & Economic Environment Index
1	<b>India</b>	7.1	8.3	6	4.2
2	<b>Indonesia</b>	6.7	8.6	4.3	4.4
3	<b>Estonia</b>	6.6	7.5	5.2	6.9
4	<b>Singapore</b>	6.5	6.4	5.7	9.4
<b>5</b>	<b>Bulgaria</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>5.2</b>
6	<b>China</b>	6.4	7	5.6	5.6
7	<b>Philippines</b>	6.3	9	2.8	3.9
8	<b>Lithuania</b>	5.9	7	3.9	6.5
9	<b>Thailand</b>	5.9	8.2	2.3	5.9
10	<b>Malaysia</b>	5.8	7.9	2.2	6.9

*Ranking of top outsourcing countries of SourcingLine.*

The attempts to increase the attractiveness of Bulgaria as an outsourcing destination works on multiple levels and there are already talks and initiatives aiming at restructuring secondary and tertiary education to better prepare employees for the business. There is an example of a collaboration between the University of Veliko Tarnovo and the Belgian-owned EUROCCOR. It includes the hosting of a call centre at the university that not only provides office space but work force as well, recruited mainly from its department of foreign language education. The university has also introduced two new MA programmes, in collaboration with another call centre, to make students in the philologies more employable – they specialize in a combination of two foreign languages and administrative skills. Similar initiatives are being negotiated or implemented at the Technical University in Sofia, Plovdiv University, and the Mathematical High School in Plovdiv.

The motivation for outsourcing companies is, undoubtedly, to widen the pool of

available labour force, but behind this, there is a strong narrative critical towards the current state of the education system. The criticism employs the common trope of the inability of schools and universities to teach students practical skills, but it extends to a more general critique of the kind of human subjectivity produced by the educational system compared to the *homo novus* of the corporate world. The clash between education and corporate needs was one of the central topics at the conference *Outsourcing Destination Bulgaria*. Paraphrasing the arguments from the conference, the participants from the side of outsourcing companies, managers, and owners, painted the portrait of the person that was desired and nourished at corporate milieus – a creative team player, who takes the initiative, is not afraid of making mistakes, and has good communication skills. In the words of one of the presenters, employee at a recruitment company, children should be taught communication skills that make them good service workers from an early age. This figure stands in stark contrast to the image of the person produced by the Bulgarian education system: docile, unimaginative, unable to take the initiative or communicate with customers. In this way the roles get reversed with the corporate world employing the very same critique that was once aimed at it.<sup>29</sup> The projected image of the call-centre worker reinforces the predominant idea of the flexible, adaptable, and entrepreneurial worker of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the nature of outsourcing industry requires the exercise of control over subcontractors and workers down the chain and this leads to an ambiguous interplay of conflicting ideologies and regimes.

### ***Call-centres – the exemplary factories of a brand new world***

#### ***Office space and discipline***

The worldwide presence of call-centres and the nature of work there – workers providing support for other countries and companies and often imposing as

---

<sup>29</sup>This ironic turn that has become characteristic for the development of contemporary capitalism, which incorporates and puts in use anti-capitalist criticism is well presented in Boltanski, Chiapello (ibid.)

native speakers, calls for a very standardized environment across all companies and countries. The rise in call centre industry is linked to the introduction of large open space offices (utilized in other industries, as well, for example logistics, think of Amazon), with rows of cubicles where the employees sit on their computers, wearing headsets to always be available for customer calls. This kind of open office allows for minimum private space with employees sitting next to each other with low partitions on the desks that serve to obstruct the view to their colleagues' monitor. No wonder that they invoke comparison with the factory production line of industrial times. This open space environment, adorned with surveillance cameras and posters instructing employees of the security rules of the company and appealing to their 'integrity' and collaboration in the event of security breach, is the embodiment of a Bentham-like fantasy of monitored employment force, docile through the knowledge of its own transparency to the management. The strict security rules are conditioned by the very nature of the business – since companies are outsourcing parts of their business to call centres, where employees handle company specific and sensitive information, the call centres have to assure their clients that this data will be kept safe. This leads to various restrictions, such as limited access to the Internet, ban on personal electronic devices on the work floor, and rules requiring the employees to put their bags and coats in lockers. All these rules are more or less universal and applied to call centres worldwide, although they can vary in intensity.

Employees are subjected to various restrictions and confined spatially through their limited work place and mobility (call centre workers are expected to remain seated at their desks during their work time, waiting for a call, chat, or an email, and sometimes bonded to the telephone via the headsets they have to wear at all times). The work is strictly defined not only spatially but also temporally – the punch in system operated through the telephone keeps a record of the daily activities of the worker. It is used for 'logging in', indicating breaks, as well as indicating what type of work the employee is doing at the moment: by dialling a special code, one can switch the status from 'auto in' (meaning available for calls)



to writing emails, taking chats, receiving feedback, etc. The idea of being 'auto-in' is omnipresent in the work culture and observed rigorously and workers have only about 20-30 second between calls before switching back to it. This controlled division of time allows the employer to monitor and sanction employees for void time: for instance, one of the workers in a big international company who participated in the establishment of a union at the company was disciplined for not being at his workplace for two minutes and some seconds – a tiny detail that comes to show the worker the inequality in power relations and the superiority of the employer in terms of knowledge and means for control.

