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### Brain Drain: Greece's Open Wound

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# Brain Drain: Greece's Open Wound<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of brain drain, which refers to the emigration of highly skilled individuals from their home country, has been a long-standing challenge for Greece. After the global financial crisis of 2007 – 2009 struck the country, scholars have observed the escalation of brain drain, the loss of valuable human capital in terms of social and economic growth and development. The current phenomenon is linked throughout the relevant literature with other eras of the Greek past. Of course, beyond the historicity of the phenomenon, there are new factors that affect the current status. This policy brief attempts to work with the existing knowledge on the subject and recommend some policy directions.

**Keywords:** Austerity, Brain Drain, Crisis, Greece, Greeks, Migration, Unemployment, Work.

## Introduction

The global financial crisis of 2007 - 2009 affected at a big scale the economies and the societies of the member-states of the European Union. Greece has been severely hit by the global financial crisis of 2007 - 2009 because of economic and political structural insufficiencies that characterized the state. The country, before 2009 had a period of almost four decades of unprecedented social, economic and political stability after the reestablishment of democracy in the country in the year 1974. That all came to an end with the 2009 crisis outbreak in the country. The new state of things in Greece would lead to, amongst many other things, some extremely high rates of unemployment. Those enormous, for the EU's standards, unemployment rates created a depressing and repellent environment for large numbers of well-educated women and men; people who could be the country's best by potentially offering many things in the country's political, social and economic progress and advance (Labrianidis, 2011; Kapur, 2014; Theodoropoulos et al., 2014) did not get any opportunity to work and evolve in their own home country (Pelliccia, 2013; Triandafyllidou & Gropas 2014; Labrianidis & Pratsinakis, 2016).

Low salaries that were a new reality for the country after the year 2009, in tandem with the high unemployment, can be identified the two major reasons of the 21st century's brain drain phenomenon in Greece. Being that way, unable to satisfy their expectations, they chose to leave their country, and migrate to countries within the EU but also to many other places worldwide (Damanakis, 2014; Labrianidis and Pratsinakis, 2016, 2017).

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## **Greek Brain Drain: What we know now**

### *Defining Brain Drain*

‘Brain drain’ was introduced to the academic literature to an increasing pace, mostly after World War II. Despite the difficulty of defining brain drain, as an original social phenomenon of high complexity, by one single and universally accepted definition, (Theodoropoulos et al., 2014) there are some serious attempts, to define that complex social phenomenon that concerns and interests a vast variety of scientists and scholars.

It has been identified (Portes, 1976; Özden & Schiff, 2005; Beine et al., 2008; Chaichian, 2011; Labrianidis, 2011; Theodoropoulos et al., 2014) as an international movement of well and highly educated human resources, from less developed or countries that are currently developing, to more developed countries and economies. Docquier & Rapoport (2012) also recognize it as a contemporary dominating trend globally, by adding to the context of brain drain, the parameter of the deeply processed globalization (Castles, 2000) in almost every sector of the post-modern human activity, as well as in the contemporary world labor market.

It is considered as a fact that the majority of developing countries are affected by brain drain while the developed countries have profited from it (Stark, 1991; Theodoropoulos et al., 2014). The mobility of scientists and the migration from their own countries to others, are caused by the absence or lack of jobs that fit their skills and expectations. They are attracted by the better prospects for better careers in the destination countries. These people are usually the most educated and skilled, something that makes the loss of this human capital even more important for Greece (Katseli, Lukas & Xenogianni, 2006; Lowell and Findlay, 2002; Theodoropoulos et al., 2014).

### *The case of Greece*

After WWII, another great in numbers and socio-economic significance wave of Greek emigration came to be (Mousourou, 1991). This emigration concerns the Greek people who left their totally war-devastated country, to migrate to the rapidly developing United States, to Canada, to Australia and a few years later to the reconstructed and reindustrialized western Germany, France and Belgium. During this post-war time period, Labrianidis (2011) identifies a phenomenon, similar to the current brain drain phenomenon, as scientists and intellectuals then, left the country in great numbers, in order to seek better potentials and chances in countries, other than their own homeland.

Some academics link those periods of loss of important human capital, observed during the 50s (Grubel & Scott, 1966), with another important continuance of the phenomenon between 1998 and

2005 (Robolis, 2005). Labrianidis (2014) also confirms that after the mid-90s the international migration of skilled professionals and scientists from Greece to other countries has increased. Thus, the origins of the current brain drain phenomenon can be located in these years, long before 2009.