The rigidity of control is supplemented by the excessive presence of software used to manage and structure the work process. Apart from the computer-operated telephones, employees are required to use software to categorize and solve each interaction with clients. They depend on software to the extent to which the industrial workers were made dependent on machines through the Taylorist restructuring of manual labour. Call centre work is chunked into bits performed through specific programmes – the so called 'back office' software programmes set the parameters to what the worker can and cannot perform through algorithms and access restrictions. As analysed by Aneesh, this new governing order or rule, called by him 'algocracy' in comparison to the models of panoptic and bureaucratic regimes, is characteristic for the work at call centers but spreads to other service jobs, such as bank-tellers or administration. It consists of an all dominating rule of the software code and programmes that have not only become irreplaceable for work – they have come to define work practice in its every detail. The software is not only the means to perform a task but it also contains the guidelines for doing it – by choosing from predefined options the workers are restricted to only providing approved solutions to a work situation.

***Inciting initiative and participation: emotional labour and entrepreneurship***

This controlling face of call centre work extends beyond practices to the emotional world of the worker – there is a constant demand for certain emotions to come through in the work process. Employees are expected to calm down angry customers, persuade customers to buy products, and retain an upbeat tone during all conversations. The myth of the customer being able to “hear you smile” is omnipresent at trainings and quality audits<sup>30</sup> and employees are continuously instructed to not only smile but modify their voice intonation and emotional disposition as part of the job. As this is not simply a supplementary advice but might cost a part of the remuneration (in the form of unreceived bonuses), workers are generally and silently annoyed by this requirement. The frustration can be felt in the words of a male call centre worker in his early 20s: “They want me to sound cheerful. How could I, I am already dead inside – I mean, I work in a call centre.” The combination between repetitive tasks, little control over the work process, and emotionally demanding labour is extremely stressful and call centre jobs are known to be stressful and generally considered a temporary employment with high turnover.<sup>31</sup> One of my interviewees was casually telling me stories of people losing their hair and being frequently ill because of work stress, while Nadeem is describing at length the exhausted look of his respondents.

Still, strenuous control over the worker is only one side of the coin. Call centre culture combines discipline, promotion of consumerism, and entrepreneurial spirit. As part of a strategy to avoid taxes calculated on salaries, call centres (and increasingly other businesses too) pay part of the remuneration in vouchers in the form of bonuses that the worker can lose if they do not reach the targets set for their job. Often located in the buildings of shopping malls, call centres attract future employees with promises of discounts and proximity to shops and restaurants. Labelled by Tsoneva<sup>32</sup> hybrid labour regime, this kind of employment

---

<sup>30</sup>This trope is quoted by Nadeem (ibid.) in his interviews with call centre workers and I have also encountered it myself more than once, reiterated by managers, trainers, and agents, all of whom firmly believe that customers can 'hear a smile' and even recognise a fake smile over the phone.

<sup>31</sup>Kirov, V., K. Mircheva (2009) “Employment in call centres in Bulgaria”, *Work organisation, labour & globalisation* Volume 3, Number 1. Summer: 144-157.

<sup>32</sup>Tsoneva, J. (2012) *Engineering and Accumulating Souls in the Offshore World: The Case of Malta*. (Master thesis. Central European University).

management combines excessive control with excessive encouragement of indulgence in consumerism and unrestrained pleasure. While hers is a far more extreme case – studying the online betting industry in Malta, where the life of the worker oscillates between being subjected to lie detector tests and lulled with alcohol in five star hotels, this kind of antagonistic duality sweeps across call centre work as well. While left with minimal control over their work, behaviour, and even emotional composure at work, employees are encouraged to take initiative in team building activities, corporate responsibility events, and even recruiting new workers. Companies are often deploying a “recommend a friend” schema for recruitment turning their employees into HR agents, who can earn up to 800 lv (400 EUR) per new hire. Such campaigns are often also advertised through stressing on the possibility to bring friends to work and create a more joyful environment this way. This strategy seems to be touching upon the right note, since quite a few of the employees I spoke to shared that they hated the job but really liked their colleagues and that was what made them stay and work hard, so they did not put a strain to their co-workers.

This kind of solidarity is exploited by companies and is probably one of the reasons for the surprising lack of unionization at call centres in Bulgaria, as workers are utilizing their solidarity and initiatives for finding ways to work better and in a more efficient manner. Of course, there are many more reasons why workers' self-organization is virtually absent, among which companies doing their best to discourage unions – including open intimidation and dismissal of union workers, is the gravest obstacle, since employees would rather avoid such troubles. Tales of bullying into quitting the job are linked to all the few attempts to form a union at a call centre in Bulgaria and even when the union does not dissolve, the membership is limited and does not have the capacity to negotiate collective work contracts and terms of employment. Unionisation can be, counter-logically, also a very individualistic act that aims at alleviating the work conditions only for the members of the union, since they are protected by law. Thus, one of the workers who initiated a union, a well-educated middle-aged man, who had experience in

labour unions from a previous job as a teacher, used his membership in the union at the end to negotiate a considerable compensation in return for his quitting the job. Surprisingly, workers' stories of self-organization and solidarity focused not on unionising, but on finding strategies to do their work better and taking some sort of control over it.

### ***Teleservices and racism***

The nature of the outsourced industry feeds into racist relations, complementing the perceived inferior position of developing countries with the accepted inferior position of the service worker in regards to the customer. The fear of the “Indian call-centre worker” (which now spreads to other popular outsourcing destinations) is legitimated and turned into a pre-condition for organizing the work process and preparing the employees. For instance, the accent trainings offered to Indians to sound American<sup>33</sup>, the pretend game making call-centre agents say they are situated elsewhere (in the country of the customer), and the acceptance of instances of outright racist insults from callers refusing to talk to an Indian or a Bulgarian point to a strange mesh-up of customer-friendliness and servitude that turns the fears surrounding the outsourcing of jobs and services into an opportunity for a politically incorrect pressure valve.

Overt racist remarks on the side of customers during the call are not only ordinary but also acceptable and a lot of work practices revolve around this issue. If workers are not required to hide their nationality and/or location, they often choose to do so themselves, in order to avoid harassment. One of the employees who used to work as customer support with German recounted how agents were allowed (sic!) to take on a German pseudonym if their accent was good enough, so they can avoid rude remarks, because the ones with German names had less

---

<sup>33</sup>The practice is mentioned in multiple studies on Indian call centres, among others, Nadeem (ibid.), Aneesh (ibid.), Palm (ibid.)

problems with scandals with customers. "What one should never, ever do", he said, "is reveal that we are in Bulgaria." The hierarchies between customers and service workers, and Westerners and Eastern-Europeans/Asians intertwine and are readily reinforced through call-centre work. Looking at the re-defining of gender and racial relations at Indian call centres, Mirchandani observes:

*Encounters of rudeness and aggression are normalized through relations of production that simultaneously situate clients as whites, as Americans and as customers. This threefold social location overrides class boundaries that are being crossed with call center work, whereby highly educated Indian workers employed in middle-class, white-collar occupations often are serving lower-class, poorly educated American callers.* <sup>34</sup>

Mirchandani point out that this type of transnational work restructures employment in a way that is reviving racial and gender divisions, which she refers to as the "racialized gendering of jobs"<sup>35</sup> and which involves highly educated men and women in the global South taking up de-skilled feminized jobs. The situation at Bulgarian call-centres is similar – the pink collar jobs that are not considered high-skilled occupations are performed by large by university graduates and professionals in the humanities. The significance of race in call centre job can easily be demonstrated by Western customers bluntly commenting on the accent of the agent, demanding they speak to somebody "better qualified" or simply "not from Eastern Europe" or joking about feeling nervous that their credit card will be wire-drawn by the Bulgarian scoundrels.

This intersection of racial and production relations is justified by the corporate principle of "customer first" and internalized by the employees, who take pains in

---

<sup>34</sup>Mirchandani, K. (2005) "Gender Eclipsed? Racial Hierarchies in Transnational Call Center Work", *Social Justice*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (102), *Race, Racism, and Empire: Reflections on Canada*: 113.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. p. 114.

achieving better accents and get frustrated by the rudeness of the callers. Thus, power relations based on production and the extraction of value are shifted and masked behind the tension caused by the junction of race and customer satisfaction. The practice of subcontracting and redistributing responsibilities and power down the outsourcing chain leaves the customer and the worker at the battlefield confronting each other in a phantom power fight. This allows the company and its corporate power structure to retreat in the background and withdraw from the field at which the battle is seemingly taking place. This way, workplace antagonism is reinterpreted as the conflict between the rude Western customer and the Eastern-European service worker. The customer and the agent are brought against each other, despite sharing much of the same frustration and (self)exploitation caused by the transformation of work in digital capitalism that leaves both sides performing chunks of the work left after the dismantling of old service occupations. Palm sees outsourcing and self-service as two variants of the universal mobility of work that is made possible through the 'externalization of labour'<sup>36</sup>. The work that the customer is doing while trying to reach a human voice on the other side, dialling and selecting options and clicking on links, mirrors the back office work done by the call-centre employee.

One of the hidden forms of workers' resistance is thus the emergence of feelings of solidarity with the customers. It can be enacted in the form of helping the customer more than one is supposed to, regardless of the time-limits imposed on customer-agent interactions, providing information that one is not supposed to give, advising customers about ways to cheat the company, advising them to buy the cheapest products or services or not to use them at all. These little acts of kindness are similar to the ones that Ehrenreich<sup>37</sup> describes during her experience as a minimum wage worker – waiters pampering customers with extra portions and adding more cream and sauce to their meals and drinks are acts of subversion through embracing the corporate ideology of always pleasing the client and the

---

<sup>36</sup>The concept of externalization of labour is developed in Huws, U. (2003). *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World*. Monthly Review Press.

<sup>37</sup>Ehrenreich, B. (2001) *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) getting By in America*. New York: Picador.

ubiquitous 'integrity'.

Apart from being torn between workplace discipline and the perceived freedom of consumer practices, workers are also subjected to conflicting expectations about the integral image of employee subjectivity they represent – on one hand, the corporate *homo novus* with their creativity and initiative and, on the other, the traditional docile worker, an object of constant supervision and surveillance, whose work is limited and guided through machinery and who is left with no real control over their labour. This is an eerie mesh-up between the "degradation of work" described by Braverman in 1974 and the literature on nourishing cadres analysed by Boltanski and Chiapello, which sifts down through the corporate hierarchy to touch upon ordinary office workers and stimulate them to take initiative and progress individually, through dare and ambition.

### ***Constructing the call-centre worker through place and mobility***

Employment at Bulgarian call centres is the embodied crossroads of mobility, stagnation, and flexibility. While there are no reliable statistics about the constitution of the labour force in call centres, outsourcing companies are citing young students and university graduates, aged 20 to 30, as the majority of their employees. These are the workers who are being seen as the "natural" candidates for low-skilled, temporary, and part-time labour while offering the benefit of their education. This social group is not only especially endangered by unemployment and difficult entry into the job market, but it is also considered more IT-savvy and a *tabula rasa* of sorts that allows for inscribing the specific corporate regulations and values<sup>38</sup>. Huws sees them as an emerging reserve army of labour easily available worldwide through outsourcing and migration and easily replaceable on

---

<sup>38</sup>Taking another example of the conference *Outsourcing Destination: Bulgaria*, the explanation for the preference for students and recent graduates with no work experience was that they were easy to train to the requirements of the company and did not "carry the burden" of previous training in practices conflicting with the ones imposed by the employer.

a global scale.<sup>39</sup> However, there are three other groups that increasingly find employment at Bulgarian call centres: older high qualified workers, return migrants, and foreigners.