Due to austerity, high unemployment rates and minimum need for high-skilled workforce, along with the nadir that wages fell to within the country's labour market, the brain drain phenomenon became profoundly recognizable (Labrianidis, 2011; Labrianidis and Pratsinakis, 2016, 2017; Polyzoidis and Tsertekidis, 2019). Labrianidis and Pratsinakis (2017) found that the notable lack of demand for highly skilled labour force is one the greatest generating factor of this phenomenon in Greece, and in the meantime a major push factor for well-educated Greeks to move out of Greece and migrate.

### *The sequelae*

Brain drain has a deep impact on the economy, the society, and the future perspectives of Greece. As Chaichian (2011) found, the loss of intellectually high human capital of Greece, was one of the largest in the Globe. The demographic problem of Greece is widely known and acknowledged. The Greek population is currently ageing really fast and decreasing in numbers (Foundation for Economic & Industrial Research, 2022). All those people who emigrate from Greece leave behind them a dangerous gap in the normal reproduction of the population.

If approached from an economical point of view, brain drain also costs a lot for the country's economy in terms of society as well as in terms of state. Both Greek society (families etc.) along with the Greek state have invested so many financial resources and funds to train and qualify this human capital but the country fails to benefit from this promising (in many aspects) part of its population. All those social and economic growth and development potentials are being eradicated.

All the parameters of brain drain presented above, lead scholars and academics in search of ways and means to deal with that phenomenon that negatively affects Greece in many ways.

### **What relevant scholarship recommends**

The context of this phenomenon is interpreted in a really negative way by the majority of the scholars that have studied it. And that is not without serious reasons as it was shown before. Scholars have made many efforts via policy recommendations to reverse brain drain. Many changes and many bold decisions should be taken to serve that purpose. A structural way to make the desirable steps is a desired bold swift of the Greek economy, supported by the state, with sufficient national and European funds, via implicating public policies, from an economy based on low-cost services, to a developed economy. An economy that would need high-skilled work force in order to produce,

advance and flourish (Labrinidis & Pratsinakis, 2017). Another solution proposed at the same time by the same academics (Labrianidis and Pratsinakis, 2017), sets aside the efforts for repatriation of Greeks that left the country as parts of the brain drain phenomenon. It sets on the spotlight the possibilities of developing new kinds of partnerships with those Greeks that already reside elsewhere on the planet. People who have already started their new lives, created their own social connections and networks with other fellow Greeks or local people. If something like that would succeed, it would have major results of magnificent importance in transnational collaboration in sciences, businesses, and many other sectors.

In a long term, a new connection like this with the motherland, can lead to further deepening on the emigrants' bonds with it. That can possibly lead to opening of new perspectives for future even closer collaboration and possible repatriation. It is a way for the Greek state's credibility to be restored in the minds and consciousness of the Greeks who left the country out of disappointment and desperation (Theodoropoulos et al., 2014; Labrianidis & Pratsinakis, 2017). Thus, approaching these people should be really careful and tactful. Free of any patronization. Collaboration and equality of the parties should be of first priority.

Also, modernizing the infrastructures of Greece's public sector, lowering taxes for businesses and individuals, social policy measures for the unemployed and for new families, investing more public funds in the universities and in the various prestigious Greek scientific institutes for research, giving more opportunities to young scientists of many scientific fields and the simplification of state bureaucracy can also lead to positive results (Labrianidis & Pratsinakis, 2017; Polyzoidis and Tsertekidis, 2019).

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The brain drain phenomenon in correlation with the Greek society and state as a subject of social research is very interesting for many Greek academics, scientists, researchers and university students for a series of quite profound reasons.

The common academic knowledge about the historicity, the origins, the reasons, and the effects of brain drain is currently deepening and expanding. In parallel, many options and possible solutions have been suggested from time to time throughout the literature by scholars who study this subject.

All the proposed options for action, the possible solutions and the strategies that can be offered by scholars can give useful tools for future implication and development. Any actions taken by the Greek authorities need to be holistic. Fortunately, there has been at least a basic consensus as a starting point

for the recognition of the problem. It is an issue that draws many families' attention, people's whose children study and venture in the scientific field and see no perspectives in Greece for them to pursue. It is clear that answering to brain drain phenomenon will not be easy nor will be of low financial and political cost. There is much progress to be made towards:

- The digital transformation of the state to diminish bureaucracy to the minimum possible and thus meeting the current European standards
- The promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation
- The emphasis on development and multiplication of sustainable and high-skilled jobs
- The implementation of a more business-friendly tax system
- A shift to granting more financial resources to academic research
- The initiatives in direction of deeper and stronger synergies between Greek universities, research institutions and businesses and the Greek diaspora

The financial resources needed for the implementation of the recommendations mentioned in the paper could be provided by an alternative of priority-setting from funds of the state budget and of the European Regional Development Fund, which has offered valuable funding capabilities throughout the EU for the post-COVID-19 era.

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