The CEO of one of the big outsourcing companies in Bulgaria, Telus International Europe, Marcenac, explains that the company has proved to be a saviour for older educated unemployed, who would otherwise hardly find a job.<sup>40</sup> The majority of them have degrees in Linguistics and have been working as teachers or translators – professions that have been increasingly worse paid. Teachers, in particular, have to manage their demanding job with a monthly salary of less than 300 Euro and in an increasingly critical public environment that puts the blame for the faults in the education system on them and their lack of motivation.<sup>41</sup> Such employees often have to readjust to the requirements of corporate work at a later age.

Another group of employees is the return migrants and students who have benefited from the EU exchange programmes to spend a few months abroad. Programmes like Erasmus Mundus allow students to spend time at foreign universities and, thus, among other things, improve their foreign language skills. The programme is motivated by the desire to promote intercultural understanding and provide students with the opportunity to experience their EU citizenship through education. However, the exchange programmes are only a part of EU-facilitated forms of mobility, which allow people to turn their migration experience into linguistic skills and cultural competences that make them suitable for a call-centre job. The growing number of Bulgarian students pursuing degrees abroad and the growing youth unemployment rate in the EU mean a growing number of well-educated Bulgarians who speak foreign languages at a near native level and are looking for a job at home. The Association of the Private Universities in Bulgaria

---

<sup>39</sup> Huws, U. (2013) “Working online, living offline: labour in the Internet Age.” *Work organisation, labour & globalisation* Volume 7, Number 1, Summer 2013: 1-11.

<sup>40</sup><http://www.investor.bg/imenata-na-biznesa/263/a/k-marsenak-universitetite-ne-poznavat-aoutsorsing-industriata-167357/>.

<sup>41</sup>See Ivancheva, M. (2014) “How a Bulgarian teacher made the news... for all the wrong reasons” <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/bulgarian-teacher-made-news-for-wrong-reasons/>.



estimated in 2011 that about 80 000 Bulgarian students get higher education in other countries<sup>42</sup>. Taken together with the number of return migrants, which is increasing due, in part, to the economic crisis in Europe, the pool of employees at Bulgarian call centres is characterized largely by the mobility of its labour force. These employees, having spent time abroad, possess the most central skills required for the work, the so called "cultural competences" that in countries like India are otherwise being taught to employees at special training sessions.<sup>43</sup>

Call centre work is indeed one of the employment options for return migrants and is actively advertised as such. A recent article in the *Independent* about outsourcing in Bulgaria quotes what is labelled as a "typical worker in Bulgaria's call centres", a young female who has graduated in Political Science in Austria and returned to work back home: „*My first intention was to stay and work in Austria,*" she said. *“But I knew outsourcing was growing in Bulgaria and the profile employers are looking for is young people like me with language skills. It was natural for me to look for a job here.”*<sup>44</sup>

The words of the young woman should certainly be taken with a pinch of salt bearing in mind the overall promotional tone of the article. The attractiveness of a call centre career for a graduate in Political Science over other work options is probably slightly overstated. The main stimulus for taking up call centre jobs is usually financial. One of the older employees, 45-50 years old man, who has worked at an international institution as translator, shared that he opted for working at a call centre because the living standard secured through the job was closer to the one he had abroad. Thus, initially he did not consider going back to his teaching position from before, because he could not imagine lowering his living standards. While some of the return migrants employees admit they have

---

<sup>42</sup><http://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/80-hil.-bylgarski-studenti-v-chuzhbina-3801971>. The official statistics show a much lower number of 27 895, which is due to the fact that not all universities collect data about the nationality of their students.

<sup>43</sup>See Nadeem (ibid.) among others.

<sup>44</sup><http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/forget-india-call-centres-are-moving-to-bulgaria-8939055.html>.

better employment options in Bulgaria, few consider the call centre a career choice that follows logically from their education.

Nevertheless, despite the overt statement of call-centre companies that higher education is not required for the job, most employees have at least undergraduate degrees. Since working knowledge of English is a must, regardless of the language to be used on the job, the majority of Bulgarian workers speak at least two foreign languages. This makes it virtually impossible for Bulgarian employees to find a call-centre job without at least a Bachelor degree. On the contrary, foreigners are often with only high-school or college degrees. In the words of a HR at one of the call-centres, the foreigners who come to work at the company would be considered low-skilled labour back home. As she explained, there is certain hesitancy as to whether call-centre employment could be considered high-skilled labour or low-skilled labour in Bulgaria. There is ambiguity about call-centre employment in Bulgaria – while most workers are overqualified in terms of education, they are taking up the role of low-skilled native labour force in the country of the customer.

### ***New migration routes driven by outsourcing***

In the Middle Ages, feudalism in Western Europe and the inheritance system, which postulated that everything goes to the first-born son, lead to a multitude of impoverished aristocrats, artisans, and peasants, who fed into the Crusades chasing the dream of the wealth of the Orient. Today, the restructuring of the economy and the state that leaves a growing number of people in the developed world jobless and increasingly considered unworthy of state support makes them turn an eye to the lands where jobs have migrated.

I am coming back to Sofia from Belgrade after attending the No Border meeting there in 2013. I am travelling by train on my own and I happen to sit in a

compartment with two foreigners on their way to Bulgaria – a young 20 something male Brit and an older man, probably in his late 30s from Switzerland. The Swiss guy is visiting a friend whom he's met online and is very nervous about setting his foot on Bulgarian soil, he keeps asking about crime, prices, customs, and culture. The British guy takes over the role of an expert on the country and willingly shares his impressions and tactics for getting along in the Balkan state. He had been living in Bulgaria for about three years, working for an online betting company that had outsourced its business here and had a Bulgarian girlfriend. He is very happy with his life and job and shares he would never be able to have this standard of living in the UK. He was recruited directly from the UK, where he was currently unemployed, and flown to Sofia for an interview before he signed his contract for work in an online betting call centre. His tactics for surviving as an expat lied in basically avoiding contact with anything local.<sup>45</sup> He described his daily routine, going to work from his new apartment building to the new business building where his office was, taking the subway and not the bus because the subway was quite new and felt more Western. He says if one manages to avoid the old buses and shabby streets and quarters, one can almost feel like “in the West”. He is praising the rise of call centres and outsourcing in Bulgaria and says they offer great opportunities to young Bulgarians.

The young Brit is one of the rising number of labour migrants in Bulgaria attracted by the booming outsourcing industry. As the essence of service offshoring is to provide services abroad, it relies heavily on linguistic competences. The hunger for employees speaking foreign languages makes companies turn their eyes on foreign labour. In recent years, outsourcing companies, foreign and Bulgarian alike, have started recruiting workers from abroad, through international recruitment agencies, operating around the world. During her speech at the conference *Outsourcing destination: Bulgaria*, the head of the HR department of

---

<sup>45</sup>This self-imposed insulation from the locality of their new home seems to be a commonplace for expats, judging from Fechter's study: Fechter, M. (2007) Living in a Bubble: Expatriates' Transnational Spaces. In: *Going First Class?: new approaches to privileged travel and movement*. Berghahn Books: 33-52.

Telus International Europe presented the recruitment of foreigners as one of the strategies for upgrading the human capital of the company. As she explained, the recruitment of foreigners also served as a disciplining measure towards Bulgarian workers, who realized that there was serious competition for their workplaces and thus became more motivated and diligent in their work. The disciplining effect of foreign workers is, of course, not the only reason for hiring foreign force.

Native speakers are especially valued in call centres, where language and cultural competences are the main qualifications needed for the job. Yet, they usually cost more to the company – the difference between the salaries of a foreign and a Bulgarian call-centre worker can be twice or more. The policy of paying foreigners more is a well-kept secret in the companies, most of which impose rules of non disclosure on their workers, meaning that they are not allowed to share information about their remuneration with co-workers.<sup>46</sup> Such rules can also be inscribed in their work contracts.

The exact number of foreigners recruited is unknown, but is on the rise. After Bulgaria's accession to the EU, the restrictions about the number of foreign workers (who should not be more than 10%) were partially lifted as EU workers are considered native ones. Native speakers are hunted down by recruitment agencies operating in Bulgaria and abroad with considerable zeal. The recruitment process can be rather aggressive and can include stealing employees from one company for another. This labour force, which would otherwise not qualify as particularly high-skilled, is so sought after that it is comparable to the new masters of the corporate universe – IT specialists and developers. I will only give one example: a couple of years ago, one of the big international companies was faced with the prospect of losing a considerable part of its German speaking employees at one of its projects to another company, when an HR agency started aggressively recruiting them by offering bigger salaries. Faced with the prospect of

---

<sup>46</sup>This tendency is also mentioned by Mircheva and Kirov (ibid.), who write about the difference in remuneration that is usually denied or simply kept secret by employers.

losing experienced employees and planting the seed of discontent among their co-workers – since German language was not the best paid in the company, the management took decisive measures and offered pay rise to all the members of the German team. The unusual decision, having in mind the general disposability of call-centre workers and the considerable flow of personnel, had to be, in turn, justified and explained to the rest of the employees. Appealing to some sort of solidarity and loyalty to the company, threatened by ill-intending external forces, could not, however, yield empathy in the generally cynical and disillusioned employees. After the meeting, people were muttering that they hoped for some other company to offer them a bigger salary and that they would accept it immediately.

The reasons to take up a call-centre job in Bulgaria are mainly financial, though some people are intrigued by the lesser-known destination. One of the new foreign employees, a Dutch man in his 50s, has been researching call centre employment options across Europe and argued that according to his careful calculations a call-centre job in Germany would pay the equivalent of 1400 lv (700 Euro), which would offer a comfortable living standard in Bulgaria. Most foreigners, however, receive roughly twice bigger salary, which is 8-9 times the minimal wage. The Dutch man had previously been working in another call centre in the Netherlands, but as others from his compatriots share, employment has been more and more difficult to land on back home, since call-centre jobs are becoming less available and the requirements for qualification more difficult to fulfil.

The foreigners directly recruited from Western Europe constitute only one share of the foreign workforce at the call centres – there are hires from other parts of the world and quite often people find themselves in Bulgaria for various reasons before taking up a call-centre job – study, love or plans for business investment in the country that failed. However, what is interesting is the way this type of migration is framed. The difference in the conditions of employment favours workers from the West, who might receive accommodation waivers partly

covering their rent. But what is truly remarkable is the consistency, with which the image of the foreign Western migrant is constructed along the lines of adventurism and leisure migration. "They are mostly single, young, and without any commitments back home," explained the HR of an outsourcing company, "they like to travel and it is harder to make them stay after the first year than to recruit them." The recruitment strategy of the HR agencies follows the same patterns, attracting the new hires with promises of never-ending partying and a high-end lifestyle dining out every day – the symbolism of this promise evoking the image of expatriates in colonial settings, enjoying luxury compatible neither with their life back home nor with their new surroundings.

The figure of the expatriate is linked to the idea of lifestyle migration<sup>47</sup> – people pursuing a different lifestyle in exotic destinations, which implies a sense of freedom in choosing the destination and the conditions for resettlement. As many of the Westerners choosing to live in the East are representatives of diplomatic missions or corporate elites, their movement has fed into the notion of nomadic and exterritorial elites.<sup>48</sup> Their mobility and resettlement are analysed in stark contrast to the movement from East-South to North-West, which is framed in predominantly negative discourses of poverty migration and welfare abuse.

The recruitment agencies aided by employees bringing in friends or simply searching for people fitting the profile that is currently wanted in the company are actively importing labour migrants in Bulgaria from the West. The the recruitment strategies of these agencies mirror the strategies of agencies offering work for Bulgarians in more affluent countries. Ads for construction workers, domestic workers, nurses, and caretakers can be seen alongside ones for medical professionals, au-pairs, and work-and-travel programmes. Labour migration has come to define one of the major survival strategies of Bulgarians throughout the

---

<sup>47</sup>Benson, M. and O'Reilly K. (2009) Migration and the search for a better way of life: a critical exploration of lifestyle migration, *The Sociological Review* 57(4): 608-625

<sup>48</sup>Bauman (ibid.)

post-1989 years and Bulgarians are still labelled as job-stealing immigrants in the West. This tendency is not only new but also telling for the restructuring of migration flows within the EU. While there have been foreigners living and working in Bulgaria, their number has so far been limited (in 2012 the number of long-term immigrants in the country is estimated to 14 103 (EUROSTAT), which is about 0.6% of the population). This excludes EU citizens, who do not have the status of foreigners or immigrants since Bulgaria became part of the Union in 2007. The number, however, includes not only economically active labour force, but also retired migrants, people who are running their own businesses, and unemployed. The Brits buying real-estate and settling in Bulgaria for their retirement have traditionally been thought of as leisure migrants, attracted by the climate and the quiet life. In the perspective of newer migrants, however, it becomes more and more clear that such migration flows are the attempt of people to counteract the global redistribution of jobs and the deterioration of the welfare state across Europe. The picture eerily resembles the stratification that Saskia Sassen describes in her study on global cities – the financial centres of the global North increasingly getting rid of the middle strata of (middle-class) workers and instead creating a dualistic model of highly-paid professionals and low-paid service force, caring for them in laundry shops, restaurants, hotels, etc.<sup>49</sup> These developments come to defy the narrative of a restructured economy justifying outsourcing, claiming manual and low-skilled jobs will be offshored to less developed countries, while the Western worker will enjoy the benefit of better occupations, working the jobs of the future – service and high-skilled jobs. The feeling of superiority induced by such narratives has remained since, but in reality the economy has been developing far from the prospects outlined in such stories of solace.

While migration from the Global North to the South-East is the result from the loss of jobs due to outsourcing and migration, it defies traditional categories in migration studies on multiple levels. It differs from what is traditionally recognised

---

<sup>49</sup>Sassen, S. (1991) *The Global City*: New York, London, Tokyo. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

as labour mobility – i.e. a South-East to North-West migration from the poorer and less developed countries to the bosoms of capitalist prosperity. Migrants from the core EU countries are analysed in the optimistic overtones of cosmopolitanism and new cultural citizenship.<sup>50</sup>

The movement from South-East to the West does indeed represent the major bulk of human traffic (taken in the very broadest sense of the word without any to the violent and involuntary trafficking of human bodies). In the field of migration studies that clearly draws a boundary between so called political, economic, and leisure migration, human flows are not only strictly defined in terms of their motivation, but also through their geographical positioning and orientation. Labour migration feeding into capitalist development has flowed from rural to urban areas and from developing to developed countries.<sup>51</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the world of digital labour we can less and less fit either labour or migration within traditional categories and expect them to follow old patterns. Call-centre jobs are an example of this change. The ambivalence of this kind of work – low-skilled in Western Europe and high-skilled in the Global South and East, creates the opportunity for a different framing of this employment in accordance with the geographical positioning of the company. It is creating middle ground employment zones of sorts that are geographically determined. This not only means that call centres in Asia are the new cradles of an emerging digital middle class, while the ones in Eastern Europe are exploiting the processes of de-classing of cognitive

---

<sup>50</sup>See Favell, A. (2008) *Eurostars and Eurocities : free movement and mobility in an integrating Europe*. Blackwell Publishing.

<sup>51</sup>See Torpey, J. (2000) *The Invention of the Passport. Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Massey, D., J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, A. Pellegrino, J. E. Taylor (1993) “Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal”, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 431-466 for a general discussion of different academic approaches to migration.



workers, but also that they are the last resort of a shrinking pink-collar labour force in the North-West that follows in the footsteps of fleeing capital. Reinforcing racial divides and nurturing old categories of migration, call-centre outsourcing masks the systemic restructuring of the relation between labour and capital, which renders them both mobile and changes dramatically the face of employment on a global scale.

The precarity of employment is also ambiguous as it is as much imposed as desired by employees who see flexibility and the frequent change of jobs as a way of escaping the harrowing dullness of repetitive tasks. This (in)voluntary precarious employment on the move means that the choice to change jobs or countries is more frequent and made easier than the choice and possibility for developing an occupational identity and self-organization to contest working conditions and social policies. Mobility becomes a defining property of employment, through migration, ICT transferred work, and the instability of precarious work. In this context, call centres provide middle ground employment zones that are defined through the new kind of outsourced work but also geographically. This kind of new middle class work is made possible through outsourcing and, specifically, at the ends of the outsourcing chains in the top outsourcing destinations of developing and poor countries that allow companies to pay lower wages but also allow employees to sustain an agreeable living standard with their remuneration.

## **Brain Drain in Serbia**

The phenomenon of brain drain in Serbia has had profound economic, social, and political repercussions. The migration of professionals, scientists, researchers, and especially the youth has been intensifying since the 1990s, leaving the country with significant labor shortages in key sectors. So, for over two decades, Serbia has been grappling with a significant brain drain, positioning itself among the leading countries in the region and globally affected by this issue. This exodus has contributed to Serbia's stagnation, both in terms of development and innovation. Also, the steady emigration of educated and talented individuals has had profound demographic and intellectual repercussions. However, the pressing question remains: what are the true and far-reaching consequences of Serbia's ongoing brain drain crisis?

Brain drain refers to the migration of (mostly) highly educated individuals, such as scientists, researchers, and skilled professionals, in pursuit of better career prospects, higher wages, and improved living conditions abroad. Unlike the concept of knowledge mobility, which implies temporary migration for the purpose of skill acquisition and development, Serbia's brain drain signifies a permanent loss of intellectual capital. A considerable number of young professionals leave the country and do not return after completing their education or gaining valuable work experience abroad. This persistent outflow of talent presents a critical challenge to Serbia's long-term social, economic, and political progress.

Even before the 1990s, Serbia had experienced several waves of emigration. However, the most recent wave is notably marked by the departure of highly educated individuals seeking better prospects abroad. This mass migration took off in the 1990s, driven largely by the wars in the former Yugoslavia, economic sanctions, and the ensuing political instability. Since then, the departure of Serbia's intellectual capital has continued, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of the country's growth and competitiveness in the global economy.

Recent statistics reveal that Serbia ranks among the top countries globally in terms of youth unemployment and the emigration of educated individuals. According to the World Economic Forum, Serbia not only has one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in the world but also ranks near the bottom in its capacity to attract and retain talent. This persistent trend of losing educated youth exacerbates the country's demographic and economic challenges, further straining its efforts to foster innovation, growth, and development. The inability to provide adequate opportunities for young, skilled individuals has left Serbia vulnerable to the continued depletion of its intellectual and professional resources.

In recent years, Serbia's brain drain has been fueled by a combination of push and pull factors. High youth unemployment, persistent economic instability, and limited career opportunities within Serbia have pushed many to seek better prospects abroad. On the other hand, the demand for skilled labor in developed countries, particularly within the European Union, has created a strong pull, attracting Serbian talent. This ongoing trend has significantly contributed to Serbia's negative migration balance and a steady population decline that has been ongoing since 2002. The loss of young, educated individuals not only weakens Serbia's workforce but also raises concerns about the country's demographic future and its ability to maintain sustainable growth.

As mentioned, the socio-economic and political climate in Serbia has played a significant role in the ongoing exodus of skilled workers. Decades of political instability and economic crises, worsened by the wars of the 1990s and the prolonged transition from socialism to a market economy, have created inhospitable conditions for professional growth and development. Serbia's sluggish economic performance, coupled with persistently high unemployment rates and low wages, has fostered a sense of pessimism among young people regarding their prospects within the country.

Corruption, nepotism, and the absence of meritocratic systems in both education and employment have further fueled dissatisfaction among young professionals.

In many cases, political connections and affiliations take precedence over talent and qualifications when securing job positions, leading to widespread disillusionment among educated youth. Additionally, Serbia's education system, plagued by issues of privatization and corruption, has failed to adequately align with labor market demands, exacerbating the problem of youth unemployment and pushing many to seek opportunities abroad.

This combination of socio-political dysfunction and economic stagnation has intensified the brain drain, as young, talented individuals increasingly see no viable future in Serbia, opting instead for countries that offer merit-based opportunities, stability, and career advancement.

The consequences of brain drain in Serbia are profound and far-reaching. The loss of highly educated individuals severely undermines the country's economic potential by depleting its intellectual and professional resources. Many of those who leave Serbia possess advanced degrees and critical skills in fields such as science, technology, healthcare, and engineering—sectors essential for driving innovation and economic development. Their departure creates a significant gap in the workforce, diminishing Serbia's ability to compete globally and slowing its progress toward modernization.

The political implications of brain drain are equally significant. The migration of educated individuals weakens Serbia's civil society by removing potential leaders, activists, and intellectuals who could push for political reforms and advocate for transparency and accountability. The absence of these influential voices diminishes public pressure on the government to address deep-rooted issues such as corruption, inefficiency, and lack of meritocracy. This erosion of civic engagement stifles the development of a robust, participatory democracy, leaving the country more vulnerable to stagnation and political inertia.

The brain drain also carries significant social and political consequences for Serbia. The emigration of educated and politically engaged individuals weakens local democracy and disrupts social cohesion. Educated citizens, often more

politically active, tend to hold governments accountable and demand higher standards of governance. Their departure undermines democratic institutions, leaving the remaining population more vulnerable to manipulation and the rise of autocratic governance. This erosion of civic engagement is reflected in the steady decline of political participation, with voter turnout dropping from 71.5% in 1990 to just 56% by 2016.

In addition to the political impact, the loss of young, educated individuals has deepened Serbia's demographic crisis. The country faces an aging population, coupled with a declining birth rate, which creates the dual challenge of a shrinking workforce and a growing number of pensioners. This demographic imbalance further strains Serbia's already fragile economy, exacerbating the difficulties of maintaining economic stability and ensuring long-term growth. The country is already grappling with one of the fastest-aging populations in the world, and the continued emigration of young people only worsens this trend. With a shrinking workforce, Serbia faces mounting pressure to support an aging population, which places further strain on social services, healthcare, and public finances. This demographic imbalance threatens the long-term sustainability of the country's economy and its ability to provide adequate care for its elderly citizens.

To mitigate the effects of brain drain, Serbia must adopt a multi-faceted strategy. One of the essential measures involves reforming the education system. By aligning education and vocational training with the demands of the local labor market, Serbia can reduce the current mismatch between graduates and available job opportunities. This reform necessitates stronger coordination between educational institutions and employers, ensuring that students acquire the skills and knowledge that are directly relevant to the evolving needs of the domestic economy. This approach would not only improve employment prospects for young people but also incentivize them to remain in the country, contributing to its development.

Brain drain presents a serious threat to Serbia's long-term economic and social stability. The ongoing loss of its skilled workforce leads to far-reaching

consequences, including hindered economic growth, weakened democratic institutions, and a deteriorating labor market. While this issue is complex and resistant to quick fixes, it is imperative that Serbia takes decisive action to foster conditions in which its talented citizens can prosper within the country. This requires creating better job opportunities, improving living standards, and investing in innovation. At the same time, the European Union must acknowledge its role in exacerbating brain drain and work in partnership with Serbia to develop sustainable solutions that benefit both sides, ensuring a balanced exchange of talent and expertise.

### ***Policy recommendations***

One of the main suggestions of the current study is to rethink about the main notions used to describe current mobilities of labour and capital:

-The studies of this project suggest that the very notion of brain drain needs to be problematized in approaching current mobility phenomena from the Southeast Europe. First, migration seems to include people from different educational and professional backgrounds. An important common motive for this mobility related to the job markets in home countries, for all types of jobs. Is it, therefore, important to shed light only on those migrants who hold university degrees and work in jobs that require expertise? Moreover, how can one draw such taxonomies between jobs and backgrounds, given that a great percentage of the young population holds higher education degrees and works on jobs that require expertise.

In rethinking about the concept of brain drain, one needs to further question the body/mind taxonomy which, to a large extent, fails to describe the nuances of every type of contemporary job. Therefore, is the concept of brain drain helpful in analysing current migration phenomena? Or, is it a euphemism for a migration related to the difficulties in the job markets of the migrants' home countries? We would, therefore, suggest to look at these types of mobility through the concept of migratory mobility which might allow to focus more on common conditions of contemporary migration.

-As the study by Tsvetelina Hristova suggests, researching workers mobility should not be separated from taking into account capital and company mobility. Outsourcing practices have moved several companies in the Balkans, in search for cheap labour, which is often based on local workers' expertise, such as IT company operations in Bulgaria. In this context of intense mobility of labour and capital, are the categories of brain drain still relevant? Local employees with university degrees often get paid much lower salaries than their colleagues in the

country of the company's origin. Is this a kind of non-mobile brain drain and/or a local migration?

-Another topic of importance is one related to the digital migration of companies and people. As employees turn to digital migrants in their own countries, growing numbers of foreign companies operate in Bulgaria, Greece, N. Macedonia and Serbia. This relatively new condition is often presented by media and governmental discourses as a factor that would prevent the "brain drain". While this holds some true, relatively low salaries in outsourcing companies often cannot compete with equivalent jobs abroad. Promoting better conditions of work and production for local employees would limit the conditions of inequality among the workforce within European countries. A way to strengthen employees rights would be through strengthening policies around Collective Labour Agreements and implementing policies that would raise salaries.

-As the study from North Macedonia underlines, a great amount of young people migrate to study abroad. Strengthening local public universities with funding for research would encourage younger generations of students to enrol in local universities. Yet, enabling exchange programmes between institutions and countries would be beneficial towards the internationalization of studies.

-Raising awareness about the implications of building global data centers in Balkan countries in relation to the local economies and the environment.

-A usual response to "brain drain" is that local governments encourage digitalization of production and labour. While this process brings new companies such as data centers, call centers and global logistics companies in the Balkans, digitalization requires infrastructure that enables production conditions that are not detrimental to the environment. For example, digital processes require large amounts of electricity. Therefore, the "non-material" digital technology is accompanied by types of materiality that affects the environment in direct ways: electricity production can produce pollution and high temperatures. A recommendation would be to introduce policies that enable the infrastructures of



the digitalization processes while also ensuring that the production of infrastructures follows environmental regulations.

-Raising awareness about the connection between digital processes and materiality is needed in a variety of jobs and daily operations. We would therefore suggest to introduce policies that underline the importance of the relations between materialities and immaterialities.

-New digital data companies that move in Serbia, N Macedonia, Bulgaria and Greece often belong to global companies managed from afar. While the day to day operations are taking place in the local companies, the data belong to companies and institutions elsewhere. This results in new spatiotemporal relations and unequal relations. While more local people might work there and, perhaps, will not move elsewhere, these new processes might result in other types of drain of local knowledge and resources that needs to be explored.